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Focus On

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

Beyond Black and White: API Students and School Desegregation

More than 50 years have passed since the United States Supreme Court struck a blow against the racial segregation of public school students in the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, but last June, America's schools received a wake-up call. In what some have called a reversal of the historic civil rights victory, the Supreme Court ruled that voluntary school desegregation programs in Louisville, Kentucky, and Seattle, Washington, violated the Constitution.¹

Like other ethnic minorities in the United States, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (API) have been direct beneficiaries of the *Brown* decision. APIs have also been direct participants in the struggle for equal education, fighting early legal battles that preceded *Brown*. But, although the nation's schools have been resegregating at a rapid rate, API students are seldom mentioned in the dialogue on school desegregation.

At the time of *Brown v. Board*, less than 0.5 percent of the entire United States population was API,² but the landscape has changed dramatically. Today, API students constitute eight percent of the enrollment in the West, larger than the region's Black enrollment, and APIs comprise almost one-twentieth of the nation's students.³ How does the growing resegregation of the nation's schools affect API students, and what stake does the API community have in advocating for desegregation for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds?

A History of Exclusion

These questions are almost impossible to address without understanding the history of Asian-American and Pacific Islander students in the United States. Though it's little known, API students are no strangers to segregation—and even outright exclusion—from schools attended by White students. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, the debate was not whether API children should attend integrated schools, but *any* school at all.

The first significant wave of immigration by Asians to the United States occurred in the 1840s. By 1865, close to 50,000 Chinese lived in California alone, many of them in San Francisco.⁴ A racially segregated, Chinese-only public school opened in 1859 in San Francisco, but it was ordered closed in 1871 by the school board, after which no ethnic Chinese student was permitted to attend a San Francisco public school of any kind.⁵

It's difficult to appreciate how intense anti-API sentiment was during this period: In 1879, the *New York Times*, even as it advocated against limits on Chinese immigrant labor as a violation of employers' rights, stated:

It may be cheerfully conceded that the Chinaman is a most unpleasant person, that he is bound by some secret and mysterious form of slavery, and that he has no political rights whatsoever. But how he is to be got rid of is the question.⁶

Despite the dangerous anti-Asian climate, in the fall of 1884, a Chinese-American family chose to defy the system: Joseph and Mary Tape brought a legal action challenging the refusal of the Spring Valley Elementary School to admit their daughter, Mamie, born and raised in the United States. At the time, San Francisco Board of Education policy expressly prohibited ethnic Chinese children from attending the city's public schools.⁷ The California Constitution even went so far as to declare Chinese to be "dangerous to the well-being of the state."⁸

By January 1885, however, the Tapes had prevailed. In *Tape v. Hurley*, a state court ordered the principal to admit Mamie Tape, a decision upheld weeks later by the California Supreme Court. It was a short-lived victory: Before Mamie could step foot in an integrated public school, a separate school for ethnic Chinese was again established, and the segregation of Chinese-American students began anew.⁹

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By the end of the century, a new wave of Asian immigration had begun: Between 1900 and 1910, the number of Japanese immigrants to the United States swelled from 25,000 to 68,000, bringing new opposition to a segregated school system.¹⁰ In 1907, 22 years after *Tape v. Hurley*, a group of Japanese-American plaintiffs renewed the challenge against San Francisco's school segregation policy, in *Aoki v. Deane*.¹¹ The case was dismissed after the rescission of segregationist policies as part of President Roosevelt's "Gentleman's Agreement" with Japan, but the segregation of API students in San Francisco continued.¹² Even decades later, of the more than 1,000 students enrolled at Commodore Stockton Elementary School, all were Chinese American.¹³

San Francisco was not the only city where early API challenges to segregation occurred. In 1924, nine-year old Chinese-American Martha Lum was prohibited from attending Rosedale Consolidated High School in Bolivar, Mississippi, solely because she was of Chinese descent. Her father, Gong Lum, filed suit. The case eventually landed in the United States Supreme Court, which held in 1927 in *Gong Lum v. Rice* that school segregation applied to Asian Americans as it did to Blacks: "We cannot think that the question is any different, or that any different result can be reached ... where the issue is as between white pupils and pupils of the yellow race. The decision is within the discretion of the state in regulating its public schools, and does not conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment [of the U.S. Constitution]."¹⁴ This precedent affecting API students, as well a string of other cases preventing Black, Hispanic, and other racial and ethnic minorities from attending integrated schools, would not be struck down until the *Brown v. Board* case in 1954.

API Students Today

Today, more than five decades after *Brown v. Board*, the status of the integration of APIs in American schools is a mixed bag. On the one hand, Asian Americans, as a whole, are the most integrated racial group in the country in terms of schooling and residential patterns.¹⁵ On average, an Asian-American student attends a school that is 23 percent Asian American. (In comparison, Black and Hispanic students attend schools that are, on average, 52 and 55 percent Black and Hispanic, respectively. White students, the most racially isolated group, attend schools that are, on average, 77 percent White.¹⁶)

On the other hand, the percentage of Asian Americans in schools attended by the average Asian American (23 percent) is four to five times higher than the percentage of Asian Americans in the United States student popula-

tion (5 percent).¹⁷ And 34 percent of API students attend schools in which ethnic-minority enrollment is 75 percent or more; in comparison, just three percent of White students attend schools with 75 percent or more ethnic-minority enrollment.¹⁸ These statistics hint at not only segregation of APIs within API-prevalent communities (which could potentially harm API students in linguistically, educationally, and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods) but also the clustered segregation of API and other ethnic-minority students in largely non-White schools with the fewest resources.

Even though APIs are the most integrated ethnic group, API students are acutely susceptible to experiencing cultural and linguistic isolation in America's schools. They are the least likely of all students to find any significant representation of their own ethnicity or hear their spoken language (other than English) used by other students or teachers at the schools they attend.¹⁹ As a result, many API students, especially those who belong to post-Vietnam War-era immigrant communities, are at high risk of experiencing linguistic isolation, a shortage of cultural or community resources, and instruction from educators who are not culturally competent.

In the decades since *Brown v. Board*, the number and ethnic diversity of APIs in the United States have grown rapidly, as has the variance in their educational attainment and socioeconomic status. Surges in immigration, often spurred by strife, war, and genocide in parts of Southeast Asia, have brought new API populations to the United States, including Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong. School districts in urban areas of every region in the country now have significant numbers of API students. In the 20 largest school districts, API students comprise 9.2 percent of the student enrollment; in six of those districts, they comprise more than 10 percent.²⁰

Many newly immigrated API students are English Language Learners (ELLs) who live in poor and linguistically isolated households and communities and who defy the "model minority" stereotype of Asian Americans.²¹ In fact, Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian Americans who are 25 years or older are among the least likely to have finished high school in the nation.²²

Amidst these changing API demographics, schools in America are resegregating, offsetting many of the gains experienced by Blacks, Hispanics, and APIs in the decades following the *Brown* decision.²³ In fact, resegregation is occurring today in an environment in which one

in five states has an ethnic student enrollment exceeding 50 percent.²⁴ Hawaii, which didn't become a state until after *Brown v. Board*, has a 73 percent API student enrollment, comprising multiple ethnic subgroups.²⁵

How does this new landscape affect Asian-American and Pacific Islander students? The answer is unclear. In areas with large API populations, more research is needed to study the relationship between school segregation and the isolation of ethnic subgroups within the API community. API youth, especially those from poor, underachieving communities, arguably have a strong interest in being integrated with students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. API students also have a strong interest in being placed in schools where people and resources tailored to their own ethnicity and language are present in significant numbers.

This complex mix of interests calls for nuanced analysis. Because APIs represent dozens of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures, traditional desegregation policy relying solely on broad, race-based analysis may have limited value in formulating policies that address API student interests. A nuanced analysis might involve looking at not only race but at ethnic subgroup, national origin, immigration history, social and economic status, and language.

Searching for a Common Future

Even though Asian-American and Pacific Islander students have their own unique issues, the problem of racial segregation and resegregation in today's schools must be addressed by anyone who is concerned with educational equity for all students. Advocates who wish to incorporate API student issues into the national desegregation discourse can follow certain steps:

- Appreciate the significance and history of school segregation for Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and multiracial students—as well as API students. Knowing and understanding the big picture is key to making policy decisions that benefit API students.
- Draw upon the historical ties between APIs and other ethnic-minority groups in the struggle for desegregation. Historically, APIs have experienced school segregation and have also played a role in the struggle for desegregation.
- Identify common circumstances between API students and other ethnic-minority students. For example, as the UCLA Civil Rights Project notes,

the circumstances of poor Southeast Asians immigrating to the United States after the Vietnam War are markedly different from the relatively educated and mobile East and South Asian migration to the United States under more favorable immigration policies and circumstances. Recent Asian immigration patterns more closely mirror Hispanic immigration patterns. Therefore, many Hispanic and API students share the “triple” segregation threat of ethnicity, poverty, and language. Countering this threat is mutually beneficial for APIs and non-APIs alike.²⁶

- Highlight the direct benefits to API students of achieving desegregation for all ethnic-minority students. As noted earlier, one in three API students attends a school that is more than 75 percent ethnic minority. This means that, while the majority of API students attend integrated schools, a significant percentage of API students attend schools that are either predominantly API or a combination of API, Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, or multiracial. To the extent desegregation benefits non-API ethnic-minority students, it may also benefit API students who live in the same communities and attend the same schools as those students.
- Discuss the benefits for APIs and non-APIs alike in attending integrated schools. These include improved instruction and resources, the fulfillment of equal opportunity and equal access to education for all students, full preparation for working in a diverse and global society, opportunities for dual or triple language immersion programs and cultural exchange, reduced rates of community discrimination and violence, and numerous other tangible and intangible gains.²⁷

The Promise of *Brown*

The *Brown v. Board* court could have hardly imagined all the demographic and societal changes—including the rapid growth of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual API population—that would arise in the decades following its decision. If the promise of *Brown* is to be fully realized, however, API students must figure into the national dialogue on school desegregation. Just as Joseph and Mary Tape, Keikichi Aoki, Gong Lum, and other valiant pioneers fought the early desegregation battles, so must contemporary advocates fight today's battles to ensure an equal education for API—and ultimately all—students.



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Endnotes

- 1 *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School Dist. No. 1*, 551 U.S. ___ (2007) (together with *Meredith et al. v. Jefferson County Bd. of Ed. et al.*).
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, Table 1. United States—Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790 to 1990.
- 3 Orfield, G. and Lee, C. *Historic Reversals, Accelerating Resegregation, and the Need for New Integration Strategies*, UCLA Civil Rights Project, Aug. 2007, p. 15.
- 4 Chang, I. *The Chinese in America*, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 55.
- 5 Wollenberg, C. *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855-1975*. University of California Press, 1978, p. 29-34.
- 6 *New York Times*, "The Proposed Constitution for California," March 17, 1879.
- 7 Wollenberg at 29-30.
- 8 Soo, J. "Back to School for Integration: The Catch-22 of Excellence and Diversity Without Race," *Asian Week*, August 18, 2006.
- 9 Wollenberg at 39-44.
- 10 U.S. Census Bureau. See Table 4, Region and Country or Area of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population, With Geographic Detail Shown in Decennial Census Publications of 1930 or Earlier: 1850 to 1930 and 1960 to 1990.
- 11 See *The Asian American Educational Experience*, Nakanishi, D. and Nishida, J.Y.: Routledge 2005, p.13.
- 12 See www3.niu.edu/ptaa/history.htm.
- 13 Wollenberg at 44-45.
- 14 *Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927).
- 15 Orfield and Lee at 27. Because this article uses and refers to "Asians," not "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders," we use the term "Asian American" without reference to Pacific Islanders in this section only.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The NCES Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2004–05.
- 19 Orfield and Lee at 27.
- 20 The school districts with greater than 10 percent API enrollment are Hawaii (73%); Montgomery County, MD (18%); Fairfax County, VA (18%); San Diego (17%); New York (13%); Gwinnett County, GA (10%). See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, the NCES Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2004–05.
- 21 See www.searac.org/seastatprofilemay04.pdf.
- 22 *We the People: Asians in the United States*, U.S. Census Bureau, December 2004; *We the People: Pacific Islanders in the United States*, U.S. Census Bureau, August 2005.
- 23 Orfield and Lee at 5.
- 24 Orfield and Lee at 17-18.
- 25 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Table 7.2. Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary students, by region, state, and race/ethnicity: 2004.
- 26 Orfield and Lee at 17-18.
- 27 See Aung, K. and Wong, C. "Asian Americans Value Racially Diverse Public Schools," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 2, 2007.