

Focus On



What Works

Learning While Asian American and Pacific Islander

"I'm not great at math and science, I don't play any musical instruments, and I want to be a teacher instead of an engineer. I guess I'm not very Asian," concludes Amy Chin, a high school student who dreams of being an educator. For today's Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) students, narrow societal stereotypes often shape their life choices and challenge their very identities.

Overcoming Stereotypes

What does it mean to be an Asian American or Pacific Islander in a community so complex it contains more than 50 ethnic groups and over 100 languages? And what happens to API students who don't fit the model minority stereotype that casts them as "Super Students" with special abilities in math and science? Many struggle silently, suffering from test anxiety, social isolation, and impaired self-esteem—too embarrassed to admit they don't have the super powers that schools, more often than not, attribute to API students the moment they walk into a classroom.

In fact, academic achievement among API youth covers the full spectrum—from stellar to struggling. And school can be particularly challenging for API students who are recent immigrants or whose families have experienced poverty, hardship, dislocation, or a lack of educational opportunities.

Language Instruction Key to Success

Language instruction will play a critical role in the academic future of many of these students. Currently, 18 percent of all ELL students, and 28 percent of elementary ELL students, speak an Asian language. Given that a large percentage of Asians and Pacific Islanders don't speak English at home, ELL competency for educators has become a major focus of API education. The key, say NEA language experts, is training all classroom teachers in ELL methodology and making cultural and social justice issues essential elements of instruction. Cultural competence is fundamental, they say, to helping Amy Chin and other API students navigate the demands of school, while celebrating their heritage *and* their uniqueness.

HOT TOPIC

Hope in Higher Ed

The API community is celebrating recent Congressional passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act, which includes the historic Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AAPISI) program. Similar to other minority-serving institution programs (such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities), AAPISI is designed to provide greater opportunities and services for underserved college students. Asian educators predict that future partnerships between these higher-ed institutions and K-12 schools will provide expanded curricula and resources, more research on the academic needs of API students, and urgently needed recruitment and training of future API educators.



FROM ISSUES

MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPE
ACHIEVEMENT GAPS
ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY



TO ACTION

PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION
DIVERSITY TRAINING
CULTURAL IMMERSION PROGRAMS
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



WHAT'S WORKING

① Parent programs and staff diversity training lead to impressive gains. Fifty-two percent of the student enrollment in Southern California's Alhambra Unified School District is Asian/Pacific Islander, and over the last seven years, API student achievement has taken impressive leaps. Strategies include: 1) Early intervention, ELL progress monitoring, and decision-making protocols that are fully embedded across the K-12 curricular path; 2) Multilingual (Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese) school/community coordinators placed at all sites to bridge the connection between parents and schools; and 3) Regular training opportunities for administrators and staff to discuss diversity and cultural issues that could negatively impact the education of minority students. Adequate Yearly Progress scores for API students show an increase from 62.6 percent in math in 2002 to 83 percent in 2008 and from 45.5 percent in English in 2002 to 68.9 percent in 2008. API 10th graders passing the California High School Exit Exam in math jumped from 51 percent in 2002 to 97 percent in 2008 and from 39 percent in English in 2002 to 86 percent in 2008.

② Emphasis on indigenous language promotes scholarship and self-esteem. The Hawaiian Language Immersion Program (HLIP) is a K-12 public school initiative with 19 school sites and 1500 children (both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian) statewide. HLIP promotes Hawaiian culture and history, while treating the indigenous language as primary and dominant in the school setting. English is introduced as part of the

curriculum beginning in grade 5 to ensure bilingual ability at the high school level. When HLIP was first established, detractors predicted that students would be unable to speak English and would be academic failures, but results from Hawaii's latest state assessment test show positive outcomes. Three school sites with classes taught in Hawaiian attained the highest state rating under NCLB this year. And students from Hawaiian language schools not only graduate from high school at a higher rate than the state average, they also have a high college matriculation rate. In addition to speaking Hawaiian and English fluently, some students study third languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and Latin.

③ Staff development and innovative curriculum accelerate ELL progress. Fallon School (K-8), in Northern California's Dublin Unified School District has an API population of 52 percent. API English Language Learners showed a 32 percent growth in Average Yearly Progress for 2008-09, compared to a 23 percent growth for all students. API gains are attributed to 1) *A district-wide focus on professional learning communities:* Educators utilize regularly scheduled collaboration meetings within and between grade levels and subject areas to analyze student data and work; 2) *An intervention model:* School staff determine the levels of interventions needed to support ELL students; and 3) *Culturally inclusive programs:* The most effective programs for ELL students appeal to their cultural background and multi-lingualism.

WHAT STUDENTS SAY

“When I transferred to school in Las Vegas, I got hit with the model minority label from the start. The teachers wouldn't even consider that I needed help—which I did. Everyone just assumed I was going to study hard and do well. I had come from a primarily Asian neighborhood in New Jersey where the teachers were much more culturally aware and understood that all kids need help.”

High School Student
Las Vegas, Nevada

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