Photo courtesy of Vattana Peong

CHAPTER 4

K-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION

ASIAN AMERICANS ADVANCING JUSTICE ORANGE COUNTY

Asian American & Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AA&NHPI) students, parents, and educators have contributed to improving the Orange County public education system and increasing opportunities for immigrant and refugee families. Over 94% of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders and 90% of Asian Americans are enrolled in K–12 public schools;[1] thus, addressing AA&NHPI educational needs should focus on these institutions. While much attention has been given to the high academic achievement of many Asian Americans and the framing of them as "model minorities" who are inherently smart, hardworking, and college bound, this misrepresents the diversity of educational experiences of the group. Like other students, AA&NHPI educational attainment depends on their parents' level of education, socioeconomic background, and type of school they attend; however, being immigrants, being English language learners, or facing racial discrimination or bullying adds another layer of obstacles. Additionally, it is critical that AA&NHPI mental health services are expanded to better serve students and their families. The K–12 public education system as well as institutions of higher education have been instrumental in contributing to the advancement of AA&NHPI families in Orange County, but educational leadership, policies, curricula, and practices require continuous modifications as the demographics change to ensure the inclusion of different AA&NHPI communities.

ASSETS

Contributions of Educators and Administrators

Asian American educators have played critical roles in advocating for immigrant and refugee student populations. These leaders are attentive to the cultural and linguistic needs that emerged with the changing population. Prior to becoming superintendent of the Anaheim Union High School District, Michael Matsuda, a Japanese American who grew up in Garden Grove in the 1960s, taught English as a second language (ESL) to Vietnamese high school students who had just arrived as refugees in Orange County. As a teacher in Garden Grove, he recalls, "They were shocked to see an Asian face. They had never seen an Asian teacher [at the school]. And I was shocked to see all these Vietnamese because I really knew nothing about the whole [refugee] experience." Matsuda drew from his own experience of being racialized and encountering discrimination as a Japanese American, which allowed him to build closer relationships with Vietnamese American students. He recalls one student opening up to him about the racism he and other Vietnamese American youth were experiencing:

> He said, 'You know, the principal . . . he's a racist. He doesn't like Vietnamese.' I said, 'What are you talking about?' And he goes, 'You watch. When there's a fight between a Vietnamese and a White kid, you watch who gets suspended longer.' And I said, 'I don't believe that.' . . . On the chalkboard, we had a code on suspension [to track]

> who got the heavier suspension, if it was equal, or who got the heavier one, and over time, he was right. The Vietnamese kids got the [heavier suspension]. Those were the early days of [the] school-to-prison pipeline. I didn't know it then, but that was going on. So the kids knew what was happening, and they were teaching me.

Audrey Yamagata-Noji, vice president of Student Services at Mount San Antonio College, served on the Santa Ana School Board for 25 years and experienced the board's shift from being predominantly White to becoming more multiethnic. She explains that working with such a diverse student population made her work both challenging and exciting:

> What's always challenging about Asian Americans and Pacific [Islander] Americans in general is it's such a vast diversity of Asian American groups—in terms of language and orientation and generation and educational needs and parental background and income levels—that it's just hard to lump everybody together, which just means that the work that you do has to be sensitive to all those different things. You can have a sixth-generation Chinese American and an Indian American who just arrived but speaks English to a Tongan who just came from Tonga, and the level of education is much lower . . . and is really struggling. So you got a whole wide cross section. And I think that will always be the challenge as well as excitement to working with our particular students—the great diversity.

As part of the board, she pushed for policies that addressed the needs of low-income immigrants as the county was experiencing an influx of both Latino and Vietnamese immigrants:

> Spanish was not spoken in the district at the time, so [Spanish-speaking] parents weren't included or invited. So we changed a lot of things. We didn't apply for Title VII bilingual funds [previously], so we applied for that. We didn't have the free breakfast program, so we went after that. So there were a lot of things that the conservative board majority up until that time didn't believe we needed.

Parent Contributions and Engagement

Education is a high-priority issue for many AA&NHPI, and Orange County's top-ranked K–12 public schools attract both foreign- and American-born AA&NHPI families to the county. In the 2016–2017 school year, Asian Americans made up 18% (88,279) of the students in the Orange County public school system, and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders made up 0.4% (1,725).[2] Asian American students are particularly concentrated in Irvine (49%, 16,504), Westminster (39%, 3,367), Fountain Valley (37.5%, 2,394), and Garden Grove (35%, 15,638) school districts.[3]

Cities such as Irvine have become known for their stellar public schools and high levels of parent engagement. Naz Hamid, an Irvine parent who ran for the local school board, was attracted to Irvine because of the top-quality education:

> Everybody would talk about the fact that we were moving behind the 'Orange Curtain.' 'What a horrible thing. Why would you leave LA with its diversity and move behind the Orange Curtain?' But that actually didn't matter to us because we knew that we would find like-minded individuals who cared about their children's education and that we would find an identity common with them, that it would be okay. And that's exactly what happened. We moved to Irvine, and all the parents care about their kid's education.

Living in Irvine, she notices that "the parents stayed very, very engaged, whether it's with the PTA [parent-teacher association], whether it's with in-classroom help, whether it's with running extracurricular activities. Parents in Irvine in particular are really, really engaged." While some Asian immigrants have joined the regular PTA, others have formed ethnic-specific groups such as the Korean or Chinese American parent groups, which allow them to converse in their ethnic language, share information, and encourage parent engagement. Their active participation as volunteering in classrooms, organizing school events, and being involved in fundraising projects benefits all students and contributes to school districts.

In some less-affluent areas such as Santa Ana and parts of Anaheim, Asian American administrators have tried to encourage parent engagement despite language and socioeconomic barriers. Audrey Yamagata-Noji recalls while serving on the Santa Ana School Board how the board tailored the parent conferences around each ethnic group's needs:

> We looked at what was appealing to the parents. So for the Vietnamese they said, 'Well, talk about financial aid and scholarships and college, and they'll come,' so that was their topic. And the Koreans said, 'You know, talk about achievement stress.' And the Cambodians wanted to know more about gangs and drugs. They were on Minnie Street. They needed to understand all of those kinds of things. The Samoans, the same things, about gangs and some of the social issues that were going on in their community. So we allowed the communities to organize their own sessions and have their own separate speakers but come together to be part of the whole.

Michael Matsuda, now superintendent of the Anaheim Union High School District, believes that policies such as the Local Control and Accountability Plan, which requires school districts to work with the community to establish plans and distribute funds, has helped the Anaheim Union High School District. He explains how this input from immigrant parents was instrumental in redirecting resources to

help their children while encouraging immigrant parents to actively engage in their children's education:

> If you're an immigrant parent, all of a sudden you have a voice in terms of how money is spent. So we've seen money shifted from just traditional salaries, benefits, the traditional things, to ensuring that we have community liaisons at every site, . . . people that have a background in ethnic studies. They understand the community—translators, social workers. We didn't have any social workers before. Now we have social workers, people that can connect the wraparound services to meet the gaps between delivery systems.

The district also used the funding to create programs that gave immigrant parents tools to support learning at home:

> We have a parent leadership academy, so part of the money goes into training parents by parents. These are parent led. We have parents coming into the classroom through parent learning walks. And we're doing them in-language now, Spanish, Korean, and now in Vietnamese. . . . That is very empowering because they're parents with their eyes and ears seeing classroom instruction.

> There are two things, two takeaways for parents: What can you do to help this [learning] at home? Like when you talk to your kid, what do you guys talk about, and how do you get them to talk about things? That's the same challenge the teacher has, so can you help support critical thinking at home? We're getting parents as allies to push the teachers in a positive way.

Matsuda draws from his experiences working as a founding member of the nonprofit organization Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA). He notes that AA&NHPI parents can be effective participants in decision-making if they have opportunities for input and know that their perspectives will be seriously incorporated into policy changes:

> Democracy is about having a voice. And that's what we're trying to do, to model democratic practices and empower, all the stuff that I've learned through OCAPICA. . . . In the Asian Pacific community you have [people], especially in the Vietnamese community, who've never experienced what a democracy is or a functional democracy. They need to be affirmed that they do have a voice and it's a valid, it's an authentic, it's a real voice that we want at the table.

K–12 Dual-Language Immersion Programs

The Orange County K–12 public school system has started providing curricula that reflect the changing demographics of their students. There are a number of school districts in Orange County that offer dual-immersion Spanish-English programs, with other public schools and some charter schools offering dual-immersion programs in Korean, Mandarin, and Vietnamese. In addition, the Garden Grove and Westminster School Districts offer a Vietnamese immersion program.[4]

Photo courtesy of Audrey Yamagata-Noji

There are also Chinese immersion programs in the Capistrano and Orange School Districts.[5] While the expense may be higher, many consider this an important service for immigrant and refugee children that helps with their adjustment, and some affluent districts have offset these costs with grants or contributions from parents.[6] As a Santa Ana School Board member, Audrey Yamagata-Noji sees the value of dual immersion or bilingual programs since they help non–English speaking children transition into English, noting that knowing more than one language actually helps children learn. In other cases, parents whose children speak English want their children to be fully fluent in other languages and enroll their children in these dual-language immersion programs to better prepare their children for the global economy.

Ethnic Studies in K–12 and Higher Education

The public education curriculum is also changing to include AA&NHPI experiences in teaching. OCAPICA developed a K–12 curriculum about the Vietnamese American experience that is offered in some school districts. These programs and courses reflect the multicultural identity of Orange County but also provide a space for Asian American youth to learn and appreciate their culture. Michael Matsuda explains how critical these courses are for youth development: "Kids, regardless of their ethnicity and gender, they hunger for that. That's why I think ethnic studies courses are so important to bring into high school or even earlier because everybody wants to know 'Who am I?', 'How do I fit in?', 'How do I become comfortable with myself?' So I think that's really important."

Local colleges provide ethnic studies courses, which offer accurate and inclusive histories that include AA&NHPI experiences. University of California, Irvine (UCI) and California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) have established Departments of Asian American Studies, while some community colleges offer courses. For some community leaders, taking ethnic studies courses was instrumental in their career trajectory. Ellen Ahn, the executive director of Korean

Community Services attributes learning about the Asian American studies movement in college to having politicized her, giving her a deeper understanding of how her work with Korean Americans fits into the larger narrative about Asian Americans:

> If it were not for that, Asian American activists throughout—I would even say, from the 19th century throughout but particularly post-1960s—people like me would not have benefited. . . . They paved the way for a lot of things that we just take for granted now. And so, the Asian American studies movement is a part of the greater Asian American rights movement. But I am very appreciative of that and all of those moments. . . . So that was very formative studying that, understanding that, understanding that there's a greater diaspora that we all function in has really helped me place my work where it belongs in that greater story, that greater narrative of where Korean Americans are.

"The [AA&NHPI communities] need to be affirmed that they do have a voice and it's a valid, it's an authentic, it's a real voice that we want at the table."

Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education

Orange County is home to major four-year colleges and community colleges that serve many AA&NHPI: 38.7% of UCI students are "Asian/Pacific Islander" and 16.2% are international students, many who are from Asia, and 21% of CSUF undergraduate students identify as "Asian/PI."[7] CSUF has the highest enrollment of Vietnamese American students out of all the CSU campuses.[8] Close to 30% of students at Irvine Valley College, the community college in Irvine, identify as Asian American.

The college environment is a space that brings the different AA&NHPI groups together where they can potentially learn about one another and build solidarity. Cyril Yu, senior deputy district attorney at the Orange County District Attorney's office and board member of the South Coast Chinese Cultural Association, describes how he developed a broader racial consciousness with other Asian Americans through his college experience:

> By the time I got to college, it became less about the cultural identity component than about common ideas about what the community should be. So certainly embracing that idea of being Asian American as opposed to Chinese American—that really came to fruition when I was in college. A lot of the things that I did were with Chinese Americans, Vietnamese Americans; [I] had a lot of Filipino friends, Korean friends, just everybody in all of those communities. It wasn't about their community; it was about creating ties among all of the communities. They were more interested in having an Asian American group than about a Chinese American or Filipino American group. Those groups had their own strengths. . . . At least among my groups of friends, we tended not to divide ourselves in that way. It was more about finding common things that we needed to work on.

With the significant number and presence of AA&NHPI in higher education in Orange County, programs have developed to meet the specific needs of these students and also often benefit the surrounding community. Notably, UCI and Irvine Valley College are both Asian American and Native American and Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI), a designation from the U.S. Department of Education and the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. This designation provides financial resources to institutions of higher education to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services to improve recruitment and retention of the different AA&NHPI ethnic groups, especially underrepresented ones.

Edwin Tiongson is project director for the AANAPISI project at Irvine Valley College, which is called ELEVATE AAPI (Equitable Learning Experience Valuing Achievement, Transfer and Empowering Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders). The program provides a safe space for AA&NHPI students to study and build community with other students, staff, and faculty. It also supports the broader community by offering ESL classes as a part of its programming. Tiongson explains the benefits of the ESL program and the diversity of the school:

> We get the students who just immigrated here to the grandparents that really can't understand their grandchild and the parent who can't navigate their child through school. And it's beautiful because we see Asian Pacific Islanders in there, I think it's like two-thirds. . . . You see a bunch of folks that also are Spanish speaking, Farsi speaking, those populations that are there. And we were able to support them with getting their center up and running and able to contribute to the institution to provide and meet that need of learning the language.

Audrey Yamagata-Noji echoes Tiongsan's sentiments regarding the intergenerational benefits of ESL programs provided by the local community colleges: "Colleges like Santa Ana [College], they have a huge adult education noncredit program for ESL, so the parents can go and actually learn the English language, which is going to help them in their jobs and help them with their children and their grandchildren in understanding and communicating."

The AANAPISI grant also helps to connect the university to local community organizations, further strengthening the network among AA&NHPI service providers. Tiongson says these collaborative efforts help to provide opportunities and inform students about how they can give back and improve their communities:

> By connecting with community-based organizations and hearing their stories, it's . . . finding opportunities for our students to connect with them so they can gain skills, . . . so they can make that choice to either be a part of the narrative [of change] and part of the engagement, or take it for what it's worth, [learning] life skills that will help them also

in the long run. Maybe they'll come back to other types of work that are similar down the line, but at least giving them that opportunity.

Upon graduation, students who benefit from this program can use their talents to find employment that improves the county's economic vibrancy and contribute to their communities. However, the future of the AANAPISI program is uncertain given educational policy changes at the federal level.

Development of University-Community Partnerships

Local university-community partnerships have also been critical in acquiring funding and sharing resources to address community needs. These partnerships have the potential to build the capacity of community organizations, which often lack sufficient infrastructure or funding to conduct research or implement programs. Pacific Island Health Partnership (PIHP) has formed two partnerships with colleges to help acquire funding in order to create culturally and linguistically appropriate community educational programs. It partners with CSUF on the Weaving an Islander Network for Cancer Awareness, Research, and Training (WINCART) program, and more recently, with the University of California, Riverside, for the Navigating Healthy Hearts cardiovascular disease program.[9] Jane Pang, cofounder of PIHP, describes how they were able to raise awareness about colorectal cancer through WINCART: "Our people aren't informed. We need to get that out, so we worked . . . three full years to get a whole video, handout, flip charts, and get the education out in language as well to the community." They build on these educational collaborations to create new partnerships and have partnered with St. Joseph's Hospital to connect with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander community members to encourage colonoscopies.

NEEDS

Resources for English Language Learners

Language continues to be an important issue for students who are from immigrant families. Over 24% of the students in Orange County school districts are English language learners.[10] While English language learners in Orange County are predominantly Latino (79%), the next-highest groups are students who speak Vietnamese (8%) followed by Korean (2.5%) and Mandarin Chinese (2%).[11] More funding and resources have been allocated to charter schools, which are able to provide language immersion programs. However, there are concerns about whether they will serve the specialized needs of low-income, immigrant children.

Michael Matsuda explains that charter schools are not obligated through locally elected school boards to address community needs, which can include needs specific to English language learners:

Photo courtesy of Jei Garlitos

> The issues of English language acquisition, that's a big thing and challenging. . . . Some of [the charter schools and voucher programs] are pretty good. The vast majority, I would say 90% plus, are in there to make money. And the most expensive kids are English learners—the ones that need more support—English learners and students with special needs and have a history of disenrollment. It'd be one thing if their demographics looked like ours in terms of ability, but they don't. There have been ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] studies that have shown they're resegregating America. That's a very dangerous trend for a democracy.

Audrey Yamagata-Noji, who advocated for bilingual education as a Santa Ana School Board member, cautions that if bilingual education is disproportionately offered in charter schools, it may hurt low-income immigrants who still primarily attend traditional public schools:

> So it became valuable for middle-class parents to have their kids learn a foreign language through a bilingual program. So it's not okay to use bilingual education for poor Latino and Vietnamese students to learn their language and English and content area. But it's acceptable for a predominantly, English-speaking middle-class families, be they Latino or Anglo to be in a bilingual program. That blows my mind.

Resources for Immigrant Students and Families

Immigrant students and their parents still face challenges navigating the intricacies of the U.S. educational system. This barrier can occur even among those who are well educated in their homeland. Naz Hamid, a parent in Irvine, who came to California initially as an international college student, describes the barriers immigrant families face trying to pursue educational opportunities for their children:

> We don't have anybody who holds our hand as much and guides us about how to navigate the system, whether it's high school and what courses you should be taking, when you should be taking them so you can get into a good college, and what is it you're supposed to be studying, what kinds of tests you should be taking. . . . Because your kids are coming up through the school system, it's sort of assumed that you know. But we don't know. I don't know. I have a college degree. I'm a working professional. I still don't know. So kids need a lot of hand holding because that institutional knowledge is not there.

This preparation can involve selecting the right major, attending job fairs, getting internships, finding mentors, and building networks; yet, even when students are proactive, they lack the personal connections that make a difference in securing a job upon graduation. Hamid believes this can impact immigrants:

> With an immigrant family who doesn't have those kinds of connections, our needs become very, very different. It sort of almost feels like we need folks who have been established to sort of give us that sort of a leg up and say 'Okay, you know what? Let me hold your hand. Let me guide you. Let me see what I can do to help you and level that playing field.' So a lot of that stuff is missing. Economically you may be pretty well off, but that network just isn't there.

Thus, despite their socioeconomic status, immigrants still face social and cultural challenges to advancing their children's education.

Serving Undocumented Students

Community leaders have expressed specific concerns about undocumented students being denied educational opportunities. The 2012 Obama-era policy, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), permitted undocumented immigrants who entered the country as minors to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation to attend school and work; however, the Trump administration rescinded this program in September 2017. California has close to 223,000 "DACA-mented" individuals, the highest number of the 800,000 DACA beneficiaries across the United States.[12] The top 15 countries of origin for DACA recipients include South Korea, Philippines, and India.[13] An estimated 45% of undocumented students within the University of California system identify as Asian American.[14] However, undocumented immigrants remain largely "hidden" in Asian American and Pacific Islander communities,[15] with many eligible undocumented Asian American and Pacific Islander youth not seeking DACA over the past five years; those that did come forward find that few resources targeted Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.[16] Audrey Yamagata-Noji explains that even under DACA, there are very few resources targeting Asian American and Pacific Islander undocumented students:

> They have almost no services available to them. The Mexican consulate is actually getting really involved in working with Mexican citizens and their rights. And there are a lot more immigrant rights activists and attorneys who speak Spanish, who understand that side. There are fewer that understand the Asian dilemma. So you have Korean, Filipino, some Chinese who fall under that. I had a Pacific Islander DACA student, and he was accepted to transfer to a college in Utah, but they wouldn't accept DACA. They wouldn't accept his DACA

"But I think for the Asian Pacific Americans who are DACAs, they just don't know where to go. They absolutely don't understand what's happening, and the resources aren't clearly available."

> status. They didn't understand it, but New Mexico did. So states don't understand it. There's so much misunderstanding about that and families are concerned. Some college students are wanting to give up. There's a lot of fear. But I think for the Asian Pacific Americans who are DACAs, they just don't know where to go. They absolutely don't understand what's happening, and the resources aren't clearly available.

In California, the state has taken many steps to protect the rights and futures of undocumented students, including providing in-state tuition and financial assistance as well as passing a new "school sanctuary" law in 2017 (AB 699) aimed at protecting undocumented students in public schools. However, great uncertainty about federal laws and policies, including the ability to obtain work authorization, will likely push any "DACA-mented" immigrants and other undocumented back underground, living in constant fear of deportation. It will be up to the state, counties, cities, and school districts to escalate efforts to support undocumented students in the coming months and years.

Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Educational Disparities

Of critical importance are the persistent educational disparities facing Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities. Only 19% of NHPI have obtained a college degree or higher compared with 38% of the general population.[17] NHPI high school graduation rates in Orange County are below average (83% versus the county average of 86%), while NHPI dropout rates countywide are identical to those of Blacks or African Americans (13%).[18] Despite high levels of enrollment of Asian Americans into higher education, NHPI make up less than 1% of the student population across California public institutions.[19] The barriers that NHPI face in education include major gaps in the education system that provide financial and social assistance to NHPI college students to pursue their education.[20] Rather than focusing on admissions policies, retention is a major issue that institutions of higher education need to monitor and critically evaluate to ensure that their programs, staff, and services assist NHPI students consistently all the way to graduation. These continuing disparities support the need to disaggregate data for NHPI and understand the educational barriers they face in order to effectively tailor programs to their needs.

Photo courtesy of Ellen Ahn

Academic Pressures and Mental Health Services

Mental health issues are also impacting AA&NHPI students; however, it may be difficult for them to accept professional assistance (see chapter 5, "Health Care Services"). Jei Garlitos, principal and coordinator of Alternative Education with the Anaheim Union High School District, has seen mental health issues impact both low- and high-income families as well as low- and high-achieving students, but they all tend to reject mental health services:

> I would see students who saw their anxieties rise as the pressures would build up. A lot of those families, we would offer, 'Hey, maybe your student needs someone to speak to, to kind of relieve [the pressure].' [The parents say,] 'Nope. No thank you.' And I think that's the biggest challenge we have. . . . They don't want anyone else as part of this intervention. The parents say, 'We will take care of it. There's an issue with my kid, just tell me what it is. We'll be able to go home and go take care of it.' Regardless, if it was the more affluent kids or high-achieving kids or the ones who are at-risk.

An emerging mental health issue relates specifically to transnational families in Orange County who are often referred to as "geese families" or "parachute kids." Within these families, parents are often separated from their children. Sometimes both parents remain in Asia, shuttling to the United States periodically. In other cases, the mother stays in the U.S. while the father continues to work in Asia or a guardian supervises the child. The parents agree to this arrangement in hopes that if their children are socialized into the U.S. educational system early on, it will assist them in gaining admission into top U.S. colleges and provide them with more opportunities than in their homeland, where there are fewer universities and competition is fierce for limited slots. However, as they are often unsupervised and left alone in the United States, parachute kids may face adjustment issues and social alienation, which can lead to mental health issues of depression, suicide, and aggression.[21]

In many cases, immigrant and refugee parents have made incredible sacrifices in order for their children to have better educational opportunities. In some cases, this creates immense pressure on their children to do well in school. Michael Matsuda relates the unforeseen problems facing a number of immigrant and refugee families in the Anaheim Union High School District:

> Right now, you have a lot of these stereotypes in the Asian communities—the tiger moms, the tiger dads—that we're all focused on going to the top colleges and all that. And there is a sense of truth to that, but I think it's also when you go deeper, I've had parents who are struggling with this issue of mental health and depression and isolation. And realizing that they're trying to do what's best, thinking I want my kid to get a high SAT score or whatever, but beginning to realize that that's leading to a sense of emptiness for the child. And I think that's another big challenge for our community. You know we've been successful with this model [of] push, push, push through education, but now there's a backlash. There's sort of an undercurrent of 'Oh wait a second, maybe we're pushing too hard. And maybe we're pushing on the wrong things.' And I'm hearing that increasingly from our Asian American parents.

Photo courtesy of Mary Anne Foo/ OCAPICA

Naz Hamid, whose children attend high-performing Irvine schools, agrees that this pressure has negative effects on children of immigrant families: "That pressure sometimes has some very unintended consequences that parents are not really looking for. Kids struggle with depression. They attempt suicide. Some of them end up dropping out of high school entirely. Some of them turn to drugs. And it's really sad because that's not what any parent wants for their child."

Intense parent engagement and unrealistic expectations of their children's academic success can also have negative consequences. Matsuda sees these different mental health issues becoming so prevalent in K–12 education that they need to be closely evaluated: "It's an increasingly complex world, and it's increasingly stressful. We know that depression, teenage depression, is on the rise. And we can no longer be education that looks at traditional metrics of test scores and SAT scores and say that we're doing a good job. We have got to reflect on what is the purpose of public education in a democracy."

The pressure also extends to college students. Audrey Yamagata-Noji works with Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP), a Los Angeles nonprofit organization that also provides leadership training for the educational, political, and corporate sectors in Orange County. She tries to guide Asian American college students to pursue their personal interests and balance them with their parents' expectations:

> It's critically important for parents to understand college majors and the American mindset, that the student has the right to decide their own major, which is not something always embraced by families. They want to weigh in, and there is an expectation that you go to a professional school. So going to college, you're going to be a doctor or an attorney or a computer scientist or some kind of a scientist, so you have STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] and the professional schools covered. That's to make your parents the proudest of what you're going to do.
>
> Many, many students want to study psychology. I've often wondered why. Is it because of their own questioning about their development and some of the issues that they go through? . . . We do this training with LEAP. . . . 'When your major is not *your* major.' 'When getting straight A's isn't good enough because you should've had A+s.' And so our 'joke' with LEAP is, you get around the parent pressure by having the double major—one for your parents, one for yourself.

> We also noticed the fallout for a lot of students at the university level: the high competition and the pressure to succeed, students committing suicide, students pressuring not just to get in but to graduate in shorter amounts of time, [and] the competition amongst Asian students with each other. And so there's a psychological fallout that's happening with all of the pressures for achievement.

There are very narrow and traditional understandings about "academic success" beyond grades and majors that can create undue pressure on AA&NHPI students. Overall there are still expectations to go to a four-year university, especially a top-ranked school, immediately after high school. Immigrant and refugee parents, especially those who did not attend college or even those educated in another country, are not always familiar with the educational options and choices available in the United States such as transferring from community colleges. In fact, 47% of Asian American and 55% of NHPI freshmen start college in the California community college system.[22] Yamagata-Noji elaborates:

> Over time the community colleges have become more of a viable alternative to recent immigrants and to other families for lots of reasons, some economical. . . . If you can't get to your destination right out of high school, community colleges have done a good job now with transfer, and you actually can get to your top college by going through a community college now. So I think we're starting to change some of that. But there still is a big stigma. Even in the UC system, UC Merced is not UCLA, and community college is still not Cal Poly Pomona, . . . and that [information] I get from talking to college students themselves.

Edwin Tiongson, who oversees the ELEVATE AAPI program at Irvine Valley College, asserts that community colleges can be an important space for young people to "discover themselves" before finding their academic and career interests, which can help with students' emotional well-being: "Not everybody has their set path in mind, and I want to say it's totally okay. Community colleges are here to be, and I'm taking my students' words, it's a 'pit stop,' a testing ground to find out what works and what doesn't. When you're a . . . small fish in a big pond, it's daunting."

School Bullying and Harassment

School bullying and harassment against AA&NHPI students based on stereotypes of their ethnic identity as well as gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, or religion are also major concerns at both the K–12 and college levels.[23] A national report indicates that while Asian Americans have the lowest rate of bullying among those who are bullied, Asian Americans are most likely to be harassed because of their race.[24] Since the 2016 election, administrators across the United States have noted increases in anti-Muslim bullying, which is consistent with an overall rise in

anti-Muslim harassment.[25] Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Los Angeles has received reports of school bullying in recent years, including in Orange County.

Asian American educators in the county such as Michael Matsuda are concerned about the current anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim climate impacting public education and persistent educational inequities:

> Public educators are kind of like the medical profession where we don't discriminate who comes through the doors. Everybody gets served. We do not ask whether you're documented or undocumented, and that's supported by the Supreme Court decision[s]. The purpose of public schools is to educate everybody, but as we know that's kind of under siege by the federal government. They're questioning that. They only want education for certain people, not the undocumented, not certain religions like Muslim. We know that's all going to be challenged constitutionally.

Students are also directly responding to harassment. Matsuda shares how his students responded to recent bullying:

> At one of our high schools we had incidents where kids were putting pepperoni pizzas in Muslim students' lockers, and then kids harassed some girls with their hijab. So the students were so upset they decided to do a wear-hijab day, and they got the Christian club and the other clubs to come together during lunch. And they were doing infomercials at the announcements about why Muslim girls wear hijabs. So there's for every knucklehead thing that's racial or whatever, there's all these kids coming together and they do the right thing.

In another example, Edwin Tiongson describes how two Muslim students on the speech and debate team he advises presented a skit to dispel myths about their community: "They found a poem, 'This Is Not Our Islam,' . . . a beautiful spoken-word poem. . . . It was through these types of performances that they were able to advocate. . . . It was about sharing the message, 'This is not our Islam—don't put us into this category. Don't overgeneralize the acts of a few to the religion of the many.'

Addressing bullying requires the creation of inclusive environments both in K–12 and higher education by students. Educators and administrators as well as elected officials and community leaders should promote and enforce inclusive policies and appropriate actions that protect those who are targets of bullying and harassment. Some of the solutions to these problems can include ethnic studies courses, diverse teachers and administrators, complaint procedures and mediation programs, and regular training of staff.

Lack of Institutionalized Ethnic Studies Curricula

Given the presence and contributions of AA&NHPI in Orange County, educators have noted that this history has yet to be consistently institutionalized as required curricula across the Orange County school districts. Audrey Yamagata-Noji notes that "we've missed the boat on educating children about their own histories and their own language." California Governor Jerry Brown signed into law AB-2016 ordering the creation of a model ethnic studies curriculum for high schools with standards that any state school could implement. The bill's sponsor, Assemblymember Luis A. Alejo (D-Salinas) remarks, "The development of a comprehensive ethnic studies curriculum acknowledges the diversity of California, which has the most ethnically diverse public school student body in the nation. . . . Ethnic studies are not just for students of color. We should give all students the opportunity to prepare for a diverse global economy, diverse university campuses and diverse workplaces."[26] School districts in Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco have already adopted these policies. Orange County school districts have yet to adopt similar policies, but efforts should be made to train teachers and build an inclusive curriculum that includes local AA&NHPI histories.

Increasing the Number of Educators, Administrators, and Elected Officials

As the AA&NHPI student population has increased, more AA&NHPI have been hired as educators and administrators. However, given the growing number of AA&NHPI students in K–12 schools and institutions of higher learning, a concerted effort to hire and appoint more diverse role models in front of the classroom and in positions of power within the Orange County educational system is needed. In particular, there are few Asian Americans in leadership positions steering education policies at either the K–12 or higher education levels. Michael Matsuda identifies this as a major workforce gap: "We're good at entry level, but we don't rise up. They're very few [AA&NHPI] superintendents, very few principals. And I think that is a challenge. How do we learn to advocate for ourselves and support each other?"

Tam Nguyen, who served as president of the CSUF Alumni Association, also sees this gap within higher education institutions:

> Even the places where you think would be the most inclusive and diverse such as the universities. I mean I can't help but to think of my two institutions, UC Irvine and Cal State Fullerton, which are near and dear to my heart 'cause I attended them as a student. And the student bodies are very diverse, but I also look at administration, I look at leadership positions and when I talk about that, I look at VPs and deans. We still lack a large number of role models. So the lack of role models in high-profile positions is still evident.

"A lot of those families, we would offer, 'Hey, maybe your student needs someone to speak to, to kind of relieve [the pressure].' [The parents say,] 'Nope. No thank you.' And I think that's the biggest challenge we have."

Photo courtesy of Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Orange County

While Asian Americans may value education and respect teachers, the field itself is not seen as a desired profession for the community. Jei Garlitos of the Anaheim Union High School District explains this disconnect: "Within the Asian American community, it's [education is] still not one of the big professions to look at and say, 'I want to be a leader in that profession.' I still think Asian American families and communities still value, although they value education pretty highly, they still will look at doctors, engineers, lawyers, those types of professions prior to say counselor or assistant principal first. . . . I hope that that's changing within the next couple of generations as we educate more and more."

Given the significant number of AA&NHPI students in Orange County schools, AA&NHPI leadership in schools and school districts should address issues that disproportionately impact AA&NHPI. Although the California state average for minority students is 76%, many schools in Orange County exceed this percentage with schools that are majority Latino and AA&NHPI.[27] For example, the Garden Grove Unified School District serves over 44,000 students, and over 90% are minority, mainly Hispanic/Latino, and AA&NHPI.[28] AA&NHPI enrollment is also increasing in other school districts in more affluent areas of the county. The Irvine Unified School District has over 33,381 students enrolled, with 16,579 AA&NHPI students.[29] While Asian Americans, primarily Vietnamese Americans, have served on the school boards in Garden Grove and Westminster, Irvine and other cities with increasing AA&NHPI student demographics need more diverse representation. AA&NHPI voices are not just needed in educational instruction and administration but are also needed in major political leadership roles, including appointed superintendents and elected school board members.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Collect and report disaggregated data for AA&NHPI on educational needs and attainment.
- Expand access to English learner, bilingual instruction, and dual-immersion programs in languages commonly spoken by AA&NHPI students. This should include increasing recruitment, retention, and support of teachers and teacher's aides bilingual in AA&NHPI languages.
- Support opportunities for limited English proficient parents to meaningfully engage in their children's education, including the translation of school documents into AA&NHPI languages, AA&NHPI language interpretation at school meetings and events, and parent groups targeting immigrant parents unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system.
- Ensure that undocumented students have access to education and related services, and implement state laws that serve and protect undocumented

students (e.g., AB 699). In particular, target outreach to and support of Asian American and Pacific Islander undocumented students and their families, in recognition that undocumented Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders face cultural barriers to disclosing their undocumented status.

- Target outreach to and support of underrepresented AA&NHPI ethnic groups, particularly Southeast Asian and NHPI students who may lack sufficient support and resources to succeed in school.
- Increase mental health education, outreach, and services for AA&NHPI students in both the K–12 and higher education levels. In the K–12 setting, these efforts should also include parents and family members and address cultural barriers (e.g., acknowledging mental health needs).
- For both K–12 and higher education levels, adopt and enforce anti-hate and anti-bullying policies at school and school district levels (e.g., AB 2845), provide counseling and other supportive services to students, develop clear reporting requirements, and provide training to teachers and school administrators on implementing these policies.
- Provide AA&NHPI ethnic studies programming, including supporting and incorporating ethnic studies curriculum at high schools as required by state law as well as in other public school grades and in private schools. Include lessons on issues like the "model minority myth" and the significant diversity (socioeconomic, culture, language, religion) across AA&NHPI ethnic groups.
- Recruit, hire, and promote K–12 and higher education teachers and administrators who can work with diverse student populations, including more AA&NHPI. Also build a pipeline that encourages more AA&NHPI to become teachers and administrators, including mentorship programs to help elevate more AA&NHPI to higher-level positions.
- Support policies that promote equal opportunity and diversity in public education, ensuring students from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds have equal access to a quality education.
- Increase funding for K–12 and higher education, including the community college, California State University, and University of California systems, to ensure public education is accessible and affordable to all AA&NHPI. Strong financial aid programs, targeted outreach, and in-language resources for parents are critical.
- Increase awareness and understanding among AA&NHPI communities of the role of community colleges in providing a more affordable path to higher education.

INTERVIEWED COMMUNITY LEADERS

Ellen Ahn	Executive director of Korean Community Services
Jei Garlitos	Principal and coordinator of Alternative Education with the Anaheim Union High School District
Naz Hamid	Parent in Irvine; ran for the local school board
Michael Matsuda	Superintendent of the Anaheim Union High School District; founding member of the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA)
Tam Nguyen	Former president of the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce; owner of Advance Beauty College; former president of the California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) Alumni Association
Jane Pang	Cofounder and board member of Pacific Islander Health Partnership (PIHP)
Edwin Tiongson	Project director of ELEVATE AAPI (Equitable Learning Experience Valuing Achievement, Transfer and Empowering Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) at Irvine Valley College
Audrey Yamagata-Noji	Vice president of Student Services at Mount San Antonio College; served on the Santa Ana School Board for 25 years; volunteer with Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP)
Cyril Yu	Former president and current board member of the South Coast Chinese Cultural Association; senior deputy district attorney at the Orange County District Attorney's office; ran for the Irvine School Board

The quotes from these interviews are represented verbatim in this report, with some shortened for space considerations, shown by an ellipsis. The only other modifications are to help provide context, shown in brackets.

NOTES

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