Asian American, Native Hawaiian, & Pacific Islander English Learners

A focus on California

APIA SCHOLARS

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INTRODUCTION

English Learners (ELs)[1] comprise one of the fastest growing groups in the nation's K–12 student population,[2] which is driven by a large and growing population of immigrant-origin youth.[3] California is home to one of the highest concentrations of immigrant-origin students with 51.5% of school-age children with one or more foreign-born parents.[4]

Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (AANHPIs)[a] are a large part of the growth within the immigrant-origin and EL student populations. In fact, Asian Americans are most likely to speak another language at home other than English (74.3%) in addition to Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (41.4%).[5] In California, AANHPI students also represent a critical mass of EL students in the state, comprising 11.8% of the total EL student population.[6] This data is essential to understand because it demonstrates the extent to which the EL population is a large concentration of the AANHPI student population and the AANHPI population makes up a critical mass of ELs in the state.

Data sources and methods for this report include a systematic synthesis of the extant literature, as well as findings from listening sessions with California-based administrators, educators, and policy and community advocates.

IN THIS BRIEF, WE DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING:

→ How AANHPI ELs are a critical population to include within broader conversations of racial equity in education, and more specifically, how intersectionality plays a role in understanding their unique needs and challenges.

→ The relevance of the AANHPI EL population for asset-based approaches to educator practices to give voice to the cultural strengths and assets EL students already possess.

→ How current teacher training and development and teacher education programs can more appropriately support and validate the educational experiences of AANHPI EL students.

→ Recommendations to address the unique needs of AANHPI EL students in K–12, which have broader implications for their academic success and participation in our economic workforce.

→ There is a historical context for the relevance of Asian Americans to the EL advocacy and policy. In *Lau v. Nichols* (1974)—a lawsuit where the plaintiff was of Chinese descent—the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the San Francisco Unified School District violated the Fourteenth Amendment and Civil Rights Act of 1964 by not providing supplemental English language instruction to students who did not speak English.

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a We use the term Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) to refer to the panethnic political identity that includes individuals who identify as Asians, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiian, and/or Pacific Islanders and individuals with origins from Asia and the Pacific Islands. We acknowledge that within this panethnic political identity, Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are racialized distinctly and differently. We use variations of the AAPI acronym such as Asian and Pacific Islander (API), APIA (Asian and Pacific Islander American), and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) when data sources we reference have used them.

AANHPI EL STUDENTS: THE DEMOGRAPHIC IMPERATIVE

California has the largest Asian American population in the U.S. and the second largest Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) population, together making up 15% of state residents. Moreover, AANHPIs are the most linguistically diverse group compared to other racial groups.[7] During the 2021–22 academic year, in California K–12 public schools, a total of 130,747 (11.8%) of all EL students had home languages that were categorized as either Asian/Asian American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander.[8] Among these students, the top four Asian languages spoken at home were Vietnamese (23,927), Mandarin (Putonghua) (20,648), Cantonese (13,683), and Filipino (Pilipino and Tagalog) (11,553).[9] These Asian languages fall below Spanish, and among Arabic as well as "Other non-English languages," as defined by the Department of Education (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

English Learners in California K–12 Schools by Language Background, 2021–22

LANGUAGE	NUMBER
Spanish	925,055
Vietnamese	23,927
Mandarin	20,648
Arabic	16,642
Other non-English languages	15,213
Cantonese	13,683
Filipino (Pilipino and Tagalog)	11,553

Source: California Department of Education, English Learners by Language Grade, 2021–22, All Students, Gender: All. Accessed March 2, 2023

This data demonstrates the linguistic diversity of AANHPI EL students across the state, yet findings from our listening sessions and a lack of publicly available data about AANHPI EL students demonstrate that school districts lack a consistent and systematic approach for collecting and reporting disaggregated data on AANHPI home languages spoken. Data disaggregation refers to splitting larger categorical data into smaller groups or subcategories such as specific racial and ethnic groups, gender, or socioeconomic identities.[10]

Without disaggregated data on the AANHPI student population, disparities within these groups are obscured, which makes it difficult to adequately support AANHPI students.

Data Disaggregation: Model & Impact

Some school districts in California have been making improvements in how they collect and report data on AANHPI EL students. In 2019, for example, the LA Unified School District (LAUSD) passed the "Everyone Counts: Increasing Equity for All of Our AANHPI AMEMSA Students and Employees (Res-044-18/19)" resolution, which disaggregates data by race and ethnicity for Asian American and Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander (AANHPI), as well as Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian (AMEMSA) students and staff. With a disaggregated data system, LAUSD will be able to better develop equitable strategies, programs, and services. This includes identifying gaps in curriculum and school services, building an understanding of student needs, providing culturally and linguistically relevant materials, and advocating for funding opportunities that are necessary to support the needs of AANHPI students.[11] This is a potential model for other districts to improve how they collect and report data on AANHPI EL students.

When disaggregated data is provided on a local level, districts and schools have a better understanding of where targeted support is needed. Given the recent demographic and migration trends, educational leaders and policymakers must consider and prioritize the unique needs and challenges facing AANHPI immigrant-origin students and ELs in EL programs and interventions.

AANHPIS, RACIAL EQUITY, AND ISSUES OF INTERSECTIONALITY

A key barrier for AANHPIs in both discussions about racial equity in education and broader discourse about EL students is that they are seen and treated as a monolithic group. There remains little understanding of AANHPI students' educational experience. Through data disaggregation and an intersectional lens, researchers and service providers have identified diversity in the educational experiences of AANHPI students, which include varying spoken languages, ethnic/cultural subgroups, historical contexts, socioeconomic status, and structural and institutional barriers.[12] For AANHPI EL students, these disparities have been a determining factor in the reclassification of a student's "English Learner" status and academic achievement rates.[13]

Thus, a critical facet of understanding the demographic composition of English Learner students is challenging the ways they are often misunderstood, misrepresented, and discussed in education research and policy as a monolithic group.[14]

To illustrate, our listening sessions revealed that there exists a monolithic and racialized perception of EL students as Spanish speakers, despite EL students coming from different linguistic, educational, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. This misperception is especially harmful to AANHPI EL students, who are also lumped together in a single racial category and pan-ethnic identity.[15] As such, it creates another barrier to understanding their distinct educational realities.

> " There's been this lack of understanding of the other English Learner groups in a way that makes it easier to dismiss them as perhaps they don't have needs or they're not needy. Not only is that coming from a deficit perspective that being an English Learner means needy, we're not sure how that works when you're also Asian. —*Carolina, Nonprofit Organization*

Intersectionality

Due to the ways in which AANHPI EL students are perceived and treated as a monolithic group, as well as overlooked in educational research and discourse, using intersectionality[b] as a lens can help better support this student population. AANHPI EL students have been affected by intersecting and overlapping issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and immigration. Targeted support that considers AANHPI EL students' intersectional identities (e.g., a Filipino EL student who immigrated to the U.S. at 17 years old) is key to assessing their distinct needs and addressing the barriers they face. This type of support should include disaggregated data research, which prevents grouping AANHPI students and their educational realities into one category.

Language Access & Storytelling

Another crucial target support is language access for AANHPI students and their families. This looks like translating instructional and library materials in AANHPI home languages, so AANHPI families, many of whom are also ELs, have equitable tools to support and be a part of their children's learning. Strategic outreach and culturally responsive services specific to AANHPI EL students recognize that educators and the school system may not be designed with their specific community's needs in mind. As such, strategic outreach that provides culturally responsive services should prioritize the success of AANHPI students in ways that are culturally affirming and resonates with their lived experiences. To understand AANHPI students' lived experiences, storytelling can be a powerful mode of targeted support. Considering the lack of AANHPI EL student perspectives in EL equity conversations, storytelling can provide a nuanced understanding of who our AANHPI EL students are.

Incorporating these targeted supports means AANHPI EL students are better seen and understood, which impacts how data is collected and used. This would then allow AANHPI ELs to be positioned in broader racial equity in education and EL advocacy.

> In the fall of 2015, Westminster School District in Orange County, California became the first public school in the state to offer a Vietnamese dual-language immersion program.[16] The expansion of dual-language immersion programs in Asian and Pacific Islander Languages in California is an important step for school districts in both acknowledging and supporting AANHPI English Learners students.

b Intersectionality is defined as experiencing a unique and distinct form of systemic oppression based on the varying intersections of a person's marginalized identity or social location, which changes with context.

AANHPI STUDENTS AND ASSET-BASED APPROACHES TO EL

In recent years, California has made considerable progress in recognizing, supporting, and elevating the cultural and linguistic diversity of EL students across the state. With the passage of Proposition 58 in 2016, which rescinded Proposition 227 of 1998,[17] schools are now allowed to reimplement programs that promote bilingual and multilingual education.[18] While California has made strides in acknowledging the diverse population of ELs and implementing asset-based support[c] for EL students broadly, there are few mentions of asset-based approaches specifically for AANHPI students.

Importance of Asset-Based Approaches

For AANHPI EL students, implementing asset-based approaches in curriculum and pedagogy that draw on the strengths of their cultural background is important in building their self-confidence personally and academically. This is especially critical as Asian American youth experience bullying based on their racial or ethnic origin which can negatively impact their academics, relationships, and perception of self.[19]

Using asset-based approaches, culturally-relevant strategies, and providing mentorship for engagement in literacy projects can support the achievement of AA & PI EL student communities. Asset-based approaches, that uplift a student's individual lived experiences, can include having more AANHPI narratives represented in the curriculum to combat monolithic and inaccurate representations like the model minority myth and other stereotypes.

As a result of asset-based approaches, AANHPI EL students can develop confidence in their learning and build higher self-esteem that could facilitate their academic success. In fact, to truly recognize languages as an asset, it is imperative that school and classroom libraries are adequately providing materials in AANHPI home languages. Consider the statement from a policy expert regarding the representation of AANHPI home languages in all aspects of the academic experience:

"We're not just talking textbooks, it's also making sure that we advocate for classroom libraries and other supporting materials to represent the different cultures of our students, and also in their home languages."
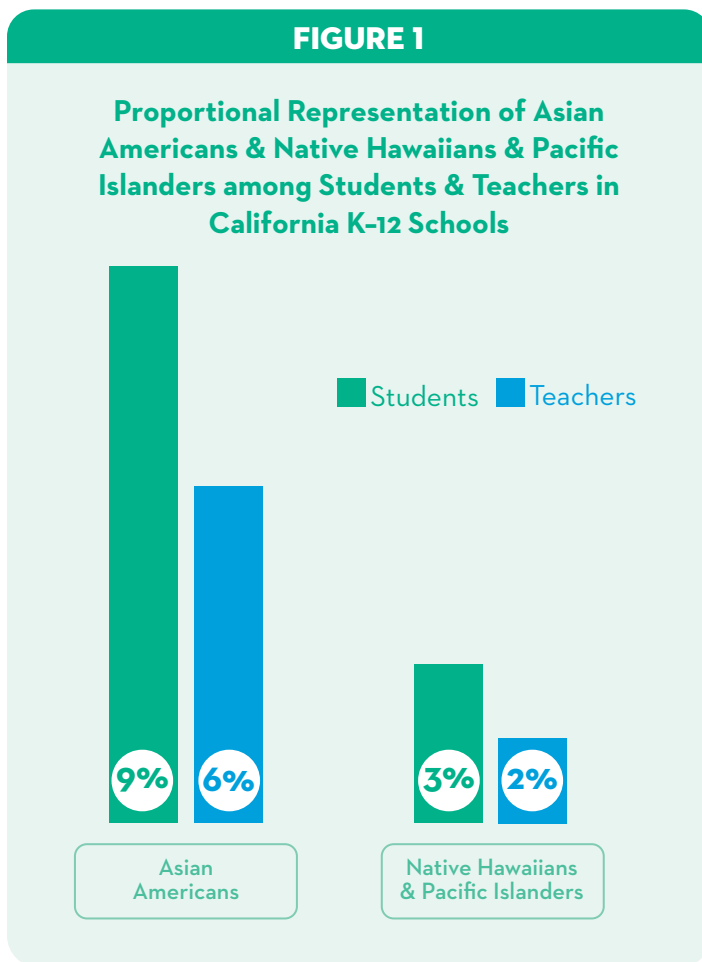—Mike, Advocacy Coalition Group

→ In 2019, Oakland Unified School District's (OAUSD) Arab Asian Pacific Islander Student Achievement initiative, created two targeted literacy programs: 1) Ta'alam is a targeted literacy program for Arab and Afghan students, and 2) Fananga is a targeted literacy program for Pacific Islander students.[20]

c Asset-based approaches are rooted in honoring, valuing, and uplifting each individual student's background, culture, and language skills, rather than seeing these as detrimental to their academic learning experience.

AANHPI EL STUDENTS AND TEACHER EDUCATION AND REPRESENTATION

As the racial and ethnic demography of our students in K–12 continue to become increasingly diverse, it is critical for students to see themselves reflected in their teachers and the curriculum, especially those who may also identify as English Learners. Yet, in California, while 9.4% of K–12 students identify as Asian American and 2.9% identify as Pacific Islander, there are only 5.8% of teachers who identify as Asian American and 1.7% who identify as Pacific Islanders.[21]

FIGURE 1

Proportional Representation of Asian Americans & Native Hawaiians & Pacific Islanders among Students & Teachers in California K–12 Schools

Note. From The Education Trust, (n.d.) *Is Your State Prioritizing Teacher Diversity and Education*?

Increasing AANHPI Representation

Increasing the representation of AANHPI teachers is critical to ensuring that the socioemotional needs, linguistic development, and academic success of AANHPI ELs are met in K–12.[22] Additionally, there is a need to increase the pipeline for multilingual teachers, who can bring innovative cultural repertoires in their pedagogy when working with AANHPI ELs. Consequently, a growing gap will continue to increase between the percentage of teachers in the workforce who identify as AANHPI and the percentage of students who are Asian and/or Pacific Islander if the issue of teacher (under)representation remains unaddressed.

Culturally-Relevant Teacher Training

In addition to addressing the lack of representation of AANHPI teachers in the classroom, there is a need to explore more ways teachers, regardless of racial or ethnic background, are trained to address the unique needs of AANHPI EL students. Traditional approaches to teacher professional development have often focused on the technical concepts of teaching like lesson planning, classroom management, and literacy growth.[23] While these aspects of teacher training and development are essential to the profession, there is a growing need to invest in training teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students.[24]

Integrating AANHPI Resources

Teacher education programs can be strengthened by integrating existing resources about AANHPI history for AANHPI students, which speaks to the relevance of the AANHPI community in the broader discussion of the role of ethnic studies in teacher education.[25] For example, Dr. Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales, Professor of Asian American Studies in the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University, founded Pin@y Educational Partnerships (PEP). PEP is a service-learning/learning service program that creates partnerships between higher education institutions, K–12 schools, and the community to train critical educators or teachers and produce curriculum in education in the California Bay Area.[26]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report reveals that while California has made notable progress in EL student support, such as implementation of the California English Learner Roadmap policy and State Seal of Biliteracy, more work needs to be done to be more inclusive of a diverse EL student population generally. Below, we provide recommendations to inform policy and practice at local and statewide levels to better address the unique needs and challenges of AANHPI EL students.

POLICYMAKERS

Invest in California Department of Education staffing to support data collection related to race and ethnicity initiatives, multilingual programs, socioemotional learning standard implementation, and positive student outcomes.

→ **Improve state instructional support by providing robust funding for state accountability systems**, including English Language Proficiency Assessments for California, to ensure data collection and student progress, especially around AANHPI students;

→ **Develop a teacher pipeline to increase the representation of AANHPI teachers and ensure high-quality instruction** to ensure the socioemotional needs, linguistic development, and academic success of AANHPI EL by increasing annual investments such as through California's Grow Your Own Programs and Career Technical Education, especially through California Mini-Corps and Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program;

→ **Provide flexible funding to allow for educator advancements** including social and emotional learning supports for educators supporting EL students and develop and provide accessible guidance, content, guidebooks, training, and technical assistance; and

→ **Outline specific, clear, and actionable goals and metrics** for ensuring curriculum is culturally responsive and sustained through annual appropriations.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

ADVOCATES

Advocate for strengthening and aligning EL serving programs by increasing investments in staffing and professional development opportunities.

→ **Urge the Governor to integrate English Learner programming** through the use of flexible funds such as the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) related professional development programs for educators in the 2024–2025 state budget;

→ **Ensure the California Department of Education builds in budget requests to hire at least two consultants who specialize in AANHPI languages** to assist with the evaluation and assessments of positive student outcomes and instructional materials (e.g., multilingual education, office/website/coaching supports, webinars/newsletters/trainings, and technical assistance);

→ **Highlight the importance of equitable, culturally-competent, and accessible programs and services and the importance of soliciting feedback** from a culturally and regionally diverse cross-section of students, families, caregivers, community-based partners, and local employers;

→ **Require that state accountability systems outline metrics for student progress and corresponding supports** such as through the English Language Proficiency California; and

→ **Emphasize the need for tuition support and/or stipends for educators, counselors, and administrators** to receive culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) trainings, certifications, materials, and additional necessary schooling and credentials.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS

Engage with community stakeholders, especially AANHPI EL students, families, caregivers, community-based organizations, and local systems leaders to ensure that the experiences and expertise of directly impacted students and service providers are considered in the development and implementation of student-centered policies and programs.

→ Districts and schools that serve a diverse and critical mass of AANHPI EL students should regularly engage local community groups on a quarterly basis such as through focus groups, surveys, town halls, participatory action research, and other means of engagement;

→ School officials should establish a Youth Council comprised of student leaders with direct lived experiences who can speak to the impact and importance of increasing the visibility of AANHPI EL students through disaggregated data, culturally responsive programming, and essential supports and services. Members of the Youth Council should be compensated and supported throughout their participation; and

→ Districts and schools should prioritize translating materials in AANHPI languages (e.g., assessments, instructional materials, access to library materials in home languages by providing both written and audio content) and ensure dissemination to students, families, and caregivers as applicable.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

ADMINISTRATION/TEACHERS

Administrators must recognize the importance of expanding teacher education programs and the need to recruit and retain more AANHPI teachers in broader diversity efforts.

→ We need to **improve the pipeline for multilingual AANHPI teachers, provide professional development for AANHPI teachers, and include culturally-relevant and ethnic studies curriculum** in teacher education programs to help teachers better understand, and advocate for and empower their AANHPI EL students;

→ Administrators should **develop mentorship initiatives** and creative supporting environments for AANHPI teachers; and

→ Educators should **seek out strategies and share best practices** for serving AANHPI ELs.

❝ There needs to be better support for how ethnic studies is getting rolled out across districts, and...demonstrating an ongoing need for critical professional development that supports teacher learning of ethnic studies...Ethnic studies, social justice, and cultural sustaining practices get collapsed and...becomes devoid of what the true sense of those particular approaches are. *—Erwin, West Coast University*

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Community-based organizations can partner with AANHPI ELs, their families, and with youth-serving systems such as the education and workforce systems to inform and strengthen the development and implementation of AANHPI EL-related policies, programs, and practices.

→ Community-based organizations can build rapport and trust with AANHPI ELs and their families and caregivers to share the knowledge and information needed to navigate and inform educational systems, leaders, and processes;

→ Design outreach and campaign strategies by working with education and community stakeholders working to prioritize and strengthen AANHPI EL programs and policies; and

→ Forums of communication should be streamlined and take place regularly between advocates and stakeholders. This will allow for uplifting existing projects that are already highlighting the positive impacts of working across and within AANHPI communities (i.e., AAJ-So Cal is promoting the need for AANHPI bilingual teachers).

> " A lot of these communities already have a sense of what they need, it's about not speaking for them but about further identifying who we need to talk to supporting their work.
>
> *—Mike, Advocacy Coalition Group*

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