

Asian American and Pacific Islander Students in Focus: Demographics and Enrollment Data

By Jeremy Anderson

This brief is the first of a two-part series focusing on AAPI students. In this brief, we provide demographic and academic information about California's AAPI student population. In part two, we discuss the experiences of AAPI students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

IN THIS BRIEF

- A discussion on the importance of disaggregating data;
- Enrollment and demographic data;
- Chronic absentee, suspension, and expulsion data; and
- Academic achievement and attainment data.

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students make up about 12 percent of California's nearly 6.2 million students. Though the California Department of Education (CDE) uses these racial/ethnic categories in their annual reports and datasets, there are essential distinctions within these groups that board members should understand when considering the needs of students in their local educational agencies (LEAs).

Broad surveys of racial and ethnic groups hide critical differences between AAPI students. It is valuable to dig beneath this more general data to unearth unique student needs, which are crucial when deciding how to create in-school programs to address mental health, learning recovery, and other educational issues. Additionally, understanding those differences can play a role in creating Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and making decisions about using COVID-19 relief funding to address learning recovery.

California law requires local boards of education and state agencies to collect data for 11 groups associated with the Asian American and Pacific Islander community.¹ These groups include Asian Indian, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Guamanian, Hawaiian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Samoan, and Vietnamese. The California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) collects

data for these student communities as well as Hmong, Tahitian, "Other Asian," and "Other Pacific Islander." Disaggregating data highlights students' educational, socioeconomic, and enrollment differences within larger racial/ethnic data groups.

This brief analyzes and discusses demographics, enrollment, achievement, and other information on California's AAPI student population and highlights significant recent changes that have occurred within the AAPI student population, where data is available.

Enrollment Trends

AAPI students from multiple ethnic backgrounds make up 12 percent of California's 2019–20 enrollment. When disaggregated, students of Asian descent made up 9 percent of the state's total enrollment. The backgrounds of the 575,067 students of Asian descent in California include Asian Indian, Cambodian, Chinese, Hmong, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, and Vietnamese. The 27,195 students of Pacific Islander descent include students of Guamanian, Hawaiian, Samoan, and Tahitian backgrounds and represent 0.4 percent of students. There were also 146,501 Filipino American students in California in 2019, accounting for more than 2 percent of California students.

Over the past 20 years, Asian American student enrollment as a percentage of overall enrollment increased from 8 percent to slightly over 9 percent. Filipino student enrollment remained stable at 2.5 percent. Pacific Islander students saw a slight decline from 0.5 percent to 0.4 percent.² Over the past two years, changes in AAPI enrollment have taken place alongside an overall decrease in student enrollment across California. Between 2017–18 and 2019–20, enrollment in the state fell by 57,412 students, or 0.92 percent, with the following changes reflected:

▶ Despite a drop in overall state enrollment, Asian American student enrollment increased by 5,323 students. That raised the overall proportion of the total student population from 9.2 percent in 2017–18 to 9.3 percent in 2019–20.

- The overall enrollment of Filipino students has declined by 5,149 students over the past two academic years. Even though Filipino students' overall enrollment fell, the proportion of Filipino students in the state stayed around 2 percent. This steady rate is due to the overall drop in California student enrollment.
- Like Filipino students, students of Pacific Islander descent saw a drop in enrollment of 1,725. That decrease changed their overall proportion of California's total student population from 0.5 percent to 0.4 percent.³

Enrollment by County and LEA

The number of AAPI students enrolled by county varies widely across California. Of its 58 counties, 57 have LEAs that enroll AAPI students. Alpine County was the only county with no AAPI students enrolled in the 2019–2020 academic year. Fifty-four percent of all AAPI students in California attend school in just four counties: Los Angeles, Santa Clara, Orange, and Alameda.⁴ Santa Clara County has the highest proportion of AAPI students, with 93,485 of its 272,132 students (34.7 percent). Besides Alpine County, Sierra County has the lowest proportion of Asian American, Filipino, and Pacific Islander students, with two of the county's 407 students (0.5 percent).⁵

There is substantial variation in the total enrollment and percentage of AAPI students in LEAs across California. Enrollment data for LEAs include school districts, charter schools, county offices of education, and state special schools. Asian American, Filipino, and Pacific Islander students are enrolled in nearly 88 percent of LEAs in California. Of California's 1,034 LEAs, 126 (12.2 percent) have no AAPI students. The majority of AAPI students (51 percent) students attend school in just 37 LEAs throughout California.⁶

Economic, Socioeconomic, and Language Status

There are wide variations in a range of economic indicators for different AAPI communities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent American Community Survey (which disaggregates data even further than other datasets in this brief), nationwide, the AAPI community has the highest earnings inequality of any demographic group. While the median household income for the Asian American demographic is higher than the national average of \$68,703, median incomes within specific communities of the AAPI community fall below that median, creating the highest earnings disparities within any demographic group. The median household income for Asian Americans in 2019 was \$88,204,8 and the median household income for Pacific Islanders was \$61,911. For those of Hmong descent, it was \$73,373, and for those of Nepalese descent, it was \$63,619. In comparison, white Americans earn a median income of \$68,785. Despite the wide variation within AAPI demographic groups, however, their median incomes are substantially higher than for Black Americans (\$41,935) and Latino and Hispanic Americans (\$51,811).9

DIFFERENCES IN REPORTING ETHNIC/RACIAL DATA

There are important differences between how the CDE and the federal government report ethnic/racial data. The U.S. Census Bureau classifies survey responses using broader racial and ethnic categories than CDE.

This distinction is most noticeable for Filipino Americans. In the Census Bureau's data, Filipino Americans are reported in the "Asian American" race and ethnicity category, along with Cambodians, Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Koreans, Malaysians, Pakistanis, Thai, and Vietnamese. For this reason, this series of briefs includes Filipino Americans in the Asian American designation unless specifically using data from the CDE or other sources that include them as a distinct category.

"Pacific Islander" also encompasses many different ethnicities and nationalities in federal data. These include Native Hawaiians, Chamorus, Samoans, Marshallese, Tongans, and Fijians.

Poverty is even higher within specific AAPI communities. For example, even though the Hmong community is included in the "Asian American" designation, 44 percent experience poverty, which is higher than the broader Asian American average. In a 2019 survey of the AAPI community in California, more than 80 percent of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders described experiencing at least one of 10 possible economic hardships within the previous 12 months. Seventy-six percent of Hmong, 71 percent of Cambodian, 70 percent of Vietnamese, and 70 percent of Filipino Californians also reported experiencing at least one hardship. The potential hardships included:

- Putting off seeing a doctor or purchasing medication for financial reasons;
- Not being able to pay a monthly bill;
- Receiving federal food assistance;
- Reducing meals or cutting back on food to save money;
- Receiving unemployment benefits;
- Receiving food from a food bank or pantry;
- Using a payday lending service;
- Helping parents or in-laws financially;
- Receiving financial help from friends or family; and
- ▶ Having difficulty paying rent or mortgage.¹⁰

Of the Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders who responded to the survey, 45 percent said that they experienced at least four of these economic hardships. This is compared to 32 percent of Hmong, 22 percent of Cambodian, 22 percent of Filipino, 21 percent of Vietnamese, and 10 percent of Chinese Californians.¹¹

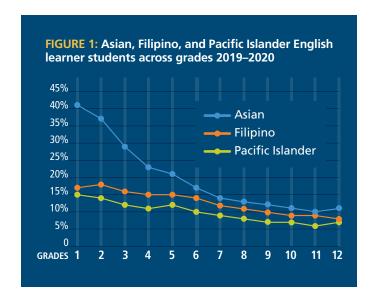
When looking at AAPI students in the state, the CDE distinguishes data on socioeconomically disadvantaged students from income disadvantage. Students are designated as socioeconomically disadvantaged in California if they meet at least one of the following criteria:

- neither of the student's parents has received a high school diploma.
- the student is eligible for or participating in the Free or Reduced-Price Meal program.
- the student is eligible for or participating in the Title I Part C Migrant program.
- the student was considered Homeless.
- the student was Foster Program Eligible.
- the student was Directly Certified for free or reduced priced meals at the state level.
- the student was enrolled in a Juvenile Court School.
- the student is eligible as Tribal Foster Youth.¹²

Of California's 6.2 million TK-12 students, 3.7 million were identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged in the 2019–20 academic year. AAPI students make up 7.5 percent of that total but that percentage hides more significant proportions of student poverty within AAPI demographic groups. For example, 65.5 percent of Pacific Islander students are socioeconomically disadvantaged. In contrast, only 37 percent of Asian American students and 34 percent of Filipino students are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, which is below the state average of 60.7 percent.

Language Learner Status

There were 1.1 million English learners in California schools in 2019–20, comprising 18.6 percent of all TK-12 students. ¹³ Asian languages make up five of the top 12 non-English languages spoken in California. These languages and their respective ranks are Chinese (two), Vietnamese (three), Korean (four), Tagalog (seven), and Japanese (12). ¹⁴ Of public school students who are English learners, 2 percent speak Vietnamese, 2 percent speak Mandarin, a little more than 1 percent speak Cantonese, 1 percent speak Pilipino or Tagalog, and 0.82 percent speak Korean in the home. ¹⁵ When looking at Asian American, Filipino, and Pacific Islander English learners in California by proportion, 21 percent of Asian American students are English learners, 10 percent of Filipino students are English learners, and 13 percent of Pacific Islander students are English learners. Figure 1 shows how those proportions decrease across grade levels for all three groups.



Migrant Students

There were 47,400 students identified as migrants in 2019–20, which was 0.7 percent of all California students. The total number of migrant students increased by 38 percent from 2017–18. Even though the number of migrant students rose across the state, the number of Asian American and Filipino migrant students fell. Of all migrant students, 0.9 percent were Asian American students (467), 0.05 percent were Filipino students (25), and 0.01 percent were Pacific Islander students (5, an increase of 3 from 2018). Though Asian American students had a slightly higher proportion than the state average overall, Hispanic or Latino students made up 98 percent of all migrant students.

Homeless Students

CDE uses the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homeless children and youths, which is "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." ¹⁶ There were 194,709 students identified as homeless in the 2019–20 academic year, which was 3 percent of all California students (down 5 percent from 2017–18). Of all students experiencing homelessness, 3 percent were Asian American (5,778), 1.5 percent were Filipino (2,930), and 0.6 percent were Pacific Islander (1,166). Because of the reporting lag, it is unclear how much impact the pandemic has had on homelessness for AAPI students in California. There is some concern among homeless advocacy groups and LEAs that the number of homeless students may be undercounted due to difficulty reaching homeless students' families (particularly during the pandemic) and a potential reluctance for families to identify themselves as experiencing homelessness. ¹⁷

Foster Students

There were 33,340 foster students in the 2019–20 academic year, which was 0.5 percent of all California students (down 3 percent from 2017–18). Of all foster students, 1 percent were Asian American (280), 0.4 percent were Filipino (148), and 0.3 percent were Pacific Islander (107). Like students experiencing homelessness, it is also unclear how this student group may be impacted by the pandemic, given the lag in reported data.

Students with Disabilities

Filipino, Pacific Islander, and Asian American students are identified as students with disabilities at a significantly lower rate than any other ethnic/racial group in California. While the statewide average for identification for students with disabilities was 11.7 percent, just 6 percent of Asian students, 8 percent of Filipino students, and 9 percent of Pacific Islander students were identified in the 2019–20 academic year.¹⁸

Academic Achievement

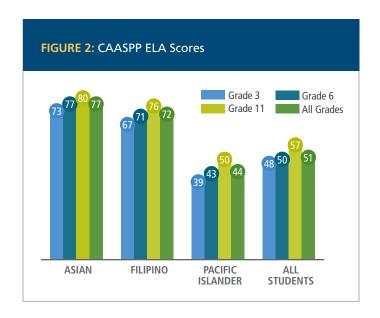
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the most recent data for the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) is from 2018–19. English language arts and math academic achievement results from that year vary significantly between Asian American, Filipino, Pacific Islander students.

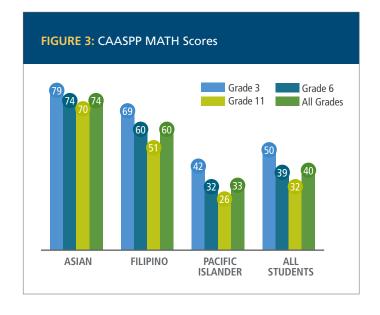
Seventy-four percent of Asian American students met or exceeded standards in math, outperforming the average of 40 percent for all students across California. Nearly 60 percent of Filipino students and 33 percent of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students met or exceeded English language arts standards. Eleventh-grade CAASPP results are of particular importance as they are used by the California State University system (and many community colleges) as indicators of college readiness. Seventy percent of 11th-grade Asian American students met or exceeded standards for math as compared to 51 percent of Filipino students and 26 percent of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students.

In English language arts, Asian American students also had higher proportions of students that met or exceeded standards than any other group. Seventy-seven percent of Asian American students met or exceeded standards, compared to 72 percent of Filipino students, 44 percent of Pacific Islander students, and 51 percent of all students in the state. Eighty percent of 11th-grade Asian American students met or exceeded standards for ELA compared to 76 percent of Filipino students and 50 percent of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students.¹⁹

Academic achievement scores should be analyzed with a degree of caution, however, and show the need for disaggregation of data as broad racial/ethnic categories can hide significant differences in

student achievement. Although Asian American students as a group perform above the state average, multiple studies and reports over the years have highlighted that Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese students score lower, on average, on achievement tests and have lower college-going rates than other Asian American students.²⁰ It is crucial for school leaders to disaggregate racial/ethnic achievement data at the local level to identify more targeted supports for students.

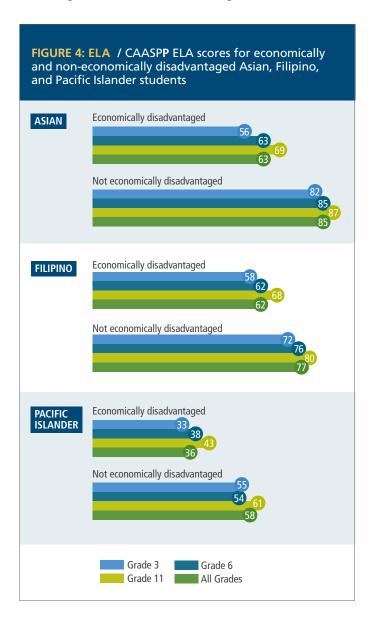


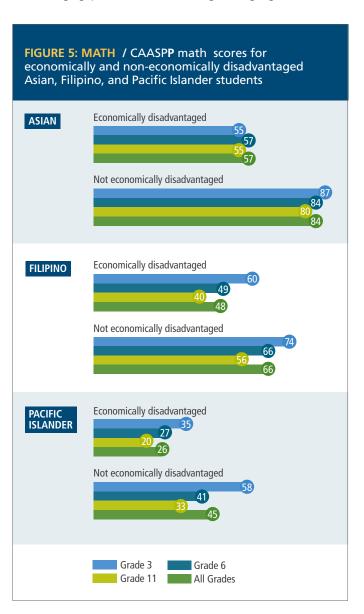


Academic Achievement and Economic Disadvantage

In addition to differences between different AAPI groups, there are significant disparities between economically disadvantaged AAPI students who met or exceeded standards and non-economically disadvantaged AAPI students.²¹

Figures 4 and 5 below compare economically disadvantaged (ED) Asian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander students who met or exceeded standards in CAASPP math and ELA to those who were not economically disadvantaged. The most significant gaps occur with Asian American students across all grades for math and ELA. Third grade Pacific Islander students also have large gaps in both math and English language arts.





Attendance, Suspensions, and Expulsions

Students' success in school is heavily impacted by their attendance. Nationwide, historically marginalized student groups are overrepresented among those who are chronically absent.²² A range of student outcomes are negatively influenced by chronic absenteeism, including reduced math and reading achievement, lower educational engagement, and decreased social engagement.²³ For those reasons, the following section explores Asian American, Filipino, and Pacific Islander student data for absenteeism, suspensions, and expulsions.

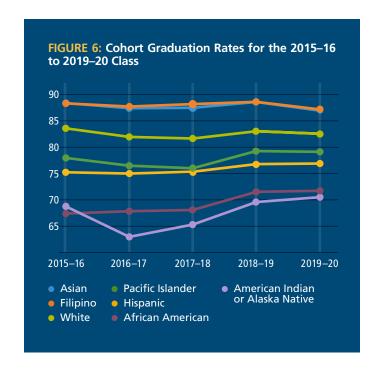
Absenteeism

In 2020, the CDE released absenteeism data (by reason) for 2017–18 and 2018–19.²⁴ CDE disaggregated the data for the first time into the following categories: average days absent, excused absences, unexcused absences, out-of-school suspensions, and incomplete independent study absences. This data can help LEAs better target intervention and support strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism in their districts. According to Education Code, students are designated as chronically absent when they have missed 10 percent or more of the days they were expected to attend school.

TABLE 1: Absenteeism Data for Asian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander Students: 2018–19²⁵

	Average days absent	Chronic absentee rate	Excused absences	Unexcused absences	Out of school suspension
Asian	6.2	4.3%	66.3%	31%	0.5%
Filipino	7.3	6.2%	64.2%	32.1%	0.6%
Pacific Islander	12.3	20.2%	12.3%	49.1%	1.2%
Statewide	9.8	12.1%	54.1%	39.5%	1.2%

Table 1 shows data for five different absentee-related categories from 2018–19 (the most recent absentee data available from CDE). The last three categories in the table contain a description of how those days absent were designated. Overall, Asian American and Filipino students were absent for fewer average days than Pacific Islander students. Pacific Islander absences were categorized as unexcused about 17 percent more than Asian American or Filipino students. Pacific Islander students were also given out-of-school suspensions twice as often as their Asian American classmates.



Suspensions

In 2019–20, Asian American (0.7 percent) and Filipino (0.9 percent) students continued to have the lowest suspension rates of any demographic group and substantially lower rates than the average statewide (3 percent). Pacific Islander students maintain a higher average (3 percent), which represents the third-highest rate of any student ethnic group (behind African American students at 6.8 percent and American Indian or Alaskan Native students at 5 percent). However, the suspension rate for Pacific Islander students has dropped nearly 2 percent from 2017–18.

Of those students suspended, 18.3 percent of Asian American students and 16.1 percent of Filipino students have experienced multiple suspensions. Twenty-two percent of Pacific Islander students who have been suspended have multiple suspensions. These rates are lower than the state average of 27.3 percent and are the three lowest rates for multiple suspensions of any student group.²⁶

Expulsions

Asian American and Filipino students are expelled at a much lower rate than any other demographic student group in California, both at 0.01 percent. They are also expelled at a lower rate than the state average of 0.05 percent. Pacific Islander students are expelled at 0.07 percent, however, slightly higher than the average statewide. Compared to 2017–18, expulsion rates are down slightly across all three groups.²⁷

Statewide Dropout Rates

In the 2019–20 academic year, the statewide dropout rate was 9 percent; the rate was 4 percent for Asian American and Filipino students. The dropout rate for Pacific Islander students was 9.5 percent, which was the fourth highest of the eight ethnic/racial designations captured in California data.²⁸ However, the dropout rate for Pacific Islander students has steadily decreased by 2 percent over the past three years.²⁹

High School Graduation Rates

The statewide graduation rate for 2019–20 was 84.3 percent. Graduation rates for Asian American students were 92.6 percent, 92.4 percent for Filipino students, and 84.4 percent for Pacific Islander students.³⁰ Graduation rates for Pacific Islander students increased by 3 percent over the past two years.³¹ Compared to 2017–18, graduation rates for Asian American and Filipino students fell by about 1 percent. It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic likely impacted the graduation rates of all student groups. The following figure includes graduation-rate trends for the last five years to include the years pre-pandemic.

Graduates Meeting UC/CSU Requirements

Fifty-one percent of all California graduates met all a-g requirements for admission to a University of California or California State University school in the 2018–19 school year, which was 0.4 percent higher than the previous year. Asian American and Filipino students who graduated and met those requirements were the two highest of any student demographic group (75 percent and 67 percent, respectively). In contrast, 40 percent of Pacific Islander students who graduated met these requirements, the second lowest of any demographic group.

AP Test Taking and Scores

Advanced Placement (AP) test-taking rates and scores are additional indicators that CDE uses to measure postsecondary preparation. It is important to note that the College Board combines Filipino students with Asian American students when they issue their annual reports. In 2019, 423,174 students in California took 793,695 AP exams. The average score, statewide, was 2.94 out of a possible five. Of those that took AP exams, 98,339 Asian American students (71 percent of 10th- to 12th-grade Asian American students) took 215,471 exams, or 27 percent, of the total exams taken in the state. Asian American students make up 9 percent of 10th- to 12th-grade students in California and 23 percent of those taking AP tests. The average exam score for Asian American students was 3.35 out of five. There were 1,287 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students (18 percent of 10th- to 12th-grade Pacific Islander students) who took 2190 exams, with an average score of 2.47 out of five.³² Pacific Islander students are underrepresented amongst AP test takers, making up 0.5 percent of 10th- to 12th-grade students in the state, but 0.3 percent of students who took an AP test in 2019.

Conclusion

One of the more significant takeaways from this brief is the critical nature of disaggregating broad racial/ethnic student categories when analyzing data at any level. California's AAPI student population varies socioeconomically and academically in unique and nuanced ways that large-scale data collection does not capture. That variation cuts across the state and individual LEAs. Members can better understand specific student needs by disaggregating student data within their districts and in individual schools. For instance, by disaggregating data, we find that Pacific Islander students tended to have lower scores on standardized state exams and higher absenteeism rates than their peers. Pacific Islander students also experienced higher poverty rates, and these students may need additional support to improve attendance, which may also help academically. Specific student groups' needs may vary widely within larger ethnic/racial groups. Identifying that variation will play a crucial role in determining the types of supports that will be effective for students moving forward.

Questions for Boards to Consider

Seeking answers to the following questions could better help board members to understand their AAPI student communities:

- 1) What are the major differences in enrollment, demographic, and academic data for AAPI students in my district or county?
- 2) How are those differences distributed across and within schools in my district or county?
- **3)** What supports are currently in place to address academic disparities within the AAPI student community? What supports might need to be created to serve students better?

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