



**Testimony of John C. Yang
President and Executive Director
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC**

**Maryland House
Ways and Means Committee**

**In (Favorable) Support of HB 922
“Asian American History Curriculum Requirement”**

February 25, 2022

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, the rise in hate incidents toward Asian Americans since the pandemic began, and the March 2021 mass shooting in Atlanta, there is now increased willingness in the nation to learn about and combat systemic racism.¹ Americans are open to learning about systemic racism’s impact on communities of color, including Asian Americans.

Historically, Asian Americans have suffered from systemic racism in the U.S. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first law that barred a specific ethnic group of people from entering the country and becoming citizens based specifically on their race. Chinese Americans were barred from enrolling in public schools with White Americans. Japanese Americans were incarcerated in camps purely based on their ethnicity. Whenever tensions arise with an Asian country abroad, Asian Americans here get blamed, and even charged, as seen in the legal cases of several Chinese American scientists. During the Vietnam War, Asian Americans were viewed as the enemy. Post-9/11 policies and executive orders banning Muslims have affected South Asian and Arab communities alike. And school bullying has become commonplace for students of Asian descent.²

Addressing bias and prejudice is important in addressing root causes of racism. Many in our nation still view Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners who will never be fully American, regardless of how long they or their ancestors have been in the United States. Often, these behaviors and attitudes are learned early, and without education to counter stereotypes and learned biases in the environments of children and students, these harmful behaviors and attitudes are given fertile ground to flourish. Myopic narratives about Asian Americans—as perpetual foreigners *and* as the model minority—need to change, and the most vital place to present this narrative change is within the school system. Education provides an effective way to

¹ Scientific American, *Teaching about Racism Is Essential for Education* (February 2022), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/teaching-about-racism-is-essential-for-education/>.

² Annie Le, Rose Anne E. Gutierrez, Robert T. Teranishi, *Anti-Asian Bullying and Harassment: Symptoms of Racism in K-12 Schools During COVID-19*, THE EDUCATION TRUST–WEST (August 2021), <https://west.edtrust.org/resource/studies-identify-steps-to-support-asian-and-asian-american-students-amid-current-forms-of-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia/>.

disrupt baseless stereotypes because of the personal and intellectual growth that can be fostered within individuals, students, and teachers through the knowledge exchanged in the classroom.

We are writing in support of HB 922, which seeks to include Asian American history in curricula in schools across Maryland. Such education will help break down the image of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” and help our students better understand that Asian Americans are just as much part of America as any other community. Long term, we need to educate Americans about the history of Asian Americans and other communities of color in the United States and provide education about these communities’ contributions to the U.S. and the challenges that they have faced. Including comprehensive K-12 curricula on the histories of Asian Americans, as well as other communities of color, is important in dispelling myths and developing a greater understanding of the diverse communities that comprise the fabric of American society. By showing that Asian Americans are part of all aspects of America, we can break down stereotypes that lead to misinformation, disinformation, bias, prejudice, and—ultimately—violence.

Organizational Background

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC (Advancing Justice | AAJC) is a national nonprofit, non-partisan organization founded in 1991. Based in Washington, DC, Advancing Justice | AAJC works to advance the civil and human rights of Asian Americans and to build and promote a fair and equitable society for all. Advancing Justice | AAJC is one of the nation’s leading experts on civil rights issues of importance to the Asian American community, including: immigration and immigrants’ rights; voting rights; census; and anti-Asian hate. Along with our Advancing Justice affiliates in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Atlanta, Advancing Justice | AAJC works to promote justice and bring national and local constituencies together through community outreach, public policy advocacy, and litigation. In the area of education policy, Advancing Justice | AAJC is engaged in ensuring equitable access in education, promoting Asian American studies to be included in K-12 curricula, and inoculating our communities against misinformation and harmful narratives about inclusive education.

Support for HB 922: “Asian American History Curriculum Requirement”

We firmly support HB 922 given its potential to bring about systemic and transformative change to the state of Maryland and its future generations. HB 922 establishes our ability to tell Asian American histories in our schools so that we can build a more inclusive future for all Americans. The proposed bill will allow students across Maryland to learn our history truthfully and have honest discussions about diversity, racism, and inequality. Our students deserve to learn truthful histories of this country so that they can become responsible members and leaders of an increasingly diversifying society.

Centuries of Anti-Asian Hate

Racist sentiment towards Asian Americans is not a passing trend but a continuing reality, fueled in recent years by a growing xenophobic and racist backlash against immigrants, which is part of a rising tide of white nationalism. Numerous hate crimes have been directed against Asian Americans either because of their minority group status or because they are perceived as unwanted immigrants. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, hate incidents targeting Asian Americans rose sharply, many of whom have been wrongly blamed for the pandemic. More

generally, anti-Asian racism and xenophobia are part of the deep structural racism that has resulted in disparities faced by many communities of color. Despite the long history many of our communities have in the U.S., Asian Americans are often still viewed as foreign, as not fully American. This racism has manifested itself at many points throughout U.S. history, including with the “yellow peril” and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II, and the scapegoating and violence directed against the Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian communities after 9/11, including profiling and discrimination by the federal government that culminated in the Muslim ban enacted by President Trump via Executive Order in 2017. At the same time, Asian Americans have been inaccurately described as the “model minority” and used as a wedge against other communities of color. The Asian American community remains highly diverse, with notable within-group disparities by income, education, and language proficiency. Asian Americans have long stood in solidarity with other communities of color to address our shared challenges and advance the civil rights of all of our communities. Such histories, which have fundamentally transformed our nation’s history, ought to be taught in schools for all students to learn from, as we build a more inclusive society.

Asian American History as American History

We understand Asian American history *as* American history. Asian American history curricula are designed to engage American students around the evolving identity, contributions, and challenges experienced by Asian Americans, who have over 150 years of history in this country. Specific to Maryland, we know that Asian Americans have a long history in this state dating back to the 19th century with the arrival of Chinese Americans. Learning about Asian American history as an integral part of American history allows everyone to see the impact Asian Americans have had in building our country, from constructing the transcontinental railroad, to mobilizing the farm labor movement, to defining what citizenship looks like in the U.S. Asian Americans have shaped and continue to shape our nation—through science, arts and culture, and sports. Asian Americans fought in the courts for rights to citizenship and equal access to education. Even as some Japanese Americans fought against the violation of their constitutional rights when they were incarcerated in camps during World War II, others sacrificed their lives alongside other Americans on the battlefield. Asian Americans championed federal laws that advanced the rights of girls and women, and stood alongside African Americans for civil rights. Today, Asian Americans continue to fight against the erasure, hatred, and exclusion of their communities, building upon the legacy of activists like Fred Korematsu, Larry Itliong, and Yuri Kochiyama who have defined pivotal moments in American history.

Leading Change with Inclusive History

All children deserve to see themselves and their stories represented in our history. Being able to fully learn about Asian American history and tell our stories will also help diverse Asian American communities to learn more about each other, fostering intercommunity empathy and understanding among groups of people that are often treated as a monolith, yet carry with them generations of tensions and convergences of history and culture. Indeed, all Americans benefit from greater cultural understanding.

Future generations of Americans should learn the lessons of the discrimination and violence communities of color have experienced and still face today, including the rise in anti-Asian hate

that Asian American communities are facing in the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, today's youth deserve to learn the truth about colonialism, slavery, racial segregation, and other historical injustices such as the Trail of Tears, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and Japanese American incarceration. If we are to heal and move forward as a country, we need a society that respects diverse cultural backgrounds, fosters equitable opportunities for everyone, and does not shy away from the truthful telling of our history. Together, we can build intercommunity solidarity and a more inclusive future.

Across the country, youth, parents, educators, and advocates are calling for diverse histories and experiences to be included in the curriculum—including Asian American studies. The TEAACH Act made Illinois the first state in the country to mandate the teaching of Asian American history in public schools,³ with New Jersey following suit.⁴ Other states, including California,⁵ Oregon,⁶ and Nevada,⁷ have mandated the inclusion of ethnic studies in K-12 curricula so that students can learn a more holistic picture of American history. These laws represent pivotal first steps in ensuring that American history books reflect the diversity of the students who read them. By passing HB 922, Maryland would be among the first states in bringing about this momentous change in heralding inclusive education for all.

Conclusion

Recent spikes in violence against immigrants and people of color have re-ignited conversations around race, discrimination, and history in the United States. Addressing acts of violence and the pervasive climate of fear requires a systemic and long-term approach in order to create a welcoming and inclusive society for all communities in our nation. Educating the future generation with an honest and truthful retelling of our past, which includes histories of discrimination, oppression, and violence towards communities of color, as well as their achievements and contributions, is central to ensuring that we learn from our past and collectively move forward as a nation towards creating an equitable society for all. We support HB 922 given its significance in expanding the history curriculum taught in schools across Maryland to include Asian American history. Such history *is* American history, and our children deserve to see their histories reflected in the classroom. In addition, it is through education that we can systematically address prejudices, stereotypes, and biases. It is critical that future leaders of our society recognize Asian Americans, and all Americans, as equally integral to American history and American society.

³ Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago, *TEAACH Act*, <https://www.advancingjustice-chicago.org/teach/>.

⁴ Katie Reilly, *How the Pandemic and Anti-Asian Violence Spurred 2 States to Change History Lessons*, TIME (January 24, 2022), <https://time.com/6141059/asian-american-history-education-schools/>.

⁵ Associated Press, *California makes ethnic studies a high school requirement*, WTOP (October 8, 2021), <https://wtop.com/education/2021/10/california-makes-ethnic-studies-a-high-school-requirement/>.

⁶ Sophia June, *Oregon is Now the Only State to Have Required Ethnic Studies Curriculum for K-12 Students*, WILLAMETTE WEEK (July 1, 2017), <https://www.wweek.com/news/state/2017/07/01/oregon-is-now-the-only-state-to-have-required-ethnic-studies-curriculum-for-k-12-students/>.

⁷ Kimberly Cuevas, *Nevada Passes Act to Establish Standards of Content and Performance for Ethnic and Diversity Studies in High School (SB107)*, NCTE (January 29, 2018), <https://ncte.org/report/nevada-passes-act-establish-standards-content-performance-ethnic-diversity-studies-high-school-sb107/>.