

Spanish-immersion first graders listen to teacher Holly Soden on Monday, Jan. 30, 2012 at Lino Lakes Elementary School, where Spanish-immersion programs are available for first- and second-graders. (MPR Photo/Jennifer Simonson)

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English-only measure still divides Lino Lakes

by [Laura Yuen](http://minnesota.publicradio.org/about/people/mpr_people_display.php?aut_id=30280), Minnesota Public Radio March 12, 2012

LINO LAKES, Minn. — In a first-grade class at Lino Lakes Elementary School, a circle of students, most of them white, sing children's songs in Spanish. The class is part of a fledgling but popular Spanish immersion program at the school, where Principal Ron Burris strives to promote a welcoming environment for all students. It's also a small island of linguistic diversity in a community where, a year and a half ago, officials made it clear that only English would be the language of city documents.

The Lino Lakes City Council in July 2010 approved a controversial measure barring the local government from translating official city actions and documents into other languages. Though not an outright ban on foreign language, some residents said the policy was a symbol of intolerance in Lino Lakes, a community that is 90 percent white.

"It hurt my soul when it happened, because I didn't want to be associated with a policy that was so contrary to what I think about personhood, people and community," Burris said.

Burris said what troubled him most about the city action is that it fed into a misguided ideology of what it means to be American. "This is America, red, white, and blue -- and any inkling that we're not English-speaking Americans, then we're not with the program, and we should love it or leave it," he said. "That's some of the mentality that was present."

Some residents critical of the policy banded together, met with local officials, and mounted unsuccessful campaigns to unseat the mayor and a council member who proposed the resolution. Others rallied to their support, arguing that the measure promotes unity through a common culture, including language.

**SYMBOLIC OF A MINNESOTA DIVIDE**

With its tranquil lakes and wide open fields, the bedroom community about 18 miles north of St. Paul maintains a north-country feel. The debate in Lino Lakes points to a larger divide in Minnesota, a state that is changing. The state's foreign-born population grew by 235 percent over the past two decades. That's the 12th-fastest growth rate in the nation.

Some longtime residents are uncomfortable with the pace of growth and change, even though recent immigration patterns that have altered the makeup of Minnesota's central cities and suburbs have yet to take hold in Lino Lakes. In the past decade, the city's population swelled by 20 percent to more than 20,000.

"You go from a very rural community to one that's growing up -- houses, businesses," said Charlie Kratsch, CEO of software company Infinite Campus, who grew up in and around Lino Lakes. "It's change, and sometimes it's difficult to deal with that."

Kratsch, a Star Trek fan, built his Starship Enterprise-shaped company headquarters a few blocks away in neighboring Blaine. Complete with an indoor rock-climbing wall and koi pond, it's in an area that once was a stretch of swamps. Kratcsch remembers shooting clay pigeons there as a boy. But when Infinite Campus was built, not everyone saw it as a sign of progress, said Kratsch, who recruits software developers from all over the world and said he finds strength in diversity.

"The night of our grand opening, we had a gun person shoot a high-powered rifle through our building," he said. "It went through two sets of windows, through my office, and embedded in a wall up here."

Some people in Lino Lakes, he said, want the community to stay the same.

**NEWCOMER IS WARY**

Although Minnesota has a reputation as a state that welcomes people from other parts of the world, the Lino Lakes policy and the cool reception some residents give outsiders makes one newcomer wary of her new home.

Stephanie Lexvold is a stay-at-home mom who moved from Texas to Lino Lakes last year after her husband found a job in Minnesota. Lexvold, who is of Mexican heritage, has felt isolated in her new community. Lexvold said that at some stores, the workers follow her. She said strangers ignore her when she says "hello."

"It kind of seems they stereotype me, and don't really want to make a friendship with me," she said. "So that's the only one bad thing I do not like about Minnesota. "In Texas, there are so many Hispanics, so it never was a problem over there," said Lexvold, who has long brown hair and olive-toned skin. "It's just something I've had to learn to adjust to here."

Lexvold didn't even know that the town she now calls home adopted English as its official language. The resolution hasn't led to a single change in how the city operates. When Lino Lakes passed the English-only measure, some residents and clergy leaders were horrified. The area's chamber of commerce warned that it would hurt the region's ability to attract companies and skilled workers.

City Council members said the policy wasn't meant to bar people from speaking or learning foreign languages, or to discourage non-English speakers from moving to Lino Lakes. It simply affirmed that the city would only print official documents in English, as it does now. They also said it would save on future costs, in line with the town's fiscally conservative ideals.

**IMMIGRATION AT HEART OF THE DEBATE**

But as much as the City Council wanted to avoid talking about immigration, it was a prominent part of the debate.

"I'm tired of going to restaurants, and I hear all the new families not speaking English," Carl Elmquist, who lives in the area, told the council the night it passed the policy. "They speak whatever their native tongue is to their kids, and there doesn't seem to be any teaching the young kids that are in their family English."

Elmquist, whose grandparents came from Sweden, was among those who spoke in favor of the English-language measure. The legislation became a lightning rod for people across the nation.

One woman wrote City Hall saying it was time that communities "took back our country, instead of letting all others of different nationalities run it." Then-Gov. Tim Pawlenty also weighed in, saying he would support a measure declaring English as Minnesota's official language, as dozens of other states have done.

At the Republican precinct caucuses held last month in Lino Lakes, voters said they supported the city policy, even if it didn't seem all that necessary.

"I actually have never heard another language spoken in Lino Lakes," said Joseph Turner, 23.

For his father, the policy spoke of a concern of some residents. "We're an English-based country," said David Turner, 60. "America's tradition has been a melting pot throughout its history, and we all like immigrants, but they need to become American, and that's English."

Another Lino Lakes caucus-goer, attorney Brian Davis, agreed. He cringes that U.S. culture might bend to outside influences.

"If people come here to change the country, that doesn't work well for me," Davis said. "The whole idea that we have to change for everybody else is the wrongheaded idea, and it's getting us into more and more trouble."

But Minnesota's newest residents aren't isolating themselves in native-language enclaves. Families with experience in uprooting themselves from other countries say the language barrier largely disappears within a generation.

**A MELTING POT**

Lino Lakes resident Thai Lee, a health educator for a nonprofit agency, represents that change.

Born in a Thai refugee camp, Lee arrived with his parents in the United States in 1978, when he was 3. His parents moved the family from Tennessee to Wisconsin to pursue adult English-language classes. Lee, now 36, recalls how hard it was for them.

"For me, it was OK," he said. "For them, it was a struggle. It took them 10 to 15 years for them to learn the language. Looking back, wow, it's amazing we came this far."

Though he has assimilated into his adoptive country, Lee tries to keep his ties to Hmong culture. In his "man cave" of a basement, the walls are decorated with a deer mount, posters of Bruce Lee and Braveheart, and old photos of the late Hmong General Vang Pao.

Lee and his wife left the East Side of St. Paul for Lino Lakes three years ago, for the same reasons anyone moves to the suburbs: a bigger house to raise their children, quiet neighborhoods, strong schools, and a shorter commute to his job.

Their white neighbors have always been welcoming, and their kids never had a problem making friends at school or on the playground. So it surprised Lee that his city would take on what he considers such a divisive position. He said his mother, now in her 60s, still struggles with English.

"She could go to Target and ask, 'Where's the salt?'" he said. "But if you gave her a form, she would have no idea. We have to think of the immigrants who are newer to this country, who didn't grow up here, who don't know the language as well I do."

Minnesota historian Hy Berman said immigrants have long been expected to assimilate immediately after arriving in the United States.

"Even Theodore Roosevelt said he was against hyphenated Americanism, and that all Americans should speak 'American'!" Berman said.

**A HISTORY OF TENSION OVER NEWCOMERS**

In Minnesota, there is a long history of friction between longtime residents and outsiders. In the late 19th century, German and Scandinavian immigrants to Minnesota were discouraged from speaking their native tongue, Berman said. During World War I, a state commission formed to stamp out cultural differences.

Berman said although Minnesota learned from those lessons, it's tricky to have a meaningful conversation about measures like the Lino Lakes policy because no one wants to be called intolerant, much less racist.

"They don't want to talk about it," he said. "They want to enforce uniformity without talking about it."

Some in Lino Lakes have embraced people from other countries and cultures, and held discussions on how to make the community a more welcoming place. But the pace of change is gradual, often taken in small steps, such as Lexvold's attendance at the largely white evangelical Eagle Brook Church, which looks like a suburban high school.

A modern mega church with a coffee shop, stadium seating, and a Christian rock band, Eagle Brook has greeters who are trained to spot that deer-in-headlights look on the faces of first-time visitors. Their strategy is to make newcomers feel connected, even in a room of nearly 2,000 worshippers.

It's where Ylwa Eklund Falk and her husband, Fredrik Eklund, both 26, forged friendships after moving to the Twin Cities from Sweden last summer. "It's given us so much," Falk said. "And for me anyway, it's really been a huge part of making Minnesota home."

Her husband agreed. "Coming here at first, we knew no one," Eklund said. "And now we can't walk down the hall without cheering at least a half dozen, or like, three dozen people."

**NEW SWEDISH IMMIGRANTS**

The couple moved to Minnesota after Fredrik Eklund accepted a one-year contract with a company that makes Swedish-style clogs. They live some 20 miles from Lino Lakes in Chisago City, Minn., a town founded by Swedish immigrants. This blond, blue-eyed couple joke about having migrated all this way to the United States, only to end up in Little Sweden.

"As soon as you tell people that you're from Sweden, everyone goes, 'Oh, really! I'm a quarter Swede,' or, 'My mom was Norwegian,'" Eklund said. "They kind of feel like they're related to you because you're Scandinavian, and they're three- or four-generations Scandinavian back down the line."

Perhaps the insularity of longtime Minnesotans is more visible through the eyes of outsiders. Fredrik Eklund was baffled when told of the English-only resolution. Eklund said he doesn't like messages that marginalize people. Both he and his wife grew up in diverse cities in Sweden, and it didn't take long for them to pick up on some Minnesotans' prejudices -- toward American Muslims in particular.

"If you hear the word going around in Chisago, they have not a lot of positive things to say about anyone coming from the Muslim culture," he said. "And that's really sad because we have a lot of Muslim friends back home... and there's no truth to that picture."

But his wife said she partly understands why some Americans have turned inward. "Something obviously happened after 9/11," she said. "The U.S., for good reason, became a more closed and suspicious country. To me, it's kind of ironic, given that this country's built on immigrants."