

Kelly Ji
SB0304
Favorable

First, I just want to say thank you to everyone for taking the time to read written testimonies. I'm here to testify in favor of SB0304. My name is Kelly Ji, and I am the president of the Asian American Progressive Student Union (AAPSU), an organization made up of middle and high schoolers from Montgomery County Maryland. Since our founding in 2020, AAPSU has worked tirelessly to advocate for local progressive policies and Asian American civic engagement. This included the approval of an APIDA studies elective in our own high schools.

Following the approval of the elective, however, us and like-minded community organizations soon ran into a problem. The elective was just that: an elective. Only students who wanted to learn about Asian American and Pacific Islander history would do so, and the classes would be made up of predominantly AAPI students. While the option of curriculum inclusion was heartwarming, it was distinctly different from the actual integration of APIDA history into the larger compulsory curriculum. To put it simply, the elective only gave and continues to give people a choice as to whether or not they wanted to learn about AAPI history. Those who do not want to take it, or don't have space in their schedules to do so, are missing the history of one of the most important and diverse minority groups in the country. How are we supposed to ensure equality and recognition of diversity when our diverse groups are not included in the compulsory curriculum?

SB0304 ensures that every student in public schools is able to acknowledge the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of their APIDA peers. Discrimination against Asian Americans is, and always has been, a rampant problem in the United States. Combating discrimination starts first with education: students *need* to understand that equality is a right, which starts with equal representation in the classroom, and extends to the recognition of diverse backgrounds from a young age (elementary school).

Of course, there is the age-old rebuttal: that identity politics and acknowledgement of racial or ethnic identity inhibits progress. In other words, everyone should be treated the same, in a color-blind way. The only way to progress as a society is to ensure that everyone is truly equal, and treated as a monolith. This rebuttal is extremely harmful, and dangerous to the comfort of BIPOC and AAPI youth as well as adults. Regardless of stated rules or established means of treatment, there is always going to be a perceived difference between white people versus everyone else. The failure to recognize that difference will always lead to conflict, and reflects a denial of the different histories and experiences of racial groups in the United States.

Instead, we should be striving for a school system that celebrates differences and diversity for the multitude of perspectives and intercultural communication that they provide. All students need to be taught the backgrounds of the other students they're surrounded with throughout high school. Only then can we achieve a more equitable and welcoming school system for all students.