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## [Special Issue on SEA Demographics] Response - K-12 Education: How the American Community Survey Informs our Understanding of the Southeast Asian Community: One Teachers Perspective

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*Special Issue on Southeast Asian American Demographics*

## **Response—K-12 Education: How the American Community Survey Informs our Understanding of the Southeast Asian Community: One Teacher's Perspective**

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The American Community Survey (ACS) is designed to provide the U.S. government with demographic, social, economic, and housing data to inform their decisions on policies, programs, and services to the community. Unlike the national Census data, the ACS is only a subset of the U.S. population. The American Community Survey utilizes three data collection methods: direct mailing, telephone interviews, and house visits. This response essay will talk about the ACS data on the Southeast Asian (SEA) community and its relevance to K-12 education. It will conclude with a discussion about how the ACS can be used to mitigate the challenges that the SEA community faces in education.

The ACS data collected on population, income, educational attainment, and linguistic isolation has significant relevance to K-12 educators. Since their initial refugee resettlement, the Southeast Asian community has made many strides in these areas. When compared to the 2000 Census data, the ACS documents slight to dramatic increases in the Southeast Asian populations. We saw a 20% increase in the Vietnamese population, 15% increase in the Khmer population, 5% increase in the Lao population, and 1% increase in the Hmong population. These various percentage gains can be seen distributed geographically in the Western, Midwestern and Southern states. The population growth of the Southeast Asian community poses new challenges for school systems (i.e., different language needs, different parental expectations, and different cultural norms). The Southeast Asians, along with other Asian and Latino student populations have been increasing in numbers inside the classroom (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). U.S. schools are struggling to serve the educational needs of this rapidly changing and complex student body (Lew, 2004; Orfield, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Irregardless of any student's ethnicity and immigration history, one important mitigating factor on student outcomes is the family's income level. Research has proven that lower socio-economic status has a negative correlation to student achievement (Kolstad & Owings, 1986; Rumberger, 1983; Swanson, 2004). The ACS data highlights the high poverty rate among the Southeast Asians. Compared to the ten percent U.S. poverty rate, some SEA communities (i.e., Hmong and Khmer) have a higher amount of members living in poverty (33% and 19% respectively). The median household incomes for the Hmong and Khmer communities were



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below the national rate of \$46,242. Family income for all Southeast Asian groups fell short of the national average of \$55,832. With the rising costs of living, it is no wonder that a third of the Hmong surveyed are struggling to meet their own needs. When parents are spending more time trying to make ends meet, there is less time to support their children's education.

Yet, the K-12 education system expects full parental support to ensure students' academic success. However, this expectation holds two underlying assumptions of the parents. First, it assumes that the parents themselves are educated and understand the U.S. education system. Second, it assumes that parents speak English fluently. The ACS data on educational attainment and linguistic isolation challenges these assumptions.

To address the first assumption, we refer to the ACS data on SEA adult education attainment statistics. These figures are staggering. While 17% of the American population age 25 years or older hold a Bachelor's degree, only 11% of Khmer, 9% of Laotian, and 8% of Hmong adults have obtained a Bachelor's degree. The Vietnamese adults in this subset population are the only group above the national average at 18%. On the other hand, there are 28% Vietnamese, 36% Laotian, 41% Khmer, and 50% Hmong adults over 25 years or older who have less than a high school education. Yet, when we compare this ACS data to the 2000 Census data, we see significant differences. According to the Census data, 39% of Vietnamese, 60% of Laotians, 64% of Khmer, and 72% of Hmong adults ages 25 years or older have less than a high school education. These statistics highlight the fact that the majority of the Southeast Asian adults do not know how to successfully navigate the education system to help their children. We see this fact reflected in the low high school graduation rate for the SEA K-12 population (i.e., 62% Vietnamese, 51% Lao, 47% Khmer, and 41% Hmong) (Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004).

In addition, as recent refugees, many Southeast Asians have never had a formal education or the ability to read and write in their native language. This means that many parents may not understand the educational system and the expectations that students undergo. Take for example one high school's truancy policy. In Lowell, Massachusetts, a Lowell High School administrator can automatically drop students from their enrollment roster after fifteen consecutive absences (Aung & Yu, 2007). For some parents, a letter notifying them of their child's absence is not a catalyst for concern. Information about attendance and absences are usually discussed in parent school handbooks. Yet, it is not common for a school district to translate the parent handbook into Lao, Khmer, Vietnamese, or Hmong. Thus, one source of information that may increase parents' understanding of school policies and procedures for English-speaking parents is not an option for SEA parents. To further complicate the matter, one could also argue that for some SEA parents who are not literate in their own heritage language, a written translation is not enough to ensure understanding of school policies and expectations.

The second assumption of English language proficiency is dispelled in the linguistic isolation data. Most teachers who teach immigrant children, like the Southeast Asian students, understand the important role language plays in education. The ACS figures show that many Southeast Asian American households are linguistically isolated (i.e., household members 14 years old and over have at least some difficulty with English). All four Southeast Asian communities continue to use their ethnic language at home with their families (i.e., 84% of Vietnamese, 85% of Khmer, 88% of Lao, and 95% of Hmong reported speaking their heritage language). Everyone knows that parent's language proficiency affects their children because parents model semantics, grammar and usage. Consequently, Southeast Asian American students are among the nation's 5.5 million English Language Learners (ELL) students. In fact, following Spanish, the second and third most spoken languages of English language learners are Viet-

name and Hmong. Consequently, limited English proficiency has been shown to affect the educational achievement of students (Cosden, Zimmer, Reyes, & del Rosario Gutierrez, 1995; Glick & White, 2003; Harklau, 1994).

This lack of English language proficiency also hinders parents' communication with school staff. Oftentimes teachers complain about the lack of parental involvement of the Southeast Asian American parents. Yet, how can limited-English proficient parents engage with teachers and school personnel if they cannot understand the language? Parents are not able to discuss or seek assistance for their children's academic needs and skill acquisition. Nor can they provide their children support with their homework, college planning, or career counseling. The lack of bilingual SEA staff and teachers exacerbates this problem as well.

Furthermore, Southeast Asian parents have a cultural expectation that teachers are the best advocates for their children and that they as parents should not interfere in the schooling process. This cultural expectation stems from their own experience in their home countries where a reverence to the teachers as professionals is honored. These parents feel that teachers are more equipped to help their children, especially when they don't know the language or the system. Ironically, while some parents understand the value of a college education, they do not know how to encourage or support their children's pursuit of a higher level of education. For Khmer, Lao and Hmong parents, very few have a Bachelor's degree themselves. Thus, they do not understand the whole educational process from the importance of reading to their children during the elementary years to the effects of high-stakes testing in high school graduation or the college application process. Most importantly, many Southeast Asian parents also do not have the means to fund their children's education.

The challenges that the Southeast Asian community face have not changed over the course of thirty years or even the past five years. There are issues of poverty, low educational attainment, linguistic isolation, and parents' lack of familiarity with the U.S. school system. The American Community Survey data has the task of informing the U.S. Government on how to distribute the more than \$300 billion per year for each community. It is my hope that they will use this information to rectify some of the challenges facing the Southeast Asian community.

Southeast Asian American students need quality education that will serve as a strong foundation to prepare them for success beyond their elementary and secondary school years. In building this foundation, we need to ensure that there is adequate funding allocated toward education programs at the K-12 levels, especially for ELL programs. For example, monies can be allocated to hiring bilingual staff and teachers for school districts that have Southeast Asian American students. Federal and state resources need to be allocated to strongly support the certification and training of teachers of ELL students. There must be more certified teachers who are trained to teach ELLs. Currently, only 84% of the states offer English as a Second Language (ESL) certification or endorsement, and only 50% of the states offer bilingual/dual language certification or endorsement. The standards of a "high quality teacher" under Title II of No Child Left Behind must be raised to include cultural competency skills and bilingual skills for those working with ELL students. Furthermore, there should be more investment in proper translation services so that materials and programs are more accessible and practical for Southeast Asian American students, their parents and communities.

We must also ensure that Southeast Asian American students are able to access resources outside of the classroom through community-based collaborations and partnerships. School systems cannot solve the problems alone. Community-based organizations can play a role in the holistic education of SEA students by providing student support and services including being a

resource for their parents to become more engaged in their child's learning. Along with allies, it was the Southeast Asian community leaders and members who helped the U.S. Government resettle the first wave of refugees in the 1970s and established mutual assistance associations to serve this community. And it will be with the help of Southeast Asian Americans that the U.S. Government can provide the educational foundation that ensures academic achievement. The millions of Southeast Asian American students, along with all other all students, are our future and we must wholeheartedly invest in their academic and professional success.

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### **About the Author**

Phitsamay Sychitkokhong Uy is a research associate at the Education Development Center. With eleven years of teaching experience, she taught as an elementary teacher, literacy specialist, teacher mentor, and Asian American Studies instructor. Phitsamay also has experience as a diversity trainer, curriculum developer, and education consultant. She is currently working on her dissertation at Harvard University investigating the dropout rates of Southeast Asian American students. Phitsamay serves as the board chair of the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC), board member of Nisei Student Relocation Commemorative Fund (NSRC), and the New England Coordinator of the Legacies of War project.



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