

OVERVIEW OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

Why are Southeast Asian American students falling behind?

Southeast Asian American students experience serious educational inequalities that are often masked due to their local categorization as “Asian.”

- 34.3% of Laotian, 38.5% of Cambodian, and 39.6% of Hmong adults over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent (Data: U.S. Census Bureau 2010).¹
- 65.8% of Cambodian, 66.5% of Laotian, 63.2% of Hmong, and 51.1% of Vietnamese Americans have not attended college (Data: American Community Survey 2006-2008).²
- By examining Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) student achievement using disaggregated data, a statewide California study found significant achievement gaps between White Americans and their AAPI peers. In reading, White Americans significantly outperform nine AAPI ethnic groups including Vietnamese Americans, Cambodian Americans, and Lao Americans. In math, seven AAPI ethnic groups scored at significantly lower levels than White Americans, including Cambodian Americans and Lao Americans.³

Challenges that contribute to low educational attainment rates include the following:

- Limited English Proficiency which can impact the academic preparedness of students, and requires that students receive additional resources to become proficient.⁴
- Low-income neighborhood schools that lack access to high quality educational resources and services, including bilingual education.
- Lack of Southeast Asian American educators and staff.
- Inadequate numbers of bilingual school counselors to connect students and families to school resources.⁸
- Limited parent engagement in their children’s education because parents lack knowledge on navigating school systems and face cultural barriers in developing relationships with school administrators and teachers.⁹

High Rates of Limited English Proficiency Across Southeast Asian American Communities

8.7%

of the U.S. population overall speaks English less than “very well”

VS.

39.2%

of Cambodian Americans,

38.4%

of Laotian Americans, and

37.6%

of Hmong Americans,

51.5%

of Vietnamese Americans

speak English less than “very well.”⁵

High Rates of Poverty Rates Across Southeast Asian American Communities

11.3%

of U.S. families live below the poverty level

VS.

18.2%

of Cambodian Americans,

12.2%

of Laotian Americans, and

27.4%

of Hmong Americans,

13.0%

of Vietnamese Americans

live below the poverty level.⁶



Lack of Southeast Asian American Educators and Staff

In 2007, Asian Americans and Native Hawaiian Pacific Islanders made up

4%

of all K-12 public school **students**

vs.

Asian American and Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander educators made up only

1%

of all **educators**.⁷

What are some local solutions?

- Local school boards can adopt new data reporting and collection policies that require disaggregated data. School boards can replicate policies of school districts that already collect and report out on disaggregated data. For example, Seattle Public Schools currently collects and reports data on the following Asian American subgroups: Asian, Cambodian, East Indian, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Other Southeast Asian, and Other Asian.¹⁰
- Schools can develop partnerships with community based organizations (CBOs) for in-school and out-of-school services. As direct service providers, CBOs have trusted relationships with immigrant and refugee communities. Schools can leverage the bilingual and bicultural skills of CBO staff. Schools can receive training from CBOs on how to work with Southeast Asian American students.

"For many years, we had few staff who spoke Cambodian [in Philadelphia]. The Superintendent met with us in April 2010 at a community meeting, learned about issues affecting [the] community, and began to hire bilingual staff. Then, we faced budget cuts, and most staff have been laid off."

-- Rong Sorn, Executive Director, Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia

"[We] need to help parents understand the educational system, and help them to become advocates. Parents tend to be deferential to the school district."

-- Michele Lew, Executive Director, Asian Americans for Community Involvement

"Parents go to CBOs first, not schools. With [CBO and school] partnerships, we need standard policies on what that partnership means, [because] schools have historically done a bad job at defining partnerships, [including] what information we can access."

-- Vu Le, Executive Director, Vietnamese Friendship Association

What are some federal solutions?

- Ensure policies that require schools, school districts, and states with significant proportions of AAPI and immigrant communities collect and report academic achievement and growth data that is disaggregated according to different Southeast Asian and other ethnic groups.
- Increase federal investment in, and support for, community based organizations that provide culturally appropriate academic and enrichment services to SEAA students through policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Race to the Top, and 21st Century Learning Centers. This support should target individuals who are English Language Learners, primary caretakers, parents, students with special needs, and students at-risk of leaving high school or those who have already dropped out.
- Ensure that federal policies enable schools to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services to SEAA students and their families. This includes developing and retaining bilingual SEAA educators, counselors and administrators, integrating curricular materials that reflect SEAA experiences, promoting language programs for SEAA languages, and developing programs to increase involvement among parents and families who are limited English proficient.
- Increase access to higher education for all students through legislation such as the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), and preserve need-based resources such as the Pell Grant Program, allowing all students to fully participate in and contribute to American society.
- Increase investment in college outreach and preparation programs for first-generation college bound students such as the Trio program and Upward Bound, and partner with CBOs to implement these programs.
- Increase federal investment in, and support for the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) Program, which provides competitive funding for institutions of higher education to strengthen programs that outreach to low-income, first generation and K-12 students.

¹ National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE). "The Relevance of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders in the College Completion Agenda", Washington, DC 2011, 8.

² Ibid.

³ Pang, Valerie Ooka; Han, Peggy P., and Pang, Jennifer M. Educational Researcher "Asian American and Pacific Islander Students: Equity and the Achievement Gap" Vol. 40, No. 8, 2011, pp. 378-389.

⁴ Wayne E. Wright & Sovicheth Boun. "Southeast Asian American Education 35 Years After Initial Resettlement: Research Report and Policy Recommendations" Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement Volume 6 (2011): vi. Accessed online on 11/29/2011 at <http://jsaaea.coehd.utsa.edu/index.php/JSAAEA/article/view/114/89>.

⁵ American Community Survey 2010, 1 year estimates.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bank, J. J. A. & Banks, C. A. M. (2007) (Eds). Multicultural education: Issues and Perspectives. (6th ed) Hobken, NJ: Wily Publishers.

⁸ Interview with Community Leader, November 22, 2011.

⁹ Interview with Community Leader, November 28, 2011.

¹⁰ Seattle Public Schools. "Data File: Demographic Data" December 2011, accessed online at <http://www.seattleschools.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1583136/File/Departmental%20Content/siso/disprof/2011/DP11demog.pdf> on September 4, 2012.

