Supporting Southeast Asian American Family and Community Engagement for Educational Success

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Abstract

Over the past 40 years, the U.S. has accepted over 2.5 million refugee and immigrants from Southeast Asian (SEA) countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Unfortunately after 4 decades of resettlement and assimilation, the SEA community has the lowest levels of educational attainment when compared to other Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. Only 34.3% of Laotian, 38.5% of Cambodian, and 39.6% of Hmong adults over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent. Moreover, 65.8% of Cambodian, 66.5% of Laotian, 63.2% of Hmong, and 51.1% of Vietnamese Americans have not attended college (SEARAC, 2011).

Background

Research has long linked parental involvement and student engagement, indicating that a high level of parent involvement significantly increases student engagement (Epstein, 2011; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). However, the reality of how schools engage with parents of different racial and ethnic groups is varied and often complicated. Southeast Asian parents often are misperceived as not caring enough to get involved with their children's schools. School administrators and district leaders often struggle with how to fully engage SEA parents in school activities. Many scholars and practitioners agree that collaboration and partnerships are necessary in order to tackle school engagement. The challenge for policy makers is how to integrate culturally relevant strategies with research-based knowledge about Southeast Asian communities into school programs and policies. This policy brief analyzes challenges and barriers that Southeast Asian children and families face with U.S. school systems. It provides

concrete recommendations for school administrators and district leaders to address SEA student issues and ensures that SEA parents' voices are valued and included in decision-making.

What We Know

- Southeast Asian refugee and immigrants can be found in all 50 United States.
- Among the 4.4 million English language learners, Chinese and Vietnamese are number 2 and 3 behind Spanish as the primary language spoken at home.
- One in 3 Laotians, one in 4 Cambodians, and one in 4 Hmong adults over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)
- One in 6 Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong have not attended college compared to one in 2 Vietnamese who have not attended college (American Community Survey 2006-2008).
- Many teachers and administrators lack specific knowledge of Southeast Asian cultures.
- Many SEA community members had interrupted schooling experiences in Southeast Asia due to the civil wars occurring in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.
- Southeast Asian youth cite their parents as #1 motivating factor for them to do well in school (Uy, 2011).

- **Policy Recommendations:**
- Collaborate with community-based organizations that work with SEA community members to provide professional development to school staff and administrators on how to develop culturally responsive strategies in working with these families.
- Create a SEA advisory committee that can give school staff and administrators' feedback on how to develop meaningful relationships with SEA parents and families.
- Increase the availability of translators and translated materials in Southeast Asian languages.
- Develop programs that help SEA parents and community members become more familiar with U.S. school systems and that encourage and train them to take on leadership roles within the school district.

Southeast Asian Demographics and Characteristics

Now totaling more than 2.5 million, Southeast Asian Americans can be found in all 50 U.S. states (see Table 1 for ethnic breakdown of each SEA group). Due to the combined efforts of U.S. refugee policy and voluntary secondary migration (i.e., Southeast Asian families moved from their first resettlement city to another city that offered more job opportunities and social services), the seven states where the most Southeast Asians now reside are California, Texas, Minnesota, Washington, Massachusetts, Florida, and Pennsylvania (SEARAC, 2011).

Once resettled in the U.S., the Southeast Asian community began to struggle with how to adapt to their new home. Without English language proficiency, Southeast Asian adults had difficulty finding jobs, asking for public assistance, and fully supporting their families. In fact, the Southeast Asian community has a dramatically high proportion of people who are linguistically isolated. According to the U.S. Census, a "linguistically isolated" household is one in which no member more than 14 years old (1) speaks English or (2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English "very well." Of the 9% of the U.S. population who are linguistically isolated, Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians are three times (39%, 38%, and 38%, respectively) more likely to be linguistically isolated, and Vietnamese are five times (52%) more likely to be linguistically isolated (SEARAC, 2011). Moreover, 77% of Cambodian Americans, 89% of Hmong Americans, 78% of Laotian Americans, and 85% of Vietnamese Americans age five and over speak a language other than English in their homes, compared to 21% of the total U.S. population. Unfortunately, this means that many Southeast Asian students come from homes where their family members cannot provide educational support, such as helping with homework and teaching college and career readiness skills. Two main factors contribute to this linguistic isolation: prior educational experiences in Southeast Asia and the development of ethnic enclaves in the U.S.

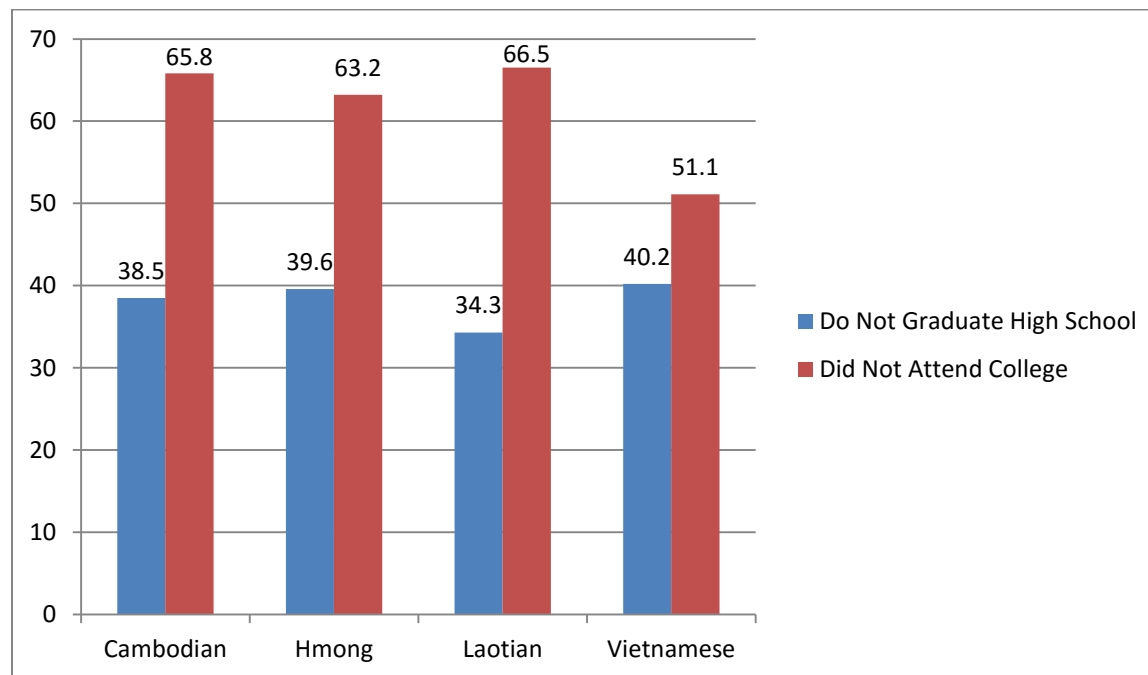**Table 1: Southeast Asian Refugee and Immigrant Populations in the US**

Country of Origin	Estimated Populations
Cambodian/Khmer	276,667
Hmong	260,073
Laotian	232,130
Vietnamese	1,737,433
Total U.S.	2,506,303

(SEARAC, 2011)

The demographic profile of SEA children is similar to other low-income immigrant and minority sub-groups. Vietnamese children account for the third largest English language learner groups in U.S. schools. For SEA children under the age of 18 years old, it is estimated that 26% Cambodian, 34% Hmong, 21% Laotian, and 16% Vietnamese live in poverty. SEA children also have a large percentage of parents who are foreign-born people (i.e., more than 50%). In other words, at least one of every two SEA parents was born in Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam.

Due to this background, as Figure 1 shows, SEA community members have a low educational attainment (SEARAC, 2011).

Figure 1. SEA Community Educational Level

(SEARAC, 2011)

Southeast Asians Experience with Education

Many Southeast Asian refugees who entered the United States in the early 1980s had little to no formal education and limited literacy skills in their native language (Weinberg, 1997; Yang, 1981). Prior to the civil wars in Southeast Asia, the education system varied by country, geographic region, and gender (Collignon, Men, & Tan, 2001). For example, formal schooling for most villagers in Laos and Cambodia occurred in temples, where they learned to read and write using Buddhist doctrines (Collignon et al., 2001; Chhim, 1981; Luangpraseut, 1989). As a former colony of France, Vietnam had based its schooling on the French education system. However, comprehensive schooling was not available in most rural villages. Several villages often shared one teacher, and many students only attended school for six years at most. Boys were encouraged to pursue educational opportunities, while girls were kept at home to help with domestic duties (Luangpraseut, 1989). Most Southeast Asian educators relied on a pedagogy that centered around rote memorization, repetition, and oral fluency (Collignon, 1994; Thuy, 1976; Yang, 1981.) During the civil wars, the educational opportunities were even more limited, as schools were bombed in Laos and a whole class of educators was killed in Cambodia (Te, Walker-Moffat, & First, 1997). Thus, as a result of the wars in Southeast Asia, generations of students lost the opportunity to go to school because of a lack of human resources and physical infrastructure.

When the U.S. opened its doors to these refugees in an attempt to keep promises made to their supporters during the civil wars (Robinson, 1998), Southeast Asian refugees who were fleeing the political persecution, "re-education camps," famine, torture, and displacement that stemmed from the Vietnam War, the Cambodian "Killing Fields," and the secret bombings of Laos saw the U.S. as a safe haven. In their attempts to escape, many families were split up, and

some family members died along the way. The "boat people" often fell victim to Thai pirates, who attacked and abused the men and raped the women. Some children died of malnutrition (Rumbaut, 2000).

Some scholars argue that many Southeast Asian adults have suffered significant political persecution and war-related trauma that compromise their ability to parent effectively (Garcia Coll, Akiba, Palacios, Bailey, Sliver, DiMartino, et al., 2002; Han, 2006). Furthermore, some Cambodian children who lived under the Khmer Rouge were taught to see their parents as powerless and voiceless against higher authority (Te et al., 1997). These factors often have long-term implications for the familial dynamics and interactions in these people's current homes (Sack, Kinzie, Angell, Clarke, & Ben, 1988).

Many of these Southeast Asian refugees who suffered the lack of and/or interrupted schooling entered the U.S. without a strong literacy foundation in their primary language and also struggled with learning English. Without a strong first or second language, many Southeast Asians had to rely on others to help them with simple life tasks. Studies have shown that first-language development has a significant impact on the development of second-language skills (Short, Vogt, & Echevarria, 2008). Scholars have emphasized the importance of a strong first language in helping students learn English (August & Shanahan, 2006), and note that people who have a strong foundation in their first language become more proficient in English and at a quicker rate. Therefore, parents who lack a strong educational background and literacy skills are hard pressed to offer concrete help to their children. School administrators and district leaders need to consider this fact when creating programs to support their SEA students.

Current View of Parental Involvement

Despite over four decades of parental involvement research, no clear definition or measures of parental involvement exist (Kakli, 2010). Many scholars have documented a list of obstacles that hinder families and schools from working together on behalf of students and schools (Henderson, Johnson, & Mapp, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1997). They highlight educators' unwillingness or inability to work with parents (Olivos, 2006), linguistic differences (Zentella, 2005), and schools' lack of strategies to involve families in setting academic goals and expectations (Miretzky, 2004). U.S. school systems have operated under a traditional view of parental involvement, whereby parents play an accommodating role in promoting school goals (Schutz, 2006).

One scholar who has dominated the parental involvement literature is Joyce Epstein. Epstein's (2011) theory of overlapping spheres of influence identifies schools, families, and communities as major institutions that socialize and educate children. A central principle is that certain goals, such as academic success, are of interest to each of these institutions and are best achieved through cooperative action and support. She identifies six types of parental involvement, which include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community members (Epstein, Sanders, Salinas, Simon, VanVoorhis, & Jansorn, 2002). Her first five categories focus solely on parents and collaborating with community members was added only recently, after some research (Schutz, 2006). This middle-class model of parental involvement defines activities that involve parents in supporting school interests.

U.S. schools value parental involvement as a means to promote a child's development, sense of competence, and understanding of the world (Coleman, 1988; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns,

1998). This means that schools encourage involvement by helping parents build home conditions that encourage learning, helping them understand communications from the schools, encouraging them to become productive volunteers at school and to share responsibility for their children's education in learning activities at home that are related to the curriculum, and by including parents' voices in decisions that affect the school and their children (Epstein, 2011). However, the locus of control remains with the school, which sets the priorities.

Epstein's framework lacks an analysis of the power dynamics that exist between parents and schools (Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Schutz, 2006). In some situations, particularly in low-income immigrant and minority communities, parents do not know their rights or responsibilities in terms of their children's education. In fact, Epstein's framework has no discussion of differing cultures or of accommodating the growing diversity of students and families. There is an underlying assumption in her work that there are neither cultural conflicts nor conflicting interests between schools and families. Many Southeast Asian parents living in economically depressed communities would find it difficult to fit into Epstein's parental involvement framework. For example, in some SEA families, the children may have more power due to their English language proficiency. SEA parents would often rely on their children to translate for them on household matters (i.e., utilities issues, doctors appointments, and employment questions) resulting in a sense of powerlessness. However in Epstein's framework and in the minds of many school administrators and district leaders, it is the parents who should have the power and sense of agency to act on their children's behalf.

Despite having high expectation of parental involvement, many educators currently view immigrant and minority parents as lacking key parenting skills and knowledge that enables them to help their children (Schutz, 2006). Past research has found that teachers often have deficit views of these parents and others from economically depressed communities (Anyon, 1997; Cibulka, 1996; Lott, 2001; Miller, 1999; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). While these deficit views are evident in current scholarship examining Black and Latino parents (Warren et al., 2009), it is important to note that Southeast Asian families are often found in similar urban communities and encounter similar challenges.

In a seminal comparative study of disparities in academic engagement between Southeast Asian American, African American/Black, Mexican American/Mexican, and White high school youth, fewer than half of Southeast Asian parents reported frequent discussions about school expectations with their children, compared to two-thirds of Mexican parents and three-fourths of Black and White parents (Oseguera, Conchas, & Mosqueda, 2011). Among the four racial groups, Southeast Asians are the least likely to report having regular discussions about high school or their children's post-secondary plans; least likely to participate in family school interactions and school events; and have the lowest rate of PTA membership, nearly half that of Black and White parents. Forty percent of Southeast Asian parents perform at least one parental involvement activity, compared to 50% of Mexicans and 60% of Black and White parents.

Oseguera, Conchas, and Mosqueda (2011) argue that relationships that result in opportunities for families to realize social capital—that is, the social networks and connections families can provide to support their children's educational and career aspirations—can also be created by family-school interactions. In all measures, Southeast Asian parents are somewhat less likely than Mexican parents and significantly less likely than their Black or White peers to participate in school events. Both Southeast Asians and Mexicans seem to be the least likely to be able to capitalize on potential social capital advantages. Their rate of PTA membership, attendance at PTA-sponsored activities, and volunteering at school is nearly half the rate of

White and Black families. And yet, Southeast Asian parents tend to have higher educational expectations of their children than other parents in this study. By most measures, Southeast Asian students have access to fewer preconditions (i.e., circumstances in students' environment) for the realization of familial social capital than Mexican, Black, or White students, when these opportunities are measured as the frequency of interactions between parents and children, parents and school, and parents and other children's parents.

With their lack of familiarity and experience with U.S. school systems, it is no wonder that Southeast Asian parents feel less prepared to help their children academically (Adler, 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Southeast Asian parents who view the teachers as their children's primary educators view their roles primarily as caretakers. In fact, like other immigrants, Southeast Asian parents consider providing moral support and motivation the parents' responsibility (Auerbach, 2007; Son, 2010; Uy, 2011). With this conception of parenting priorities, school administrators and district leaders need to look for alternative means to connect families with schools.

Alternative Conceptions of Family and Community Engagement

In recent years, community-based organizations have become engaged in educational reform generally, and school, family, and community partnerships specifically. Founded on the community control efforts of the late 1960s, family members in impoverished communities were frustrated with the lack of quality education their children were receiving from schools and with the lack of responsiveness and accountability of school bureaucracies (Warren, 2005). For example, some community-based groups, as "outside" organizations, have mobilized families and communities to confront educational bureaucracies and influence specific educational policies and practices (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002; Hong, 2011; Jehl, Blank, & McCloud, 2001; Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001; Warren, 2001).

Using a collaborative approach to bridge the power gap between parents and schools, some community-based groups have facilitated a movement toward the partnership model. With the common goal of helping their children, these organizations have built families' capacity to work with individual schools through parent organizing, leadership development, and providing direct support and information to the families (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Hong, 2011; Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2005). The key to the success of such partnerships is the willingness of schools to collaborate with families and community groups to achieve common goals. When such willingness exists, community groups have been successful in increasing family involvement and in creating more effective and responsive schools as part of a broader goal of community development (Warren, 2005; Schutz 2006).

Collignon, Men, and Tan (2001) propose that engaging Southeast Asians through community-based organizations is possible and that it has a positive influence on their children's academic engagement. They argue that community-based organizations are "uniquely positioned to lead in brokering a relationship between the home and school" (p. 28). Their study demonstrated the capacity of Southeast Asian community-based organizations to break down barriers between home and school. The study was able to document their work on the Career Ladder Program for Southeast Asian adults interested in entering the teaching field and the Summer Academy, a summer school for the Southeast Asian youth. Focus group data revealed that Southeast Asian parents value the educational opportunities provided in the U.S. but are confused by the parental expectations that are imposed by the schools, especially since they are not familiar with U.S. schools. They are also concerned with the lack of bicultural and bilingual

school staff members who could understand the realities of their lives and help bridge cultural differences. They particularly wanted to know how to address truancy issues and how to voice their concerns to school staffs.

The community-based organization involved in the study had multiple partnerships with local, state, and higher education institutions. Through their collaborations, the community-based organization was able to make significant progress in engaging both the school officials and the Southeast Asian communities. The most notable benchmarks were the creation of the Southeast Asian Advisory Council, which meets regularly with the superintendent, having Southeast Asian representatives on working committees within the school districts, increasing the number of Southeast Asian credentialed teachers hired by the school district, enrolling at least 30 Southeast Asian teacher candidates in teacher education programs, building a "Family and Community Partnerships" component into the district plans, and securing continual funding of the Summer Academy.

There currently are many community-based organizations engaged in collaborations between school districts and Southeast Asian families (SEARAC, 2004). The Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC), a national advocacy group based in Washington D.C., works with strong grassroots community-based organizations at the local level to advocate for policy changes and support of Southeast Asian children and communities. Table 2 details SEA community-based organizations involved in the Southeast Asian American Action and Visibility in Education (SAVE) project. The SAVE program was created specifically to target education policy and reform. It combines capacity-building, organizing, advocacy, and action-oriented research to connect the real experiences of Southeast Asian students to the conversations of other AAPI organizations and civil rights organizations so that they can move policy at the local, state, and federal levels (Dinh, 2012).

Table 2. SEA Community-based Organizations Involved in SAVE Project

Community-based Organization	SEA Population	Family & Community Engagement Activities
Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia	Cambodian	• Parent workshops through the Parent Enrichment Program • Implementing Common Core State Standards with Philadelphia School District • Disaggregating SEA Data
Hmong Women's Heritage Association	Hmong	• Capacity-building of Hmong parents and children around self-efficacy • Implementing Common Core State Standards with Sacramento School District
Stone Soup/Fresno	Hmong	• Implementing Common Core State Standards with Fresno School District • Disaggregating SEA Data
Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans	Vietnamese	• Implementing language access campaign with the Recovery School District in New Orleans, LA

Conclusions

With current policy moving toward evaluating educators on how effectively they engage families and communities, reaching out to community-based organizations may be a promising practice. Working with community-based organizations, teachers, school administrators, and district leaders can authentically engage the Southeast Asian community in a culturally relevant manner. Recommendations for policy and practice include:

1.   Collaborate with community-based organizations that work with SEA community members to provide professional development to school staff and administrators on how to develop culturally responsive strategies in working with these families

School administrators and staff should identify current community-based organizations within their school districts that partner with the Southeast Asian community. On its website, SEARAC offers a directory of mutual-assistance associations that service Southeast Asian communities nationally (http://www.searac.org/maa). This directory of Southeast Asian American community-based organizations is the most comprehensive guide to Southeast Asian American grassroots organizations yet produced. The directory includes contact and programmatic information for 180 community-based organizations managed primarily by and for Americans with roots in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam—communities that include more than two million resettled refugees, children of refugees, immigrants, and native-born Americans. The mutual-assistance associations listed in the directory provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services for communities nationwide, and present unparalleled outreach opportunities for public agencies, funders, and others wishing to reach out to Americans from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Culturally responsive strategies should include intergenerational projects, such as community gardens and intergenerational dialogue to promote connections across generations.

2.   Create a SEA advisory committee that can give school staff and administrators' feedback on how to develop meaningful relationships with SEA parents and families

Having a Southeast Asian advisory committee will allow school staff and administrators to draw on the social capital of these community members. They can help produce ideas for outreach and provide the cultural understanding of Southeast Asian parents and families.

3.   Increase the availability of translators and translated materials in Southeast Asian languages.

Language access is an important tool in engaging SEA families and community members. National statistics demonstrates that Hmong and Vietnamese are the second and third largest English language learners in U.S. schools. Knowing that the majority of SEA families have limited English proficiency, school districts need to offer both written and oral translation of school materials in Hmong, Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese.

4.   Develop programs to help SEA parents and community members become more familiar with U.S. school systems and that encourage and train them to take on leadership roles within the school district

Many SEA parents are not familiar with U.S. school systems. In order to engage SEA parents and community members, they need to understand the various roles and functions that exist in the school system. They also need to know how to meaningfully contribute and advocate for their children. SEA parents cannot do this without proper training and support.

While the recommendations offered above can help increase the engagement of SEA parents and community-members, a major barrier to utilizing the assets within the community is the disconnect between the SEA families and the schools. Increased focus should be given to bridging these two disparate communities by increasing language access and communication. Community-based organizations are primed to do this work but they will need cooperating partners and funding sources to do so.

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