



# Focus On

## Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

### API STUDENTS AT INCREASED RISK FOR BULLYING

*Navigating stereotypes is a familiar challenge for Asian and Pacific Americans, but another ordeal disrupts the lives and learning of far too many API students.*

A day-long assault and mass beating of Asian-American students at a Philadelphia high school ends with 13 students in the hospital; yet the seriousness of the problem is downplayed by school officials until the students stage an eight-day boycott, refusing to return to school until they feel safe.

The Philadelphia incident is not the only instance of violence against young Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Three API students were beaten so badly near their Queens high school, they skipped school for weeks and begged to be transferred. A group of API students in a Fresno, California, high school were repeatedly called names and pelted with food before being physically attacked. A video of an API teenager beaten by seven other teenagers in an alley behind a Chicago school recently went viral; and beyond school grounds, the suicide of Army private David Chen after repeated racial threats and attacks made headline news.

#### Valuable Information for Educators

These are just the incidents that garner media attention: Many API students nationwide face episodes that are less sensational, but no less troubling. A joint study by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education found that 54 percent of Asian American and Pacific Islander teenagers were bullied in school, a number sharply above the percentages for other ethnic groups. The study also found that API teenagers were three times more likely to face harassment online.

As schools focus more attention on the bullying crisis, the growing harassment of API youth is valuable information

for vigilant educators, say API policymakers, who stress that a conversation about the experiences of API students is not meant to diminish the hardships of GLBT students and other youth at high risk for bullying.

#### What's Fueling the Harassment?

Policymakers point to a range of factors fueling the harassment of API students: racial tensions, resentment of immigrants and language barriers faced by some API students, the stereotype of API students as unassertive overachievers, and the spike in attacks against students perceived as Muslim all play a part.

“About one-fourth of all Asian and Pacific American students are English language learners,” explains Khin Mai Aung, Director of Educational Equity and Youth Rights for the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF). “Students who are not fluent in English are often targeted because they are perceived as too disempowered to fight back.”

Yet courageous students *are* fighting back. After a student-led boycott in Philadelphia, AALDEF filed a civil rights complaint with the Justice Department and won a settlement requiring the school district to implement a long-term plan addressing anti-Asian violence at the high school. The students also formed the Asian Student Association of Philadelphia, an advocacy organization that tours schools and rallies for stronger harassment prevention and increased education about diverse cultures. Honored for their work, the students have become powerful agents for change in their community.

Inspirational, yes, but educators and policymakers agree; it shouldn't be up to students to guarantee their own safety.

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School staff plays a fundamental role in protecting high-risk students and keeping all students safe. Writer Tina Tsai, a former public school teacher and NEA member, credits the enlightened attitudes of her own teachers with a “joyous” school experience.

“Growing up, I was too clueless to know I was being picked on because of my race, but now that I’ve been a teacher myself, I realize the teachers and staff played a huge role in my being able to get by relatively unscathed,” says Tsai. Thanks to the positive example set by school staff, when a situation with a bully started to escalate to physical violence, the other students backed Tsai up, and the situation was defused.

“I was once told that as a teacher, I would be the weather in the classroom,” recalls Tsai. “That’s an excellent description of just how much impact educators have on the sort of environment our young grow in. Education that does not reach beyond just facts and figures, that is not human at the very core, is no education at all.”

There’s a world of difference between Tsai’s experience and that of the students bullied so mercilessly in Philadelphia. And a valuable lesson for every educator. That kind of tempest never has to sweep through another school if educators, parents, students, and community members act together to change the climate.

## FIVE STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS

API educators and policymakers recommend a range of strategies to protect students and empower the school community.

1. Multiple cultural influences in one school can cause growing pains. **Provide a diversity consultant or cultural awareness training** to help school staff address shifting demographics.
2. **Make school bullying policies available to students and parents in multiple languages**, as needed. Post hallway signs on how to get help from counselors or guards in languages spoken by the school’s English language learners.

## STUDENT GROUPS STEP UP

Duong Nghe Ly was a junior the day API students were attacked in the day-long assault at his Philadelphia high school. He was standing in a cafeteria line, recalls Duong, when a teacher physically used her body to protect several API students from a mass assault. After the incident, the students formed the Asian Student Association of Philadelphia (ASAP) to help decrease bullying and improve the school’s racial climate.

The high school group ASAP recently joined forces with college students on an anti-bullying initiative. The Asian Pacific Student Coalition, an umbrella organization of 19 API student groups at the University of Pennsylvania, is planning to launch a pilot program in area high schools this fall. College students will hold workshops on bullying, form support groups, and serve as mentors for API high schoolers. Their efforts, and the efforts of educators and a new school-wide anti-harassment policy, have started to pay off. Ly, now a freshman at U Penn, has seen a significant decrease in racial conflict at his old high school.

## EDUCATORS TAKE ACTION

*“The most valuable lesson we teach educators is to stop bullying as soon as they see it,” says Patty Koyama, an elementary school teacher and NEA bullying prevention trainer. “Our training gives educators the tools they need to take action safely and effectively.”*

Unlike her mother, who attended school in a U.S. government internment camp for Japanese Americans during WWII, Patty Koyama didn’t experience overt bias until she became a college student and beginning teacher. When she was harassed, she wasn’t prepared to deal with it, says Koyama. The memory of her mother’s experience, as well as her own, drives Koyama to help all children—no matter their heritage—feel welcome and safe in school.

The training she gives other educators creates ripples that touch children beyond her own classroom, says Koyama. “A group of ESP’s I trained told me they were able to use the strategies they learned the very next day in their own school and that everything I told them to try worked. That’s a fast return!”

An NEA survey shows that although 98 percent of educators believe it’s their job to stop bullying when they see it, only half receive training in their own district’s bullying policies and, as a consequence, often feel ill-equipped to intervene. Bus drivers and other education support professionals, often on the front lines of bullying, are even less likely to receive the training they need. NEA helps bridge that gap by providing a variety of free resources to help concerned educators like Patty Koyama become culturally aware, anti-bullying agents in their schools:

- NEA’s **BullyFree: It Starts with Me Campaign** identifies caring adults willing to take a pledge of action to help bullied students. In return, NEA provides them with the resources to address bullying in their own school community. The campaign is at 12,000 pledges and growing. Take the pledge at [nea.org/home/NEABullyFreeSchools.html](http://nea.org/home/NEABullyFreeSchools.html).

- NEA’s **National Bullying and Sexual Harassment Prevention and Intervention Program** and **National Training Program on Safety Bias, and GLBT Issues** provides training and resources to members, along with easily implemented prevention strategies. In constant demand, the programs have trained thousands of educators. Sign up for training at [nea.org/home/47681.htm](http://nea.org/home/47681.htm).

- NEA’s online program, **bNetS@vvy**, helps educate adolescents, parents, and educators on the risks and benefits associated with Internet use. Stay informed and connected at [bnetsavvy.org](http://bnetsavvy.org).

- Cultural competence—the key to thriving in diverse schools and classrooms—can be learned. NEA’s **Cultural Competence Training and Diversity Training** teaches educators nationwide how to serve America’s increasingly diverse student population.

While acknowledging the power of one caring adult to make a profound difference in a bullied student’s life, NEA also recognizes that educators can’t do it alone and our students can’t afford to wait for adults to get it together. There’s no better time for all stakeholders—educators, parents, students, school districts, and policymakers—to step up, speak out, and put an end to the scourge of bullying in our nation’s schools.



Become Part of the Solution: Take NEA’s Bully Free Pledge

Join the growing ranks of Educators who have taken the pledge! **Go to [nea.org/bullyfree](http://nea.org/bullyfree)**. Take the pledge. Receive a button, sticker and poster that will identify you as a caring adult to whom any bullied student can turn for help.

[nea.org/bullyfree](http://nea.org/bullyfree)

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Interviews: Khin Mai Aung, Director of Educational Equity and Youth Rights, Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund; Tina Tsai, Owner, The Literacy Guild; Vida Benevides, Principal, Dewey Square Group; Duong Nghe Ly, Member, Asian Student Association of Philadelphia; Michelle Leong, Chair, Asian Pacific Student Coalition; Patty Koyama and Fran Bellinger, Trainers, NEA Bullying Prevention/Intervention Peer Training Cadre.

