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## Appendix D: Focus Group Summary of the Union of Vietnamese Student Associations of Southern California

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## **Southeast Asian American Education 35 Years After Initial Resettlement: Research Report and Policy Recommendations**

*Conference Report of the National Association for the Education and  
Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans*

### **APPENDIX D**

#### **Focus Group Summary of the Union of Vietnamese Student Associations of Southern California**

**Phong Ly**

*Union of Vietnamese Student Associations of Southern California*

#### **Southeast Asian Student Education (K-12): Access, Assessment, and Accountability**

When it comes to liking school or not, for Southeast Asians, the factors seem to be diversity on campus, the availability of clubs and sports, flexibility in class choices and tolerance for others. The greater the values of these factors, the more that the student likes school, in any level from k-12. Other factors involve the social environment surrounding the student such as whether the student is exposed to strong cliques or whether he/she found a niche that he/she can identify with. The key factor seems to be whether the student finds his/her community on campus and has a sense of belonging.

In addition to finding a sense of community, Southeast Asian students are sometime treated differently due to either their perceived or actual intelligence. In some cases, other student groups would try to cheat on their test from their fellow Asian students. The stereotypical image of Southeast Asian students is smart in math, science and they play badminton, tennis. Many times these stereotypes are used to generalize Asian Americans without any knowledge of how Southeast Asians are different. Vietnamese American students are frequently approached with the question whether they are Chinese and if they can say certain phrases in Chinese.



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In my discussion group, many Vietnamese American students felt that their peers from the same ethnicity are extremely competitive among each other. They felt that friends were turning on each other to get ahead due to their competitiveness. While the reason for this behavior is not know, a potential reason is the tremendous pressures that Vietnamese American students get from their parents to do well in school, and by well, they meant straight A.

When asked to evaluate the importance of having Southeast Asian teachers/administrators on campus, many students in my discussion group felt that while it is not necessary to have Southeast Asian teachers/administrators, it does help students relate better to their teachers/administrators and their education. When the teachers/administrators are not Southeast Asian, it is important that they are educated about Southeast Asian culture, heritage, as well as stereotypes to help prevent unequal treatment of students by their peers or other teachers.

In regard to English language learners (ELL) or limited English proficient (LEP) students, there was only a handful including myself. For us, our struggles included not understanding lessons in class and instructional materials as well as not able to effectively communicate with classroom teacher. Often time we were either pulled out of class or moved to the back of the classroom to meet with special language aide. I believe that ELL and LEP students should be given opportunities to practice their language speaking skill with native English speakers because as we all know, practice makes perfect.

For all students, extracurricular classes present an exciting opportunity to learn something outside of the set instructional curriculum. However, elective and extracurricular classes do not receive the same attention and priority as traditional classes because schools often time focused too much on the basics and how to improve test scores and not on the learning experience of students. This is especially true for low performing schools across the state.

While test scores are important, there was no consensus among my discussion group as to whether test scores alone should determine important decisions such as promotion, graduation, college admission, etc. Some felt that test scores are important benchmarks to keep teachers accountable to students' learning while others felt that they are a waste of learning time and do not measure the ability of the students. Despite the disagreement, everyone agreed that they have known Southeast Asian students dropping out because of state tests. One student mentioned that he knows a case of 300 freshmen dropped out because of standardized tests. Some admit that a number of students drop out of school due to family and personal matters. For those students, there should be continuation high school offered to them to earn their GED.

### **Southeast Asian Language and Culture Programs**

It has been three and a half decade since the Southeast Asian communities began in the United States. Many students, especially the Vietnamese Americans in my group felt that they have been able to retain some aspects of their culture and heritage yet they have not

been able to retain their native language. For most, casual and conversational speaking is the best they can do. Writing and reading skills are virtually non-existing. This has created a communication barrier between the students and their family members, making it difficult to learn about their family history and traditions. At the same time, it prevents the family members from understanding the students and their needs.

Today many Southeast Asian students, particularly the Vietnamese American students in my discussion group recognize their disadvantage of not knowing their native language fluently. However, they believe that offering opportunities to learn Southeast Asian languages through language elective classes in high school would be critically important to the future of Southeast Asian students. Students in my group admitted that growing up, they did not want to attend Vietnamese schools at churches or temples on Sunday, but in retrospect, they probably should have. Today, there are increasingly more companies looking to expand into servicing the Vietnamese American community and they open jobs to individuals with Vietnamese language skill. This has potentially turned Vietnamese Americans from being the ideal candidates for these jobs into less ideal ones.

When asked why not take Vietnamese language class in college after discovering its importance to their personal growth and their career, most Vietnamese American students in my group agreed that Vietnamese language classes in college are immersive. Most students in beginner classes should be in higher levels but they stay in the beginner classes in order to earn easy grade. This effectively reduces the opportunity for other students who want to advance their Vietnamese language. The responsibility of detecting that type of students rests on the shoulders of professors and those administering the placement exam.

### **Southeast Asian American Higher Education Access and Opportunities**

In regard to higher education access, many students today agree that financial matters are among their top concerns. These matters range from the lack of financial aid and scholarship to having to work 1 or more jobs while pursuing higher education degree due to lack of family financial support or ineligibility for aids. On top of that, college tuitions have been continuing to rise due to inadequate state funding and other factors.

Beyond financial matters, students also find access to higher education a difficult path to find from the days in high school. College requirements such as the A-G requirement, college application, standardized tests, personal statement, and others are not equally clear to all students from all socio-economic background. Particularly, many Southeast Asian students lack the parental support in this area because their parents simply do not understand these complicated steps, left alone guiding the students. Some parents even have mental health issues resulted from the conflicts in Indochina that have a significant impact on the students when they have to take care of their parents' mental health on top of school. In addition, Southeast Asian parents often place tremendous pressure on their children to succeed in schools and in life. As a result, students feel that they must succeed or be looked down on.

To help address the issues relating to higher education access, a policy change recommendation is to provide more funding for low-income areas rather than the higher achieving ones. Since all school students in California and the United States are accountable to certain achievement benchmarks throughout their K-12 education, it makes sense for low-income areas to receive more educational funding than high achieving schools because low-income areas tend to have fewer resources available to the community and to the students than higher income areas. Expecting all students to achieve the same educational standards and outcome when not all students have equal access to the same resources might not be a realistic expectation and it is a disservice to the idea of no child left behind.

### **Southeast Asian American Communities**

The Southeast Asian Communities are relatively new to the United States with the majority arrived as refugees resulted from the end of the Vietnam War and other conflicts in Indochina. On one hand, Southeast Asians face similar discriminations as other Asian communities such as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. On the other hand, for the majority of Southeast Asians, their socio-economic statuses are far lower than that of those more established and affluent East Asian groups. For K-12 schools in Southern California, Southeast Asian students often face racial tensions with other minority groups such as Latino and Black.

While racial discriminations exist, a more serious concern is how racial prejudice is passed down to students from their parents, purposely or unintentionally. Many of the Vietnamese American college students in my discussion groups, including myself have recalled experiences going through high schools having someone much younger than them from a different ethnic group coming up to them and shout “ching chong, ching chong” or other racial slurs. The first reaction we had was “what’s on earth?”

Ending discrimination begins with education. When parents are educated about racism, they will less likely pass it down to their own children. It is the best tool in preventing hate and promoting diversity, tolerance, and harmony among groups.

Vietnamese Americans as a community has grown tremendously over the last 35 years comparing to other ethnic groups in California and in the nation. Many Vietnamese Americans have become successful businessman, medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. We have also begun to break into the arts and entertainment industry; however, Vietnamese Americans are still needed in many professional fields that currently lack diversity, such as mental health, psychology, nursing, etc.

### About the Author



Phong Ly received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) with a double major in Economic/International Area Studies and International Development Studies, focusing on East and Southeast Asia. While attending UCLA, Phong served as President of the Vietnamese Student Union. He is active in the Vietnamese American community through youth organizations and community activities. He currently serves as President of the Union of Vietnamese Student Associations of Southern California (UVSA), and is also a member of the Phan Boi Chau Youth for Democracy. He has previously served on the Organizing Committee for the 5th International Vietnamese Youth Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and also Chairperson of the 2009 Black April Commemoration Committee in Little Saigon, Orange County. Recently, Phong served as the Chairperson for the 2010 and 2011 Tet Festival in Garden Grove. Phong is also a freelance writer for *Vien Dong*, a Vietnamese daily newspaper in Southern California.