

# Beyond Model Minority: Asian American History In Michigan's K-12 Schools

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This article is an edited transcription of a virtual Education Town Hall that discussed the significance of integrating Asian American history in Michigan schools in response to the surging anti-Asian hate and violence during the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic. The Town Hall featured perspectives from important stakeholders: an elected legislator, the state superintendent, a school teacher, an aspiring teacher, a high school student, a parent, and a university faculty member in Asian American studies. Convened on April 13, 2022, by the Michigan Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission, it drew over 100 participants, mostly from the state, but also others from across the country and even internationally. Social studies educators will gain better understanding of the curricular and instructional salience of teaching Asian American history in schools, the broader social and political contexts of its development, and practical strategies for advocacy and pedagogical implementation.

## **Stephanie Chang (elected State Senator):**

We have seen so much anti-Asian hate, especially since COVID-19 has entered the United States. After the Atlanta shootings in March 2021, I checked in with Asian American female friends, and many felt afraid and

concerned. Unfortunately anti-Asian violence is not new.

In my conversations with Asian American parents and community leaders, they repeatedly ask, “Why are my children not learning about Asian American history in schools?” I am the daughter of Taiwanese American immigrants. I grew up in Canton and now live in Detroit. In high school, the advisor of our Asian Pacific American Club encouraged me to read Helen Zia’s *Asian American Dreams* book, and I began learning about Asian American history. As an undergraduate at University of Michigan, I obtained a Minor in Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies. Perhaps if we actually taught the histories of all communities of color, if we had more inclusive curriculum, we would have better community relations and less hate crimes.

In January 2022, Senators Erika Geiss, Adam Hollier, Paul Wojno, and I introduced Senate Bills [797](#), [798](#), [799](#), and [800](#) that would require education about Asian American history as well as Latino, Indigenous, Arab and Chaldean American histories in our school curriculum. These bills joined Senate Bill [414](#), introduced by Senator Betty Alexander in May 2021, that would require the teaching of African American history in schools. These bills would allow the boards of school districts, intermediate school districts, and public school academies to determine the minimum instructional time. We try not to be too prescriptive, but we want students to learn about the contributions of Asian Americans, their role in civil rights and other movements in our country, and discriminatory

policies such as the [Page Act of 1875](#), the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the Japanese American internment.

Knowing these histories is beneficial for Asian American students and for all students because our future leaders need to understand our rich, complicated, and sometimes painful histories. For communities of color, we need to continue working together because our past, present, and futures are intertwined. As a mom of two young kids, I believe it is important that our children are learning about their own and other communities. By the time my daughters are in high school, my hope is that we would have a better understanding of what led us to where we are today, we don't repeat horrible mistakes from the past, and we can build on the contributions and successes of various communities.

**Dr. Michael F. Rice (State Superintendent, Michigan Department of Education):**

In Michigan, we need to prepare all children with knowledge, skills, and experiences to be successful in our diverse world. Yet we find ourselves at the current moment when some people are trying to expand the curriculum, while others are actively pushing to narrow it. For example, state legislators have introduced bills that, if passed, would limit what teachers could teach and what students would learn in schools, including about race, racism, and xenophobia. Let's be clear: the curriculum in most school districts is already limited. It needs to be broadened.

Within the Asian Pacific American community, there are shared and distinct experiences. Exclusion is a shared experience for Asian Americans and other minority groups. Events range from the violent murder of Vincent Chin and the recent assaults of Asian Americans during the pandemic, to laws that prohibited migration from Asia to the United States, for example, the [Johnson-Reed Act of 1924](#), also known as the National Origins Act of 1924. There are distinct experiences, as well. When I met with Asian Pacific American community members a year ago, they explained their professional and personal backgrounds, so that I would understand where they were coming from. They weren't all immigrants, or native speakers of languages other than English, or good at math. They shared stereotypes and microaggressions that they dealt with on a regular

basis. "How long have you been in this country?" "My whole life." "How did you learn to speak English well?" "It's my native language." "Where did you grow up? But were you born in Michigan?" Asian Americans have been made to feel they are not real Americans.

Teaching broad history includes not only the struggles of different groups of people, but also their contributions. Asian Americans have made countless contributions to the development of our nation that most often do not make it into textbooks. All our children deserve to know of Asian American contributions including those to medical science, labor rights, [architecture](#), and technology.

The Michigan Department of Education does not write curriculum, but we are responsible for standards. In June 2019, the State Board of Education approved [new K-12 Standards for Social Studies](#) that recognize and affirm comprehensive history instruction. In January 2022, in response to bills introduced to restrict history instruction, the State Board of Education passed a resolution supporting the [comprehensive teaching of U.S. history](#), including about race and racism and the consequences thereof. We need to teach history not simply chronologically, but also thematically. In April 2022, the Michigan Department of Education began hosting a [new webinar series](#) to assist educators with teaching history, in collaboration with professional organizations and higher education institutions. Our series began with "Remembering the Holocaust," and continued with Indigenous Peoples history. In fall 2022, we hosted additional webinars, including one on Asian American history, led by Dr. Naoko Wake and Dr. Andrea Louie of Michigan State University. Our children deserve to learn about the full breadth of U.S. and world histories, including difficult topics. And as educators, we have the responsibility to teach them.

**Richard Mui (Social Studies teacher):**

Asian American history is American history. But a major shortcoming in teaching Asian American history in schools is we start with Chinese railroad workers, skip to Japanese American internment, and then never to be heard of again. Excluding Asian American history creates a disservice to all students because we are only getting part of the story of how we have become a nation. For instance, if we look at

the [Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965](#), which opened immigration and reversed prohibitions from the National Origins Act of 1924, it created a demographic and cultural tidal wave that altered this nation. Without knowing that, we don't really know who we are in totality.

Omitting parts of our history creates problems for our country, including giving rise to stereotypes. The model minority stereotype, the perpetual foreigner myth, and a lot of anti-Asian hate are due to people lacking understanding of how long Asian Americans have been in the United States and how we have been part of this country's development. When people say, "Go back to where you came from," this is where we came from if you've been in the US for generations. This is not the first time that such anti-Asian incidents occur, and it won't be the last. As Mark Twain said, "History doesn't repeat itself but it often rhymes." When economic, political, and social tensions rise up in society, Asian Americans end up becoming scapegoats. Perhaps anti-Asian hate could be tempered if we knew more about Asian American history. Many people are not familiar with the differences within Asian American communities. Asian Americans should not be generalized into a monolith. If some say, "Those people are okay," then there's not a lot to learn for people both within and outside of the Asian American communities. Everybody can benefit from more nuanced understanding.

Finally, where do we start? You start where you are. For aspiring and current teachers, it starts in the classroom. It might be rocky in the beginning. We'll have to help fill in the cracks, develop lesson plans, but with collective effort, we can and will improve on that. As a result, the next generation will have a fuller understanding of American history, and we'll be better off for it.

### **Kathryn Ocomen (aspiring teacher):**

When I was invited to be a panelist for this event, I was asked, "What do you want to know about Asian American history?" With a chuckle, I responded, "Where do I begin?" Since freshman year of high school, looking at the mirror was part of my daily routine. Almond-shaped eyes and yellow skin: two features that distinguished me from my white peers. Growing up dealing with stereotypes led me to focus on what I lacked, instead of what I

could do. The stereotype that Asians are good at math made me feel like I was given an image to uphold. In class, I denied any help from teachers. I studied late at night so my peers didn't doubt my so-called expertise. Some might view me as a hard worker, but I define it as shamefulness. I allowed a stereotype disguised as a compliment to be the compass of my work ethic.

How does the Asian American community benefit from having Asian American history in schools? Maybe we would catch a break from ongoing battles against ignorance and institutional racism. Having no representation in school curriculum feels like we repeatedly lose to the same opponents. The founders of this country are composed of white men in power who have developed systems so they stay segregated.

I now speak and assert myself, a change from what I was accustomed to. English as a second language (ESL) courses were not available when I started school as a five-year old immigrant. In a recent conversation, my father shared with me that a school administrator called him and demanded that he and my mother teach English in our household. My parents were my first teachers, but they were not proficient in English and neither were my siblings. Instead of receiving individualized curriculum, I was gifted with neglect. In middle school, I was grouped with students repeating the same grade. By ninth grade, I held a self-fulfilling prophecy. I took to heart the words "speak English" from peers and strangers. My paradigm fixated on being less than, and I had a distorted perception of myself.

Now in college, I realize that I sacrificed myself to American assimilation so that I would no longer be labeled a foreigner. I have witnessed how trauma alters a person's behavior and mindset. I have embraced my skin, and I am more than a checked box to fulfill diversity quotas. I am no one's model minority, but my parents' American dream. I have retaliated with words to combat ignorance. But that is not enough. We need teachers to initiate conversations about Asian American history, and we need to support them in this process. Nothing will compensate for how poorly our Asian American community has been and continues to be treated, but this country can be held accountable by giving us the education we deserve.

**Neha Rao (high school senior):**

As a high school student, I know firsthand how much we don't know about minority history in the United States. Before taking Advanced Placement US History or being part of [Rising Voices](#), I was unaware of how many important pieces of history are left out. The history of race relations in this country – for example, the Supreme Court case of [Bhagat Singh Thind](#) in 1923 or the murder of [Vincent Chin](#) in 1982 – is much deeper than what is taught. Continuing to ignore Asian American history in schools perpetuates the idea that we are not important and we weren't impactful to history. It perpetuates biases we might hold, instill insensitivity, and create gaps in our knowledge of how society works.

I was part of Rising Voices in summer 2021. As Youth Fellows, my peers and I talked about how discussing Asian American history might be difficult because it is not taught in schools. Learning about new historical events could also contradict what we've been taught. Learning that Asian Americans have been in this country for a long time can be shocking for some people, and having discussions about it is a crucial step in moving forward. I have been fortunate to be exposed to Asian American issues at a young age, but many students in Michigan and across the country do not have the same opportunities.

Integrating Asian American history in the school curriculum can combat many stereotypes. We often hear how Asian Americans are complacent or timid. In fact, many moments in history indicate they are not. The campaign for Ethnic Studies in the 1960s, for example, demonstrates immense willpower and coalition building with other minority groups. The community organizing that emerged after the killing of Vincent Chin is another example of Asian American advocacy. Another stereotype is the model minority myth, which assumes that if Asian Americans work hard and succeed, then other minorities should be able to, as well. What is not talked about is that Asian migration to this country was banned for a long time, and when these laws were reversed, immigration was very selective, and only skilled professionals were allowed to come. So this set-up ended up pitting minority groups against each other.

I see many benefits in teaching Asian American history, especially in my school with a sizable Asian American student population. It will allow us to connect with our own history and personal identity. It will show peers who are not Asian American other parts of history that we don't know about. Leaving out critical historical details can create animosity between minority communities. Learning Asian American history can improve cultural awareness and build positive relations.

**Dr. Suchiraphon McKeithen-Polish (parent and education consultant):**

Many Asian American parents do not feel connected to teachers and schools in Michigan. One reason is tied to how they perceive the education system. In education, there's a concept about curriculum and books as mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors. When you look at a mirror, you see your reflection. Asian American parents do not see their histories and experiences reflected in what is taught in schools, so they cannot relate or even help their children. At the elementary level, when they read supplementary materials about Asians, they are depicted in problematic and stereotypical ways. For example, for families originally from Cambodia, Laos, or Burma, they feel disconnected because there are no school materials reflecting who they are. There are many multicultural resources for diverse Asian American communities, but they are not in our schools.

Asian American parents have a lot to offer, but are not seen as assets by teachers and administrators. They can be guest speakers for topics on cultural history, race, immigration, and Asian Americans. But they are not invited or encouraged to be involved. At the decision-making level, I also do not see Asian American parents present in many board rooms, so their voices are not heard.

As an education leader, I would love to help parents feel empowered, so schools can be more reflective of diverse communities and histories. Asian American history needs to be in the curriculum and not as supplementary material. Parents have shared with me that they want their voices to be heard, they want to be part of decision-making, and they are definitely ready. Moving forward, I suggest providing them with resources (like mentorship about school and community

political systems), create support groups for Asian American parents and families, and engage them in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways.

**Dr. Manan Desai (Associate Professor, University of Michigan):**

As a lifelong Michigan resident, I attended the public school system in this state. I first learned about Asian American history as an undergraduate at University of Michigan. It was the first time I heard of “Asian American” as a political concept, and allowed me to recognize myself and my family as part of this broader community. Fast forward to a quarter century later, I now teach courses that engage Asian American history. Many of my students – and not just Asian American students – are dismayed and angry that they had never known the history of Asian Americans. Perhaps they had heard references to the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese American internment during World War II, but they were presented as mere footnotes within a larger history.

The impact of teaching and learning Asian American history at the K-12 education level would be empowering. It would give students important tools to apprehend our changing society. The story of Vincent Chin's murder 40 years ago, the history of Japanese American incarceration, and how citizenship laws throughout the 19th and 20th centuries discriminated against people of Asian origin are moments in our country's history when Asian bodies became scapegoats. When examining post-9/11 violence against South Asians, Muslims, Arabs, and Sikhs, many will realize that the surge of anti-Asian violence is not new, and will be given tools to combat it. Asian American history is rich with stories of struggle and complexities of racial identity in this country. Just think about Yuri Kochiyama and Malcolm X, or about Larry Itliong and Cesar Chavez. Their stories tell us about people of Asian descent who fought for a more just world.

I am thrilled about this possible addition to the K-12 curriculum. Any parent or community member who is apprehensive about these changes needs to understand that it will enhance all students' education as they enter a more diverse workplace. Students have so much to gain from learning the histories of Asian Americans, of other communities of color, and of race in America. Learning these

histories will help ensure that they don't come to these issues for the first time when they're already adults.

**Kumar Palepu (Moderator):**

Senator Chang—How can students who can't vote help in supporting Asian American studies curriculum in schools?

**Stephanie Chang:**

First of all, you are on here, listening and participating. The next step is to reach out to lawmakers. Look up who your state representatives and senators are by going to [house.mi.gov](http://house.mi.gov) and [senate.michigan.gov](http://senate.michigan.gov) websites, putting your address, and contacting them. Let them know that you support these bills and ask what their position is. Anyone can reach out to their lawmakers.

**Kumar Palepu:**

The other question is: How will you combat opposition to divisive concepts bills? For instance, there are [House Bill 5097](#) and [Senate Bill 460](#) that prohibit the teaching of so-called controversial topics, such as critical race theory (CRT), as well as the “Don't Say Gay” bill in Florida.

**Stephanie Chang:**

There have been efforts to whitewash our history and to not talk about things that might make some people uncomfortable. There are also parents attending this session who support inclusive education, who want students to gain critical thinking skills by learning the full history of our country. It is important that lawmakers hear from parents, students, and community members like you to remind them that people wanting to ban CRT or “don't say gay” are the extreme. They are not the majority, and they don't reflect the kind of future that we want in Michigan.

**Kumar Palepu:**

Dr. Rice, if the proposed legislation on Asian American history were to pass, how would this history be incorporated into the curriculum? What would that look like?

**Dr. Michael F. Rice:**

Michigan is a local control state. There are 835 local education agencies across the state: 535 traditional school districts and 300 public school academies or charter schools. Each one has a

separate board that controls local curriculum. So the integration of Asian American history will look different for each district or academy. There will be no one answer.

**Kumar Palepu:**

How do we support teachers in integrating Asian American history in their classrooms?

**Richard Mui:**

Teachers are apprehensive when you don't fully know what you're teaching. They have professional development (PD) requirements to maintain their certificate. So teacher education programs and regional education service agencies can provide PD sessions focused on integrating Asian American history in K-12 curriculum. What does it look like in the classroom? There are always trade-offs made in a history class. When you teach early US history, you might cover 50 years in a page or two. For more recent history, it might be harder to discern what is important and what is not. We have to make thoughtful decisions about what we include and cut out because the practical reality of teaching only has so many days and hours. The big question is: what frameworks can we provide to help teachers and students gain better understanding of history?

**Kumar Palepu:**

In closing, what can participants and listeners do as next steps?

**Kathryn Ocomen:**

Keep an open mind because you never know what somebody has been keeping inside until they are asked. Continue to listen and keep the conversation going. And look for opportunities to stay engaged in your community.

**Neha Rao:**

Since the curriculum is not in schools yet, it is our responsibility to search for resources, like documentaries, books, and other educational materials. Also make space for student voices through Asian Pacific American Club in schools or Rising Voices in the community to get their perspectives.

**Dr. Manan Desai:**

Connect with others who share this view that Asian American history ought to be taught. There's a

lot of reason for hope, and we need keep up this momentum.

**Note**

The Education Town Hall 2022 was organized by MAPAAC SIG 3 (Roland Sintos Coloma, Kumar Palepu, and Reginald Pacis). Much appreciation to Aimon Islam for administrative, publicity, and technical support, and to Ayesha Ghazi Edwin for opening remarks.

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