School social workers have a long history of advocating for the rights of immigrants and refugees in order to help them obtain a good education (Padilla, Shapiro, Fernández-Castro, & Faulkner, 2008). As the numbers of immigrants and refugees increase, schools must become better prepared to address the educational barriers that can hamper their education.

This article focuses on the Hmong population in the United States and includes a brief overview of: (1) recent Hmong history, particularly in relation to Hmong immigration to the United States; (2) barriers to Hmong education; (3) approaches that facilitate the education of students of Hmong heritage; and (4) ways school social workers can support the education of Hmong students in their schools.

Hmong History

The Hmong, an ethnic group of nomadic people from Southeast Asia, have a long history of resisting pressures to acculturate to the dominant cultures in the host countries in which they live. They fought during the Vietnam War, assisting the United States in Laos, and were severely persecuted for their efforts once the United States withdrew (Omato, 2002) and Pathet Lao took over the government in 1975. Many spent considerable time in refugee camps where conditions were extremely difficult. Thousands of these Hmong refugees resettled in the United States.

Barriers to Hmong Educational Success

When Hmong children first entered schools in the United States, issues pertaining to differences in educational expectations, culture, and language emerged that hindered their academic success. Prior to emigrating from Laos, the Hmong typically did not have formal schooling, but instead learned through oral traditions and participation in hands-on, practical learning such as hunting game, building homes, growing food, making clothes, and so on (Thao, 2003).

Learning how to read and write in English presented formidable challenges. The Hmong did not have a written language of their own until the 1950s (Duffy, 2000), and as a result, many Hmong are not literate in their native language or in English (Pfeifer, 2004). In 2006, U.S. Census Bureau data indicated that 94.4 percent of the...
Hmong population spoke a language other than English at home and 42.6 percent did not speak English fluently.

Hmong culture has essentially remained the same for centuries. However, as children of Hmong heritage attend American schools and master the English language, they become more acculturated and the socio-cultural distance between generations increases. Conflicts can also arise between school personnel and Hmong families, who are struggling to attain upward mobility through educational opportunities while preserving the integrity of their cultural heritage (Stevenson, 2001).

Understanding the historical, linguistic, and cultural divergence between the Hmong experience and the United States public school system is essential for school social workers and other school district personnel in order to successfully meet the needs of Hmong students (Broussard, 2003).

Facilitating the Education of Hmong Students

When immigrant students enter the educational system in the United States, there can be considerable confusion as to how to interact with school personnel (Collignon et. al., 2001). Believing that building a bridge between home and school can help overcome this problem, the St. Paul, Minnesota School District has tried several approaches to working with the Hmong community.

First, this school district has worked closely with Hmong community agencies, including the Hmong American Mutual Assistance Association and the Lao Family Community of Minnesota. Their strong ties with the Hmong community and approval from their community leaders were essential for success in working with Hmong families.

Second, school administrators have worked with leaders from the Hmong community to develop programs for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). For example, transitional language centers were developed to provide intensive English lessons and introduce students to the cultural learning environment in the United States. The school district also employed a Hmong liaison to meet regularly with the superintendent (Zehr, 2006).

(Educational Needs, continued on page 4)
An Unsafe Environment for Students

Research clearly shows that schools are extremely unsafe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, parents, and staff (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Stader & Graca, 2007; Elze, 2003). Grave safety risks are created by pervasive heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia and compounded by the greater likelihood that self-destructive behavior will occur among LGBT students and children with LGBT parents when they have negative experiences at school (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2003).

This problem is not only a social justice issue, but also a liability issue for school districts. One school district in California agreed to pay more than $1 million in a settlement that included $560,000 for six students who endured anti-gay and violent attacks while school personnel did nothing to stop the harassment (Neff, 2004).

Many efforts have been made to increase acceptance, visibility, and education regarding LGBT issues, including the formation of alliances with heterosexual groups. While these efforts are making schools safer, they fail to address bullying, harassment, and violence on a systemic level. Policies addressing harassment and violence toward LGBT students, teachers, and parents are essential to creating safer school environments and need to be a significant factor in any plan to address this problem.

Importance of Explicit Policies

Written policy is considered a statement of intent and commitment, and it is often a starting point in addressing issues that may arise within educational settings. Including sexual orientation and gender identity/expression in policy codifies school administrators’ intent and commitment to keeping schools safe and welcoming places for LGBT students and others.

Such policies guide the actions of people within the organization. Without formal written policies, people who need protection and support may find help at school, but even still, they will not have access to formal redress or resources should they experience violence or harassment. It is important for school social workers to understand the climate that LGBT students experience in schools, and to know the school policies that provide protection for them.

Many national organizations are helping pave the way, authoring policies on how to create safer educational settings for LGBT students, teachers, and parents. For example, The National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG, 2004) and the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 2001) cite the inclusion of sexual orientation and/or gender identity in school district anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies as a vital first step in creating a safe environment for LGBT students, families, and school employees.

Note that policies are only effective when implemented fully across the organization. Policies that do not state explicitly who is protected and how they are protected are not actionable, and therefore have little value. However, robust policies that are supported and communicated by school administrators do work.

Researchers in the 2003 National School Climate Study sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that LGBT students who were unprotected or unaware of LGBT policies were almost 40 percent more likely to skip school than students who were
Third, the St. Paul schools have provided teachers with “Hmong Culture Kits” containing kindergarten through third grade lesson plans that were incorporated into social studies modules and other content areas (Zehr, 2005).

### How School Social Workers Can Improve Services and Support for Hmong Students

School social workers can support the education of Hmong students by taking the following steps:

1. Learn about the Hmong language and culture, starting with a few basic expressions, such as greeting someone with “Nyob Zoo” and saying thank you with “Ua Tsaug” (Stevenson, 2001).
2. Make sure that information on Hmong history and culture is incorporated into teacher training. One helpful resource is the “Building Bridges Multicultural Education Program” curriculum, available online at http://hmongcc.org/BuildingBridgesGeneralPresentation2007Version.pdf.
3. Facilitate the integration of information about the rich Hmong heritage, language, and culture into the curriculum.
4. Advocate for policies requiring that a professional translator be available to communicate with families, preventing reliance on children for translation.
5. Build partnerships with community agencies that serve the Hmong population.
6. Work with community leaders and school administrators to create programs that meet the unique linguistic and cultural needs of the population.
7. Make sure that phone calls or personal visits are the primary form of communication with Hmong families, rather than written correspondence, which many families cannot read.
8. Stay updated on evidence-based practices for teaching English as a Second Language (Goldenberg, 2008).

### Conclusion

School districts and school social workers need to address the educational barriers faced by students of Hmong heritage and other immigrant and refugee populations. The use of evidence-based practices is critical for building English proficiency, collaborating with community partners, and bridging cultural differences in educating students from Hmong immigrant families.

### References


aware of their schools’ policies against discrimination and harassment (GLSEN, 2003).

At present, federal policy on the protection of LGBT individuals in public school systems amounts to a loose patchwork of statements that have been interpreted as implicitly inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression but do not explicitly address the needs of this population. This means that not just each state, but each independent school district, is “on its own” with regard to policies for protecting its LGBT population.

The Minnesota Study

Minnesota is one of only 20 states that include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination statute and 12 states that include gender identity/expression (Human Rights Campaign, 2008). The Minnesota Human Rights Act (MHRA) of 2003 clearly articulates that individuals cannot be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression and that this protection applies to staff, students, and visitors to public schools.

Despite the existence of MHRA, Minnesota State Statute 121A.03 Subd.2 only requires independent school districts to include sexual, racial, and religious harassment and violence in their anti-harassment policies (Human Rights Campaign, 2008). Statute 127A.42 Subd.2, Article 6 states that Minnesota independent school districts may lose state aid if they do not have an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy inclusive of all the MHRA categories except sexual orientation. This apparent contradiction in the law countermines the efforts of policymakers to increase the responsibility of school districts for protecting the LGBT population.

The Minnesota School Board Association and the Minnesota Association of School Administrators develop and disseminate model policy statements for school districts that comply with state statute but go no further. These statements do not include sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

[Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, from page 3]

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Understanding Adolescent Health: The Social Worker’s Role. For more information visit www.naswwebed.org
Nevertheless, each school district has the autonomy to create additional categories or expand the definitions of required categories. Yet, a 2005 Minnesota study that investigated school districts’ anti-harassment policies for sexual orientation and/or gender identity/ expression found that nearly 93 percent of the school districts in a random sample of Minnesota Independent School Districts did not include sexual orientation and none included gender identity as a separate, protected category.

**Implications for the LGBT Population and School Districts**

Conflicting state statutes, non-inclusive model policies, and lack of oversight have led to uncertainty as to what does and does not constitute discrimination and harassment. The lack of clarity provides an opportunity for harassment and violence to occur with impunity.

**Role of School Social Workers**

The findings of the 2005 Minnesota study mentioned above point to the need for policy reform at the state level. School social work professional associations should lobby for state laws that require all school districts to include the LGBT population in harassment policies. The statewide civil rights organization, Outfront Minnesota, is presently lobbying for legislative reforms that resolve inconsistencies and guarantee accountability for all school districts with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

School social workers should review their districts’ harassment policies to determine if the LGBT population is presently protected. If your school district’s current policy provides for adequate protection against discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, you should work with students, staff, administrators, and parents to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the policy and that it is strictly enforced. If the current policy statement does not afford explicit protection for the above categories, then policy reform becomes necessary and school social workers should advocate for new policy on behalf of their students.

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CHALLENGES FACING UNDOCUMENTED MEXICAN IMMIGRANT STUDENTS
By Carol Goodemann, LSW

During the past decade, the number of undocumented Mexican immigrants settling in the United States—men, women, and children—has grown rapidly. This demographic trend affects multiple facets of society, from politics to sports, pop culture to education. School social workers find themselves increasingly challenged to ensure that the children of these immigrants have equal access to culturally appropriate services and education.

The National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) policy regarding immigrants and refugees specifically addresses issues affecting undocumented immigrants. The policy states that social workers should ensure that undocumented immigrants have access to educational, medical, and mental health services and that the children of undocumented immigrants have access to higher education without being penalized for their parents’ undocumented status (NASW, 2006).

This article describes one Mexican immigrant student’s quest for equal access to educational and employment opportunities. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, an estimated 80 to 85 percent of all Mexicans immigrating during the past 10 years were undocumented (Passel, 2005); Maria was one of them.

Maria’s Story
Maria (a pseudonym) was a 10-year-old Mexican child, excited to visit relatives in the United States. As her visit extended from weeks into months, her parents enrolled her in school. She believed her family was staying longer to learn English, and she says she does not remember her parents actually telling her they were staying permanently.

Maria’s School Experience
She studied diligently and was thrilled to have the opportunity to learn English. However, problems with other Hispanic students surfaced in middle school. Some of them used ethnic slurs to address her and accused her of “trying to be white” by making an effort to achieve academically.

Unable to understand why her peers put her down for wanting to do well in school, she asked: “How are good grades a white thing? Why do I have to be more ‘Mexican’ than the Mexicans and more ‘white’ than the whites to be accepted?”

Maria excelled academically as a high school student. Involved in many extracurricular activities and community organizations, she was well respected by teachers and other students. She appeared to be on her way to living the American dream.

Revealing Educational and Other Disparities
A closer examination of Maria’s life, however, reveals the social and economic disparities between undocumented immigrants and legal residents. In many states, undocumented residents like Maria are unable to obtain photo identifications, driver’s licenses, voter registration cards, or jobs. To make matters worse, Maria is unable to receive federal or state financial assistance for post-secondary education.

Unlike Maria, who strived to succeed academically, many undocumented students are perceived as not caring about or valuing education. In reality, when undocumented students realize that higher education and subsequent career employment are unattainable they often feel that graduating from high school is not worthwhile.
The Role of Family in Mexican Culture

Family is at the center of Mexican culture. Family obligations, perceived support, and family role models are components of familialism or loyalty to the family (Miranda, Bilot, Peluso, Berman, & Van Meek, 2006). Someone who is in need will turn to her family first, before talking to friends, coworkers, or teachers.

For school social workers, being sensitive to the Mexican immigrant population’s needs involves ensuring that interventions are family focused (Rothman, 2008). For example, interpreters should be available for non-Spanish-speaking practitioners and limited-English-speaking clients. It is important to avoid using the student in the role of interpreter.

It is important to provide sufficient space for family members and stimulating toys for children when preparing for a meeting. As mentioned earlier, family is the center of the Mexican culture and numerous adults and children will often accompany an individual to the appointment.

Familiarity with the culture increases a social worker’s ability to provide culturally appropriate interventions. When in doubt about cultural norms for handling a situation, the school social worker should ask someone who is familiar with Mexican culture for guidance.

How School Social Workers Can Help

School social workers can influence internal school biases to improve attitudes toward Mexican immigrant families (Altshuler &
It is also important to be aware that Mexican immigrant parents often feel disconnected from school due to cultural and language barriers.

The school social worker can provide support, and encourage parents to be involved in their children’s education. Serving as advocates for immigrant families by mobilizing them to speak up for the needs of their own families must be a priority for social workers serving this population.

**Equality for Children of Immigrants**

When interviewed, Maria (now an adult) addressed removing penalties on children for their parents’ actions. She stated that she did not choose to come here, but that her parents brought her. Yet, she is being severely penalized for her parents’ decision to immigrate illegally to the United States.

Maria wants and needs equal access to opportunities in education and employment. Enrolling in a post-secondary institution is not the issue for her. Securing funding to pay for her education, however, is a significant barrier. Furthermore, if she succeeds and graduates from college, it will be nearly impossible for her to get a job in the United States.

Maria is one of the countless undocumented immigrant students struggling to secure their future in this country. “I hope they [U.S. citizens] know how hard it is,” she said. “We came to get a better life and we can’t do anything. We tried to get papers and the lawyer took our money and left. It’s so hard, and I don’t know what I can do about it.”

School social workers need to advocate on the macro level for the children brought here by their parents. We must remember that these children did not choose to be thrust into a foreign culture, with limited rights and access to services.

What will happen to Maria? Will she have the opportunity to use her talents in a country that seems hostile and is doing virtually nothing to help support the efforts of immigrant children who want to succeed? Without reforms in immigration policy, her hopes and dreams will likely remain unfulfilled—her talents unrealized. We will all lose if this happens, as this bright, intelligent woman, and others like her, will remain unable to contribute to our nation as they wish to do.

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The Fourth International School Social Work Conference is not only an occasion to meet many other social workers from around the world, but also an opportunity to challenge some of our basic approaches to social work that are taken for granted in our own countries and organizations. There are over 30 countries that have school social workers; we have many commonalities—situations any school social worker would recognize—as well as many dramatic and subtle differences.

An international conference allows us to see in greater relief what we are doing through the practices that are different from our own, yet commonplace in other countries. The problems faced by children and families have universal features, but they also reflect divergent cultural, economic, and social circumstances.

The 2006 Third International School Social Work conference in Korea gave participants rare and valuable insights into a variety of different forms of social work practice. Participants represented the entire spectrum of international development in terms of economic stages, demographic characteristics, constitutional features, and religious settings.

At the 2006 conference, the New Zealand delegates expressed their surprise by the comparative lack of poverty issues encountered by Scandinavian social workers. Social workers in New Zealand routinely work with children who are suffering the adverse educational outcomes associated with poverty and work diligently to ensure that the basic needs for food and clothing are met for many children in their schools.

One of these social workers described his experiences working in the refugee camps with families displaced by the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, where he witnessed extreme physical deprivation.

Despite the differences in their circumstances, there were sufficient commonalities in the experiences of conference participants for them to recognize their kindred challenges and see new possibilities. Furthermore, the conference allowed participants to look critically at aspects of their own practices.

The Fourth International School Social Work Conference will be held in 2009 in New Zealand. School social workers in New Zealand will showcase how their own programs and practices have developed in response to the special needs of children and families. There are subtle, yet significant differences between New Zealand society and other English speaking, settler societies like the United States.

For instance, in New Zealand we speak of social workers in schools, not school social workers. Since the mid-1990s, social workers in schools are employed by external social service providers, and they practice independently and on a voluntary basis with children and families. This situation often creates partnership challenges for schools, health care facilities, and social service agencies, but it also provides special advantages for social workers and their clients.

New Zealand’s school social work profession is a reflection of its recent economic, cultural, and social transformation to a multicultural society in which the Maori indigenous population...
commands a greater role in shaping social policy and practices. A high percentage of clients in schools are new migrants, largely from the islands of the South Pacific, i.e., Samoa, the Cook Islands and Tonga.

The numbers of Maori and Pacific social workers that provide government-sponsored services are, fortunately, increasing. Their social workers have developed indigenous and Pacific models of practice rooted in the cultural traditions of Maori and Polynesia. While culturally based practice affords greater accountability to communities, it also creates more obstacles for evaluation, because programs and services are often modified by local tribal and village practices.

New Zealand schools have been heavily influenced by the growth in social inequality that accompanied the neoliberal socio-economic reforms of the 1980s. New Zealand had its own brand of “Reaganomics” (called “Rogernomics,” after Minister of Finance Roger Douglas) that attempted to reduce dependency on the state. The reforms were embraced even more quickly and completely than in the United States, due to the nation’s flexible constitutional laws.

For better or worse, New Zealand has been able to pioneer a wide range of social experiments, because it is a small country. Child protection and youth justice laws were combined under the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act of 1989, which emphasized empowerment, giving parents ultimate authority for decisions affecting their children.

The Family Group Conference is the primary instrument for dealing with children’s needs, giving equal weight to cultural issues alongside other issues when assessing the needs of the child. New Zealand’s current Children’s Commissioner, Cindy Kiro, will be one of the conference speakers. She will discuss how cultural issues are central to the rights of children under the 1989 legislation described above.

Not only will school social workers coming to New Zealand in April 2009 be able to meet and learn from so many other social workers from around the world, but they will have the opportunity to spend at least a few days getting to know the culture and geography of New Zealand. The conference will include Maori and Pacific cultural performances, as well as recreational opportunities afforded by the country’s spectacular natural attractions.

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