

PHOTOGRAPHS

**THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICAN
EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY**



SEARAC

About SEARAC

SEARAC was founded in 1979 as the “Indochina Refugee Action Center” due to concern about the genocide in Cambodia and large number of refugees fleeing Southeast Asia.

After the war and bombings of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia claimed millions of lives between 1955 and 1975, our founders advocated for the passage of the 1980 Refugee Resettlement Act, which created our nation’s first comprehensive and unified system of refugee resettlement and support.

Today, SEARAC is a national civil rights organization that builds power with diverse communities from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to create a socially just and equitable society. As representatives of the largest refugee community ever resettled in the United States, SEARAC stands together with other refugee communities, communities of color, and social justice movements in pursuit of social equity.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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COVER ART

Image: Ngan Nguyen (pictured at left), a community leader at ARISE, celebrates with her father, Binh Van Nguyen, during her graduation from Brown University.

Photo courtesy of ARISE, Ngan, and her brother, Kelvin Khiem Nguyen.

Photos within this report courtesy of SEARAC.



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INTRODUCTION



Since first arriving in the United States over 50 years ago, Southeast Asian American communities have actively advocated for their children’s education. They demanded schools and higher education institutions that saw their full experiences, valued their history, culture, and language, and protected their right to education access and opportunity.

In response, school districts, colleges, states, and previous federal administrations have invested in evidence-based supports—such as ethnic studies, dual language learning, and culturally responsive training for educators—to improve educational access for Southeast Asian American students.

Community advocacy has paid off. Today, the educational outlook is cautiously optimistic. Based on the limited data available, Southeast Asian American students are more likely than ever to graduate from high school and higher education—but this march toward equitable outcomes remains incomplete, unequal across genders, and inconsistent among Southeast Asian American communities.

These educational advances for Southeast Asian American students are now under threat. In 2025, the Trump Administration dismantled the US Department of Education (ED), undoing decades of progress within days by cutting funding for research-backed programs that expanded access for dual language learners, first-generation college students, Asian American and Native Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs).

A long-standing barrier remains: a dearth of disaggregated educational data on Southeast Asian American students. Educational data are available at the school, district, state, and institutional level for the aggregate “Asian” category and other major racial groups. Despite a well-documented historical lack of access to education, data specific to Southeast Asian American students are largely nonexistent. Without disaggregated ethnic data, educational institutions and decision makers reinforce the “model minority myth” of universally well-off, well-educated Asians and overlook significant needs within Southeast Asian American communities.

Despite these threats, a bright future remains possible for the Southeast Asian American students of today. Guided by half a century of community advocacy, the wisdom of their elders, and sustained support from educational systems, these students will soar.

Southeast Asian students are a growing, diverse population.

“Southeast Asian American” is a term that encompasses over a dozen diverse communities with a shared history of displacement and resettlement.

Southeast Asian Americans are refugees or descendants of refugees from Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam, who arrived in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Secret Wars in Laos, and the Khmer Rouge genocide. Though widely diverse across culture, language, and history, these communities are unified by a shared experience of displacement and resettlement following US militarization of their homelands.³

Southeast Asian American communities include, but are not limited to, the Cham, Hmong, Khmer, Khmer Kampuchea Krom, Khmer Loeu, Khmu, Lahu, Lao, Iu Mien, Montagnards, Phutai, Pnong, Tai Dam, Tai Deng, Tai Lue, Vietnamese, and ethnic Chinese communities with Southeast Asian heritage.

The United States is home to at least

1.0 million Southeast Asian American youth

between the ages of 5 and 24.



653,000

School-aged youth [ages 5–17]



353,370

College-aged youth [ages 18–24]

Figure 1 on the next page undercounts the Southeast Asian American student population, because it relies on incomplete US Census data. The US Census does not currently identify communities such as the Phutai and Khmu, a significant data limitation enabling the persistent invisibility of these groups.

NATIONAL DATA

Figure 1. Southeast Asian American Youth Ages 5 to 24, by Ethnic Community (Alone or in Combination) (2020)

	5 to 17	18 to 24	Total
Cambodian	79,130	36,673	115,803
Hmong	90,027	41,899	131,926
Lahu	833	194	1,027
Laotian¹	56,627	26,357	82,984
Iu Mien	4,967	2,062	7,029
Tai Dam	711	293	1,004
Vietnamese	420,909	247,889	668,798

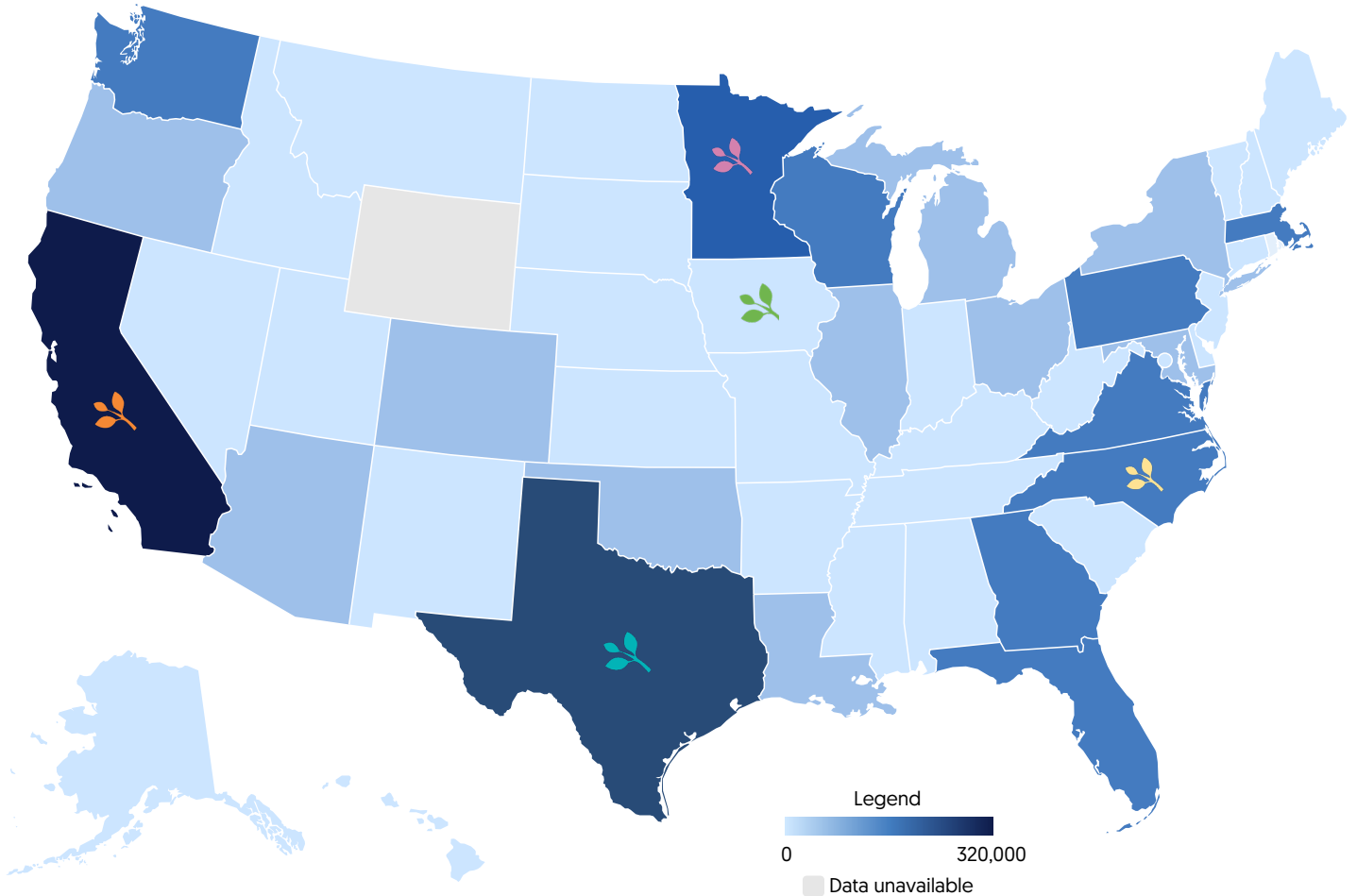
Source: US Census Bureau, 2020 Decennial Census.²



Southeast Asian American youth live across America.

NATIONAL DATA

Figure 2. Concentrations of Southeast Asian American Youth, Ages 5 to 24 (2020)



Source: US Census Bureau, 2020 Decennial Census.⁴

CALIFORNIA

1 in 3 Southeast Asian youth live in California.

- The Sacramento region is home to sizeable Iu Mien and Hmong communities
- The Bay Area region is home to Iu Mien, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese communities
- Long Beach is home to the largest Khmer community outside of Cambodia
- Orange County is home to a sizable Vietnamese community as well as minority communities such as the Cham and Khmu

TEXAS

Texas is home to large Vietnamese, Lao, and Khmer communities, particularly around Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth

IOWA

Iowa is home to the Tai Dam community

MINNESOTA

Minnesota is home to the greatest concentration of Hmong youth in the country

NORTH CAROLINA

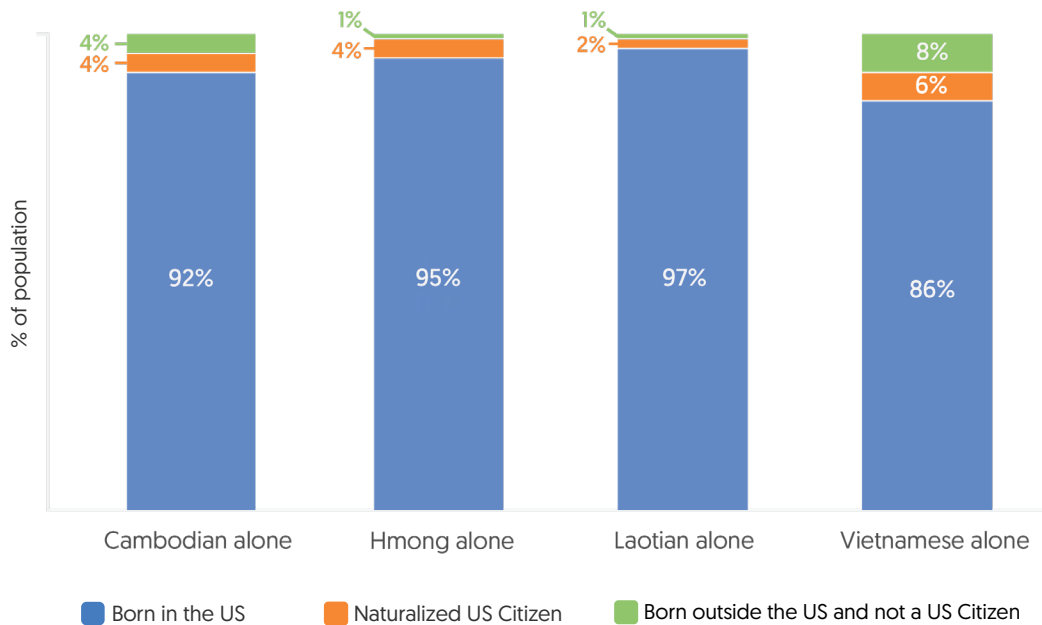
North Carolina is home to the Montagnard community

Southeast Asian American youth are primarily US-born.

Unlike their parents and grandparents, the vast majority of today’s Southeast Asian American school-age youth were born in the United States.

NATIONAL DATA

Figure 3. Place of Birth of Southeast Asian Youth Under 18, by Ethnic Community (2021)



Source: U.S Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2021 Five-Year Estimates.⁵

As a result, almost all Southeast Asian American students are proficient in English. Fewer than five percent of Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese under-18 youth speak English “not well” or “not at all”—though many have less mastery of their heritage language.

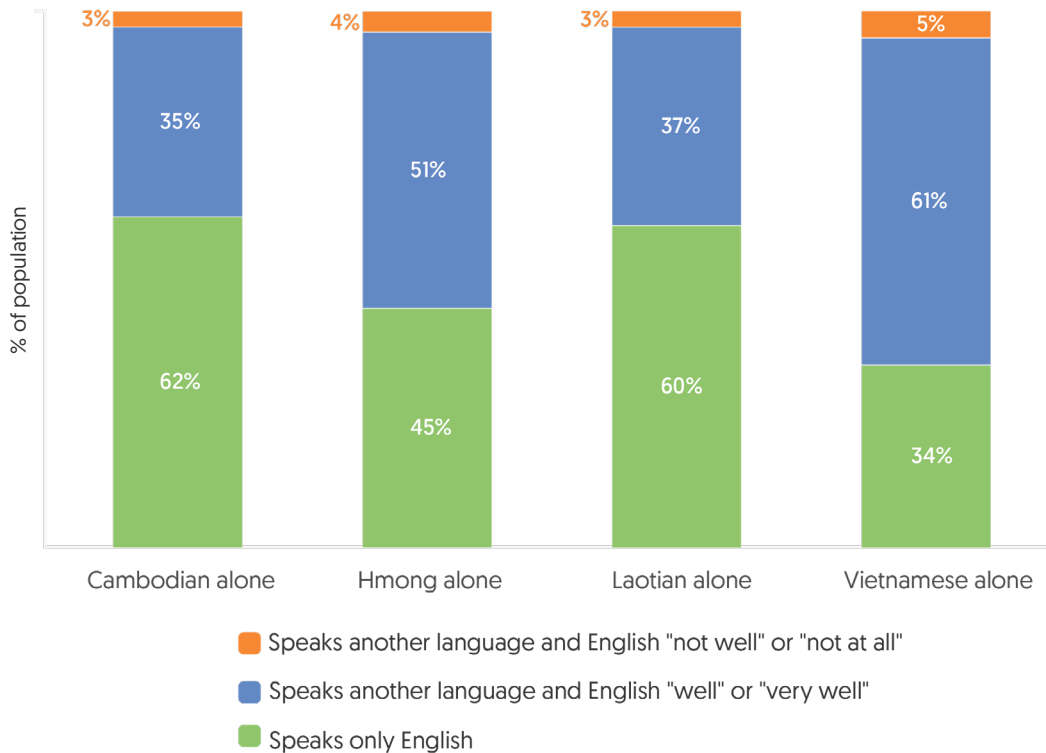
This is a significant shift from previous generations of Southeast Asian Americans, who were more likely to be limited English proficient than Asians overall.^{6 7} Language accessibility remains essential for many Southeast Asian Americans, such as parents, grandparents, or other caregivers who struggle to communicate with their children’s teachers and engage fully in their children’s schooling.



Southeast Asian students live across the country, from urban centers such as Orange County, California, to rural communities in Iowa and North Carolina. California, Texas, Minnesota, and Washington are **home to over half of all Southeast Asian youth.**

NATIONAL DATA

Figure 4. English Proficiency of Southeast Asian Youth Under-18, by Ethnic Community (2021)



Source: U.S Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2021 Five-Year Estimates.⁸

Only a small percentage of Southeast Asian American youth are undocumented or have a family member who is undocumented. Nationwide, an estimated 15,000 Southeast Asian Americans of all ages have final orders of removal—legal orders issued by a judge for deportation.⁹

Regardless of citizenship status, many Southeast Asian American youth experience daily fear stemming from federal deportation threats to themselves or their family members.



Southeast Asian American youth are multiracial.

Almost a third (29%) of Southeast Asian American students aged 5 to 17 identified with two or more races in the 2020 Census.¹⁰

About the outcome data in this report

This report mixes and matches data across federal, state, local, and institutional sources to present an incomplete but telling portrait of Southeast Asian American student outcomes.

Ideally, this report would present longitudinal outcomes on Southeast Asian American students nationwide—federal data that is readily available for white, Black, Latinx, and Native students. Unfortunately, almost all federal, state, local, district, and institutional data sources do not disaggregate, or collect, analyze, or report data specific to Southeast Asian American communities.

Disaggregated data is essential to understand the Southeast Asian American educational journey. Aggregating all Asian ethnic groups into an “Asian” or “Asian American” average, as most data sources do, conceals the distinct challenges and outcomes of Southeast Asian Americans.

For example, as **Figure 5** on the next page shows, 57% of all Asian American adults aged 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree—far above the national average of 35%. This aggregate statistic can lead to the incorrect conclusion that Southeast Asian American adults have higher-than-average college completion rates. However, disaggregating by ethnic community reveals the *true picture*: Only about a third of Vietnamese American adults and a quarter or fewer of Hmong, Cambodian, Iu Mien, and Laotian American adults have completed a college degree.

The “Asian American” average inaccurately represents Southeast Asian Americans because it is biased toward the larger populations of East and South Asian Americans. Their educational journeys differ significantly from those of Southeast Asian Americans: While most Southeast Asian American communities immigrated to the United States as refugees, many East and South Asian communities immigrated under policies that privileged highly skilled individuals with advanced degrees.

Consequently, East and South Asian Americans communities have higher average incomes than Southeast Asian Americans. For example, 39% of Hmong Americans of all ages are low-income (living at or below 200% of the federal poverty threshold), compared with 13% of Indian Americans.¹² Further,

East and South Asian American youth are more likely to have parents who completed college. Household income and parental education are both strong predictors of educational attainment.

The “Southeast Asian” umbrella, while an improvement, remains insufficient to identify the specific needs of the various ethnic communities it encompasses. The distinct histories among Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, Montagnard, Khmu, Iu Mien, and other Southeast Asian communities shape their educational outcomes. For example, the first wave of Vietnamese refugees to the United States arrived with comparatively greater economic and educational resources, which has contributed to higher educational outcomes than those of other Southeast Asian refugee communities.¹³

While immigration has continued from Vietnam in recent decades, refugee relocation for Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, and other communities effectively ended in 2005, following the closure of the last refugee camp in Thailand resulting in a final wave of Hmong refugees. As a result, Vietnamese communities have a slightly higher percentage of youth who are non-native English speakers and require English learner support, while other Southeast Asian communities increasingly require more support to learn or maintain their heritage language.

This report aims to shine a light on what the “Asian American” average obscures. Guided by the premise that limited data are better than none, the report highlights the sparse disaggregated data that exist—a seemingly haphazard mix of limited national, state, local, and institutional sources.

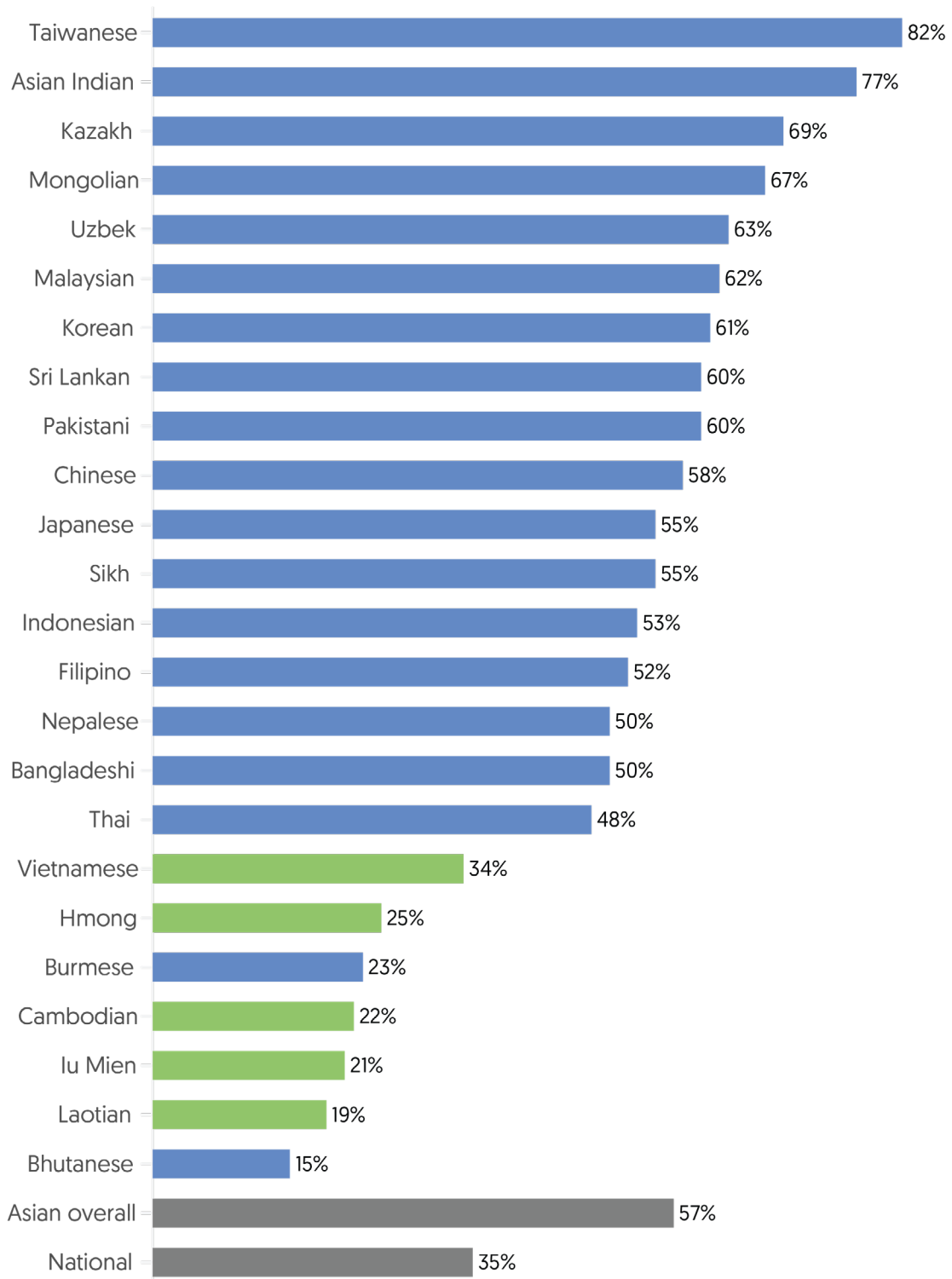
Whenever possible, this report presents statistics for individual communities, such as Hmong or Iu Mien, rather than a “Southeast Asian” aggregate, to increase the visibility of distinct ethnic communities. When data are not presented for a specific community, they were not available in the dataset.



Guided by the premise that limited data are better than none, the report highlights the sparse disaggregated data that exist.”

NATIONAL DATA

Figure 5. Percentage of Adults 25 and Older Who Attained a Bachelor’s Degree, by Asian Community, United States (2023)



Source: AAPI Data, 2025.¹¹

KEY FINDING 1

Outcomes are improving, but not equitably across ethnicities and genders

Historical displacement disadvantaged previous generations of Southeast Asian Americans in education

Resettling in the United States with limited financial, physical, and social assets, today’s Southeast Asian American adults had fewer educational opportunities in their youth.

As **Figure 6** shows, Southeast Asian Americans aged 25 or older are more likely to have not finished high school and less likely to have completed a bachelor’s degree than the national average.

Educational outcomes are improving for today’s youth, but not fast enough and not equitably

We expect the above figures to change as today’s Southeast Asian American youth age into adulthood. Limited data on Southeast Asian American communities paint a mixed but cautiously optimistic future for Southeast Asian American students—one that depends on continued and deepened investment in these communities.

Although national statistics on college completion for Southeast Asian American students are unavailable, data from California’s higher education systems show varied outcomes.

For example, as **Figure 7** on the next page shows, graduation rates for Cambodian and Vietnamese American students in the California State University (CSU) system exceed the systemwide average, while graduation rates for Hmong and Lao students fall below the average.

Figure 6. Educational Attainment Among Adults 25 and Older, United States (2023)



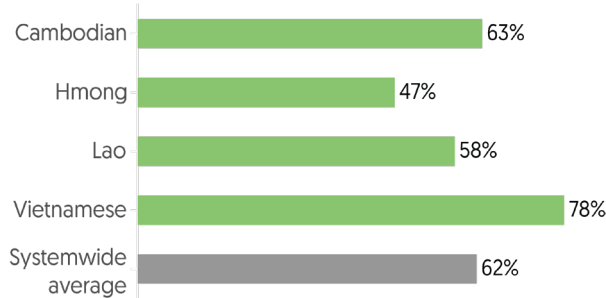
Source: AAPI Data, 2025.¹⁴



Limited data on Southeast Asian American communities paint a mixed but cautiously optimistic future for Southeast Asian American students.”

CALIFORNIA DATA

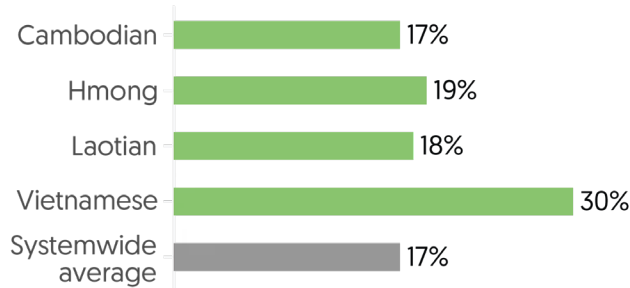
Figure 7. Systemwide Six-Year Graduation Rate for First-Time, Full-Time Undergraduates Entering in 2018, California State University (2024)¹⁵



Source: California State University, 2024.¹⁵

CALIFORNIA DATA

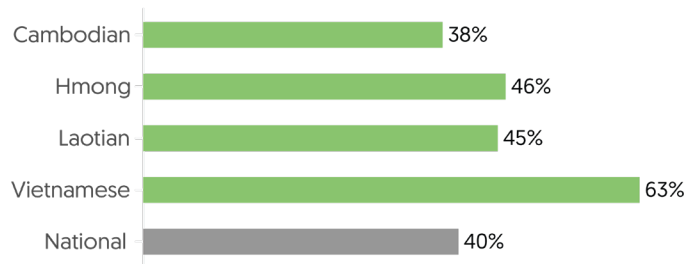
Figure 8. Systemwide Completion Rate, California Community Colleges (2020-21 Cohort)



Sources: The RP Group, 2025.; California Community Colleges, Chancellor's Office, 2025.¹⁷

NATIONAL DATA

Figure 9. Percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, United States (2022)



Source: US National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2024.

In California's community college system, Southeast Asian American students complete their certificates or associate degrees at or above the systemwide average (see **Figure 8**).

Nationally, Southeast Asian American youth are enrolling in college at rates close to or exceeding the national average (see **Figure 9**).

Limited K-12 data available show uneven outcomes among Southeast Asian American communities. In Minneapolis Public Schools, students who spoke Hmong at home were the only demographic group to see an increase in high school graduation rates from the class of 2022 to 2023.¹⁸

In the state of Washington, Southeast Asian American students taking the statewide assessment demonstrated mastery of English skills above or close to the state average.

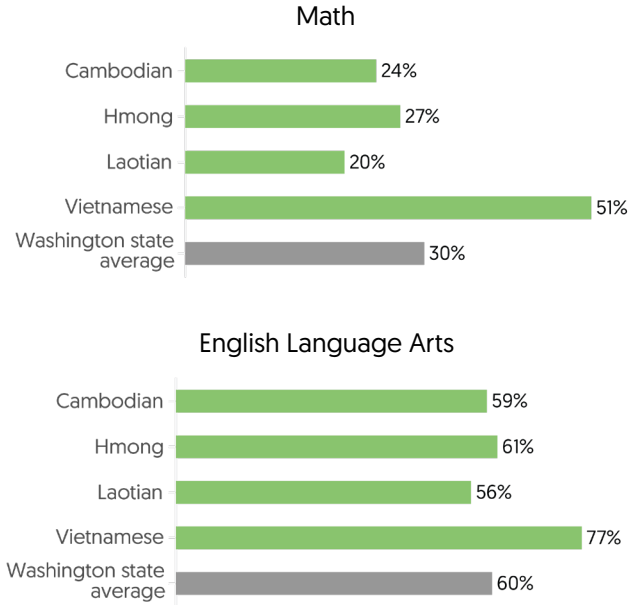
In math, over half of Vietnamese students met or exceeded educational standards, compared with fewer than a third of Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao students (see **Figure 10** on the next page).



Limited K-12 data available show uneven outcomes among Southeast Asian American communities.”

WASHINGTON DATA

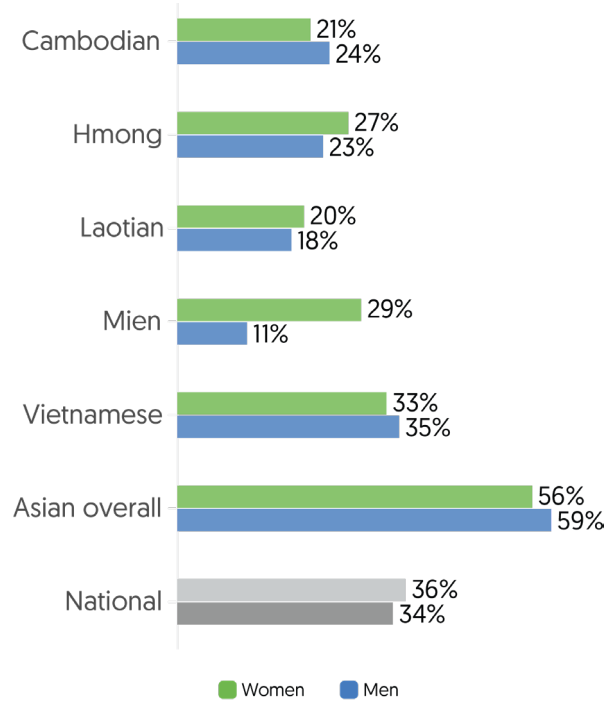
Figure 10. Percentage of 10th Graders Meeting or Exceeding Standards, State of Washington (2023)



Sources: Jenn Nguyen et al., 2025; Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2025.¹⁹

NATIONAL DATA

Figure 11. Percentage of Adults 25 and Older Who Attained a Bachelor's Degree, by Gender, United States (2023)



Source: Analysis of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey via IPUMS, 2023 Five-Year Estimates.

Outcomes differ by gender

While overall outcomes are improving for Southeast Asian Americans, gains for boys and men are not keeping pace with those for girls and women.²⁰ Among adults aged 25 and older, educational attainment varies widely by ethnic community.

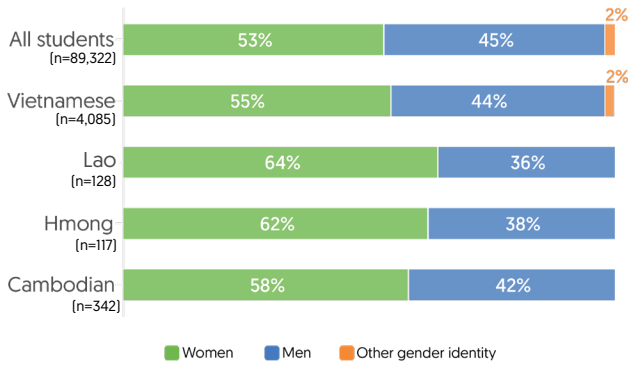
As **Figure 11** shows, women aged 25 and older in Hmong, Laotian, and Iu Mien communities have higher rates of bachelor's degree completion than men. In Cambodian and Vietnamese communities, however, men aged 25 and older are more likely to have completed a bachelor's degree.

However, the picture looks very different for adults currently in college. As is the case across racial groups, Southeast Asian American women are outpacing men in higher education.

Across the University of California system, for example, more women than men received degrees, with the largest gaps among Laotian and Hmong communities (see **Figure 12** on the next page).

CALIFORNIA DATA

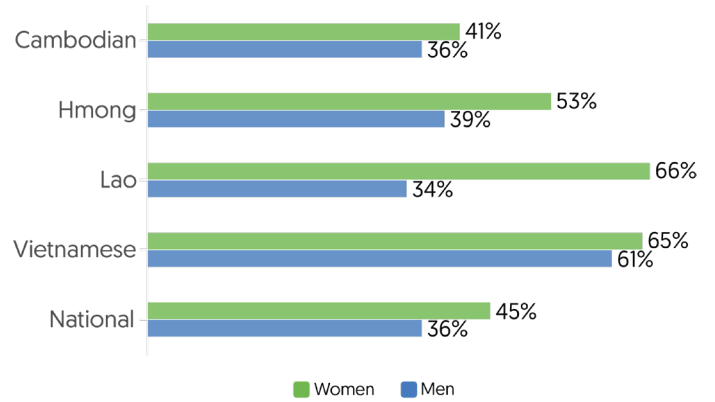
Figure 12. Degree Recipient Headcount, Any Level, by Ethnicity and Gender, University of California (2024-25)



Source: University of California, 2025.²¹

NATIONAL DATA

Figure 13. Percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Ethnicity and Gender, United States (2022)



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2023.²²

And nationally, as **Figure 13** shows, more Southeast Asian American women than men are enrolling in postsecondary education. The difference is particularly stark among Lao students, with women enrolling at nearly twice the rate of men.

No national dataset captures outcomes for Southeast Asian American students by gender at the K-12 level—a significant gap in understanding the needs of this population.



However, researchers examining specific schools or districts find that gender differences arise early.

A review of longitudinal data from kindergarten through high school found that Southeast Asian American girls typically achieved higher grades and performed better on assessments than their white counterparts, while Southeast Asian American boys did not.²³

At a New England high school, for example, Vietnamese girls were 51% more likely to graduate on time than Vietnamese boys.²⁴ This pattern mirrors national trends: In 2022–23, 90% of girls nationwide graduated from high school on time, compared with 85% of boys.²⁵

Gender differences arise in part because of unique challenges that Southeast Asian American boys face in achieving educational success. Educators often stereotype Southeast Asian American boys as gang members, which can create pressure to demonstrate “toughness” in reaction to the “model minority” stereotype.²⁶

As a result, Southeast Asian American boys are more likely to be disciplined in school and experience higher arrest rates than boys from other Asian American communities.²⁷

On average, Southeast Asian girls have higher educational attainment than boys—but often at a cost. A national review of ninth graders found that Southeast Asian American girls reported the second-lowest sense of belonging in school across all ethnic groups and socioeconomic statuses.²⁸

A study of Cambodian high school students found that girls succeeded at the cost of being stereotyped as “good girls” in opposition to their “gangster male” peers.²⁹ Two qualitative

studies of Hmong students in the Sacramento region found that girls achieved higher levels of academic success, but often at the cost of assimilation and resulting conflict within their families and communities.³⁰



Gender differences arise in part because of unique challenges that Southeast Asian American boys face in achieving educational success.

Educators often stereotype Southeast Asian American boys as gang members, which can create pressure to demonstrate ‘toughness’ in reaction to the ‘model minority’ stereotype.”

KEY FINDING 2

Supportive educational environments improve outcomes

To sustain progress and improve equity, schools, districts, and colleges must strengthen efforts to increase Southeast Asian American students' visibility across curricula, data, and institutional mindsets.

Culturally responsive curricula improve outcomes

Teaching curricula that recognize and celebrate Southeast Asian American history and culture improves outcomes by enabling students to connect new information to their lived knowledge and experience.³¹ Examples of culturally responsive curricula include:

Ethnic studies

The study of America's diverse racial and ethnic communities improves sense of identity, boosts critical thinking, and has significant academic impacts, particularly for students who need the most support.³²

San Francisco Unified's ninth-grade ethnic studies course, for example, led to long-term increases in high school attendance, graduation rates, and college enrollment among low-performing students of all ethnic backgrounds.³³

Southeast Asian American studies and related fields

Fields of study highlighting the history and culture of individual Southeast Asian American communities address critical gaps in existing curricula.

Many textbooks and children's literature about the Vietnam War largely ignore the US role in causing the displacement of millions in the ensuing refugee crisis.³⁴

Asian American studies, Southeast Asian American studies, Hmong studies, and other emergent fields focused on Southeast Asian communities challenge these narratives and increase belonging and connection among Southeast Asian American students.³⁵

Heritage language learning

Today's Southeast Asian American student population largely has native proficiency in English but less mastery of their heritage languages. However, providing students with opportunities to gain, increase, or maintain proficiency in their heritage language offers significant benefits: bilingual learning supports linguistic development, strengthens a sense of belonging, and deepens connections to family and community.³⁶

High school students who earn a State Seal of Biliteracy are more likely to enroll in a four-year college and earn \$2,000 to \$3,000 more annually.³⁷



Schools, districts, and colleges must strengthen efforts to increase Southeast Asian American students' visibility across curricula, data, and institutional mindsets."

Culturally competent educators improve outcomes

According to the National Education Association (NEA), cultural competence is defined as: “having an awareness of one’s own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families.”³⁸

Cultural competence among teachers, counselors, administrators, and other educators is a critical success factor of Southeast Asian American students. A qualitative study of Southeast Asian high school students, for example, found that a lack of cultural competence among principals contributed to students dropping out of high school.³⁹

Conversely, culturally competent educators have a positive impact on students. Bilingual and bicultural Southeast Asian American educators, for example, help Southeast Asian American students and families navigate the US educational system.⁴⁰ Qualitative studies of Hmong and Vietnamese American public school administrators also found that the experience and resilience gained as first-generation refugees ultimately strengthened their leadership approaches to support students of color.⁴¹

Despite this, only 5% of teachers nationwide identify as Asian American, compared with 7% of the US population. Data specific to Southeast Asian American educators are largely unavailable because the federal government does not collect or report data on Southeast Asian American communities in most cases. The few Southeast Asian American educators who enter the profession often experience microaggressions, isolation, and poor pay.^{42 43}

While recruiting more Southeast Asian American educators is paramount, training existing educators of other backgrounds to be culturally competent is equally important. Relying solely on Southeast Asian American teachers to support Southeast Asian American students is unfair and often leads to burnout and attrition.⁴⁴

Instead, investing in educators of other backgrounds can be equally effective. A qualitative study of Southeast Asian American high school students found that counselors and teachers who developed an understanding of their students’ culture—though not necessarily from those cultures themselves—positively influenced how students navigated postsecondary decision-making.⁴⁵

Similarly, a national study of Southeast Asian students at four-year colleges found that students who built relationships with faculty of any background reported increased confidence in science, technology, engineering, and math disciplines.⁴⁶



Increased belonging improves outcomes

A significant challenge for Southeast Asian American students is invisibility, isolation, and feelings of not being welcome in their school environments.⁴⁷ In addition to being the only—or one of a handful of—students with their background in a school or college, Southeast Asian American students experience higher-than-average rates of bullying.

A study of California youth, for example, found that almost a third of Cambodian students experienced bias-based bullying—more than students of any other background. Hmong and Lao students in California also experienced bias-based and cyber-bullying at higher-than-average rates.⁴⁸

To address this challenge, Southeast Asian American communities have created their own educational spaces. Several Midwestern Hmong communities, for example, have established charter schools with curricula in Hmong language, culture, and history alongside standard academics.⁴⁹

Making space goes beyond building schools. In 2006, Southeast Asian American scholars founded the *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement* as the first and only research journal dedicated to Southeast Asian American education. In 2021, after identifying a dearth of support for Southeast Asian American women entering academia, six doctoral students organized the SEAAster Scholars Collective as a “homemaking process for ourselves.”⁵⁰

Ultimately, schools and higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring that all students feel welcome.

One Midwestern high school, for example, supported students and a faculty member in creating a Hmong student association where students could explore their identities and advocate for community concerns.⁵¹ To address bullying, some California school districts have created materials specifically to address bullying of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, including resources translated into heritage languages.⁵²

In higher education, colleges and universities that received federal grants through the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) program reported improved feelings of belonging and increased retention among AAPI students through dedicated community spaces and culturally relevant academic support.⁵³

Supporting mental well-being improve outcomes

According to the US Center for Disease Control, promoting mental health and well-being improves classroom behavior, school engagement, and peer relationships—all of which are connected to academic success.⁵⁴ Yet in a 2024 national survey, one in three Southeast Asian American youth described their mental health as “fair” or “poor.”⁵⁵

Southeast Asian American youth experience unique psychological stressors. Many navigate intergenerational trauma and cultural differences rooted in their parents’ and grandparents’ histories fleeing violence in Southeast Asia.⁵⁶ As a result, only 43% of Southeast Asian American youth surveyed report feeling comfortable talking to a parent or caregiver when encountering a difficult emotional situation—the lowest rate among any Asian group surveyed.⁵⁷

Southeast Asian American youth also experience racism and discrimination from their peers and educators, with a notable uptick during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁸

More recently, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency has targeted Southeast Asian Americans at disproportionately high rates. These youth experience heightened anxiety, fear, and destabilization as the federal government arrests, detains, and/or deports them, their parents, their grandparents, or other family members in ways that can inflict significant trauma and be inhumane.⁵⁹

When Southeast Asian American youth seek help, they often face stigma and a lack of culturally appropriate service providers.⁶⁰ As a result, less than half of the Southeast Asian American youth experiencing depression in the 2024 national survey reported having spoken with a mental health professional.⁶¹

Without support to combat these pressures, Southeast Asian American students are at risk of

disengaging from their education. A qualitative study of Southeast Asian American high school students found that chronic pressures such as parental divorce or tight family finances, impeded high school completion.⁶²

Culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services, by contrast, improve outcomes. For example, a mental health literacy program geared toward Hmong and Chinese Vietnamese teens resulted in reduced stigma, increased confidence, and stronger connections with peers.⁶³

In a study of best practices for Cambodian American mental health, culturally appropriate practices included locating services in the heart of a Cambodian neighborhood, having a greeter who spoke Khmer, incorporating cultural elements, such as karaoke, and hiring bicultural and bilingual providers. This study also called for activities such as art or storytelling to strengthen youth resilience by grounding young people in their cultural identities.⁶⁴



Disaggregated data improves outcomes

Southeast Asian American advocates and researchers have long called for data disaggregated by ethnic communities under the “Asian” category.^{65 66} In spite of this, nearly all government, institutional, and other data sources continue to lump Southeast Asian American students alongside East Asian and South Asian students under a single “Asian” label.^{67 68 69}

This lack of data specific to Southeast Asian American students reinforces the “model minority” myth—a harmful stereotype that inaccurately portrays all Asian Americans as “intelligent, well-off, and able to excel in fields such as math and science.”⁷⁰ Beyond the “psychological injury,” as one Vietnamese American scholar put it,⁷¹ the “model minority” myth has tangible negative impacts on Southeast Asian American educational access and outcomes. Educators, institutions, and resource centers that buy into the “model minority” myth fail to see the educational challenges Southeast Asian American communities face, circumventing resources intended for them and compounding their invisibility and isolation.^{72 73}

In instances where Southeast Asian American communities have successfully advocated for disaggregated data, they have leveraged the data to identify educational inequities in their communities and recommend policy and institutional improvements to address them.

For example, Sacramento State and Fresno State—both campuses of the CSU system—analyzed their own institutional data to publish reports on Southeast Asian and Hmong students, respectively.⁷⁴ At the K-12 level, the Southeast Asian American Coalition successfully accessed data on Southeast Asian American students in Washington state 18 months after its initial request. The coalition examined these data and combined it with qualitative research to produce a report outlining recommendations on curricula, language access, data collection, and supporting postsecondary transitions.⁷⁵



Educators, institutions, and resource centers that buy into the ‘model minority’ myth fail to see the educational challenges Southeast Asian American communities face.”



KEY FINDING 3

In absence of federal leadership, states, school districts, and institutions must step up to support Southeast Asian American students

Recent federal policies threaten the slow but meaningful gains Southeast Asian American communities have made in education over time. States, school districts, and higher education institutions now have both an opportunity and a responsibility to make changes that improve educational outcomes for Southeast Asian American students.

Federal funding cuts and immigration actions are devastating

While the federal government previously played a leadership role in protecting equal opportunity for immigrant students and students of color, the US Department of Education (ED) during the second Trump Administration abdicated that responsibility.

Instead, the ED has denied educational opportunities to countless students—especially students of color—while advancing discriminatory ideologies espoused by the Administration.⁷⁶ As a result, long-standing programs proven to be effective for Southeast Asian American students and other students of color have been terminated or lost critical support.

Federal administration decimated language and college access programs

In the first year of the second Trump Administration, the ED fired all but one

staffer in the Department's Office of English Language Acquisition, which supports K-12 English learners nationwide, and declined to renew funding for English learner programming, including bilingual teacher professional development and interpretation services for limited English proficient family members.^{77 78}

The Administration also cut funding for college access programs. As of October 2025, the Administration has withheld over half of the \$1.19 billion Congress allocated for the ED's long-standing TRIO programs, which help low-income and first-generation students access higher education.⁷⁹ These programs have a proven track record: Students who participated in Upward Bound and related Student Success programs at four-year institutions had an 11% higher completion rate than those who did not.⁸⁰

Federal administration demolished AANAPISIs

Another devastating loss is the Administration's cuts to the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) competitive grant program, which supports higher education institutions with undergraduate populations that are at least 10% Asian American or Native American Pacific Islander and with at least 50% of enrolled students receiving federal financial aid.

AANAPISIs used these funds for a variety of approaches that support Asian American and/or Pacific Islander students, including summer bridge programs, academic advising, peer mentoring, faculty development, and technology upgrades, in addition to initiatives that improve institutional capacity for all students.^{81 82}




These practices were effective. Asian American and Pacific Islander students participating in an AANAPISI grant-funded learning cohort, for example, were more likely to transition out of developmental English classes and complete a two-year college degree than their peers.⁸³ AANAPISI benefits also extended beyond Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander students. For instance, full-time students at public four-year AANAPISIs had higher completion rates and earned approximately \$8,700 more annually than their peers who did not attend AANAPISIs.⁸⁴

Despite strong evidence of effectiveness across AANAPISIs and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), the Trump Administration ended discretionary funding for MSIs in September 2025. These cuts devastated AANAPISIs, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and other higher education institution programs for underserved students. The AANAPISI program alone lost \$18 million in discretionary funding.⁸⁵

In December 2025, the Trump Administration effectively ended all MSIs through a Department of Justice (DOJ) legal opinion. The DOJ argued MSIs were unlawful, despite their long-standing legitimacy and Congress's clear intent in creating and supporting them.⁸⁶

Previous federal support for data disaggregation has not continued

The federal government has historically implemented initiatives to further disaggregated data collection:

-  The ED's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) funded the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 and High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, the only two nationally representative, education-specific datasets identifying outcomes for Southeast Asian American students.⁸⁷ In March 2025, the Trump Administration laid off all but three of NCES's more than 100 employees, dismantling the agency and threatening future data collection that could uplift the experiences of Southeast Asian American students.⁸⁸
-  The ED's 2016 Asian American and Pacific Islander Disaggregation Initiative awarded \$1 million to the states of Hawaii, Minnesota, and Washington to implement data disaggregation; the grant was never repeated. Nearly a decade later, Minnesota and Washington are two of the three states which currently report educational data for individual Southeast Asian American communities.
-  Created in 1999, the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (WHIAANHPI) championed data disaggregation for these communities. Its work included providing guidance on overcoming barriers to disaggregation and advocating for it across the federal government.⁸⁹ After 25 years of bipartisan support, the Trump Administration dismantled WHIAANHPI in 2025 as part of its attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion, and access.⁹⁰

✿ In 2024, the US Office of Management and Budget issued Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (SPD 15), which requires all federal agencies to disaggregate data for the six most populous Asian communities. While the directive falls short of disaggregating data for most Southeast Asian American communities, it nevertheless represents a step in the right direction.⁹¹

✿ The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)—a form students must complete to access federal and institutional need-based financial aid for college—now includes a question that identifies some, but not all, Southeast Asian American communities. The information is collected for research purposes only and is not used in aid determinations or shared with colleges and universities. As with SPD 15, while this greater level of disaggregation is an improvement, it still falls short of making all communities visible.⁹²

Federal deportation surge devastates student learning

The Administration’s promise to “carry out the largest deportation operation in American history” will result in decreased educational outcomes for students who are immigrants or come from immigrant families.⁹³ With federal immigration authorities arresting and detaining immigrants regardless of status—and in some cases US citizens—merely going to school has become increasingly risky for Southeast Asian Americans, other students of color, and their families.⁹⁴

In addition to the drastic and often violent uptick in enforcement actions, the current Administration now permits these actions near previously “protected areas,” such as schools and afterschool care centers.⁹⁵

As a result, families are increasingly afraid to send their children to school. A study of immigration raids in California’s Central Valley showed a 22% decrease in school attendance, which in turn affects school funding.⁹⁶ Students who do attend school face an environment that the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS)—a coalition of approximately 80 of the nation’s largest school districts—characterized as “objectively less safe and feel less safe... causing serious and irreparable harm.”⁹⁷

These students experience additional mental health challenges, including trauma, developmental regression among young children, and increased suicidal ideation and alcohol use among teens.⁹⁸ CGCS anticipates that this current approach will result in lower educational outcomes for students from undocumented or mixed-status families.⁹⁹



CTE is a promising but relatively unknown pathway

Funded by the federal Perkins Act, Career and Technical Education (CTE) is a lesser-known opportunity for Southeast Asian American students to pursue education toward high-demand careers. By combining classroom education with hands-on training toward an industry credential, CTE participation in high school has resulted in well-documented increases in higher education enrollment, as well as increased employment and earnings outcomes—particularly for boys and men, low-income students, and Black and Latinx students.¹⁰⁰

A recent white paper drawing on findings from 28 youth-serving organizations found similar benefits for Southeast Asian American youth: in addition to increasing access to higher education, CTE reduced the time and financial burden required for students to enter the workforce.¹⁰¹

Despite these benefits, existing school and community college systems present significant barriers for Southeast Asian American students to participate in CTE. Students often lack information, funding, and guidance to access CTE pathways.

Further, misconceptions within their communities may have framed CTE as a lesser alternative to traditional four-year colleges. Southeast Asian American community organizations that could connect students to CTE or dispel inaccurate stereotypes often struggle with a lack of staffing, funding, knowledge, networks, and time needed to foster CTE partnerships with schools or community colleges.¹⁰²



KEY FINDING 4

States, school districts, and institutions are uniquely positioned to support Southeast Asian American students

With the federal government increasingly retreating public education and actively harming immigrant communities, states and local school districts are more important than ever in advancing educational equity for Southeast Asian American students.¹⁰³

Thankfully, states have risen to the challenge in recent years:

- ✿ **Culturally relevant curricula.** To expand culturally relevant curricula, 26 states now require ethnic studies, and 13 states require Asian American studies. In Wisconsin, where the Hmong community is the largest Asian American group, Hmong Studies is now required alongside Asian American studies. California recently published a free, open-source model Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong Studies K-12 curricula.¹⁰⁴
- ✿ **Heritage language learning.** To increase opportunities for heritage language learning, Minnesota created an alternative licensure pathway for teachers of heritage languages. As of 2025, the initial cohort of 19 teachers includes two Hmong heritage language teachers.¹⁰⁵
- ✿ **Data disaggregation.** To improve data on Southeast Asian American communities, eight states have responded to community advocacy by passing laws that require disaggregated data for Southeast Asian communities, though the scope of disaggregation varies by state.¹⁰⁶ However, only Minnesota, California, and Washington

currently make these data publicly available—though not fully and/or by request only.¹⁰⁷

Across the country, school districts and higher education institutions are implementing innovative, supportive practices targeted to Southeast Asian American students:

- ✿ **Heritage language learning.** To promote heritage language learning and strengthen belonging, the Westminster School District (serving K-8) and the Huntington Beach Union High School District in Orange County, California, partnered to create the first pathway offering dual Vietnamese-English immersion from preschool through high school graduation.¹⁰⁸
- ✿ **Data disaggregation.** To improve data on Southeast Asian American communities, the CSU and University of California (UC) systems now collect and report data for individual Southeast Asian American communities. The UC system goes a step further by reporting data for those communities disaggregated also by gender, low-income status, and other characteristics.
- ✿ **Protections for immigrant students.** To protect immigrant students and families, the nation's three largest school districts—New York City Public Schools, Los Angeles Unified, and Chicago Public Schools—condemned the intrusion of ICE into schools and directed administrators to provide training, support, and advocacy for affected community members.¹⁰⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

A call to action across sectors

What federal policymakers can do

- ❁ Remain vigorous advocates for the US Department of Education, which only Congress—not the president—has the authority to close.
- ❁ Hold the Administration accountable for administering congressionally approved and mandated programs that flow through the Department of Education, including funding for federal English learner, TRIO, and Minority-Serving Institutions, including AANAPISIs.
- ❁ Monitor and ensure timely, high-quality implementation of data disaggregation across federal agencies, as directed under SPD 15 issued by the Office of Management and Budget.
- ❁ Demand an immediate end to inhumane immigration enforcement practices that terrorize and harm immigrant and refugee communities.

What states can do

- ❁ Pass ethnic studies and Asian American studies legislation that include Southeast Asian American history and contributions.
- ❁ Implement culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy, including developing new curricula and providing professional development for school districts and teachers to implement them.
- ❁ Invest in recruiting and retaining more teachers of color including Southeast Asian American teachers.
- ❁ Implement data disaggregation in collection, analysis, and reporting, while making disaggregated data publicly available.
- ❁ Pass “sanctuary laws,” that forbid state law enforcement agencies from cooperating with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).



What schools, districts, and higher education institutions can do

- ❁ Implement culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy.
- ❁ Invest in campus- and student-centered support services targeted to Southeast Asian American students, such as student associations and culturally responsive mental health services.
- ❁ Consider Career and Technical Education (CTE) partnerships with Southeast Asian American community organizations to create programs offering postsecondary and workforce pathways for students and communities.
- ❁ Invest in culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate mental health services.
- ❁ Implement data disaggregation in collection, analysis, and reporting and make disaggregated data publicly available.
- ❁ Provide language access supports, such as translation and interpretation, in Southeast Asian American languages.
- ❁ Collaborate with community advocates to create school, district, and institutional policies that foster safe and welcoming environments for immigrant students and their families.
- ❁ Expand K–12 “Grow Your Own” teacher recruitment programs by providing mentoring, financial assistance, and alternative certification pathways to grow and diversify the educator workforce.

- ❁ Implement inclusive faculty hiring and increase visibility and belonging for Southeast Asian American academics in higher education, who generate a disproportionate share of research on Southeast Asian American communities without the benefit of prior generations of scholars who share their identities or lived experiences.

What community advocates can do



Southeast Asian American community organizations can:

- ❁ Teach Southeast Asian American youth their histories, how those histories shape their educational journeys, and how previous generations have successfully fought to improve education.
- ❁ Increase awareness of Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs among students and families by communicating their benefits and dispelling stigma.
- ❁ Reclaim narratives through storytelling and data analysis that dismantle the “model minority” myth.
- ❁ Use this report to support advocacy efforts with local school districts, higher education institutions, and state education agencies.







Aligned progressive organizations can:

- ❁ Actively challenge the “model minority” stereotype about Asian Americans in their research, communications, and advocacy.

What funders can do

-  Fund data disaggregation initiatives in education, similar to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's support for data disaggregation in health.¹¹⁰
-  Increase the visibility and sustainability of organizations supporting Southeast Asian American communities through trust-based, multi-year general operating support to build organizational infrastructure and capacity.

What researchers and academics can do

-  Continue to advocate for longitudinal datasets that disaggregate among Southeast Asian American communities.
-  Address the dearth of research focused on Southeast Asian American students by:
 -  Investigating inequities revealed in educational data, such as gaps in outcomes by gender and by ethnic community.
 -  Employing more quantitative research methodologies to complement the existing body of research, which is largely qualitative.
 -  Investing in more research on K–12 students to complement the existing body of research, which focuses heavily on higher education.
-  Leverage the limited but growing number of datasets that disaggregate for Southeast Asian American communities.

Historical Context

- **Incorporation:** 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act
1980 Refugee Act
- **Enforcement:** 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)
- **Criminalization:** 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) & Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA)

CONCLUSION



Since the first refugees arrived over half a century ago, Southeast Asian American communities have persistently demanded better educational opportunities for their children and students. Today, more than 1 million Southeast Asian youth benefit from their elders' advocacy, and educational outcomes are improving—slowly, and unevenly.

But incremental progress is not enough. Nor is it equitable across ethnicities or genders.



We know what works: educational systems and settings that recognize Southeast Asian American students’ histories, identities, languages, and unique needs—in curricula, teaching, school culture, mental health, and data—and invest accordingly. Yet, the federal government has abdicated its responsibilities to students at a time where it is most urgent.

The path forward is clear: States, school districts, and higher education institutions now have the opportunity to lead in bringing forward a more equitable educational system that benefits many more generations.

Methodology

Review of Southeast Asian American student demographics

To describe the current Southeast Asian American student population, we drew upon US Census data. We were unable to use the census’s predetermined “Southeast Asian” category in our analysis because the census definition does not align with SEARAC’s definition.

First, the census does not count Hmong Americans in their definition of “Southeast Asian,” a glaring oversight.

In 2023, “after extensive engagement with leaders from the Hmong community,” the US Census Bureau acknowledged that “many within the Hmong population in the United States identify as part of the Southeast Asian population.” However, the census continues to classify Hmong Americans within the “East Asian” category.¹¹¹

Second, the Census includes several communities in “Southeast Asian” that are outside of SEARAC’s geopolitical definition. For example, the US Census considers Filipino, Malaysian, and Singaporean communities to be “Southeast Asian.”¹¹²

Since we could not rely on the US Census “Southeast Asian” category, we created our own. We totaled the number of youth across the seven Southeast Asian communities currently identified in the 2020 Decennial Census: Cambodian, Hmong, Lahu, Laotian, Iu Mien, Tai Dam, and Vietnamese.

We used the 2020 Decennial Census over the more recent American Community Survey because the Decennial Census was the only dataset to include small communities such as the Lahu or Tai Dam.

Although the 2020 Decennial Census dataset was more inclusive than others, it still lacks data for other Southeast Asian American communities, such as the Cham, Khmu, Montagnards, Phutai, Pnong, Tai Deng, Tai Lue, and ethnic Chinese with Southeast Asian heritage.



Since we could not rely on the US Census “Southeast Asian” category, we created our own.

Review of Southeast Asian American educational outcomes

To identify educational outcomes for the Southeast Asian American community, we drew on three primary sources:

1. Federally available data sources, such as the US Census and the US Digest of Education Statistics;
2. Reports from educational institutions, such as Minneapolis Public Schools or the California State University system; and
3. Reports produced by other organizations, such as the Southeast Asian American Coalition in the state of Washington.

We attempted to find state-level data for Southeast Asian American students across common federal and state educational data reporting systems, such as the California Department of Education’s DataQuest or the US Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. In almost all cases, these systems do not report data for Southeast Asian American students. The state of Minnesota is an exception, publishing disaggregated data for all communities. However, the data is not representative since public school district reporting of disaggregated data is voluntary.¹¹³

Review of supports for Southeast Asian American students

To identify the components of a supportive educational experience for Southeast Asian American students, we (1) interviewed leading academics, policy experts, and community leaders working in the field, and (2) conducted a review of the literature on Southeast Asian American education since 1975.

Our review identified a severe dearth of research on Southeast Asian American education in mainstream educational journals. A 2020 meta-analysis of 151 articles that mentioned race across six top education journals over a 10-year period found that just four mentioned Southeast Asian communities.¹¹⁴

With such little research available in mainstream journals, our report depends heavily on open-access literature, government reports, and other “grey literature,” defined as research and analysis disseminated outside of commercial academic journals.¹¹⁵

Review of current policy environment

To assess the current policy landscape affecting Southeast Asian American students, we reviewed recent legislation and research on implementation and practices at the federal, state, local, institutional, and district levels.



Endnotes

¹ In this report, “Laotian” refers to the US Census Bureau’s categorization of all ethnic groups from the country of Laos, except those that meet the Bureau’s population thresholds such as the Hmong and Iu Mien. When not referring to Census data, this report uses “Lao” to describe people of the majority lowland Lao heritage.

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