

Hear Student Voice



Rising Up: The Southeast Asian American Educational Journey

Across classrooms, campuses, and communities, Southeast Asian American students need educators, administrators, and policymakers to hear their voices on what works and what doesn't in their education. In interviews, they identified the "model minority" myth, cuts to federal funding, and immigration enforcement as systemic threats to their success. They shared what is effective: curricula, spaces, and educators which value their histories, identities, and cultures.

This fact sheet shares the voices of Southeast Asian American students from across the country on what decision-makers need to hear.

SEAA STUDENT POPULATION



653,000

Number of school-aged (5 to 17) Southeast Asian American youth, nationwide



353,370

Number of college-aged (18 to 24) Southeast Asian American youth, nationwide

Source: United States Census Bureau, 2025

Systemic challenges to student success

i. The "model minority" myth

Southeast Asian American students identify the "model minority" myth—a stereotype of all Asian Americans as wealthy and well-educated—as inaccurate and harmful.

“Asians in school are expected to be the person raising their hand, but I was in the back, head down, crouched, thinking ‘don’t call on me.’”

“Being perceived as successful in the system, people assume I don’t need help or I only got my achievements because of my race. I can never reach out for the help I need...‘Model minority’ sounds positive, but it’s a really bad thing.”

ii. Federal funding threats to college access programs

During the second Trump Administration, the US Department of Education has withheld funding for college access programs—evidence-based supports for Southeast Asian American and other low-income, first-generation students to succeed in college.

“I participated in a ‘summer bridge’ program targeting first-generation, low-income students. We came in a month early and took classes on campus in a small cohort. Programs like that allow for you to have a community and adjust easier to college prior to attending. Don’t take away funding for these opportunities—increase it! They allow students to feel more at home at institutions that were created without them in mind.”

iii. Federal immigration actions

With federal immigration authorities regularly arresting and detaining immigrants regardless of status, going to school has become a daily risk for Southeast Asian Americans, other students of color, and their families.

“My family insists I carry my passport with me when I go to campus. Some of my classmates changed to virtual classrooms because their families are unable to leave their houses.”

“The local ICE incidents affected my learning and my experiences of coming to school. I always had to look out for my family in case someone came to our house. It’s very scary to think about.”

What works: supporting educational environments

i. Ethnic studies

Ethnic studies recognizes and celebrates Southeast Asian American history and culture, improving belonging, student engagement, and academic outcomes by enabling students to connect new information to their lived knowledge and experience.

“ I used to regret being a Southeast Asian. My last name isn’t appealing to an English speaker. Medicines in my culture aren’t common, the foods don’t sound ‘nice’ in the cafeteria, the deities aren’t popularized. I took ethnic studies—the first implementation of it at my school—and it help created the foundation of my identity. Now I’m comfortable with who I am.

ii. Cultural affinity spaces

Often as “the only” or one of a handful of students with their background at a school or college, Southeast Asian American students find mentors and opportunity through student associations, resource centers, or spaces that recognize and celebrate their culture and identity.

“ In high school, I found a mentor who was a year older than me in a Vietnamese community organization. She told me about a local Vietnamese American youth development organization and an opportunity on the city Youth Commission, both of which I joined. She showed me pathways I didn’t know existed.

“ I’ve always liked dancing when I was younger, but I didn’t know how to do Hmong dance or traditional things. One of my upperclassmen taught me how to do it. It brought out a different side of me, and it makes me happy to see my culture is still alive.

iii. Educators of color

Southeast Asian American students and families seek role models in educators who share bicultural experiences.

“ In sixth grade, I had my first-ever Southeast Asian American teacher. I thought—as a Southeast Asian American—I can be an educator, too.

“ I talked to my counselor at school. She’s Hispanic and connects to the struggle of being afraid of ICE.

Recommendations

- ✦ Dispel the “model minority” myth through research, disaggregated data, and storytelling.
- ✦ Hold the Department of Education accountable for administering congressionally approved and mandated college access programs, such as TRIO.
- ✦ Demand an immediate end to immigration enforcement practices that terrorize immigrant and refugee communities.
- ✦ Implement culturally responsive curricula, such as ethnic studies and heritage language learning.
- ✦ Invest in cultural affinity spaces for Southeast Asian American students, such as student associations and campus resource centers.
- ✦ Invest in recruiting and retaining more educators of color including Southeast Asian American teachers.

About this fact sheet

This fact sheet is one in a series accompanying [Rising Up: the Southeast Asian American Educational Journey](#) (2026), a report on Southeast Asian American students from Southeast Asia Resource Action Center. We express gratitude to the youth leaders at ARISE and Vietnamese American Roundtable who shared their stories and provided us quotes. They have been lightly edited for grammar and clarity.

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