



## **THE COALITION FOR ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

**New York Education Reform Commission  
Public Hearing for New NY Education Reform Commission  
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### **Testimony of Elizabeth Lee, Program Manager, Coalition for Asian American Children and Families**

Good Afternoon. My name is Elizabeth Lee, and I am a Program Manager at the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF). We would like to thank the New NY Education Reform Commission for holding this important hearing to collect feedback on how we can improve New York's public education system in order to better meet the needs of our students.

The Asian Pacific American (APA) community in New York is a diverse and growing population with over 40 Asian ethnic groups and speaking over 100 languages. The Asian Pacific American community is by percentage the fastest growing group in New York City, nearly doubling every decade since 1970. Asian Pacific Americans reside in all five boroughs of New York City, and make up almost 14% of the city's population. Since 1986, CACF has been the nation's only pan-Asian children's advocacy organization and works to improve the health and well-being of Asian Pacific American (APA) children and families in New York City in three key policy areas: education, health, and child welfare. CACF challenges the stereotype of Asian Pacific Americans as a "model minority" and advocates on behalf of underserved families in our community, especially immigrants struggling with poverty and limited English skills. CACF promotes better policies, funding, and services for East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander children youth and families living in New York City.

#### **COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS**

All youth living in New York deserve a sound and basic education that adequately prepares them for the future and ensures they are college and career ready. Often when APA students are mentioned in discussions of the public education system, it is to praise the successes of a community where Asian students are characterized as smart, successful, attending specialized schools, are self-sufficient, and do not require additional support and assistance. While the perception of APA students as high-achieving model minorities continue to prevail, these beliefs are far from the reality in which many APA students live as they face a multitude of challenges that decrease their ability to compete with their peers academically. Making up 14% of New York City's public school population, at-risk APA students often come from immigrant and low income families, face language barriers, and are the first-generation in their families to attend American public education schools and pursue a higher education.

Unfortunately, due to stereotypes APA students remain largely invisible and their needs are not considered in education reform initiatives. Often conversations regarding the achievement gap in education focuses upon the needs of Black and Latino students as compared to Whites and Asians. While the model minority myth continues to exemplify the notion of successful Asian Americans, this preconception masks the achievement gap that exists within the Asian American community itself. With over 100 languages and cultures, Asian Americans makeup an extremely diverse community where there are as many disparities across ethnicities but also within each ethnic community itself.

More specifically, while only 5% of APA students attend a specialized school, there are many more APA students who fail to meet education standards, and struggle throughout their academic career. These students find themselves isolated and marginalized, and often lack the necessary support to navigate the education system and access services critical to becoming competent, well-adjusted adults. Consider these facts: 1 in 4 APA students does not graduate on time or at all, and according to the New York State Department of Education "only 50% of APA students are considered prepared for college and career, and for APA students in high needs urban-suburban areas, the rate drops to 35.2%." While reasons for student struggles can be infinite and are unique to each individual, there are common trends underlying the challenges APA students face in education. Primarily these challenges include:

- Coping with the stress and anxiety associated with the stereotypes and stigmas of being viewed as a "model minority." More specifically, Asian Pacific American youth experience increased pressures from

their families and peers to succeed academically and fit into the mold of “model minority.” With high expectations placed upon them, often youth feel overwhelmed and disappointed in their own abilities if they cannot live up to such standards.

- Having difficulty keeping-up with their peers academically as 1 in 5 APA students is an English Language Learner- meaning they are simultaneously learning English and course content. These youth are marginalized by the acculturation process and often do not have adequate academic preparation and guidance to achieve to their fullest potential.
- Dealing with communication issues and language barriers within their families as 28% of Asian Americans live in linguistic isolation where no one over the age of 14 in a household speaks English well. This situation forces students to serve as interpreters for their families which may cause additional undue stress and anxiety.
- Being financially able to afford an education as 1 in 2 Asian Americans are born into poverty, and many Asian American families identify as “working poor.” These financial barriers create another challenge for students to achieve access to higher education, as their families encourage them to take on added responsibilities at home, are asked to help to support the family financially, care for younger siblings, find employment instead of apply to college, or attend a nearby college close to home.

Concerned about their futures, the experiences of Asian American youth have emphasized the pervasiveness of these issues. Youth from our leadership program, Asian American Student Advocacy Project (ASAP) shared:

“Like me, many Asian Pacific American students come from immigrant families. My parents have never been to college and they are new to the American education system. They also lack the ability to speak English, which means I have to deal with the college process by myself.”

“My parents always put a lot of pressure on me to do well in school, and think that getting A’s means I will succeed. Unlike my siblings who set the bar really high, I am a mediocre student and with their guidance they helped me understand that develop leadership skills and joining extracurricular activities to explore my interests are just as important as academics. I wish everyone had access to role models that can help direct and support so that everyone is given opportunities to develop leadership and explore career aspirations.”

“Many parents work long hours to take care of me and my brother and think that making money will help us for the future. I cannot talk to them about my problems and wish that schools would take more time to help us solve our problems in life, and not just think about our report cards because many students have a lot of life pressures and don’t know what to do. “

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Barriers to college and career readiness are inherent for all students, but the challenges faced by the most vulnerable youth in the Asian Pacific American community make academic success even more difficult. Most discussion regarding college and career readiness relies heavily on academic preparedness, and many education reform initiatives like the common core standards were developed to address this issue. In addition, the New York City Department of Education’s (DOE) report card indicates that benchmarks for college and career readiness are measured by primarily focusing on student test scores. While there is a high correlation between test scores and academic ability to a student’s level of college and career readiness, we believe that a more holistic approach must be taken.

College and career readiness cannot only focus on academic factors to success, but must also include nonacademic factors and develop the social skills of our youth. We must ensure our youth are provided with the skills and abilities needed to become responsible, well-adjusted, civically engaged, citizens. Thus, college and career readiness must also include fostering the development of leadership, providing youth with opportunities for career exploration and developing vital life skills and abilities. To support our students and ensure they are adequately prepared for their futures, we encourage the NY Education Reform Commission to consider the following measures for middle school and high school education reform:

- **Collaboration: Incentivize school and community based organization (CBO) partnerships that help create a college-going culture.** By creating partnerships with CBOs, schools can build their capacity to adequately address student needs and provide additional support services that prepare youth to be college

and career ready. CBOs can provide schools with access to valuable, culturally specific services and resources to help better engage students academically, socially and emotionally.

- To support these collaborations and ensure services provided are culturally competent and language accessible, RFP's seeking services should establish criteria in the scoring that set aside points for organizations to demonstrate their ability to provide culturally competent and language accessible services.
- To strengthen communication between school and CBO, an integrated and shared database should be developed to ensure there is a shared understanding of student and family needs.
- To ensure a strong partnership, there must be a designated liaison in a leadership position that is solely responsible for maintaining the school-CBO collaboration.
- **Offer increased services to at-risk students that promote a college-going culture within the school.** Providing additional support services can ensure that all high school students are on track to graduate and are adequately prepared for their future. These services should be provided in a cultural competent manner and address the following:
  - Provide knowledge about the education system and developing a standardized checklist outlining requirements students must meet by grade level. For many families the education system is complicated, and they are unsure of the process of applying to schools, services available, and the requirements needed to graduate and continue education. By understanding how the system works, families will be better equipped to navigate the system and ensure students are getting the support they deserve. A helpful model is California's "A through G" requirements that ensures families know what is required of students in order for students to gain entrance into post-secondary education.
  - Encourage the development of life-skills to prepare youth for the future (such as time management, conflict resolution, college and career counseling)
  - Financial planning and literacy that helps youth learn about opening up bank accounts, managing money, and helping families navigate the financial aid process and plan for college expenses.
  - Implement college awareness workshops beginning freshman year that provide additional guidance and make explicit benchmarks and outcomes they should be achieving at each grade level. In addition, schools should offer and organize school-wide college fairs and trips providing students with opportunities to explore their interests and be more informed of their options. With early awareness students are better equipped to make decisions and develop a roadmap for success.
- **Develop guidance programs that integrate college and career advising with general guidance counseling services.** It is never too early to start planning, thus such services should begin in middle school and help to ensure students are on track to graduate, and provide opportunity for youth to develop realistic goals for the future. In addition, the role of school guidance should be better integrated into the overall college and career readiness initiatives within high schools. To increase capacity, distributive guidance could be helpful in supporting a student's path to college. It is necessary for all school staff, administration, teachers and counselors to collaborate with each other in order to advance college and career readiness in our schools.
- **Develop standards to measure social and emotional development of our youth.** In addition to holding schools responsible for measure such as test scores, graduation rates, and attendance, schools should also be responsible for social emotional standards. This accountability will force schools to address the nonacademic factors vital for college and career readiness and realize the importance of partnerships. Models of these standards have been developed by Partnership for After School Education, The After School Corporation, and New Visions.
- **Additional Supports for First Generation Students: Develop experiential learning programs targeting middle and high school youth and parent.** Programs should: 1.) build leadership skills, 2.) engage both students and parents in navigating and understanding the education system, and 3.) encourages students and parents to become active agents within their schools and their community. There are many models that demonstrate the power experiential learning can have upon youth and parents, such models include: CACF's college and career readiness collaborative Project Collegebound, New York State Youth Leadership Council, Urban Youth Collaborative, and Child Welfare Organizing Project.
  - Particularly for youth, programs should provide a space where students can build their confidence, participation in school (attendance, public speaking, identifying personal narrative for college essays, etc), and civic engagement. The focus of these leadership programs should be geared

towards college readiness by providing youth with vital skills of critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, writing, responsibility, and teamwork. Such programs not only build individual leadership and confidence in abilities, but can also foster positive identity development, and can increase knowledge and access to college information. By providing meaningful and empowering opportunities to youth, programs can increase student resiliency, and increase student engagement in academics and put them on the path to being college and career ready.

- Parent engagement is a vital component in the success of youth, and parents are often difficult to engage. Developing a parent leadership program can encourage and provide new ways parents can be involved in schools and support their child's education. Such a program can offer a safe space for parents to enter into their child's school, where they feel the voice can be heard and their needs addressed. For immigrant parents, engaging with schools can be intimidating and uncomfortable setting. By finding meaningful ways to engage parents (preferably in their own language), schools can begin to build a foundation where parents are more likely to support and attend school events, and provide their children with more guidance.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide information about the challenges facing at-risk Asian Pacific American Students regarding successful completion of high school, and ensuring are youth are college and career ready.