

Southeast Asian Americans as English Language Learners

Good afternoon. First of all, I would like to thank Congressman Hinojosa and Congressman Honda for their continued support of strong education policies for all students. I would also like to extend my thanks to the Campaign for High School Equity for this opportunity to speak about Southeast Asian American English language learners (ELL). I am truly honored to be among this distinguished panel to speak on this topic and its impact across our diverse communities.

My name is Phitsamay Uy. I am a doctoral candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a research associate for the Education Development Center. I also serve as the board chair for the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC). Based in Washington D.C., SEARAC is a national non-profit organization that serves the interests of Southeast Asian American communities from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. SEARAC is also a coalition partner of the Campaign for High School Equity.

With the allotted time I have, I would like to briefly describe the Southeast Asian American community in the U.S., the barriers that the Southeast Asian American ELL students face, and some recommendations to address their issues.

Southeast Asian Americans

To date, Southeast Asians from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are among the largest group of refugees to be resettled in the U.S. in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.¹ Now totaling more than 2 million and growing in size, Southeast Asian Americans can be found in all 50 states across the U.S.

As recent refugees, many Southeast Asians have never had a formal education or the ability to read and write in their native language. Many Southeast Asian American households are linguistically isolated (i.e., household members 14 years old and over have at least some difficulty with English.) The latest census figures reveal that compared to just 4% of the total U.S. population, 32% of Cambodian-, 35% of Hmong-, 32% of Lao-, and 45% of Vietnamese American households are linguistically isolated.² Consequently this means that many Southeast Asian American students come from homes where they speak a language other than English. Compared to only 19% percent of the U.S. population aged 5 and over who speak a language other than English, 85% of Cambodian-, 95% of Hmong-, 88% of Lao-, and 84% of Vietnamese Americans aged 5 and over speak a language other than English in their homes.³

¹ Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) Annual Report to Congress—2005, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/05arc7.htm#8>

² Source: 2000 Census; see also SEARAC’s Southeast Asian American Statistical Profile at www.searac.org ; A “linguistically isolated” household is one in which no member over 14 years old and over (1) speaks English or (2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English “very well”.

³ Data Set: 2005 American Community Survey. S0201. Selected Population Profile in the United States. Population Group: Cambodian alone or in combination, Hmong alone or in combination, Lao alone or in combination, and Vietnamese alone or in combination with one or more other races.

Overshadowed by the model minority myth that stereotypes all Asian American students as doing well academically, the needs of Southeast Asian American students, particularly those of the ELL population, are often overlooked. Southeast Asian American students are among the nation’s 5.5 million ELL students.⁴ In fact, following Spanish, the second and third most spoken language of English language learners are Vietnamese and Hmong.⁵

Barriers for ELL Students

Like all ELL students, Southeast Asian American ELL students face multiple barriers to attaining educational success. Not only do ELL students face the rigors of learning a new language, they are also trying to learn other educational subject matter in this unfamiliar language. Due to parent’s limited English language abilities, these students may lack parental support and assistance with homework and school projects.

As a result of the lack of resources available to ELL students outside of the classroom, having access to high quality teachers and services as well as in-school and community resources are integral to supporting the academic growth of ELL students. Properly trained teachers are better equipped to teach and prepare ELL students for success. Yet less than 3% of teachers instructing ELL have a degree in English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual education.⁶

In addition to the very limited number of quality teachers, there is also a lack of quality educational services for ELL students. Only 8% of ELL students receive extensive instruction designed specifically to meet their learning needs. In other words, 8% of ELL students are receiving 10 or more hours of ESL instruction per week of content instruction and at least 25% or 2.5 hours of the instructional time is in the students’ native language.⁷

Recommendations

ELL students need quality education that will serve as a strong foundation to prepare them for success beyond their elementary and secondary school years. In building this foundation, we need to ensure that there is adequate funding allocated toward education programs at the K-12 levels, especially for ELL programs.

We must also ensure that ELL students are able to access resources outside of the classroom through community-based collaborations and partnerships. Community-based organizations can play a role in the holistic education of ELL students by

⁴ Source: U.S. Department of Education, www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/lepfactsheet.html; See also MALDEF testimony, http://www.maldef.org/pdf/Zamora_Testimony.pdf

⁵ National Educational Association. www.nea.org/achievement/talkingells.html.

⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, 1997.

⁷ Ibid.

providing student support and services including being a resource for parents of ELL students to become more engaged in their child’s learning.

Additionally, federal and state resources need to be allocated to strongly support the certification and training of teachers of ELL students. There must be more certified teachers who are trained to teach ELLs. Currently, only 84% of the states offer English as a Second Language (ESL) certification or endorsement; and 50% of the states offer bilingual/dual language certification or endorsement.⁸ The standards of a “high quality teacher” under Title II of No Child Left Behind must be raised to include cultural competency skills and bilingual skills for those working with ELL students.

Furthermore, there should be more investment in proper translation services so that materials and programs are more accessible and practical for ELL students, their parents and communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I stand with my colleagues on this panel today to stress the importance of ensuring that the needs of our ELL population is addressed and that it is made a priority in education policy. I urge all of you to go beyond English proficiency as a marker of success for ELL students, and more towards academic achievement. The millions of ELL students, as is all students, are our future and we must wholeheartedly invest in their academic and professional success.

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

⁸ National Educational Association. www.nea.org/achievement/talkingells.html