



Focus On Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

AN AMERICAN STORY

Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in the nation, reports the 2010 Census, and with that growth comes age-old friction—21st century style. A UCLA student's YouTube rant against her Asian classmates and their lack of "American manners" recently sparked a national controversy, while a famous radio host's mockery of Japanese tsunami victims struck a new low; and who can forget a state legislator's call for Asian citizens to change their names to something *real* Americans can pronounce?

Spewed by simple college students or savvy politicians, the stereotypes contain a well-worn theme: Asians aren't Americans, even if your family has been here for generations. "Having to battle these stereotypes in 2011 is exactly why it's so important for educators and parents to start teaching diversity in the early grades," says Daphne Kwok, chair of the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. "People from all backgrounds are what make America, America."



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Interviews: Daphne Kwok, Chair, President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; Frank Wu, Chancellor and Dean of Hastings UC College of Law; Sefa Aina, Vice Chair, President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; Maile Akina, English teacher, Nanakuli High School; Dennis Tynan, Social Studies Teacher, Nanakuli High School; Kiran Ahuja, Executive Director, White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

WORDS PACK A POWERFUL PUNCH

Academic and author Frank Wu has spent his adult life promoting cross-cultural awareness between ethnic communities. Chancellor and Dean of Hastings College of Law at the University of California, and author of "Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White," Wu talks candidly about the impact of bigotry on Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) students.

Q: Is there a connection between the rapid growth of the API community and anti-Asian bias?

A: In the blink of an eye—from one census to the next, we've grown from a tiny percentage to a critical mass—and not just in California and Hawaii but in the Midwest and the South. There's this feeling there are too many Asians, especially on college campuses like UCLA, where more than 40 percent of the student population is AAPI. For some people, that's frightening. It doesn't mean everyone's a bigot, but people have difficulty adjusting to change. Within our lifetime, our nation

will undergo a profound change never made before by any society on the face of the globe. We will cease to have a single identifiable racial majority.

Q: What impact do incidents like the YouTube rant have on API schoolchildren?

A: When I was just five years old, I understood that if I talked funny or ate funny smelling foods, I wouldn't be considered American. I was called "ching chong Chinaman" and worse almost on a daily basis. For me, the lingering power of the childhood cruelties of teasing and taunting are more painful than any physical trauma I can recall. As the number of immigrants has increased, so has the bullying of Asian students. Today's Asian students face a high level of bullying—verbal and physical—that can be devastating. Sometimes, when I encounter the same old racial insults, I want to say, "If you're going to dis me, at least get some new material."

Q: What's the biggest challenge for API students?

A: No matter how well you speak English, how long you've been in this country, or how much you assimilate, you're seen as a perpetual foreigner and therefore not a real American. "Where are you from?" is a question I like answering. "Where are you *really* from?" is a question I really hate answering.

Asian students also have to live up to the stereotype of child prodigies who win every spelling bee, science fair, math competition, and piano recital on their way to the Ivy League. On the surface being a "model minority" sounds like a complement, but it's a dangerous generalization for several reasons: Asian students are assumed to be gifted and talented and therefore need no help, the very image of Asian overachievers leads to resentment that we are wrecking the grade curve and taking jobs away from real Americans, and it compares Asians to other minorities in an inflammatory way that ignores history. The tremendous



pressure for Asian students to live up to a perfect ideal is taking its toll in rising rates of depression and suicide.

Q: What should educators know about API students and families?

A: The tremendous diversity among Asian American and Pacific Islander students shapes their experience: they may come from families who have been here for five generations, or they may

be recent immigrants; they may be adoptees, or they may be from mixed-race backgrounds. These students present challenges because some are very gifted, some have suffered war or terrible trauma, some are dealing with cultural disconnect, and some who seem assimilated and well-adjusted may be suffering from the pressure of absurd expectations. If they are having problems, they're often reluctant to share personal concerns out of a desire for privacy and

worry about dishonoring their families. Fortunately, awareness of the stereotypes and issues faced by API students helps educators start to address them.

Q: Can America really be more inclusive?

A: I'm an optimist. I believe that by working together cooperatively and constructively, we can forge a sense of community. That's where social justice begins.

SPOTLIGHT ON PACIFIC ISLANDERS

"Pacific Islanders get lost in the conversation about the AAPI community," notes Sefa Aina, Vice Chair of the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. A native Californian whose family hails from American Samoa, Aina is a founding member of several organizations serving Pacific Islander students and educators. "Too many Pacific Islander students are struggling in school, yet we miss out on needed resources and opportunities," says Aina. He believes that everyone was lumped into one big category because it was easier than dealing with the nation's true diversity" but reports that the White House Initiative is leading the charge to disaggregate data on Asians and Pacific Islanders, a complex community containing over 50 ethnic groups and more than 100 languages.

NANAKULI STUDENTS IN THE ZONE

As Nanakuli High School moves into Hawaii's Zone of School Innovation, a DOE designation that gives struggling schools more flexibility to raise student achievement, Nanakuli students are aiming for that zone of concentrated effort that defines people at the top of their game. An NEA Priority School, Nanakuli is using a federal grant and transformation model of school reform to raise test scores and graduation rates. Teachers Maile Akina and Dennis Tynan discuss their hopes for the future.

Q: Who are your students?

A: The vast majority of our students are Pacific Islanders from many cultures—mostly Native Hawaiian, but we also have Samoans, Tongans, Filipinos, and Micronesians. We have a handful of White, Black, and Latino students, as well.

Q: How do they fare in school?

A: Our students live in a community with higher than average rates of homelessness, foster children, and health problems. For many, school is the only stable, functional part of their lives. We're working to send our students to college or the workplace with 21st century skills and knowledge to compete with the rest of the world, but

our kids have three big roadblocks: poverty; the power of negative stereotypes; and poor reading skills, which link to poverty and the lack of print-rich environments. We believe our students deserve the same education as those in the most privileged schools and are capable of the same work, but we have to meet them where they are. So we work to try and provide the same high expectations that private schools on the island provide their students And we work to constantly improve our teaching craft. When we see where the gaps are, we work to try and fill them. We ask ourselves, "What is not working in my class? Why are they not understanding this concept? Why are they not invested in this reading program?" And then we work to improve. We have to — their futures are too precious.

Q: What strategies are you using to boost student achievement?

A: Nanakuli is using the New Tech school model, centered on project-based learning and an Internet-wired laptop computer for each student in the program. Academic standards are taught through assignments based on real-life scenarios and collaborative work groups. When we started, students and their parents attended laptop

orientation sessions. One of the biggest changes we're seeing is that our students are really internalizing the big ideas of each unit. New Tech students will graduate with 12 college credits and exposure to college camps, college discovery days, and early admissions programs. Every freshman and sophomore at our school is in the program, and each incoming class will join until the entire school is New Tech.

Q: Are there any victories that inspire you?

A: Daily. We get inspired by the things that inspire our students, whether it's a great book they're reading, a better math exam score, a fun biology project, or singing their hearts out in our performing arts program. We're inspired by the changes that could be coming not just to our school, but to the entire community.

EDUCATING API STUDENTS: ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

"The AAPI experience is so complex and diverse, I encourage teachers and administrators to get a good sense of the communities their students come from," advises Kiran Ahuja, Director of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. API students from different communities face significantly different challenges, including level of parental involvement. Some parents from refugee communities may even be coping with post-traumatic stress disorder, says Ahuja, who stresses that differences in ethnicity, language, culture, economics, and education call for a nuanced approach to educating AAPI students and building relationships with their families.

Since language is still a major issue for so many API parents and students, Ahuja also calls for school districts to provide English Language Learner programs that are geared to diverse immigrant populations, in addition to Hispanics. In the higher education arena, the Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions program, approved by congress in 2007, is trying to help more API youth attend and graduate from college. "We must come together and understand what these changes in our country's demographics mean for public policy," said Ahuja, who is heartened that advocacy organizations increasingly regard immigration and its associated challenges as a civil rights issue.

Despite the rapid growth of the API immigrant population, there remains a dearth of API educators who can enrich the profession and serve as touchstones for API students and parents. Recognizing a critical need, the White House Initiative recently issued a call to action to promote the teaching profession among API youth, hosting a roundtable discussion at Granada Hills High School in Granada Hills, California. "We need to raise the level of discourse around teaching in our community," the Initiative's youth outreach coordinator, David Lee, told attendees. "It's unfortunate that

we champion law and medicine as traditional occupations, but we've lost in the conversation the power of teaching to transform the lives of the next generation."

Visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVJ0IPE5yac> to see the roundtable video.

FAST FACTS

- America's **single-race Asian population** grew from **10.2 million in 2000** to **14.7 million in 2010**, experiencing a **43% increase**. The smallest major race group is **Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders**, numbering **0.5 million**.
- **Asian Americans** number **15.5 million**; **11.8%** live in poverty; **3.5%** are unemployed; **14.4%** haven't graduated high school; **16.3%** have only a high school degree; **20.5%** have some college education; **29.3%** have a bachelor's degree; **19.5%** have a graduate or professional degree.
- **Polynesians** number **610,684**; **12.4%** live in poverty; **4.8%** are unemployed; **10.6%** haven't graduated high school; **34.8%** have only a high school degree; **37.6%** have some college education; **11.5%** have a bachelor's degree; **5.6%** have a graduate or professional degree.
- Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders make up **less than one percent** of all the nation's teachers.