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Cambodians find L.B. a place to wait and worry

By James Leavy
Staff Writer

Mrs. Leng Hang, former member of the Royal Cambodian Ballet, kissed her polio-ridden, 5-year-old son and her mother goodbye one day nearly four years ago and flew with her daughter from Phnom Penh to Thailand for a two-week vacation.

Five days later, on April 17, 1975, black-clad Communist insurgents marched into the Cambodian capital. Mrs. Hang has neither seen nor heard from her son or mother since.

On that same day, in the northern province of Battambang, Dr. Chhen Kong abandoned his work at a local hospital, picked up his wife and three small children and fled to Thailand.

The takeover by the dreaded Khmer Rouge was so sudden that Kong was forced to leave without his 13-year-old daughter, who was visiting friends in another province. He has heard nothing from her since.

Mrs. Hang and her daughter and the Kong family live in Long Beach with an estimated 3,000 other Cambodians who tell similar stories of flight and loss of family and friends.

FOR THEM THE CITY has become a place to wait. Like relatives in a hospital waiting room, they watch and listen for some kind of report; they hope and pray, but fear the worst for parents, brothers, sisters, and children in their ravaged homeland.

"If my family is not dead, I want to go back," says Mrs. Hang. Her voice is strained. Her face, showing the strain of years of anxiety and tension, darkens with sad memories.

She is 37, and worries about her son, Romana, who is almost 9 now. She left him with his grandmother that day because he was too ill to travel. Later she was warned that she would be killed if she returned to Cambodia for him.

Whn Mrs. Hang and her daughter came to the United States, she was taken to Camp Pendleton with only the things she had packed for her vacation in Thailand and $60.

In Cambodia she had been a professional dancer. At one time she owned a restaurant and, toward the end, she worked for the Cambodian military. She was divorced and supported her entire family, including her mother and father, who lived on a small farm near Phnom Penh.

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—Staff Photo by LEO HETZEL

YOUNG Piseth Lao, from Garden Grove, studies in classroom of Cambodian American Association in Long Beach with other children of refugees here.

Long Beach is 'Cambodian capital'

Refugees find a place to wait

From Page 1

In America, at first she found herself without friends, without a job, and without marketable skills.

A sponsor was found for her and her daughter in Santa Monica. After a short time, however, she struck out on her own, moving to San Bernardino to live with a Cambodian friend.

Mrs. Hang attended school during the day to earn a cosmetology license and at night to learn English. She moved to Long Beach and now works as a hairdresser in a downtown shop.

She knows nothing of the fate of her son. The Communist regime, headed by Pol Pot, cut off communication of any kind. The Red Cross was not allowed in Cambodia.

Only a few months after she left her country, however, dispatches told of the flood of refugees across the border to Thailand.

Interviews with refugees a year later revealed massive shifts in population. The Khmer Rouge forced people out of the cities to work on farms. Food supplies were short. Starvation and disease killed thousands. There was no medical care.

Later, reports of wholesale executions by the Communists leaked out of the terror-stricken nation. It was estimated that up to 2.5 million Cambodians, a third of the population, were murdered or died of mistreatment by the regime. The word "genocide" was used to describe the annihilation of those considered enemies of the new government.

Mrs. Hang and other refugees here found little comfort in the recent news that Cambodia had been invaded by its longtime enemy, Vietnam. Phnom Penh was taken Jan 7. On Jan. 10, more than 200 members of the Cambodian American Association, headquartered in Long Beach, marched on City Hall to protest the Vietnamese invasion.

Led by association vice president Lah Tol, the Cambodians called on the United Nations to condemn the takeover of their homeland as a flagrant violation of international law. Russia vetoed a U.N. resolution denouncing the action.

"We hate the Khmer Rouge, but that doesn't justify the Vietnamese invasion," Tol said.

He expressed the dilemma faced by Cambodian refugees in Long Beach. Many of them want to return to their country. Nearly all of them are worried about relatives and friends they left behind.

But their hopes have been dashed by nearly four years of Khmer Rouge terror and the recent invasion by Vietnam.

When asked which they regime they prefer, Long Beach Cambodians shrug and talk about their problems here. Long Beach has become the Cambodian capital of the nation. Tol says there may be up to 3,000 refugees here and more coming. In 1977 there were about 10,000 Cambodians in the United States.

The refugees were sent all over the country when they began arriving in 1975. They have been drifting back to Southern California in increasing numbers.

According to Lav Cheav, president of the Cambodian American Association, there are several reasons why Long Beach is attractive to refugees:

— **There were Cambodian students** at Long Beach State University and Long Beach City College who helped refugees when they first arrived.

— **The weather here is much** like it is in Cambodia. Refugees find the winters in northern and eastern U.S. cities too harsh.

— **Cambodians are able to find** the kind of food they like in area stores run by Chinese, Japanese and other Asians. Most of the refugees say this is very important to them.

Mary Arimoto, who heads Asian Pacific Family Outreach Inc. at 213 E. Broadway, says food is an important part of Cambodian culture. Eating is an important family activity.

— **Long Beach is also attractive** to refugees because there is still a supply of low-rent housing here. The Cambodians live along Anaheim and 10th streets, generally between Termino and the downtown area.

Despite these advantages, most of the refugees find themselves adrift. The shock of being suddenly dropped into a strange culture has created emotional problems for 80 percent of them, according to Cheav.

Cheav runs the Cambodian Association from an office on the second floor of the Asian Pacific Family Outreach building on Broadway. Part of his work is to find U.S. sponsors for about 4,700 more refugees due to arrive in May. There are 15,000 more waiting in Thailand.

Cheav says a sponsor must be willing to pick up the refugee family at the airport, provide them with food, shelter, pocket money and help them adjust to American life and find jobs.

But Cheav's biggest problem is dealing with the mental health of those already here.

ON THE WALL beside his desk is a carefully printed chart in English. It describes succinctly the jolt Cambodians received when they fled their country and tried to rebuild their lives here.

It's a "before" and "after" comparison. In one column headed "social status" are listed the occupations of refugees in Cambodia. They were doctors, teachers, military and government workers. Next to this are listed the types of jobs they can get here — busboy and factory worker.

Under the heading of "family" is written, "Husband supports whole family, wife stays home with children." The change which occurred is described under the title "breakup."

The results of these changes are listed in two other columns: In Cambodia, "self esteem" was characterized as vigorous, important, responsible, attractive. Here, under the heading of "shattered," the refugee is described as "tired old man, worried, nervous, angry."

Cambodians, while they anxiously await word of the fate of their country, fear their culture is slipping away from them. Mothers forced to leave home to work have weakened the family and eroded the traditional role of the husband as the head of the household.

WHILE PARENTS struggle desperately to learn enough English to earn a living, their children pick up the language with amazing speed. With it they are learning the ways of an alien and sometimes undesirable culture.

Mrs. Hang says her daughter, 15, who attends Wilson High School, likes the American ways. She wants to begin dating. In Cambodia, Mrs. Hang says, young women do not date until they are 18 to 20 years old, and then young men ask the parents' permission first.

Mrs. Hing Meas, 37, a sixth-grade teacher in Cambodia, studied bookkeeping, typing and office machines at City College. She has a difficult time with English and can't find a job.

Her husband, Dam Meas, 43, was a colonel in the Cambodian army. He is a trained mechanic, also looking for a job. They have five children, average for a Cambodian family. They are receiving public assistance, and this tends to further demoralize Asians, who are industrious and take pride in supporting themselves.

The plight of Chhen Kong speaks of the havoc caused by the uprooting of middle-class families. When he talks about having to leave his daughter in Cambodia his face grows dark and his voice trails off.

When he first arrived in the United States, Kong lived in Maryland. He worked as a laboratory technician for $4.50 an hour.

A little more than a year ago he and his family drove 3,000 miles to Long Beach "because the weather is better here and we wanted to be with other Cambodians."

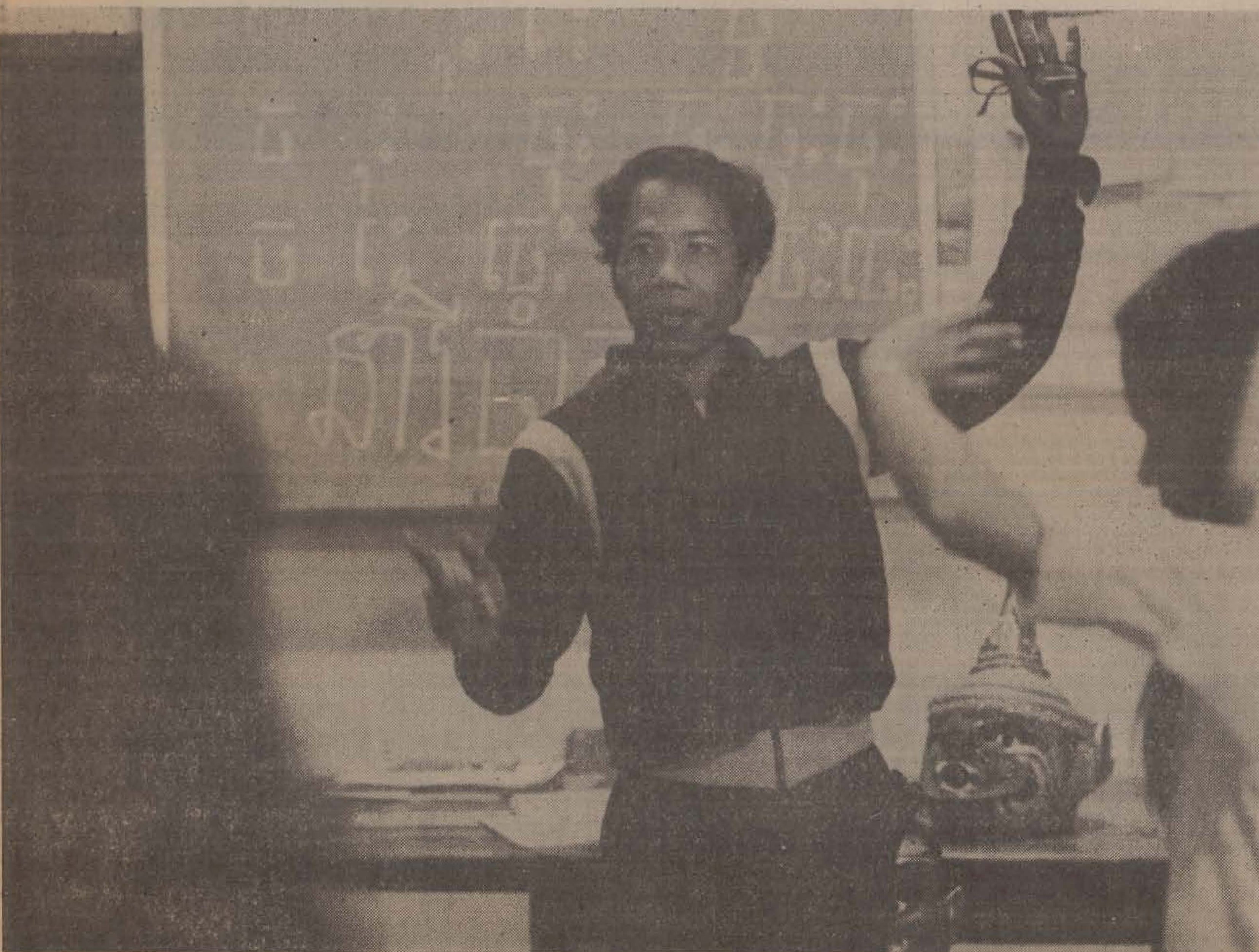
But Kong could not find work here despite seven years of medical training in Cambodia. He says he passed the medical portion of the state examination which would qualify him to practice medicine, but failed the language requirements.

Kong and his family receive public assistance while he studies English full-time at City College. He will take the examination again. If he passes, he will qualify for internship at a hospital.

Kong says he lived in a large house in Cambodia and had two autos. In Long Beach he and his family are crowded into a one-bedroom apartment.

THE LANGUAGE problem works against refugees two ways. Their children have as much trouble with Cambodian as their parents do with English. The gap between child and parent widens each year. Along with their native language, the children are also beginning to lose their cultural identity.

Each Sunday afternoon in makeshift classrooms at 2226 E. Anaheim, volunteers nurture embers of their culture. The Cambodian American Association sponsors classes for children to soften the impact of American life on the refugee families.



CAMBODIAN girl wears national costume, top left, at Cambodian New Year celebration by refugees in Long Beach. Mrs. Leng Hang, top right, works in Long Beach beauty shop. Teacher Yon Pich, below, holds classes for refugee children at Cambodian American Association center in Long Beach to help preserve the native culture. At left, Mony Chhun and Chawy Pich practice traditional dance movements at the center.

—Staff photos by LEO HETZEL

SIGN in parking lot at Edison Elementary School gives message in seven languages.

PRESS-TELEGRAM/LEO HETZEL

Immigrant wave stunned schools

By Robin Hinch
Staff Writer

Editor's note: This installment of an ongoing series is the concluding segment of a two-part look at how a decade of change has affected the Long Beach Unified School District's schools and programs.

Suddenly, with little warning, immigrant students began streaming into Long Beach schools.

During the first nine school days of September 1980, elementary enrollment jumped from 28,730 to 31,000. More than 1,000 of those new youngsters were Hispanic; another 1,000 were Southeast Asian refugees.

What was to become a steady parade of non-English-speaking parents and children began lining up inside and outside the offices of inner-city schools, staring at pages of incomprehensible forms written in a totally unfamiliar language and alphabet.

Harried school principals and counselors became creative with sign language to help these earnest parents who knew nothing of proofs of age, inoculations, and overcrowded schools — but who knew they had reached a country where education was free and all children could attend.

The district's few Southeast Asian translators ran frantically from school to school, but could not possibly keep up with the demands for their services.

The district, caught off guard by the sudden influx, arbitrarily and without public notice, put the children on buses for Eastside schools where there was space for them. Students who normally would have attended Roosevelt, Edison, Whittier and Stevenson elementary schools were sent to Emerson, Lowell, Burcham, Cubberley, Prisk and Mann.

Principals and teachers at the receiving schools watched in disbelief as scores of non-English-speaking children — many without name tags or school records — obediently filed off the buses and awaited placement in a classroom.

"It really was a terrible situation," acknowledged Long Beach School Board member Harriet Williams, who lives a few blocks from Lowell Elementary, one of the hardest-hit schools that fall.

"I got a lot of phone calls from people in my neighborhood. No one was prepared for all those little children. Everyone wanted to help them, but

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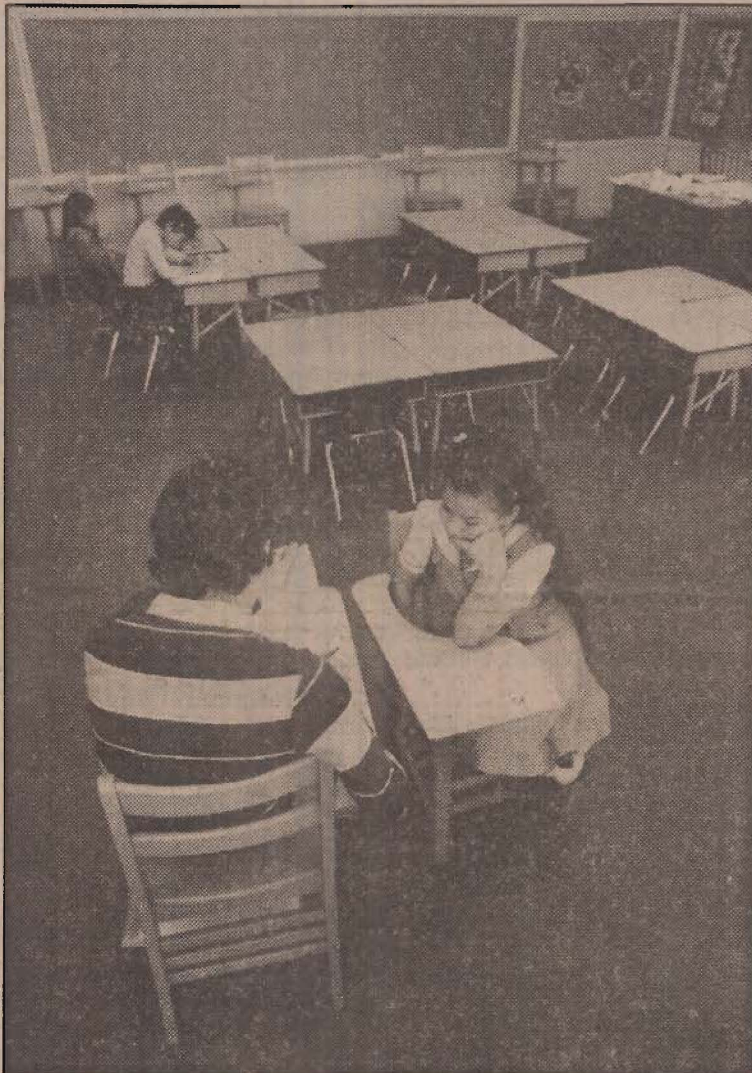
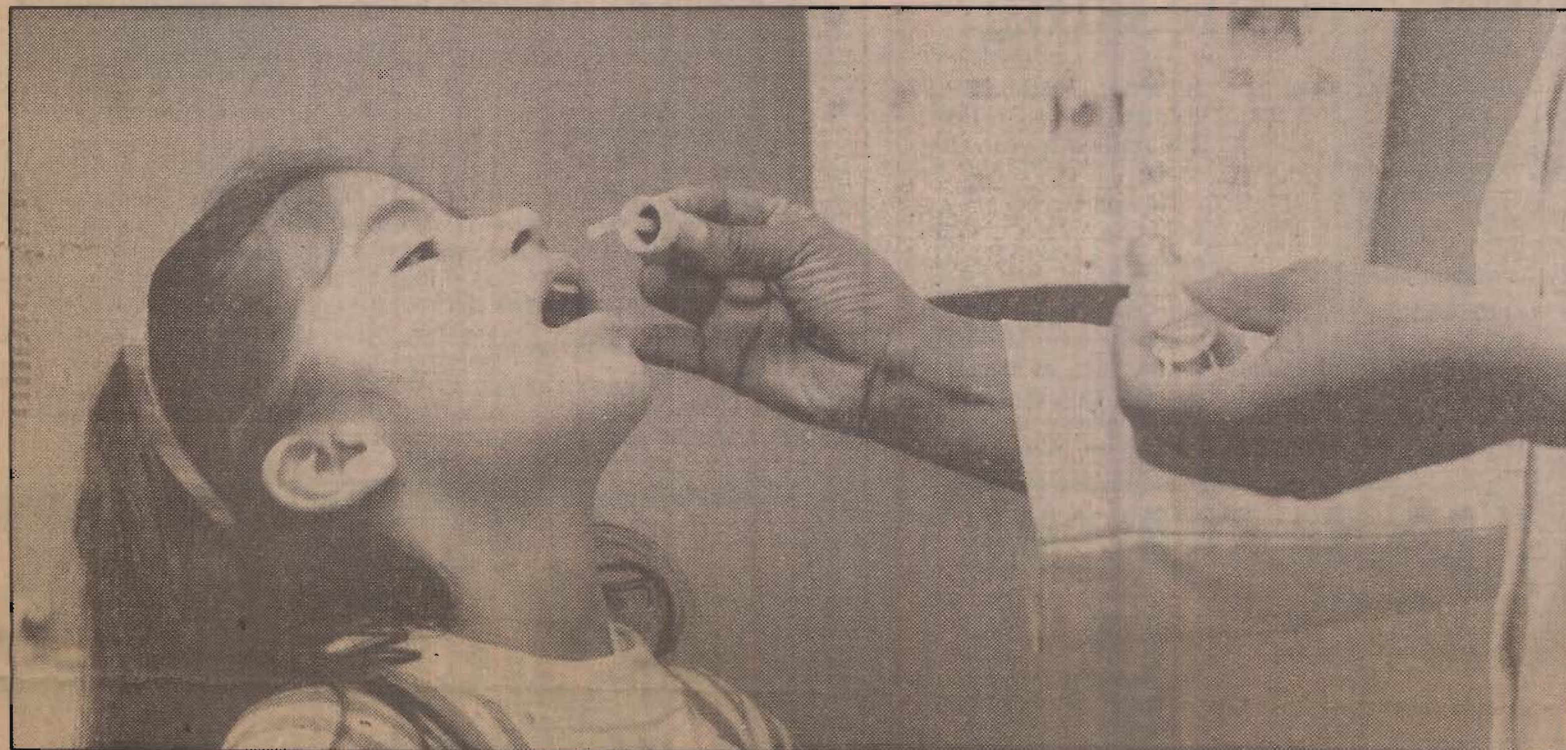


CECELIA ALFARO, 11, is language-tested by Richard Guerra at Edison, while her brother and sister wait turns.



NURSE gives Norma Torres, 8, polio drops at Edison assignment center health clinic.

Schools learn to cope with influx of immigrants

FROM/B1

we weren't certain how or where to place them."

Long Beach Teachers Association President Don Goddard appeared at a September school board meeting on behalf of Lowell teachers, who complained that they didn't have enough materials or bilingual aides for the newcomers, many of whom were sent to the school two weeks after the beginning of classes.

Parents in Lowell's Belmont Shore neighborhood complained that their children had to be shuffled to different classrooms in the second week of school to accommodate the refugee youngsters.

"Chaos. That's the only word that really describes things that year," laughed Betty Seal, head of two programs designed to smooth the way for non-English-speaking students new to Long Beach. "Chaos."

Mrs. Seal can afford to look back and chuckle. For now the situation is well in hand. And not a moment too soon.

The 8,000 students who spoke little or no English made up 13.6 percent of the district's enrollment last school year, up from about 8 percent (4,400 students) in fall 1979.

The number of Asian students rose from 3,000 in 1979 to 5,939 last fall, with immigrants accounting for nearly all of the increase. The increase of Hispanics has been more gradual, with 5,500 enrolled in 1974, 7,300 in 1977, 10,300 in 1980 and 12,200 last fall.

At Edison and Lincoln elementaries in the inner city and Emerson on the Eastside, one out of two children is considered "limited English proficient." And at nine other elementaries — all in the inner city or Westside — one out of three youngsters has limited command of the language.

Correctly anticipating a continuing influx of immigrant children and more than anxious to avoid the confusion of fall 1980, school officials set up an enrollment clearinghouse the following year for new non-English-speaking youngsters. Intensive English-language classes were also developed.

The Assignment Center, set up in a half-dozen converted classrooms at Edison Elementary School on Sixth Street downtown, serves as more than just an office where foreign-born parents can sign their children up for school.

It also offers a wealth of information, counseling and reassurance for those to whom everything American is new and different and awesome.

The center, which costs the district nearly $300,000 to operate, is staffed by more than a dozen bilingual aides who speak Spanish, French, Vietnamese, Chinese, Hmong, Tagalog, Lao and Cambodian, plus several Southeast Asian dialects.

It is the only facility of its kind in California.

Enrolling a child is usually a family affair. When parents and children arrive at the center, they are handed a stack of forms and it is determined what language they speak.

They are introduced to an aide who speaks their language, and who, by patiently asking them for information required for school records, fills in each of the many blanks.

A child is then taken to a testing room, where a bilingual teacher determines the youngster's academic abilities and proficiency in English.

From there the child is led to the health center, staffed by members of the Long Beach Health Department, who give all the children in the family — school age or not — vision and hearing tests, a physical examination and necessary inoculations.

The final stop is the counseling office, where parents are told a little bit about the Long Beach school system, special school programs that smooth assimilation, and other enrollment options.

They receive pamphlets printed in seven languages that explain things such as Halloween, Ground Hog Day, garage sales, credit cards and Mother's Day — all of which which must baffle even the most sophisticated Southeast Asian newcomer.

For students, there are booklets translating mathematical, industrial and mechanical terms into Cambodian, Chinese, Hmong and Spanish. Another booklet explains patriotic events and translates the flag salute and the national anthem.

By the first day of school, the children and parents know where the youngsters will be going to school, what time they should be there and a little of what they can expect. And school principals know just how many non-English-speaking students they will receive.

A popular first-year option of the immigrant children is a language and learning center at one of seven elementary schools.

The language and learning center programs, set up in previously unused classrooms, last one year and help children of all nationalities to assimilate.

There are no English-speaking children in the center classrooms, but English is the common language among students and teachers. Recesses and lunch hours spent with the entire student body give the center children an opportunity to pick up plenty of playground English.

"They learn 'no cuts' (in line) and 'what's for lunch?' the first day," said Raoul Ramos, principal of MacArthur Elementary in Lakewood, which houses a dozen language-and-learning-center classrooms.

Faced with a classroom full of children speaking every conceivable language except English, center teachers start with basic directions such as "stand up" and "sit down," combining words with sign language, then move on to academic subjects.

The centers cost the district $200,000 a year.

More than 2,000 students are enrolled this year in such centers at Barton, Riley, Mann, MacArthur, Tincher, Holmes, Cleveland and Carver elementary schools.

At the end of a year, most Center students opt for English-as-a-second-language or bilingual classes at eastside and Lakewood schools. Other immigrant youngsters elect to bypass the Centers and plunge directly into the ESL and bilingual programs the first year.

Students may remain in ESL programs for several years. They spend most of the day in regular classes with native English-speakers, and are taken out of class for intensive English instruction. There is also a classroom aide available to translate.

In bilingual classes, currently offered only in Spanish, students receive academic instruction in their native language, then join English-speaking children for classes such as art and physical education. Most youngsters transfer out of bilingual classes in two or three years.

California's bilingual education law, passed in 1976 and revised in 1980, requires bilingual education programs in any school with 10 or more limited-English-speaking students in the same grade.

But bilingual teachers are hard to come by, especially those credentialed in the Southeast Asian languages.

Of the 9,000 credentialed bilingual teachers in California, about 92 percent are bilingual in Spanish, according to the State Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education.

Long Beach's 120 bilingual teachers represent only half the number needed.

The bilingual-teacher shortage is particularly hard to remedy because of the large numbers of Cambodian, Vietnamese and Laotian students entering the district. Teachers with credentials in those languages are virtually impossible to find, officials say.

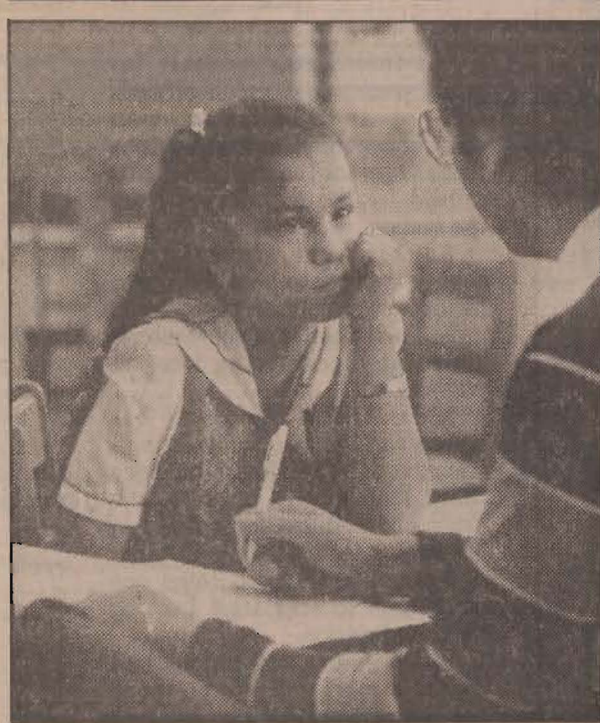
Both the language and learning centers and the Assignment Center are financed from the school district's general fund. There is no state or federal support.

Long Beach does, however, receive about $300,000 in federal money each year to pay for the Southeast Asian Learners (SEAL) project, which was started in Long Beach in 1975.

Long Beach's main SEAL-fund expenditure is for multilingual staff members, who provide counseling to refugee students, visit children's homes to explain school procedures to parents, and serve as classroom aides.

SEAL staff members provide a valuable and reassuring link between refugees and the schools and community.

"A SEAL staffer can become a friend and confidant to a child with emotional needs," said Mrs. Seal of the Assignment Center. "You can't look in a person's mind and know the hurt that is there. But there is trauma in the backgrounds of these little kids. Sometimes it takes a lot of talking to work it out and get them to discuss it. Once they talk about it, it seems to help."



AT EDISON school assignment center, above, Victoria Guillen, 6, and her parents, Frank and Angelica, are interviewed by student evaluation technician Ilda Collette, who is fluent in four languages. At far left, Richard Guerra tests Cecilia Alfaro, 11, who is bilingual. Left, Frances Torres comforts her nephew, Raymon Torres, 3, who is about to get a measles shot at the center's health clinic.

PRESS-TELEGRAM/LEO HETZEL