

RISING UP

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

AT A GLANCE

This report examines the educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students fifty years after their parents and grandparents fled war and genocide in the largest refugee resettlement in American history. Drawing on limited but telling data and community-based research, we find that educational outcomes are improving, but progress remains uneven and the policies that contributed to such progress are under significant threat.

-  1M+ Southeast Asian American youth nationwide
-  Culturally responsive education improves student outcomes
-  Educational outcomes improving—but uneven across ethnicity and gender
-  Recent federal actions threaten decades of educational progress
-  Disaggregated data gaps obscure Southeast Asian American experiences
-  Federal, state, and local leaders must act to protect opportunity

CONTEXT

Southeast Asian American students share unique history

Today, there are more than one million Southeast Asian American school-aged or college-aged youth. They identify with over a dozen ethnic communities diverse in language and culture, but with a common history of displacement and resettlement in the aftermath of war, genocide, and political upheaval in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

As second- or third-generation immigrants, the majority of today's Southeast Asian American youth were born in the United States and speak English with native proficiency. However, many of their family members were born abroad and speak limited English. Nearly one-third of Southeast Asian American students identify as multiracial. A small but significant number live in undocumented or mixed-status families, facing persistent fear of deportation and family separation.

KEY FINDING 1

Outcomes are improving, but remain uneven across ethnicity and gender

Over the past five decades, community advocacy has resulted in increased supports for Southeast Asian American students, which in turn has yielded cautious, but measurable, gains. Southeast Asian American students are graduating from high school and enrolling in college at higher rates than previous generations, and in many cases, close to institutional or state averages.

However, that progress has been uneven. Vietnamese students often fare better than other Southeast Asian communities, in part due to differences in migration histories. Gender disparities are particularly pronounced. Southeast Asian American women are enrolling in and completing college at higher rates than men, in part due to long-standing stereotypes of Southeast Asian American boys as “delinquents.”

KEY FINDING 2

Lack of data prevents clear picture

The severe lack of disaggregated educational data for Southeast Asian American students prevents schools, colleges, researchers, and communities from fully understanding their experiences and outcomes. Most federal, state, and institutional systems collapse Southeast Asian American, South Asian, and East Asian students into a single “Asian” category, masking inequities and reinforcing the harmful “model minority” myth.

Disaggregated data is the antidote, revealing the unique experiences of Southeast Asian American communities and providing educators, researchers, and policymakers with information on how to better support them.

KEY FINDING 3

Evidence-based approaches such as culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy improve outcomes

The evidence is clear that Southeast Asian American students thrive in educational environments that make them visible and valued. Effective strategies include culturally responsive curricula, such as ethnic studies, Southeast Asian American studies, and heritage language learning; culturally competent educators; culturally appropriate mental health supports; and intentional efforts to foster belonging through student organizations and community spaces.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) also emerges as a promising but underutilized pathway, particularly for students seeking faster, more affordable routes to stable careers.

KEY FINDING 4

Federal abdication of its responsibilities to support students leaves door open for states and local actors to step up

Recent federal actions—including the gutting of the U.S. Department of Education, the end of the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) grant program, and cuts to support for bilingual learning, college access, and data collection across K-12 schools—threaten to undo decades of progress for Southeast Asian American students.

From its first day, the Trump administration has attacked immigrants and refugees through violent enforcement actions and denied equal opportunity to communities of color by obstructing diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. As the federal government abandons its responsibility to protect educational access and opportunity, states, school districts, colleges, and universities are now the primary actors capable of safeguarding and advancing educational equity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A call to action across sectors

We call for coordinated action across sectors:



Federal policymakers must restore funding to the U.S. Department of Education; ensure that education data are disaggregated, accurate, and secure; and end harmful immigration enforcement.



Schools, districts, and higher education institutions should adopt culturally responsive practices, expand mental health and student support services, strengthen CTE partnerships, and ensure safe learning environments.



States should mandate and implement ethnic and Asian American studies, invest in teachers of color, protect immigrant families, and make disaggregated data publicly accessible.



Community organizations, researchers, funders, and allies play a critical role in advancing data visibility, dismantling stereotypes, and sustaining long-term advocacy.

CONCLUSION

Southeast Asian American communities have spent five decades fighting for educational opportunity. Today's youth are beginning to reap the benefits. Yet progress remains fragile. Ensuring that Southeast Asian American students not only rise, but soar, requires intentional investment, accurate data, and systems that recognize their histories, strengths, and needs. With decisive action at the state, local, and institutional levels, a more equitable educational future is within reach.