

Southeast Asian Americans & Career and Technical Education



SEARAC

Rising Up: The Southeast Asian American Educational Journey

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs can offer a low-cost pathway toward high-demand careers by combining classroom education with hands-on training toward an industry credential. However, Southeast Asian American students, particularly women and girls, underenroll in CTE. Access to CTE is inequitable for Southeast Asian American students, and students and families may hold misconceptions about CTE programs. Policymakers can address these barriers through community partnerships and improved data.

CTE improves academic and employment outcomes

Across all students, CTE increases high school completion, college enrollment, and employment outcomes, particularly for men and students of color.¹ A white paper by SEARAC, drawing on interviews of 28 Southeast Asian American organizations, found that CTE increased access to higher education and reduced the time and financial burden required for students to enter the workforce while aligning their training in-demand skills.²

Asian Americans least likely to participate in CTE

Asian American students are the least likely among all racial groups to “concentrate,” or enroll in multiple CTE courses. Concentration is important because students develop a deeper understanding of a pathway and is often correlated with an industry credential, high school graduation, and college enrollment.³ A similar gap exists by gender: only 17% of girls of all racial groups participated in three or more CTE courses, compared to 23% of boys.⁴ Data specific to Southeast Asian American students are unavailable because the federal government does not report data on Southeast Asian American communities in most cases.

Stigma and inequitable access limit CTE participation

Across many communities, CTE suffers from stigma as a lesser option to traditional four-year colleges. This perception is rooted in history: over a century ago, our educational systems created CTE to track low-income and immigrant students into low-wage vocations with no path to college or high-wage professions. Today, however, CTE offers accelerated opportunities into a wide range of high-demand careers. Further, students can pursue CTE alongside, rather than in place of, a postsecondary degree.⁵

MAKING THE CASE FOR CTE

A study of students in Nebraska and South Dakota found that students who completed a CTE course sequence were

7% more likely to graduate from high school on time, and

10% more likely to enroll in postsecondary education

Source: Brodersen et al., 2021

CTE ENROLLMENT GAPS

The most recent national data show that **only 12% of Asian and Pacific Islander students** enrolled in three or more CTE courses, compared to 22% of white students.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2026

Another challenge to CTE participation is inequitable access. For example, CTE outreach materials are rarely available in Southeast Asian American languages.⁶ Additionally, Southeast Asian American communities are disproportionately low-income: more than a quarter of Southeast Asian Americans live within 200% of the federal poverty line (an annual household income of \$66,000 for a family of four).⁷ They attend schools with fewer resources, such as qualified teachers and standard equipment to support CTE.⁸

Community partnerships and improved data increase access

Southeast Asian American community organizations are a bridge to families and youth to reframe CTE as a promising option. However, these organizations struggle with insufficient staffing, funding, knowledge, networks, and time needed to develop awareness and foster CTE partnerships with schools or community colleges.⁹

Improving data through disaggregation—the process of collecting and reporting data for specific communities—is another step toward improving access. Currently, there is no available data on Southeast Asian American participation or outcomes. When students remain invisible, disparities in CTE access and outcomes persist.

Recommendations

- ✦ Build strategic partnerships between CTE programs and Southeast Asian American community organizations to increase enrollment and students' success.
- ✦ Invest in culturally responsive outreach, such as materials in Southeast Asian languages.
- ✦ Demand full, timely implementation of Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (SPD 15), which requires all federal agencies to disaggregate race and ethnicity data beyond the major groups such as the aggregate “Asian” category.

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.

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- ⁸ Equity in CTE Workgroup, 2022.
- ⁹ Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), 2025.