

2007

Focus On

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

Out of the Past, In the Present, Toward the Future

In many ways, Asians are still below the radar . . . it's a huge mistake to keep generalizing as we do about Asian American students and to treat them as a monolithic group that doesn't need attention.

Pedro Noguera, Ph.D., "The 'Other' Gap," *Education Week* (February 14, 2007)

Take even the briefest of looks into the past and it becomes clear that the Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) community is on the move—and on the rise.

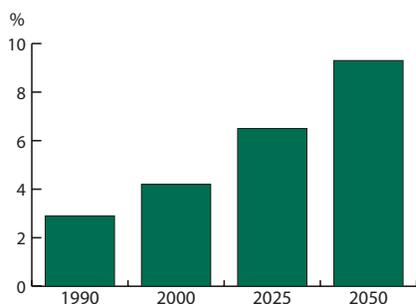
In 1970, the U.S. Census Bureau counted only 1.4 million Asian Americans. Among these, more than 40 percent were Japanese American; another 32 percent were Chinese American. No separate category existed for most other Asian Americans or for Pacific Islanders.

By 1980, the number of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (API) had increased to 3.7 million. In 1990, the number was 7.3 million.¹

In 2005, the number of APIs, alone or in combination with another race, was projected at 15.4 million—eleven times the API population in 1970.²

By 2050, both the number and percentage of APIs in the U.S. will be more than double what they are today.

APIs as percentage of US population



(Source: Population Resource Center: *Asians and Pacific Islanders in America: A Demographic Profile*, 2004)

The API population is increasing not only in size but in diversity. Groups that did not appear on the 1970 Census—including Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and Korean Americans—are now among the five largest API

populations in the U.S. The number of Southeast Asian Americans, including those who are Cambodian, Hmong and Laotian, has grown significantly, as has the number of Pacific Islander Americans, including those who are Native Hawaiian, Samoan and Guamanian.

As the API community has grown and changed, so have the needs of API students.

This *Focus On* provides a closer look at a remarkably diverse community—and makes recommendations for present and future generations of API students.

Who is API?

The home to which the older Hmong [Americans] dream of returning—which they call *peb lub tepchaws*—'our fields and our lands'—is prewar Laos. Their memories of wartime Laos are almost unrelievedly traumatic: a 'bereavement overload' that critically magnifies all other stresses.

Ann Fadiman, author, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*³

The U.S. Census Bureau defines *Asian* as a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.⁴ Asian groups include not only nationalities but ethnicities (e.g., Hmong).

The U.S. Census Bureau defines *Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander* as a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.⁵ Pacific Islander Americans include people of Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian cultural backgrounds.

The most numerous ethnic subgroup is Chinese American, followed by Filipino American. The number of Asian Indian and Vietnamese Americans has increased dramatically since 1980. More recently, the Southeast

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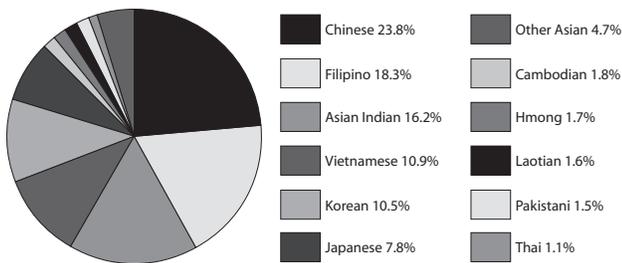


Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

Asian American population (included Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian) has grown significantly. The largest Pacific Islander ethnic subgroup is Hawaiian, followed by Samoan and Guamanian/Chamorro.

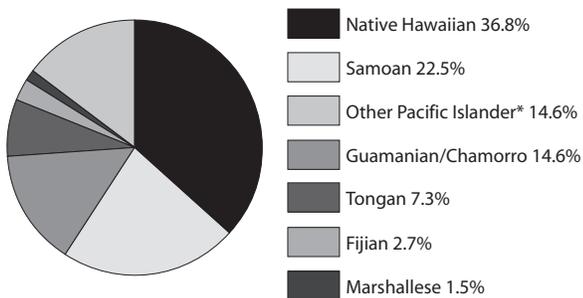
Given these dynamic changes, it is important for policymakers and the education community to understand the depth and breadth of the current national, state and local API population when considering policy, curriculum, testing, student support, employee recruitment and retention, and community outreach.

Asian American Population by Group, 2000



(Source: *We the People: Asians in the United States*, U.S. Census Bureau, December 2004)

Pacific Islander American Population by Group, 2000



* The category "Other Pacific Islander" appeared in the U.S. Census as a stand-alone category for the first time in 2000; in 1990 the category appeared as "Other Asian or Pacific Islander."

(Source: *We the People: Pacific Islanders in the United States*, U.S. Census Bureau, August 2005)

Where do APIs live?

I am from Naperville, a suburb of Chicago. I am Chinese American. I identify as American Asian because I feel much more American than Asian. If I could say two words at once it would probably be those two.

Becky, API student, Illinois

While half of Asian Americans live in just three states—California, New York, and Texas—the population is at least three percent Asian American in 12 other states (including Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, Virginia, and Washington). Hawaii is 43 percent Asian American.⁶

Cities with the largest Pacific Islander populations include Honolulu, New York, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Seven states (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Utah, and Washington) have counties that are at least one percent Pacific Islander. Hawaii is 23 percent Pacific Islander.

Thus, while the list of cities and regions in which large numbers of APIs live is relatively short, it is expanding. The states with the fastest-growing populations of school-age immigrants, including API immigrants, are located in the West, the Midwest, and the Southeast.⁷

How Do the Experiences of API Students Differ From One Another?

What I came to understand later is that even though I wasn't Chinese, I was a "chink." Since one of the main tenets the racist spews against Asian people is that we all look, act and are the same, it's hardly surprising that the word has been hurled at Japanese people, Thai people, Vietnamese people, Malaysians and even half-Indonesians like me.

Kate Rigg, API comedian/playwright

Every educator knows that no two students are alike. This is particularly true among API students, for whom two factors—language and immigration—play a large role in shaping their educational careers.⁸

First, API students who are native-born or who speak English at home may have very different language needs than those who are foreign-born or who speak a language other than English at home. Factors such as family dynamics, location, length of residency in the U.S., income, and other social or cultural influences also shape a student's ability; therefore, it is necessary to evaluate each student on an individual basis.

Second, while some APIs entered the U.S. through professional and educational visas, others entered the U.S. as refugees, or as temporary visitors or undocumented workers. Given that the immigration pathway of parents—which often reflects their education, income and degree of hardship they have experienced—tend to influence the academic achievement of their children,

it is not surprising that there are disparate educational needs within the greater API student population.

Getting to know the individual backgrounds and histories of API students and their families goes a long way in addressing their educational needs.

API School Personnel

As the older daughter and the oldest of my generation, I have decided to just forget about my dreams and liberal arts. I will be an accountant. For my parents.

Cecily, API student, Massachusetts

You begin the journey of becoming an Asian educator wondering why you are alone in the universe.

Julia, API education employee, Colorado

API school personnel face social, financial, cultural, and linguistic barriers to entering the field of education, and in finding and keeping employment. These barriers include:

- Cultural pressure to enter other professions;
- High cost of higher education application fees and tuition;
- Language and content bias in testing and credentialing assessments;
- Racial and accent discrimination in the hiring and promotion of school personnel; and
- Lack of culturally competent peers and support networks.

Perhaps due to these factors, the number of API school personnel has not kept pace with the number of API students in the U.S.

Percent of School Personnel and Students who are API

School Personnel 1.6% Students 4.2%

Source: National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education (Spring 2006 Newsletter).

Policymakers should support policies and practices that increase the recruitment and retention of API school personnel. In addition, policymakers should provide all education employees the support needed to educate API students of diverse backgrounds. This includes minority outreach support for higher education programs, professional development (including diversity and cultural competency training), and employee mentoring.

API Student Achievement: The “Other Gap”

When you get bad grades, people look at you really strangely because you are sort of distorting the way they see an Asian. It makes you feel really awkward if you don't fit the stereotype.

API student (from S. Lee, *Unraveling the “Model Minority” Stereotype*)⁹

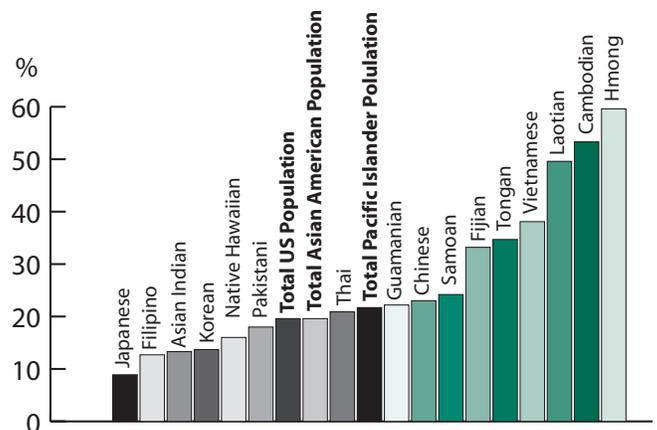
Academic performance among API students varies tremendously. While many API students—in particular some East and South Asian Americans—perform, as a whole, well above average, others—in particular some Southeast Asians, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders—perform below average.

Consider the following statistics:

- The percentage of APIs who have *not* finished high school is equal to or higher than the national average.
- The percentage of Southeast Asian (including Hmong, Cambodian, Laotian) and Pacific Islander (including Native Hawaiian, Tongan, Fijian, Samoan, Guamanian, Marshallese) who have completed college are among the lowest of any racial or ethnic group in the nation.

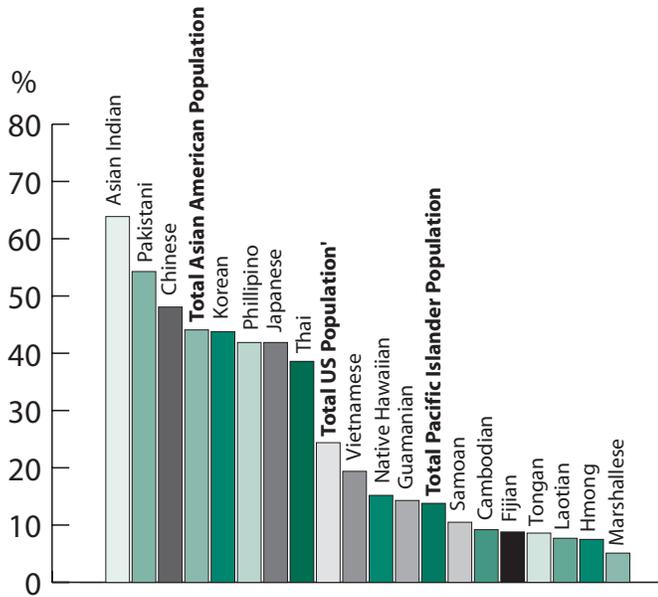
And yet these trends go unnoticed when all student data is analyzed together under a single “API” umbrella.

Percentage of persons who are 25 or older who have NOT finished high school:



(Sources: *We the People: Asians in the United States*, U.S. Census Bureau, December 2004, and *We the People: Pacific Islanders in the United States*, U.S. Census Bureau, August 2005)

Percentage of persons who are 25 or older who hold a bachelor's degree:



(Sources: *We the People: Asians in the United States*, U.S. Census Bureau, December 2004, and *We the People: Pacific Islanders in the United States*, U.S. Census Bureau, August 2005)

Policymakers should fund research that disaggregates data within the API student population by ethnicity, not just race. Changes in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act, that would benefit API and other minority students include greater emphasis on and funding of the following: programs for disadvantaged and low-income students, teacher quality (including cultural competence), accommodations for testing and teaching English Language Learners, safe and drug-free schools, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Teachers can avoid the “aggregation trap” by steadfastly assessing each API student as an individual, and by speaking up when API students are not being tested in the language that is most likely to give an accurate assessment of their true ability.

Racism and Harassment

From almost the first day at [school] the other kids started calling me names...because my Samoan complexion got very dark in the San Diego sun. It wasn't until much later that I discovered I was a Pacific Islander. This was not a time when people celebrated ethnic diversity, and you can see why I think it's so necessary.

Olympic diving champion Greg Louganis¹⁰

API students experience direct and subtle acts of racism and harassment due to their identity and appearance. One common purpose of such behavior is to outcast API students as “foreigners”—or even “terrorists,” in the case of many South Asian students (including those who are Muslim, Hindu and Sikh) and students with ethnic origins in the Arab world and the Middle East. The problem of harassment is compounded for API students who identify or are targeted as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

School personnel can address racism and harassment by learning how racism and other “isms” affect school systems in visible and not so visible ways; improving bullying intervention skills; examining their own behavior; and encouraging students to learn about cultural and racial stereotypes and how to resist acts of prejudice and racism.

English Language Learners

Facing the following obstacles has proven to me the value of dedication and perseverance: Lonesome for my homeland, giving up traditional food and holiday celebration, unable to communicate with English speakers, frustrated, struggled in school, feeling a sense of failure, worried...I cried every day.

Florence, API education employee, California

While three out of four English Language Learner (ELL) (termed “Limited English Proficient” by federal government) students in the U.S. come from Spanish-speaking households, 18 percent of ELL students in the U.S. speak an Asian language.¹¹ And 28 percent of Asian American elementary school children are ELL students.¹²

API and ELL populations continue to grow nationwide. The API student population grew 18 percent between 1990 and 2000.¹³ And between 1994 and 2005, the ELL population more than doubled in 24 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, and Wyoming.¹⁴

Policymakers should create enforceable and funded policies that help school districts test ELL students accurately in their appropriate language and create more capacity for schools to serve ELL students through instruction and supplemental services. And school personnel may wish to hone their use of different instructional methods when working with API ELL students.



Curriculum

Hawaii is unique. It is important for Hawaiian students to know their history and culture. So much has been taken from them; they need to grow up to be the peaceful warriors who will be protectors of their island home.

Diane, API 4th grade teacher, Hawaii

It is critical that API students learn about themselves. As one multicultural expert has stated, “[There is a] need for curriculum to function both as window and as mirror, in order to reflect and reveal most accurately both a multicultural world and the student herself or himself.”¹⁵ K-12 textbooks sometimes fail to highlight or even mention the contributions or perspectives of many API persons or groups in U.S. or world history.¹⁶ Therefore, it is important for educators and curriculum experts to fill in gaps in education through advocacy and supplemental materials.

Reaching Out to API Parents and Guardians

Pacific Islander parents are surprised when asked to participate in the schools. On the islands, everything related to education is handled by the teacher. Parents are not used to a system that encourages parent participation, and may feel uncomfortable addressing school administrators or teachers, out of respect for school officials, or a lack of understanding of language or the system itself.

Victor Thompson, President, National Pacific Islander Educator Network

Seventy-nine percent of Asian Americans and 44 percent of Pacific Islander Americans aged 5 and over speak a language other than English at home.¹⁷

The majority of API American parents and guardians require linguistically and culturally compatible outreach and communications in order to be engaged within the school system.

Policymakers should ensure that schools receive funding to work with non-English-speaking parents and guardians, and that communities receive funding for educational programs for adult English Language Learners.

School personnel may wish to address practical, cultural, and psychological barriers to dialogue among API parents and guardians, such as lack of childcare or transportation, feelings of shame when children are

not performing well, lack of trust in public institutions, and fear that dialogue will result in immigration consequences. Two actions that might help: involving API school personnel in decision-making and partnering with API community organizations.

Conclusion: Past, Present and Future

“Where are you from?” is a question I like answering. “Where are you really from?” is a question I really hate answering. More than anything else that unites us, everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted with the perpetual foreigner syndrome.¹⁸

Frank Wu, author, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*

Stereotypes are like barnacles of our past: once they adhere, it is difficult to shake free of them. One such barnacle is the notion that all APIs are foreigners. Another is the oft-repeated “model minority” stereotype, in which all APIs are viewed as high achieving on account of an unflagging cultural work ethic. The model minority stereotype gained a grip on the American consciousness during the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s, when it was propagated to dispute the existence of racial barriers and inequality that held back African Americans and other people of color, including APIs.

Today, many API students are doing quite well in school, which is a cause for celebration. On the other hand, the needs of many API students are not being met, in part because many policymakers and the education community have not fully recognized the diverse needs of a diverse population. The barnacles remain.

In the future, recognition of the true diversity of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community will be essential if schools are to maintain and improve upon current levels of achievement—and we as a society are to “shake free,” at last, from the barnacles of the past—not only those affecting APIs, but all people.

NEA Resources

A Report on the Status of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Education: Beyond the "Model Minority" Stereotype (2005). Contact NEA Human & Civil Rights, 202-822-7700.

www.apiresources.org: A co-sponsored Web site clearinghouse that provides educational resources, including curriculum materials, research, and links to organizations.

NEA Human & Civil Rights Department, hcrinfo@nea.org, 202-822-7700.

NEA Minority Community Outreach Department:
www.nea.org/mco

Safe Zone: Taking a Stand So All Students Can Learn and Succeed www.nea.org/schoolsafety/safezone.html

Other Resources

Asian Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund
www.apiasf.org

Asian and Pacific Islander Caucus of the NEA
www.geocities.com/apic03/index.html

Association for Asian American Studies
www.aaastudies.org

National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education www.naapae.net

National Association for the Education and Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans http://www.ncapaonline.org/detail_members.

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) www.ncela.gwu.edu

Native Hawaiian Education Council www.nhec.org

National Pacific Islander Educator Network
www.geocities.com/npienwebsite

Endnotes

- 1 Bureau of the Census, Statistical Brief (Nov. 1995).
- 2 Table 3: Annual Estimates of the Population by Sex, Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2005, U.S. Census Bureau; Table 4: Annual Estimates of Population by Age and Sex of Asian alone or in combination for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2005, U.S. Census Bureau.
- 3 Fadiman, Ann. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, p. 205.
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau, *We the People: Asians in the United States* (Dec. 2004), pp. 1-2.
- 5 U.S. Census Bureau, *The Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Population* (Dec. 2001), pp. 1-2.
- 6 The American Community—Asians: 2004, U.S. Census Bureau.
- 7 Capps, Randy, et al., *The New Demography of American Schools: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act*, Urban Institute, 2005, p. 12.
- 8 See Capps et al., 2005.
- 9 Lee, Stacey. *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).
- 10 Louganis, Greg. *Breaking the Surface*. New York: Random House, 1995, p. 32.
- 11 See Capps et al., 2005.
- 12 See Capps et al., 2005.
- 13 National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, *English Language Learners and the U.S. Census: 1990-2000*
- 14 http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/policy/states/reports/statedata/2004LEP/GrowingLEP_0405_Nov06.pdf
- 15 Style, Emily. "Curriculum as Window & Mirror," *Seeding the Process of Multicultural Education*, 1998.
- 16 See Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1989) and *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (1993).
- 17 *We the People: Asians in the United States*, p. 11; *We the People: Pacific Islanders in the United States*, p. 11.
- 18 Wu, Frank H. *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, p. 79.



Great Public Schools for Every Child