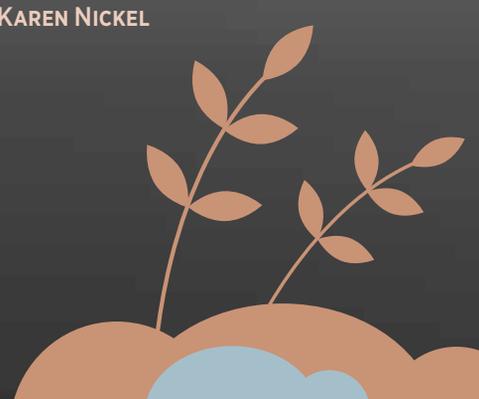




Turning Obstacles into Stepping Stones:

A Cohort Model to Navigate the Pathway to Teacher Licensure

BY MEGAN BUDKE AND KAREN NICKEL



“Today’s teacher recruitment pipeline needs to be expanded. During the 2017-18 academic year, at least 49 of 56 U.S. states and territories experienced shortages in teachers qualified to teach world languages and bilingual education. Declining teacher education enrollments, increasing K–12 student enrollments, and high teacher attrition rates all contribute to the challenge. And shortages are only projected to grow. By 2025, there could be a hiring gap of 100,000 teachers annually. It’s time to reimagine how we recruit and nurture the next generation of world language teachers.” (ACTFL, n.d.).

It began with a question. “Where is everybody?” That was the question that Pang Yang, the 2019 Minnesota Council on the Teaching of Languages and Cultures (MCTLC) Teacher of the Year, asked when she attended her first MCTLC conference and realized she was the only teacher of Hmong present. It was this question that helped the MCTLC begin a journey of radical listening—“listening without judgment, keeping silent and giving full attention so that the speaker will continue sharing” (Sudermann, 2020).

As an organization, we hit pause to create the space needed to listen and learn from Pang and other heritage language teachers. In hearing their stories, we learned that “it’s not about giving everyone

the mic and all speaking equally ... it’s about giving the mic to those who are often silenced” (Suderman, 2020). We learned more about supporting specific needs for teachers navigating these spaces of silence. We’ve made a number of changes since then, including how our organization supports teachers through the teacher licensure process in Minnesota. Many teachers have specific expertise but face numerous systemic challenges when seeking licensure.

Working with our state licensing organization and institutions of higher education, we have embarked on a cohort model that invites teachers to work collaboratively with guidance and support to complete the process required for them to gain licensure.



What Are the Benefits When Teachers Are Licensed?

- Full access to teacher benefits, including pay scale, tenure, access to professional development funds, and union membership
- Teacher retention
- Teacher recruitment

In all disciplines, but certainly in world languages, teachers of diverse backgrounds offer insight into different cultures and how language is used by a variety of speakers. In addition, learners benefit in a variety of ways when their teachers look like them. One study found that “when students had teachers of the same race as them, they reported feeling more cared for, more interested in their schoolwork, and more confident in their teachers’ abilities to communicate with them. These students also reported putting forth more effort in school and having higher college aspirations” (Boisrond, 2017).

Unfortunately, many teachers work under a provisional license and are not allowed to remain in the school/district when that license expires. What message does it send when learners see their teachers, particularly those of color, being let go and replaced? In a world of rampant teacher shortages, this is a problem. We need every qualified person with a passion for teaching to be able to find stability and establish continuity in their work.

What Are the Barriers?

- *Understanding How to Get Licensure*

Obtaining teacher licensure in Minnesota requires teachers to demonstrate that they have met the pedagogy standards, or Standards of Effective Practice (SEP), and the content standards, such as the Standards for Teachers of World Languages and Cultures. In addition, teachers in Minnesota must also navigate four licensure tiers, or pathways. Some tiers do not include access to benefits, representation through union membership, or advancement on salary scales. Tier 3 is a pathway to access full licensure and benefits.

A candidate can choose to complete a teacher preparation program at a qualifying college or university and receive their recommendation for licensure, submit a portfolio for review, or complete post baccalaureate work (Education Minnesota, 2021). On each of these pathways, teachers must pass applicable content and pedagogy exams as well.

Even when a teacher holds a license, if the license is from another U.S. state or country, it is often not recognized by the state in which they are applying for a teaching position. Teachers must then find a licensing institution to complete additional state requirements. This often requires them to pay for and complete additional courses to access the necessary state teaching license.

Tiered Licensure in Minnesota

TIER 1 REQUIREMENTS

BACHELOR'S DEGREE
FOR ALL SUBJECTS EXCEPT CAREER & TECHNICAL ED (CTE) OR CAREER PATHWAYS COURSE OF STUDY (CP)*

OR

***CTE OR CP CANDIDATES MUST HAVE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:**

- AA degree
- Professional certification
- Five years of relevant work experience

Candidate must have a BA degree unless teaching Career and Tech Ed or Career Pathways, in which case must have AA degree, professional certification, or five years of relevant work experience.

- ▶ Good for one year and can be renewed three times, though there are conditions under which districts can renew further.
- ▶ District and teacher apply jointly. District must show it could not find a Tier 2, 3, or 4 teacher.
- ▶ These teachers are not in the teacher bargaining unit and are not earning credit toward probation. Teachers at Tier 1 do not have continuing contract rights.

Anticipated transition details can be found at www.educationminnesota.org/resources.aspx#credentiaals-licensure.

Revised April 22, 2021. Subject to change. 199661 1918

TIER 2 REQUIREMENTS

BACHELOR'S DEGREE
FOR ALL SUBJECTS EXCEPT CTE OR CP*

AND

MINNESOTA APPROVED TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM ENROLLMENT

OR

MASTER'S DEGREE IN CONTENT AREA

OR

TWO OF THE FOLLOWING:

- Completed teacher preparation program
- Eight upper-division credits in subject area
- Training in subject-specific teaching methods
- Passing scores on state subject area and pedagogy tests
- Two or more years experience teaching in subject area

Candidate must be enrolled in a teacher preparation program, OR have a master's degree, OR have two of the following: completed teacher preparation program; eight upper-division credits in subject area; training in subject-specific teaching methods; two years of experience teaching in subject area; passing scores on state tests in subject area.

- ▶ Good for two years and can be renewed three times.
- ▶ District and teacher apply jointly.
- ▶ These teachers are in the teacher bargaining unit and are not probationary. However, if these teachers get to Tier 3, then two years of successful teaching at Tier 2 can count toward the Tier 3 requirement of three years of probation. Teachers at Tier 2 do not have continuing contract rights.

TIER 3 REQUIREMENTS

BACHELOR'S DEGREE
FOR ALL SUBJECTS EXCEPT CTE OR CP*

AND

PASSING SCORES
CONTENT AND PEDAGOGY

AND

ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- Completion of a Minnesota-approved teacher preparation program (traditional or alternative, if accredited)
- Completion of a prep program from another state that includes field-specific student teaching equivalent to requirements of MN programs
- Portfolio in a given licensure field
- Three years teaching experience at Tier 2 without being placed on an improvement plan
- Professional teaching license from another state, license in good standing, and two years of teaching experience

Candidate has BA degree for all subjects except CTE or CP; passing scores on content and pedagogy exams, and ONE of the following: Completion of a Minnesota-approved teacher preparation program (traditional or alternative, if accredited); completion of a prep program from another state that includes field-specific student teaching equivalent to requirements of MN programs; portfolio in a given licensure field; professional teaching license from another state, license in good standing, and two years of teaching experience; three years of teaching experience under a Tier 2 license and evidence of summative evaluations that did not result in placement on an improvement plan.

- ▶ Good for three years and can be renewed indefinitely.
- ▶ Teacher applies for the license.
- ▶ These teachers are in the bargaining unit and must complete three years of probation. If a teacher at Tier 3 got to Tier 3 via Tier 2, two years of teaching at Tier 2 can count toward the three-year probationary requirement. Teachers at Tier 3 have continuing contract rights after completion of the probationary period.

TIER 4 REQUIREMENTS

BACHELOR'S DEGREE
FOR ALL SUBJECTS EXCEPT CTE OR CP*

AND

COMPLETION OF PREPARATION PROGRAM

AND

PASSING SCORES
CONTENT AND PEDAGOGY

AND

PASSING SCORES ON BOARD-APPROVED SKILLS EXAM

AND

THREE YEARS TEACHING EXPERIENCE IN MINNESOTA

AND

MOST RECENT SUMMATIVE EVALUATION MUST NOT HAVE RESULTED IN AN IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The candidate must meet all Tier 3 requirements, have completed a preparation program or portfolio, have passing scores on content and pedagogy exams and passing scores on board-approved skills exam. In addition, the most recent summative evaluation must not have resulted in placing the teacher on an improvement plan.

- ▶ Good for five years and can be renewed indefinitely.
- ▶ Teacher applies for the license.
- ▶ These teachers are in the bargaining unit. Teachers at Tier 4 have continuing contract rights after completion of the applicable probationary requirement.



THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS



One of the alternative pathways to licensure is the portfolio option.

LEFT: Lenny Ulloa Silva, MCTLC Cohort Lead, Membership Chair, and Webmaster.

A major obstacle that world language teachers face in obtaining licensure is that certification is required in the language they are to teach. Unfortunately, there are no certification programs available for a license in many languages. For example, teachers of Hmong and Somali have not been able to go to an institution in Minnesota and be certified to teach in those languages. For teachers of these languages, alternative pathways must be explored.

One of these alternative pathways to licensure is the portfolio option. Any teacher can choose to submit a portfolio for licensure in Minnesota. It provides an opportunity for teachers to submit evidence of mastery of each SEP as well as each of the world languages and cultures teaching standards.

However, candidates must navigate numerous standards and provide evidence for various indicators within the standards. Candidates are often advised to submit three or four pieces of evidence for each standard to ensure that the level of mastery is met. This has made it necessary to submit hundreds of pages of documentation for a complete portfolio. Once submitted, the portfolios are reviewed by a panel and must be approved; licensure is not guaranteed.

Finally, teachers in Minnesota are required to pass both pedagogy and content assessments for licensure. Teachers who are not L1 speakers of English, many of whom are teachers of color, confront challenges in passing these exams. This then becomes a barrier to accessing full licensure.

- *Financial Obstacles*

Many teachers who seek licensure are already teaching full-time under a provisional license to support themselves and/or their families. This means that they cannot necessarily leave their current job and become a full-time student. In addition, attending a teacher preparation program is the most expensive pathway to obtain licensure.

Licensure via portfolio is a less expensive option, but it still costs as much as \$500 to submit each part of the portfolio. The portfolios must be reviewed and approved by a panel, so licensure via this pathway is not guaranteed.

How Does the Cohort Support Teachers?

“With this Portfolio Cohort, I am working with humans who really want to teach, and they have the passion and knowledge to do it. Only because of a broken system they cannot.”

– Lenny Ulloa Silva, MCTLC Cohort Lead, Membership Chair, and Webmaster

The Portfolio Process

Pursuing licensure via a portfolio is not a new process in the state of Minnesota. The portfolio pathway has been in existence for some time. It is unique in that it allows candidates to submit individual pieces of evidence for each teaching standard, rather than completing a teacher preparation program.

“So many educators of color have tremendous qualifications that fit outside of the traditional teacher preparation/higher education model. The portfolio process is the ability to evidence these qualifications to the state,” stated Alex Liuzzi, Executive Director of the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) in Minnesota in 2021.

However, licensure via portfolio is a complicated and arduous process that is challenging to navigate alone. Interpreting the level of performance expected from each standard and providing evidence for the various indicators requires significant time and effort. Locating and attending professional development to meet the standards of the portfolio can be expensive. Candidates need some technical expertise to organize their digital portfolio in accordance with the expectations from the state. In addition, if a teacher is not an L1 speaker of English, linguistic and cultural differences can create further barriers.

- *The Cohort Model*

To facilitate a more collaborative process for this alternative licensure pathway, PELSB partnered with three organizations in 2021: the Chinese Language Teachers Association of Minnesota, the League of Latinx Educators, and MCTLC, to create the first cohort

model. Each organization supports a cohort of teachers seeking licensure through alternative pathways.

These organizations receive support from PELSB staff as well as from a partner organization familiar with teacher preparation for licensure. MCTLTC selected Concordia College in Moorhead as their partner organization. “We hope, with the support of partner organizations, that this process broadens the recruitment process to individuals connected to education but concerned about the barriers to licensure,” stated Liuzzi (2021).

The cohort model creates a collaborative, supportive space that helps candidates navigate paperwork, understand the standards, locate professional development, and answer candidates’ questions regarding the process. “We hope the cohort process also provides comradery and helpful dialogue regarding how to meet standards and how to show evidence,” adds Liuzzi. “All our belief in the power of the cohort is a theory of action—we believe that individuals working together to understand standards, meet evidence, find professional development, and support each other helps build strong teachers and strong portfolios. This is our first attempt at the cohort model.”

Navigating the complexities of licensure is a challenging process. One of the benefits of the cohort model is that it creates a collaborative space for candidates to navigate these challenges together. This is an ongoing, consistent, collaborative space for candidates to work together under the guidance of experienced teachers. The MCTLTC cohort is led by our membership chair, Lenny Ulloa Silva. He is an immigrant to the United States and has had to navigate licensure in multiple ways. His experience and testimony have helped create a safe space where candidates are comfortable working with him and asking questions.

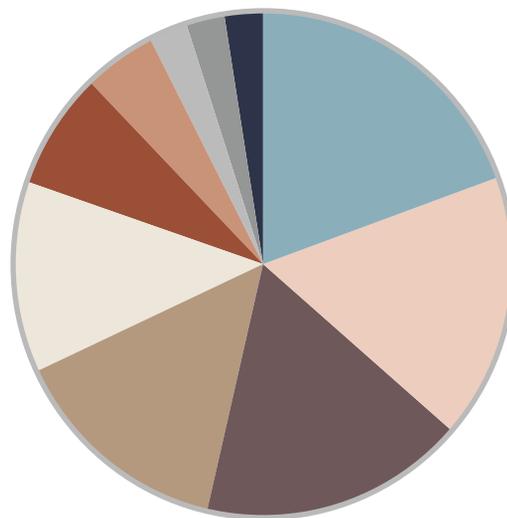
Ulloa Silva holds monthly meetings for candidates to gather, work together, and pose questions around standards they are working towards. He then meets with Dr. Cassandra Glynn, Director of Graduate Education and Associate Professor of Education at Concordia College, Moorhead, and utilizes her expertise to answer questions. In addition, Ulloa Silva meets monthly with PELSB leadership to pose questions from his cohort, seek answers, and request support. All of these structures have helped build a system of support so that candidates no longer have to navigate licensure alone.

- *Professional Development Modules*

One of the obstacles within the portfolio model was that multiple pieces of evidence were requested, so that at least one of them would evidence a particular teaching skill. Rather than requesting numerous pieces of evidence and hoping for the best, Glynn created high quality professional development modules that pinpoint the evidence needed for multiple standards.

“The modules are asynchronous and meet multiple standards of effective practice,” explains Glynn (2021). “They are not required for portfolio candidates, but they’re an option for demonstrating how candidates are meeting standards. They can learn content

Cohort Participant Licensure Goals



through the modules, and the modules provide suggestions for how they can demonstrate competency in the standards.” These are provided at a low cost (\$10 each) to ensure that the modules are affordable and accessible for candidates.

- *Proserva*

In the past, the portfolio process required candidates to adapt to the organizing system of the state. Unlike in classrooms where we can personalize according to our students’ needs, this method of organization did not differentiate to address the potential needs of non-L1 speakers of English. These candidates may not be as familiar with the language and may be challenged by the required organizational structure of the portfolio.

To help with this process, PELSB has partnered with Proserva, a public benefit company that provides the organizational system needed to support teachers to achieve licensure via portfolio. Proserva created an interface with all the Minnesota Teaching Standards for both pedagogy and each content area so that candidates can upload their evidence and easily connect it to the appropriate standard(s). It is a more efficient, intuitive platform that helps organize candidates’ work for them, rather than placing the burden of organization solely on the candidate.

Proserva’s platform also helps candidates identify which standards have not been met and points them toward professional development opportunities to support this work. Numerous organizations in

“I’m excited to help candidates, who have faced so many hoops, especially as heritage and immigrant language teachers, submit a portfolio for licensure. I want them to feel confident about what they’ve submitted.” – DR. CASSANDRA GLYNN

our state hope to partner with this platform in the future to provide the professional development needed to meet each state standard.

Ongoing Work

“What I am doing is not fixing the system. I am only helping with the ... mess. The ... mess will keep going. Licensure is the problem.”

– Lenny Ulloa Silva, MCTLC Cohort Lead, Membership Chair, and Webmaster

We recognize that this is an ongoing process and we continue to take steps forward and innovate. For example, one participant in the current cohort also noted that in the future it might be possible for cohort participants to be grouped by specific licensure area and work collaboratively, step-by-step through various parts of the licensure process. Another example is how we label MCTLC conference sessions and workshops. We now flag them for re-licensure so that those who already have a license can easily identify and attend sessions that support Minnesota re-licensure requirements. We now also plan to label MCTLC conference sessions and workshops for licensure. This will allow candidates who are working to obtain licensure to easily identify MCTLC sessions and workshops that support their journey to obtain a Tier 3 teaching license. Innovations like these help us take a more holistic approach towards supporting the cohort model.

Despite these accomplishments, we recognize that we are merely applying Band-Aids. The system is broken and it needs to be fixed. We have reached a tipping point in which current licensure requirements are no longer supporting a sustainable teacher workforce. We must do more if we want to build a sustainable workforce, keep teachers in classrooms, and ensure that all teachers—particularly those of color who feel these systemic barriers most keenly—have equitable access to licensure, benefits, and job stability.



We are hopeful. We have taken numerous steps forward over the past year. Our partnerships have brought multiple organizations together to offer a more cohesive system of support. As Glynn states, “I’m excited to help candidates, who have faced so many hoops, especially as heritage and immigrant language teachers, submit a portfolio for licensure. I want them to feel confident about what they’ve submitted.”

Our hope is that the cohort model can be replicated in other states and pave the way for licensure support across the nation.

Megan Budke is Supervisor of Immersion, Indigenous, and World Languages at St. Paul Public Schools in Minnesota. She served as 2020 MCTLC President.

Karen Nickel is a peer coach and a former German teacher and World Language Coordinator for Wayzata Public Schools, in Plymouth, Minnesota. She served as 2021 MCTLC President.

References:

- ACTFL. (n.d.). *Educators Rising 2.0* (n.d.). ACTFL: Language Connects. Retrieved from <https://www.actfl.org/advocacy/educators-rising>
- Boisrond, C. (2017, September 29). If your teacher looks like you, you may do better in school. NPR. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/09/29/552929074/if-your-teacher-looks-like-you-you-may-do-better-in-school>
- Education Minnesota (2021, April 22). Tiered Licensure in Minnesota. Retrieved from https://educationminnesota.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021_TieredLicensure_Infographic.pdf
- C. Glynn (Personal communication, December 13, 2021)
- A. Luiz (Personal communication, December 13, 2021)
- Suderman, H. (2020). Radical listening. *University of Washington Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://magazine.washington.edu/feature/radical-listening>