

## **Accountability of All Asian and Pacific Islander American Students**

Good morning. My name is Doua Thor and I am the executive director of Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC). SEARAC is a national non-profit organization that serves the interests of the 2 million Southeast Asian Americans from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam who resettled in the United States as refugees after the Vietnam War. SEARAC is also a proud partner of the Campaign for High School Equity coalition. Today, I will address how the lack of data, in particular the lack of *disaggregated* data, poses a problem for the Asian and Pacific Islander American (APIA) community, and how we can address the problem.

The APIA community is tremendously diverse and includes more than 50 ethnicities, over 100 languages<sup>1</sup>, differences in cultural practices, socio-economic statuses, and historical circumstances. For example, this category includes Chinese American communities who have lived in the United State for multiple generations and Southeast Asian Americans who are relatively new to the U.S., coming here as refugees arriving with little to no formal education even in their native languages.<sup>2</sup> As a result, many Southeast Asian American students face tremendous poverty, language, and cultural barriers. When educational data is not disaggregated and not collected, the diverse needs of students under one aggregate Asian American category are overshadowed by much larger, more established communities.

Plagued by the model minority myth, the stereotype that all Asian and Pacific Islander Americans (APIA) are achieving above and beyond, the profile of Southeast Asian American ethnic groups call for much needed attention and support.

For example, according to the 2000 Census, Hmong Americans (an ethnic group from Southeast Asia) had the lowest per capita income of any ethnic or racial group in this country at \$6,613 compared to \$21,587 of the U.S. population overall. In addition, the average size for a Hmong family was 6 compared to 3 people in the overall U.S. population.

While 84% of the total U.S. population 25 years and over is a high school graduate or higher, only 65% of Cambodian-, 62% of Laotian-, and 72% of Vietnamese Americans 25 years and over is a high school graduate or higher.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, compared to just 9% of the total U.S. population, 42% of Cambodian-, 43% of Hmong-, 44% of Laotian-, and 51% of Vietnamese Americans 5 years and over speak English less than well<sup>4</sup>—signifying that many Southeast Asian American students

---

<sup>1</sup> National Education Association, Minority Community Outreach, [www.nea.org/mco/asians.html](http://www.nea.org/mco/asians.html).

<sup>2</sup> Um, Khatharya. 2003. *A Dream Denied: Educational Experiences of Southeast Asian American Youth*, [http://searac.org/ydfinal-2\\_03.pdf](http://searac.org/ydfinal-2_03.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey. Population groups: Cambodian alone or in any combination, Hmong alone or in any combination, Laotian alone or in any combination, and Vietnamese alone or in any combination.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

are identified as English language learners (ELLs). In fact, following Spanish, Vietnamese and Hmong are the second and third most spoken languages by ELLs in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

It is unfortunate that I am unable to report the academic performances of Southeast Asian American students across the U.S. as a whole. States are required by the *No Child Left Behind Act* to disaggregate achievement and graduation data by race, but not by ethnicities causing misperceptions about the performances of Southeast Asian American students and English language learners. Although there are some reports on the performances of Southeast Asian Americans at the local level, data collections are inconsistent with others making it difficult to report reliably on a national level.

In addition to skewing perceptions about Southeast Asian American students, the lack of data fails to authenticate the experiences and concerns of Southeast Asian American students, parents and communities. It is already difficult for low-income, overworked and non-native English speaking communities to mobilize and advocate for the educational rights of their youth; it is a greater burden when data and research are unreliable or insufficient.

Southeast Asian American communities continually struggle to be included in national discussions about issues such as school drop-outs, ELL services, and college enrollment and retention, which are usually regarded as black and brown issues. A case in point, in 1999, the influential College Board released a report<sup>6</sup> that neglected to examine disaggregated data for APIA students; and thus, failed to recommend any special efforts to support any APIA ethnic group. After a community outcry, the College Board is now producing a new report focused specifically on the needs of APIA students. Better data and research can help support both advocates and policymakers.

The U.S. Census collects and reports disaggregated data inclusive of many APIA ethnic groups, including Southeast Asian Americans. They understand the importance of having accurate data, which is necessary to address the needs of many different APIA ethnic groups. Academic and graduation data collection and reporting should aim to align with the Census so that it can accurately reflect the diversity of APIA ethnic groups.<sup>7</sup>

Southeast Asian Americans are concentrated and growing in several particular states including California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Texas, Virginia and Washington. At the very least, states or even school districts with concentrations of Southeast Asian American students should be required to disaggregate their data in order to make better informed decisions in their local areas.

---

<sup>5</sup> National Education Association, [www.nea.org/achievement/talkingells.html](http://www.nea.org/achievement/talkingells.html).

<sup>6</sup> *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*.

<sup>7</sup> Southeast Asia Resource Action Center. 2006. Testimony by Khammany Mathavongsy on California Assembly Bill 2420, <http://searac.org/tst-edukham6-27-06.pdf>.

Others are concerned that there will be additional weight on states and schools to further disaggregate data by ethnicities and social classes. However, if sufficient funding and guidance is provided to states and schools, then it will make the process of data disaggregation and reporting less burdensome.

Our recommendation is to provide funding to build the capacities of the school districts to collect additional student-level information, and of states to systematically report disaggregated data for student ethnic and social class subgroups that meet a critical mass threshold. It will be a lengthy process to evolve data collection and reporting systems to reflect the increasing diversity of our student populations, but it is critical that we are both proactive and inclusive.

In conclusion, I urge all of you to encourage the need for better data and research, and to pay particular attention to data that is disaggregated by ethnicity and social class when developing policies and procedures.<sup>8</sup> I stand with my colleagues on this panel today to stress the importance of ensuring that the needs of all populations are addressed and that it is made a priority in education policy. We must wholeheartedly invest in our students' academic and professional successes, and see to it that they all graduate from high school on time and prepared for work, college and life.

Again, thank you for this opportunity. I welcome any questions you may have at the end of the panel presentation.

---

<sup>8</sup> National Education Association. 2005. *A Report on the Statuses of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Education*.