Growing Up American

Children of immigrant families must confront the challenges of first understanding, and then negotiating, their place in American society. As generations of immigrants before, they often must deal with racial and economic prejudice as they struggle to create a new identity for themselves—rooted in their ancestry, but at the same time, seeking all the opportunity and promise this country has to offer. The articles in this section explore what it means to “grow up American” today from three different perspectives: a Latino perspective, a Southeast Asian perspective, and an economically-disadvantaged perspective.

In the first article, Pérez discusses the importance of education, health, and economic status in efforts to promote the future productivity and well-being of the growing numbers of Latino children in this country. She notes that the nation’s economic and social prosperity will depend on how well Latino children are prepared to lead the country forward.

In the second article, Yang points out that while as a group, Asian Americans are doing quite well, children whose ancestors are from Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) continue to struggle with limited English skills, discrimination, miscommunication, and feelings of alienation. She urges policymakers to recognize that these children need attention and support to overcome their barriers to success.

In the third article, Edelman and Jones describe the growing gap between children who are rich and poor, and between children who are black, white, and Latino. They call on society to work collaboratively and strategically to ensure that all children, regardless of their race or ethnicity, have a safe passage to adulthood.

The Latino and Southeast Asian American children of immigrant families are a growing proportion of America’s undereducated and poor. As they are also a growing proportion of America’s workers and taxpayers of tomorrow, helping them to do well in school and achieve economic success should be a top national priority.
Shaping New Possibilities for Latino Children and the Nation’s Future

Sonia M. Pérez

One of the most profound demographic shifts in the United States during the past two decades has been the dramatic increase in the Hispanic population, driven both by high birth rates relative to other racial and ethnic groups, and by immigration. (See the article by Hernandez in this journal issue.) The Hispanic population grew by 58% from 1990 to 2000, and in 2003 became the largest “minority” community in the country with a total of 38.8 million people. Today, about one in eight Americans is of Hispanic origin. Although 70% of Latinos live in five states (California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois), over the past decade the population has grown significantly in other parts of the country, including both the South and the nation’s heartland.

Two characteristics of the Latino population are especially noteworthy. First, Latinos are a young population. More than one-third are under 18 years of age and almost half are under age 25. Both the size of the Latino population and its youthfulness mean that the well-being of the Hispanic community—and especially of Latino children—matters to the future economic and social status of the United States as a whole.

Second, although more than half of Latinos—and 85% of Hispanic children—were born in the United States, recent data from the Urban Institute show that one in ten Latino children lives in a “mixed-status” household in which both immigrant and native-born Latinos reside. Thus, policies and programs that focus on immigrants are likely to have consequences for Hispanic children, whether or not they themselves are immigrants.

Many Latinos—as is true of almost all Americans—have immigrant origins. Yet, as was the case with previous waves of immigrants to this country, the children of Latino immigrants were born in the United States, and their outcomes will profoundly affect America’s future. To this end, the following discussion highlights three areas that are key to promoting the future productivity and well-being of this growing segment of America’s children: education, health, and economic status.

Education

Latinos now represent the second-largest segment of the school-aged population in the United States (after non-Hispanic whites). Latino parents recognize that education is critical to their children’s opportunities in life, yet the portrait of Hispanic education today is decidedly mixed. Compared with other racial/ethnic groups, Latino children are less likely to be enrolled in preschool or to complete high school. Also, many Latino children are not proficient with the English language.

Despite the nation’s recent emphasis on the importance of early childhood education to later academic success, three- and four-year-old Latino children are the least likely of all children to be enrolled in such programs (36%, compared to 64% of black, and 46% of white children in 2000). Similarly, Latino children are the least likely to participate in Head Start. At the other end of the educational pipeline, data show that only about 60% of Latino students are completing high

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school, compared with almost 90% of both white and black students.\textsuperscript{8}

Another educational issue of concern is the fact that the nation’s schools now serve more than five million students who are English language learners (referred to as “limited English proficient,” or LEP, in federal law and regulations),\textsuperscript{9} and nearly 80% of these English language learners speak Spanish as their first language.\textsuperscript{10} Yet there is a dearth of information on the most effective practices to serve these students. In particular, very few large-scale assessments are being developed that are appropriate for English language learners, which is worrisome since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires schools to improve instruction and outcomes for these children as measured primarily through test scores.\textsuperscript{11} More appropriate assessments are especially needed in states where an increasing number of English language learners is a new phenomenon. In the past, such students tended to be concentrated in traditionally Hispanic states, such as California and New York. Increasingly, however, English language learners now are present in many states in the Midwest and Southeast regions of the country. As the NCLB requires all states to help all limited English proficient students meet the same academic benchmarks as their English-proficient peers, those states with new and growing Hispanic populations must learn quickly how to serve the increasing numbers of English language learners in their schools.

\section*{Health}

Young Latinos—who by 2020 are projected to account for one in every five children in the United States—face a number of significant health challenges, including disproportionately high rates of diabetes,\textsuperscript{12} asthma,\textsuperscript{13} HIV/AIDS,\textsuperscript{14} and the highest teen birth rate in the nation.\textsuperscript{15} Many of these concerns could be prevented or more effectively managed given access to quality health care. Unfortunately, myriad barriers—especially the lack of health insurance—often stand between Latinos and their ability to access such care.

For more than a decade, Latino children have been, by far, the group of American children most likely to be uninsured.\textsuperscript{16} In 2001, 24% of Latino children lacked health insurance of any kind, compared to 14% of black and 7% of white children,\textsuperscript{17} in part because, compared to their peers, they are less likely to receive health coverage through their parents’ jobs. In 2001, 41% of Latino children were covered by employment-based insurance, compared to 74% of non-Hispanic white children, and 51% of non-Hispanic black children.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, the major reason for high uninsurance among Latinos is not unemployment, but employment in jobs with low wages and no benefits, in industries such as construction, agriculture, and service. In fact, almost nine in ten uninsured Latinos (87%) are from working families.\textsuperscript{19}

Lack of medical coverage among Latinos also is due in part to current laws that ban immigrants from federally-funded public health programs if they arrived in this country after August 22, 1996. Even when children are citizens themselves, those in immigrant families are much more likely to be uninsured than those in native-born families.\textsuperscript{20} Other barriers to the health system include high costs of health care, a lack of linguistically and culturally competent providers, and inadequate outreach efforts to enroll eligible Latinos in public health programs.

\section*{Economic Status}

Poverty can result in serious consequences. Research has shown that child poverty is associated with poor health, school failure, drug use, and teenage pregnancy, among other social risks. Yet poverty among Latino children has been a serious problem for several decades. In 2002, 29.3% of all poor families nationwide were Latino.\textsuperscript{21} The poverty rate for Latino children reached a high of 40.3% in 1996. Although there has been a notable decline since then, Census data show that in 2002, 28% of Latino children still were poor—almost three times the poverty rate of non-Hispanic white children (9.5%). Compared with other racial/ethnic groups, Latino families are less financially secure across a number of indicators, including unemployment rates, homeownership, and net worth. (See Box 1.)

Latino child poverty is especially troubling because a significant share of poor Latino children live in two-parent families with at least one working parent.\textsuperscript{22} As a result, current efforts to reduce poverty through marriage promotion and increased employment are not likely to be as successful with Latino families as they might be with other racial/ethnic groups.
Box 1

Indicators of Latino Family Economic Status and Security

- **Unemployment and income.** During the fourth quarter of 2002, 7.8% of Latino workers were unemployed, compared to the national unemployment rate of 5.9% during that same period. In 2001, the median income of Hispanic households was $19,651, well below the national average of $27,652.

- **Homeownership.** Census data show that 48.1% of Hispanics are homeowners—a proportion significantly lower than the nation’s overall rate of 68.1%, as well as that of non-Hispanic whites at 74.6%.

- **Financial assets.** Only about 33% of Latinos have basic checking accounts. Moreover, in 1998, the median net worth of white families was $81,700—a staggering 27 times that of Hispanic families, which was a mere $3,000.


The Future

Ensuring the well-being of Latino children should be a national priority. In about ten years, 35% of Hispanics who are children today will be workers and taxpayers. Their educational preparation, their labor, and their productivity will be called upon to keep the economy vibrant and sound. Indeed, the stability and growth of the future economy greatly depend on maximizing the educational and employment outcomes of Latino children.

The economic case is compelling. If Latinos had higher education levels, the positive results would be measurable for all Americans. A study by the RAND Corporation shows that Hispanics who now have a high school education would earn between $400,000 and $500,000 more over their lifetime if they had a bachelor’s degree; and increasing the college completion rate of today’s Hispanic 18-year-olds by as little as three percentage points would increase social insurance payments by $600 million.23 Similarly, a recent analysis finds that raising the educational attainment of Latinos in the California labor force would result in an increase of $79 million in state income tax revenue.24 The potential gains in societal equity, community strength, and social cohesion are equally powerful.

To shape a healthy future for Latino children, the following principles should guide efforts to respond to the disparities that have surfaced from the nation’s demographic shifts:

1. **Focus on facts, not on ideology.** Proposals that restrict immigrants’ access to supports and services have not helped to increase the overall economic security of Hispanic working families. Similarly, the “abstinence only” approaches to teen sex education ignore the research on how to teach Latino youth important messages about taking responsibility for their behaviors and preventing disproportionately high rates of deadly diseases like AIDS. The socioeconomic and health disparities between Latinos and others will not address themselves over time unless concrete steps are taken to design programs and policies relevant to the challenges faced by Latino families.

2. **Go to the source.** Communities “own” problems, but they also “own” solutions. Reversing the pressing and potentially explosive trends for Latinos is not solely a government responsibility. Latino families and adults must play an active role in calling attention to—and taking the lead on—addressing these issues, especially educational preparation. Latino national and community-based organizations, as well as research institutions, bear a special responsibility for providing leadership and expanding efforts to document challenges and advocate responses. At the same time, policymakers and other stakeholders must ensure that there are resources and a receptive environment to facilitate the development of community responses.

3. **Build upon successes.** One of the frustrations for practitioners is the repeated attempts to reinvent the wheel rather than looking to the many examples of effective programs across the country. For example, many schools facing a host of socioeconomic barriers have been demonstrated to be effective for Latino students.25 There are also increasing numbers of Latinos with college degrees and a growing Latino middle class. As communities become larger and more diverse,
stakeholders should seek to learn from, invest in, and expand such successes.

4. **Focus on long-lasting change.** Public policy can often be shortsighted, responding to an issue of the day without regard for long-term implications. As early as 1991, the Census Bureau projected significant Hispanic population growth, yet in the past year, national media reports have reacted to data on population increases with surprise, and some local communities are scrambling to diversify teaching and police forces and other social institutions. The nation must be wiser about planning for demographic changes that will affect the future and about investing resources in areas where they will have the greatest impact. Creating and supporting local leadership in Latino and other communities, and looking to models with records of proven success, are crucial in this regard.

5. **Remove structural roadblocks.** Good ideas in public policy often are limited in their execution. In 1997, Congress passed the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which allocated a total of $48 billion over ten years to expand health insurance coverage for children in poor or near-poor families. Following enactment of SCHIP, the number of uninsured children declined, including the number of uninsured Hispanic children. Nevertheless, the rate of uninsurance among Latino children remains disproportionately high. In 2000, 35% of all uninsured children were Hispanic, even though Hispanic children accounted for only 16.5% of all children. Many Latino families do not realize that their children may be eligible for this government-sponsored program. Further efforts are needed to increase awareness, to expand roles for community-based organizations involved in reducing uninsurance and increasing access, and to improve state agencies’ credibility, access, and long-term commitment to minority communities. Similarly, NCLB contains several important provisions (such as parent involvement strategies) that could help to improve Latino education, but further efforts—and funding—are needed for their implementation.

Four years into the 21st century, demographic changes and increasing racial/ethnic diversity show that society cannot afford to talk about Latinos on the one hand, and the rest of Americans on the other. The nation’s economic and social prosperity will depend on how well Latino children are prepared to lead the country forward. Fortunately, the issues facing Hispanic children are not intractable, and improvements in their educational, health, and economic well-being are easily within the nation’s grasp. All Americans stand to gain from shaping new possibilities for Latino children, as their future is the nation’s future.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau to identify persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, and Spanish descent; they may be of any race.

2. U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000, Summary File 1 (SF1)—100 Percent Data, Table P12. Sex by age (Hispanic or Latino).

3. Data from the 2000 Census show that 59.8% of Latinos were born in the United States. With the addition of naturalized citizens, about 70% of Latinos are citizens. This does not include the 3.8 million residents of Puerto Rico who are U.S. citizens by birth.


5. Polling data show that nearly nine in ten (87%) Latinos consider education a critical component to expanding life opportunities...
for Hispanic children. 2002 AOL Time Warner Foundation/People En Español Joint Hispanic Opinion Tracker Study. Available online at http://www.hispanicprwire.com/print_AOL_Tracker_ENG.html. Also, in a May 2002 poll (“National Hispanic Electorate”) by Bendixen and Associates for the New Democrat Network, almost half of Latinos rated education as their first or second choice as the most important public policy issue for the community.


7. For further discussion of this topic, see the article by Takanishi in this journal issue.

8. For further discussion of this topic, see the article by Fulgini and Hardway in this journal issue.


12. According to the National Council of La Raza, Institute for Hispanic Health, one in ten adult Latinos has diabetes; of particular concern is the increase in the number of young people who are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. Research shows that Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans are two to four times more susceptible to developing diabetes than the general population. More information available online at http://www.nidk.org/opt03-01E.asp?Id=E.

13. Overall, Hispanic children in the United States have a rate of asthma (10.3%) comparable to or lower than that of other peer groups (11.4% and 17.7% for white and black children, respectively). See National Center for Health Statistics. Summary health statistics for U.S. children: National health interview survey. Vital and Health Statistics (March 2004) 10(221):7–8. However, data by ethnic subgroup show that as many as 20.1% of mainland Puerto Rican children have had asthma at some point in their lives, compared to 6.4% of non-Hispanic white and 9.1% of non-Hispanic black children. Evidence also suggests that all Latino children, but especially Puerto Rican children, experience high levels of asthma morbidity. In other words, when they do have asthma, the symptoms these children experience are more likely to be severe and to cause functional impairment, such as missed school days.


15. In 2001, Hispanic females had the highest teenage birth rate in the nation (88 per 1,000 women), compared to 76 per 1,000 for black teenagers, and 31 per 1,000 for non-Hispanic white teens. See Hamilton, B.E., Sutton, P.D., and Ventura, S.J. Revised birth and fertility rates for the 1990s and new rates for Hispanic populations, 2000 and 2001: United States. National vital statistics report, vol. 15, no. 12. Hyattsville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 4, 2003, pp. 15–16. Moreover, while the teen birth rates for other major ethnic groups have dropped by 30% or more over the last decade, the rate for Hispanic teens has dropped by only 13%, with most of that change occurring prior to 1998 and almost no further decrease since that time.


18. See note 17, Census Bureau, 2002.

19. For further discussion of this topic, see the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue.


Southeast Asian American Children: Not the “Model Minority”

KaYing Yang

Although an impressive number of Americans whose ancestors are from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (“Southeast Asian Americans”) have achieved tremendous success in education, a disproportionate number have found it difficult to succeed academically. Yet their difficulties are largely invisible to policymakers, who tend to look only to the aggregate data on Asian Americans—data that suggest that, as one large undifferentiated group, Asian Americans are doing quite well. They are considered to be doing so well, in fact, that they are called the “model minority.” For example, in 2000, 25.2% of Asian Americans aged 25 and over held bachelor’s degrees or higher, compared with 15.5% of Americans overall. In contrast, among the various Southeast Asian American groups, the percentage with bachelor’s degrees ranged from 5.9% to 14.8%—proportions that more closely resemble those of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, than those of Asian Americans in aggregate. (See Figure 1.)

Significant numbers of Southeast Asian Americans now live in the United States. According to the 2000 Census, 1,814,301 people in the United States reported that their heritage was Southeast Asian: 206,052 from Cambodia, 384,513 from Laos (including 186,310 Hmong), and 1,223,736 from Vietnam. Southeast Asian Americans accounted for approximately 15.2% of those reported to have an Asian/Pacific Islander heritage, and 6.4% of the total U.S. population overall.

Given the profound contributions of Southeast Asian Americans to U.S. history, their present community development efforts, and most importantly, their current indications of need, it is essential that decision-makers focus added attention on the education of this particular group of Asian Americans.

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Most Southeast Asian Americans arrived in the United States as refugees after 1975, or are the children of refugees. Parents in these communities endured tremendous hardship for the sake of their children, and for the most part, they promote their sons’ and daughters’ success in school to the full extent of their ability. Yet nearly three decades after the beginning of their refugee flight from Southeast Asia to the United States, many of their children continue to struggle with formal education due to a variety of factors including limited English language skills; discrimination; systematic miscommunication between students, parents, and teachers; and widespread feelings of alienation from mainstream schools. With small infusions of external support to help overcome these barriers, it is likely that the enthusiasm and commitment of Southeast Asian American parents and their children could produce great academic success within a short period of time.

**Limited English Skills**

According to the 1990 Census, a high percentage of Southeast Asian Americans had severe problems with the English language. Figures from the 2000 Census show improvements in this area, but it is clear that a high percentage of Southeast Asian Americans remain “limited English proficient” (LEP). (See Figure 2.) These difficulties endure, in part, because many community members arrived in this country unable to read and write in their native languages, and many suffer from trauma-related illnesses. Also, many people lack the time and energy to participate in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes as a result of their long work hours.

Even Southeast Asian American children who were born in this country often have difficulty with the English language when they first arrive at school. For example, in 1998, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health reported that in 1998, 7,706 Khmer (from Cambodia) and 5,712 Vietnamese students did not speak English as their primary language. In 2000, California public schools reported having 93,908 LEP students who primarily spoke the Southeast Asian languages of Hmong, Khmer, Lao, Mien, and Vietnamese in their homes, 6.2% of the total LEP population in the state.

Efforts to decrease or eliminate assistance directed specifically toward LEP students are troubling for Southeast Asian communities, especially in light of the proliferation of “standards” and “high-stakes testing.” The debate about whether these are useful tools to improve education is complex. Nevertheless, most researchers and practitioners believe that high-stakes testing will have the greatest consequences on minority students, English-language learners, and students with disabilities, and will result in these students being disproportionately retained in grades and denied high-school diplomas. Critics have argued that schools do not expose these students to the knowledge and skills that are necessary to pass the tests. They point out that simply instituting such tests does not address the concern about how to improve learning. Furthermore, research has shown that increased retention increases dropout rates. As a result, high-stakes testing will likely create an increasingly large class of students who are...
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at increased risk of dropout by virtue of having been retained in a grade one or more times. Moreover, such initiatives have the potential to make otherwise well-qualified students who are English-language learners ineligible for graduation and eventual attendance in their only affordable institutions of higher learning: state colleges and universities.

**Systematic Miscommunication between Students, Parents, and Teachers**

Southeast Asian American parents and children often have trouble communicating with each other, and people in both groups often find it difficult to communicate with teachers and school personnel. Consequently, many parents have limited knowledge of, and impact on, their children’s educational development. Lacking the support and guidance they need from their parents, many students rely heavily on advice from their peers. Although their peers may share their challenges, they generally lack the maturity and understanding to provide wise guidance.

Communication gaps between parents, children, and school personnel are more complex than they may first appear. Most obviously, language barriers often keep the groups separate. In addition, as noted above, relatively high percentages of Southeast Asian Americans lack extensive experience with higher education (or formal education of any sort). For this reason, Southeast Asian American parents are often poorly equipped to serve as educational mentors to their children and to communicate with teachers. For example, as described in the article by Fuligni and Hardway in this journal issue, immigrant parents are often unaware of opportunities for college financial aid, and sometimes they are unaware of the specific roles teachers play in our society. Furthermore, students, parents, and teachers often have conflicting communication styles. Teachers generally expect parents to come to them with questions about their children’s educational future. But Southeast Asian American parents often are shy, and therefore reluctant to engage intimately with others. Also, their lack of English skills makes it difficult for them to learn new things. Many suffer from trauma-related illnesses resulting from their experiences of persecution, displacement, and war in Southeast Asia, and some remain more focused on life in Southeast Asia than in the United States. Southeast Asian American students also often have communication styles that contrast with those of their parents and teachers. Many students are not fluent in their native language or unable to speak in ways that their elders consider polite, while at the same time they want their parents to show expressions of affection and encouragement that they have grown accustomed to seeing in their “American” friends. Furthermore, the dress, attitudes, and Americanized assertiveness and individuality of young Southeast Asian Americans can sometimes give others the impression that they are bellicose gang members. Such communication difficulties and negative stereotypes contribute to the impression among some teachers that Southeast Asian American students are poor prospects for academic advancement. These factors also contribute to feelings of powerlessness among some Southeast Asian American families about the ability of their children to achieve academic success. Many Southeast Asian American parents and children also find it difficult to communicate with each other because they have very different conceptions of healthy parent/child relationships. Surrounded by a multi-cultural environment with many perspectives on family values in the United States, some Southeast Asian Americans have become confused about what is “American” and what is “traditional cultural practice.” Young people have adopted more typically American ideas that emphasize the rights of children to make decisions for themselves. These ideas often conflict with parental convictions, brought from Southeast Asia, that parents should be strong authority figures who play a central role in shaping the child’s future. In fact, many parents see their children as their caregivers during retirement and feel it is the child’s responsibility and obligation to carry out this role. This kind of expectation is planted early on, creating a sense of burden that is difficult for a young child to understand within the American context.

Community-based organizations—including mutual assistance associations and other organizations (such as temples and churches)—have been proven to have the ability to provide environments in which Southeast Asian Americans flourish academically, in part by fostering healthy communication between students, parents, and teachers. These organizations provide
supports that help validate the cultural and historical context of Southeast Asian Americans as they adjust to U.S. society. Unfortunately, most communities lack such programs.

**Discrimination**

Policymakers on the state and national levels tend to overlook the specific educational needs and assets of Southeast Asian Americans and to remain under the influence of the “model minority” myth. But at the local level, some educators and school administrators take a different view that is equally damaging and unrealistic—that Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese American students are incapable of first-rate academic achievement. Accounts of teachers telling their students they should not consider going to college are commonplace. Some teachers discourage their Southeast Asian students from taking advanced courses or pursuing scholarship opportunities. Indeed, a study conducted in 2000 by Santa Clara County, California, found that 11.5% of Vietnamese Americans in the sample (the only Southeast Asian Americans studied) felt that teachers discriminated against them. This was the highest for any refugee or immigrant group studied, and was more than twice the percentage for Asian Americans overall (at 5.0%).

Southeast Asian American students are placed in a difficult position. On the one hand, policymakers neglect to acknowledge their academic plight and to give them access to the educational resources and institutional support they need to overcome the barriers to success. On the other hand, many of the people who structure their daily academic environment—teachers, peers, and others—treat them as if they are incapable of succeeding, and in various ways convince them that they should give up on school. Research findings from over a decade ago, focused on Hmong Americans in California, may still hold true for large numbers of Southeast Asian American students. The authors of the study concluded, “The most disturbing finding of our research was that some children have stopped trying to learn and have accepted and internalized their [learning] ‘disabilities’ as their own personal attribute, not as a consequence of historical circumstances and dysfunctional instructional arrangements.”

**Widespread Feelings of Alienation from Mainstream Schools**

Southeast Asian American students often feel alienated from their schools—they feel as if they do not really “belong” in them. In part, this is because not enough of their schools tailor curricula specifically for them, and in part because there are not enough Southeast Asian American teachers and staff in educational institutions. Some schools have begun to address these shortcomings by, for example, giving their students the option of taking Southeast Asian language classes to fulfill foreign language requirements by teaching about Southeast Asian history and culture, and by recruiting more Southeast Asian American teachers and staff.

Courses acknowledging the value of Southeast Asian cultures and languages can help motivate students to succeed. Courses in Southeast Asian studies can also counteract the negative stereotypes teachers often have of their Southeast Asian students. Teachers are more likely to be genuinely growth-encouraging when they hold positive views about their students, and when they understand the challenges Southeast Asian Americans face in historical and cultural context. In addition, non-Southeast Asian American students benefit from courses that enable them to become global citizens who appreciate the historical legacies, cultural contributions, spiritual commitments, and political lessons of Southeast Asia.

Finally, courses in Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American studies can help young people better understand their own lives and the lives of their parents, and thereby assist with intergenerational reconciliation. Because of their trauma-related illnesses and the difficulties they experienced while adjusting to U.S. society, many parents do not teach their children about the challenges they faced to survive in their homelands, arrive in this country, and build better lives for their families. As a result, many children lack gratitude for their parents. They also often lack understanding not only of the depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) many of their parents face from the past, but also of the struggles with discrimination and hardship that families continue to confront in the United States. Learning about the histories and cultures of Southeast Asians in the United States and overseas can help children to feel
compassion and love for their parents and other elders, while developing values and visions of healing and social justice for their communities. (See Box 1.)

Just as many Southeast Asian American students feel alienated from their schools because curricula do not reflect their heritage, many also feel alienated because few schools have sufficient Southeast Asian American representation on staff. Even in California, the state with the largest number of Southeast Asian Americans, policymakers neglect to ensure that Southeast Asian Americans have access to the educational support they need from bilingual staff. For example, one study found that in 1997, California had only 72 certified bilingual Vietnamese teachers for 47,663 Vietnamese-speaking students (ratio: 1:662), 28 certified bilingual Hmong teachers for 31,156 Hmong-speaking students (ratio: 1:1,113), and 5 certified bilingual Khmer teachers for 20,645 Khmer-speaking students (ratio: 1:4,129).22 According to the study’s author, “The fundamental problem is a blatant lack of sensitivity and understanding on the part of schools and teachers concerning the needs of Southeast Asian students.” Others might add that teachers of all ethnic groups are in short supply, and that programs for training Southeast Asian American bilingual teachers are too rare. In all likelihood, all of these factors (and others) contribute to the longstanding shortage.23

It is important that Southeast Asian American students have access to teachers and other staff of their own ethnicity for several reasons. They can understand and negotiate the family, cultural, and personal dynamics of their students in ways that are rare among other teachers. They can also share knowledge of Southeast Asian cultures with their peers, and thereby create school-wide changes. Furthermore, they can provide inspirational examples of academic achievement for their students, many of whom would not otherwise personally know people of their own ethnicity who have graduated from college.24

Recommendations

Policymakers, educators, and community leaders must recognize that Southeast Asian Americans are not part of some fictional “model minority” that succeeds easily in the United States. At the same time, most Southeast Asian Americans, like most other Americans, have deep respect for academic pursuits, and they seek educational advancement with all of the resources available to them. By supporting their commitment and enthusiasm in relatively modest ways, as outlined below, the educational trajectories of Southeast Asian American children could be significantly improved.

1. Disaggregate and disseminate more data. Policymakers, teachers, and other decision-makers need better information on Southeast Asian Americans in education in order to make better-informed decisions. Research institutions and agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau should disaggregate data for particular Southeast Asian American groups, and then release their data in a timely and widely accessible fashion.

2. Promote Southeast Asian American studies, courses, and personnel. Colleges and other educational institutions with significant community representation should integrate Southeast Asian language,
history, and culture components within their main-stream curricula, and train and hire more Southeast Asian American teachers and personnel. By taking these steps, schools can motivate students to succeed, foster better communication with communities and parents, and diminish dangers of discrimination by providing non-Southeast Asians with accurate information about their neighbors.

3. Support community organizations. Community-based organizations, such as mutual assistance associations and faith-based organizations, promote academic success by facilitating healthy communication and information-exchange between groups separated by language and culture. They also provide students with environments that enhance academic achievement. These types of community organizations should be supported in their promotion of academic success by providing them with technical assistance, funding opportunities, and access to models of best practices.

4. Create new systems for financial and technical support. To make the American educational system more equitable, greater financial incentives should be provided to Southeast Asian American students and the institutions of higher learning reaching out to them. Current legislative efforts, as well as efforts now underway to establish an Asian and Pacific Islander American college fund (or group of funds), similar to those of African, Hispanic/Latino, and Native Americans, have the potential to significantly aid in Southeast Asian American quests for educational success.

Despite their tumultuous and tragic history within the last 30 years, Southeast Asian American families have demonstrated a resilience that has resulted in many success stories. Many have rebuilt their lives and have instilled great hope and aspirations in their children. Their achievements have been remarkable. Yet, many Southeast Asian American families continue to struggle with unmet needs. The “model minority” myth that is still so often applied to Asian Americans of all backgrounds, regardless of their distinguishing characteristics, must be overcome. Only by recognizing the educational disparities for Southeast Asian American children can their barriers to success be addressed and their academic potential realized. If this vital segment of the next generation of Americans is provided with access to quality and equitable educational opportunities, it is without a doubt that their productivity, strength, and resiliency will continue to grow by leaps and bounds.

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ENDNOTES


3. For example, in 1999, the influential College Board released a report, Reaching the top: A report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, that neglected to examine any disaggregated data for Asian/Pacific Islander Americans (APIAs). As a result, the report neglected to recommend that special efforts be targeted to any APIA group. The report is available online at
Survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime and people who were imprisoned in reeducation camps (such as recent arrivals from Vietnam under the Resettlement Opportunities for Vietnamese Refugees Program) are particularly likely to suffer from trauma-related illnesses, which are appropriately treated by only a small number of clinicians operating in a few areas. These illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and head injury, impair their sufferers’ abilities to relate intimately with others, take on new life challenges, and learn new skills. See note 5, Um, p. 34.

10. See note 5, Um, pp. 7, 17–19.


14. See note 5, Um, pp. 6–8.

15. See note 5, Hobbs, p. 100.

16. See also note 5, Rumbaut, 1999, p. 10. In this 1992 and 1995 study in Southern California and South Florida, Rumbaut found further confirmation that Southeast Asian American students in these sites were more likely than most other refugees and immigrants to experience discrimination, and to expect to be discriminated against in the future.


18. Acknowledging the importance of curricula that address the particular linguistic, cultural, and historical characteristics of student populations, AAPIP recommended that fellow grant makers “Promote research, development, and staff training in the use of multicultural curricula that portray the history and culture of Asian Pacific Americans, and of anti-racism curricula that support direct and honest dialogue among students.” See note 13, Olsen, p. 35.


20. See note 17, Trueba, et al., p. 106.


23. Personal communication with Dr. Serec Weroha, Education Consultant, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, in April 2002. Dr. Weroha noted that one reason for the shortage of Southeast Asian American teachers is that not enough Southeast Asian American professionals take the initiative to lead and recruit Southeast Asian Americans who may want to become teachers.


25. See, for example, legislative efforts such as H.R. 333, which would “amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to authorize grants for institutions of higher education serving Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.” H.R. 333 is available online at http://thomas.loc.gov.
Separate and Unequal: America’s Children, Race, and Poverty

Marian Wright Edelman and James M. Jones

Fifty years ago, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that:

“Segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race, pursuant to state laws permitting or requiring such segregation, denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment—even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors of white and Negro schools may be equal.”

Even with a half-century to digest this notion and implement and enforce policies to make equality a reality, the United States today is still a country of “separate and unequal.” In fact, there is a growing gap between rich and poor children, and between black, white, and Latino children.

The United States is top of the list of industrialized nations when it comes to the number of poor children. There are more children living in poverty today than there were 40 years ago when the war on poverty was officially declared. As noted in the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue, black children are still twice as likely as white children to be poor, and a record number of black children are living in extreme poverty. In 2001, nearly one million black children lived in families with an annual income of less than half the federal poverty level (disposable income below $7,064 for a family of three)—the highest number in 23 years.

The portrait of inequality is astounding. (See Box 1.) Poverty accentuates racial disparities in children’s health, and poor health and poverty spiral together in a vicious cycle that injures all children. The situation in the classroom reflects a similar gaping demographic schism. Fifty years after the Brown decision, black children are still almost twice as likely as their white peers to become dropouts. (See the article by Fuligni and Hardway in this journal issue.)

The result of this disparity is a direct pipeline from school to prison. Many high schools have become prep schools for jail. Pushouts, dropouts and expulsions all create an underclass of children who are ready-made for prison cells rather than dorm rooms. Society can no longer feign surprise when confronted with glaring overrepresentation of children of color in our juvenile justice system. A black boy today has one chance in 55 of earning a master’s degree, but one chance in 5 of going to prison before age 30.

It is reprehensible that a country such as the United States is home to more than 12 million children who live below the poverty line, and more than 9 million children who lack health insurance. Families who work hard and play by the rules should not face the pernicious sting of poverty, ill health, inadequate and unsafe housing, inappropriate and unequal education, and lack of affordable quality child care. More children live below the poverty line today than 30 years ago, even though the nation’s per capita wealth—and our resources to end poverty—nearly doubled during that time.

The gap between the races will widen and poverty’s grasp will strengthen if the nation continues down this current path. As the Hernandez article in this journal issue points out, in the year 2035, when baby boomers will retire, the economic support of this overwhelmingly white population will rely on a workforce that is more than 40% black and Latino. If training a pro-
Productive workforce is indeed necessary for the future of the country’s economic well-being, society cannot afford to be complacent about the joblessness among America’s youth. The jobless rate rose to almost 60% in June 2004—the highest rate for youth in the 56 years that data have been reported, and the highest ever for a summer month. Joblessness among black and Latino teens was even higher: more than 77% for black teens and 68.6% for Latino teens, the highest ever reported for young Latinos.

Nor should society be complacent about current tax policies that favor the wealthy at the expense of the nation’s future productivity and moral well-being. Dividend tax cuts do little to benefit poor working families who will never receive stock dividends. More than 260,000 children of active duty service members are excluded from receiving the Child Tax Credit, whereas American millionaires receive, on average, more than $93,000 in tax breaks. Meanwhile, the national deficit is skyrocketing: Even if all of the current tax policies were frozen today, our children would still inherit a debt of $7 trillion.

Child poverty is not an act of God. It is a by-product of the nation’s moral and political choices. The United States has the resources to lift children out of poverty. This is not a financial issue, it is an issue of priorities. If there is the money to wage war in and then rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq, if there is the money to send spacecrafts to explore Mars and colonize the moon, if there is enough money for tax breaks that disproportionately favor the wealthy, then there is more than enough money to reduce poverty through such programs as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Head Start, and Medicaid—programs that provide crucial services to help the poorest children.

A comprehensive plan, funded at $75 billion annually, could ensure the end of child poverty by 2010. Key elements of such a plan include the following:

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**Box 1**

**A Portrait of Inequality**

**Health:**
- Young black children are twice as likely as white, Native American, Asian American, or Latino babies to be born with low birth weight.
- Babies born to Latinas and Native Americans are twice as likely as those born to whites to have mothers who receive late or no prenatal care.
- Young black children are twice as likely as their white peers to die from influenza or pneumonia.
- Black young adults are three times as likely as white young adults to die from complications of diabetes.
- Black children and teens are five times as likely as their white peers to die of chronic lower respiratory disease, and almost twice as likely to die of heart disease.

**Education:**
- Latino fourth graders are two to three times as likely as their white classmates to be performing below the basic level in mathematics.
- White fourth graders are three to four times as likely as their black and Latino classmates to be reading at the proficient level.

**Juvenile Justice:**
- Black juveniles are about four times as likely to be arrested as their white counterparts.
- Black males ages 15 to 19 are four times as likely as their white peers and twice as likely as their Latino peers to die from firearms injury.
- Black juveniles are five times as likely as white youths to be incarcerated.

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Ensure that every child is prepared for school by fully funding quality childcare and Head Start and making new investments in preschool programs.

Improve the quality of public education by modernizing schools, reducing class sizes and providing incentives for high-quality teachers for the students who are most in need.

Ensure that health insurance coverage is available for all children and their parents.

End child hunger through the expansion of food programs.

Ensure that children have a place to call home through decent affordable housing.

Protect all children from neglect, abuse, and other violence and ensure them the care they need.

Support families leaving welfare with health care, child care, education and training in order to be successful in the workplace.

Although ambitious, such a plan is far less costly than the recent tax breaks for the wealthy, or sending a spaceship to Mars.

It is time for new choices. It is time to work collaboratively and strategically on behalf of the nation’s children who are suffering in poverty, violence, hunger, and homelessness. It is time to hold elected officials accountable for their words, their deeds, and their voting records. The stakes have rarely been higher for the future of Head Start and early education, for tax fairness and justice, for breaking the pipeline between our public schools and prisons, for guaranteeing health coverage for all children including immigrants. It is time to reaffirm the appropriate role of government in providing a social safety net for poor children. These are the issues that consume U.S. politics today, and how they are resolved will shape our future.

James Baldwin, celebrated author and essayist, once said, “If history were the past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present. You and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history.” Just as what came before determines society’s actions today, what society does today matters to future generations. The nation’s demographic patterns may shift, but the challenges remain constant. The time is long overdue to honor the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education and realize a future when all children, regardless of their race or ethnicity, are ensured a safe passage to adulthood.


8. For example, 94% of all Latino children in America will gain nothing from the dividend tax cut because their families do not receive any stock dividends. For additional information, see Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Exempting corporate dividends for individual taxes. Washington, DC: CBPP, January 2003. Available online at http://www.cbpp.org/1-6-03tax.htm.


11. After two years of extensive consultation with child-serving and community leaders in every sector, CDF’s Action Council developed a long-term policy vision to truly Leave No Child Behind®. Endorsed by more than 1,800 national, state, and local organizations, as well as hundreds of public officials, the comprehensive Dodd-Miller Act to Leave No Child Behind (S. 448/H.R. 936) was introduced in Congress in 2001. (It is not to be confused with the Bush Administration’s single-issue No Child Left Behind Education Act.) Some of the provisions of Leave No Child Behind, such as the child tax credit, have been enacted. For more information, see the CDF Web site at http://www.childrensdefense.org/leave/default.asp.