

FAQ: Heritage Language Teaching in Minnesota

What is a heritage language? Who speaks heritage languages?

A **student's home language** or that of their wider community other than English. 148,000 students in Minnesota speak a heritage language—nearly 20% of students in the state. Common languages spoken at home are Spanish, Somali, Hmong, Karen, and Arabic.

Why do heritage languages and multilingualism matter?

Learning one's heritage language makes it easier to learn English. And, research shows multilingualism **increases academic achievement**, as well as:¹

- **Improves linguistic development and executive function** in students who process information through more than one language.
- **Builds positive identity and belonging**, making students less likely to drop out of school than their English-only speaking immigrant peers.
- **Strengthens families and communities** by empowering them in their children's education—and by valuing multilingualism as a powerful asset, not a deficit falsely believed to hinder English language literacy.

How does HF 2741 help?

This legislation maintains the successful, innovative pathway by which heritage language teachers earn a license through cohort portfolio process. Prior to 2023, there was *no viable* way for these talented, in-demand teachers to achieve full licensure and stay in the classroom.

Who are these heritage language teachers?

47 educators representing nine unique languages comprised the first licensure cohort last spring. These educators hailed from 18 school districts across the state—from Austin to Pine City. Already, 40% of the cohort have attained full licensure, including Minnesota's first licensed heritage language teachers in Somali, Karen, and Amharic.

The demand continues: The Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) recently opened applications for the second cohort and has already received 64 applicants and counting.

¹ For a thorough review of academic literature supporting heritage languages see our report *Power, Politics, and Preservation of Heritage Languages* at: www.educationevolving.org/heritage-languages

EDUCATION

For the first time, Minnesota teachers can become licensed to teach Karen, Somali and other heritage languages

Thanks to a 2023 law, dozens of Minnesota teachers are on track to become licensed to teach heritage languages — including two of the first licensed Karen teachers in the nation.



by **Becky Z. Dernbach**
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Ehtalow Zar is one of the first teachers in the state licensed to teach Karen. In her Karen advisory class at St. Paul's Johnson Senior High School on December 9, she taught students how to cook Karen porridge and provided a lesson in its cultural significance. Credit: Dymanh Chhoun | Sahan Journal

Before Ehtalow Zar's students could sample the porridge their teacher had prepared for them, they had to answer a question.

“Why do you guys think this is our traditional Karen food?” she asked them.

One student raised her hand and suggested that it was a tradition that evolved in the jungle.

Their teacher agreed, noting that in those days Karen people did not have much access to rice, meat, or vegetables. “So our elders will cook this meal so everybody can have some, so we don't have to cook food separately,” she said.

Classes like this one at St. Paul's Johnson High School — where a group of mostly Karen students learn about Karen language and culture — have become more and more popular in Twin Cities schools in recent years. In addition to this advisory — like a homeroom — Ehtalow Zar teaches a Karen language class for Karen speakers. Johnson students attend in person, and students from several other St. Paul high schools attend virtually.

The push for heritage language programs has grown as charter schools have developed programs honoring the cultures and languages of immigrant communities, and students and parents have asked school districts to create these programs, too.

Research has shown that learning a heritage language — a student's home language or the language of their broader community, which kids born in the United States may not speak fluently — can improve academic performance and sense of belonging.

But until very recently, it was all but impossible for heritage language teachers to obtain a license in teaching their language and culture. Instead, those teachers often received temporary permissions to teach their subject matter. That gave them little job security or relevant professional development, and they often weren't eligible for annual raises.

Now, following a 2023 law, a **program** through the state of Minnesota helps teachers in languages like Karen, Hmong, and Somali obtain licenses. Forty-seven teachers joined the first cohort; of those, so far about a third have either received their license or been approved to receive it soon.

Some of those teachers hold the first professional licenses in the state in Somali and Karen. State officials say Ehtalow Zar is one of the first two teachers licensed in Karen language in the state, and possibly the

country.

Minnesota's cohort pathway for heritage language teachers is "the first of its kind," said Jenna Cushing-Leubner, an associate professor of world languages education at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. And it comes at the same time that two university pathways have also opened up for these teachers.

Concordia College in Moorhead debuted a **master's degree program** that allows heritage language teachers to obtain a license. A **cohort of Hmong teachers** graduated this spring, and Concordia now has its first candidates for Somali and Karen licensure. And the University of Minnesota has a **master's in teaching program** that can help working professionals gain a world language license — including heritage language teachers.

"It's like a huge switch has flipped, and things are happening in Minnesota that we're just not seeing anywhere else," Cushing-Leubner said.

Creating a pathway

When Pang Yang **developed a Hmong language class** at Park Center Senior High in Brooklyn Center, she didn't have the right license to teach the class. Instead, she held licenses in elementary education and English as a second language.

"There was no license for heritage language teachers," Yang said. "So regardless of that, my district leader said it's the right thing to do, we're going to move forward with it."

But as she talked to other Hmong language teachers, she realized the lack of a license was a major obstacle. They had to get an "out of field" permission to teach their subject each year, and the state caps teachers at five out-of-field permissions in their career.

"I was hearing stories of teachers not feeling that they were qualified to even teach in the classroom, because they didn't have a heritage language license," she said. "There was this feeling of lack of confidence."

Theoretically, these teachers could have obtained a license by submitting a portfolio to demonstrate proficiency in their subject matter. But the process was so burdensome that it was essentially inaccessible — even for Yang.

“I put everything together, and I submitted it in, and they said, well, you’ll need a syllabus from your professor,” Yang said. But she’d gotten her teaching degree 15 years before. “My professor is dead.”

Yang reached out to Education Evolving, an advocacy nonprofit, which took up the cause.

“It was putting her program in jeopardy every single year,” recalled Alex Vitrella, the program director at Education Evolving. “We had visited her classroom and knew how powerful it was, how impactful it was for her students and for the community at large.”

In Minneapolis Public Schools, Deqa Muhidin was running into similar challenges trying to develop a Somali heritage language program. She said she received administration pushback around teacher retention, since the Somali language teachers would have to use temporary licenses. Despite the pushback, the district **launched its Somali heritage language program** in 2021. But Deqa worried about whether they would be able to sustain it.

“It was really scary knowing that we were essentially proposing a program that we could not keep up in the long run due to lack of teachers that were licensed,” said Deqa, who’s now Minneapolis Public Schools’ district program facilitator for Somali heritage language.

After years of advocacy — including an Education Evolving **report**, a change of leadership at the state’s teacher licensing agency, and the election of a Democratic trifecta — the Legislature passed a **bill** in 2023 to create a state program to help heritage language teachers obtain a license and simplify the process for them to do so.

“It was long overdue,” Deqa said.



Deqa Muhidin, the district program facilitator for Somali heritage language in Minneapolis Public Schools, and Alex Vitrella, program director for the nonprofit Education Evolving, celebrated a new law that would make it easier for heritage language teachers for languages like Somali, Hmong, and Karen to get a teaching license at the Minnesota Capitol in May 2023. Credit: Jaida Grey Eagle | Sahan Journal 2023

Grant Boulanger, the heritage language pathway specialist at the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, said the new standards “reduced burdens” on teachers by considering their multilingualism and multiculturalism an asset and reducing the number of steps necessary to complete a portfolio. It also provided for a specialist — Boulanger — to facilitate a process for heritage language teachers. The program is free to participants.

The first cohort represents a range of languages: Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, Hmong, Karen, Korean, Spanish, Somali, and Tigrinya. Thirty of those teachers signed up to pursue a language license in addition to other licenses they already hold. For 17 candidates, the license in their heritage language will be their first teaching license.

A support system and a toolkit

Teachers gaining their license through the heritage language pathway expressed praise for the cohort model and the opportunity to expand their skill sets.

“It’s a lot of value for no money,” said Andrea Sepulveda, a Spanish teacher for kindergarten through fourth grade at Hiawatha Academies in Minneapolis. A longtime teacher with a language arts license, Sepulveda had been on the brink of running out of “out of field” permissions.

Samira Abdurahman, who teaches multilingual learners at Willow Creek Middle School in Rochester, applied for the program because of her love for the “beautiful” Somali language. Her children speak Somali, but they don’t speak it the same way she does.

“I think that when you lose your language, you lose your culture, and that’s what we see these days,” she said. She hoped that by learning to teach Somali as a heritage language, she could help with a “revival of the language” so that future generations would not lose their culture.

Putting her portfolio together was challenging, in part because she could not find much relevant literature in Somali. For example, she wanted to put together a lesson on budgeting for Eid shopping, but there were no materials — so she had to make them herself.

Now her portfolio has been approved, and she is waiting for her license to come through. It will be one of the first professional Somali licenses in the state.

“I’m checking twice a day,” she said.

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Johanna Huang, a Chinese world language and culture teacher at Visitation School in Mendota Heights, said she appreciated the program's structure. Though she teaches at a private school, where a teaching license is not required, she wanted to develop her skill set.

"Being a heritage speaker does not mean you will be a good teacher to teach the heritage language," she said. "It really is, how do you deliver this to students? And that's art."

Hyein Lee, a kindergarten teacher at Sejong Academy, a Korean immersion charter school in St. Paul, trained as a pianist in Korea before coming to the United States. Through the program, she hopes to obtain her professional teaching license for the first time. Lee's upbringing in Korea gave her fluency in the language, but it also meant that she grew up in an education system that relied on rote memorization, she said. Through this program, she is learning effective and dynamic methods of teaching a language.

"This course has truly been a support system, equipping me with a fresh, innovative toolkit to teach my students in ways that I hadn't imagined before," she said.



Wilson Myo, an 11th grader at Johnson High School, tried to finish the Karen porridge in class on December 9, 2024. Credit: Dymanh Chhoun | Sahan Journal

Empowering students

In the kitchen at Johnson High School, students praised Ehtalow Zar as a dedicated teacher, and expressed appreciation for their ability to learn more about their culture in school.

Eh Htoo, a 14-year-old student, said he'd learned how to spell and write in Karen, which he hadn't known before. Poe Soe, 16, said he appreciated building connections and community.

Ehtalow Zar grew up attending St. Paul Public Schools. As the first person in her family to attend college, she initially thought she could not become a teacher. A professor told her that her English wasn't good enough to teach. But she became an associate educator in her home district, and later earned a master's degree in teaching. Now, she's one of the first teachers licensed in Karen in Minnesota.

She sees herself in her students.

“They’re teenagers. They feel like they’re not proud of where they’re from,” she said. “There’s a lot of strain when people don’t know who [the] Karen are. I think I myself experienced that as a high school student. So I want to empower them.”

And she can see her efforts paying off.

“Now I feel like a lot of students want to be part of the Karen advisory,” she said.

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