

Asian Pacific Islander American Students and U.S. High Schools

Because Asian American¹ students as a group score higher than any other race on proficiency tests, many observers assume that there is no need to be concerned about their collective academic progress. Asian American students are often stereotyped as the “model minority,” and it is assumed that most of them do extremely well academically, especially in math and science. This stereotype causes psychological, social, and emotional problems for many Asian American students. Furthermore, it often cloaks the complicated and diverse barriers that many members of this student population encounter, including immigration and refugee status, limited English proficiency, and poverty, as well as the experiences of ethnic subgroups who do not fare as well academically. Because of the lack of disaggregated data, the Asian American statistics primarily reflect East Asians’ overall academic successes and obscure the scholastic struggles of groups such as Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders.²

It is clear that many Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) students are not being adequately served by the nation’s public schools. Changes in the way they are educated must be made if America is to meet the goal of preparing all K–12 students for college, work, and life.

Graduation, Dropouts, and Preparedness

- Intense pressure to succeed—from parents, schools, and the students themselves—prompts some Asian American students to drop out (Blakely 1984).
- Other students, particularly those from lower-income immigrant families, are urged by their parents to drop out and get jobs, especially if they are not doing well in school (Sim 1992).
- In 2006, though the average Asian American’s math score on the SAT was forty-two points higher than the average white student’s, Asian American students scored an average of seven points lower in writing and seventeen points lower in reading than white students (College Board 2006).
- Many students from Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, have experienced war-related trauma and educational disruptions prior to moving to the United States. Upon arriving here, many of these students are faced with obstacles such as poverty, racism, and limited access to educational resources (Um 2003). As a result, they begin school

¹ Note: The U.S. Census only began separating Asian and Pacific Islander data in 2000. Many education sources still unite Asians and Pacific Islanders into one category. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, whenever “Asian,” “Asian American,” or “Asian American student” is used, the statistic is for the category “Asians and Pacific Islanders.”

² Pacific Islanders are defined as native Hawaiians, Samoans, Guamanians (also called Chamorros), or others who trace their origins to one of the Pacific islands.

with severe disadvantages and have different academic and psychological needs than students of Asian descent who have lived in the United States for multiple generations (Kim and Yeh 2002).

- Because of language-learning problems and an inability to fit in socially, Asian American immigrants who arrive in the United States as adolescents are more likely to experience problems in school than those who arrive as young children (Ima and Rumbaut 1989).

Schools, Segregation, and Teacher Quality

- Fifty-six percent of all Asian American students attend schools that are at least 50 percent minority (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- Thirty percent of all Asian American students go to high-poverty schools, compared to just 18 percent of white students (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- Nineteen percent of all Asian students attend schools with weak promoting power (schools that promote 50 percent or fewer of their freshmen to senior status in four years) compared to 11 percent of white students (Balfanz and Legters 2004).

Special Education and Learning Disabilities

- Asian American and Pacific Islander students were 1.20 times more likely to receive special education and related services for hearing impairments and were 1.24 times more likely to receive special education and related services for autism than all other racial/ethnic groups combined (U.S. Department of Education 2004).
- Many Southeast Asian students with limited English proficiency are misdiagnosed as “learning disabled” and are placed in special education (Um 2003).

English Language Learners

- The average Asian English language learner attends a school that is 25 percent Asian (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- Though Spanish is the most common native language of non-English-speaking students, it is followed successively by Vietnamese, Hmong, Cantonese, and Korean (Hood 2003).
- Asian American students are more likely than black or white students to attend schools with high concentrations of English language learners (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al. 2000).



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