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Diversity is Key: The Relationship Between AAPI Representation and High School Graduation Rates

Introduction:

In California, approximately 77% of public school students are students of color while only 37% of public school teachers are people of color¹. The population of students of color is increasing at a much higher rate than the population of teachers of color. Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students make up about 12% of California's public school population, and this number is steadily increasing². California holds the second-largest Asian population in the United States, making the question of diversity in the classroom incredibly important to AAPI students in California³. The question I will be addressing through this research report is: How is diversity in public high schools in California related to the graduation rates of AAPI students?

To answer this question, I have analyzed 42 counties⁴ in California from 2018 to 2019 and measured the percentage of AAPI residents in their general population, the percentage of AAPI teachers, and the high school graduation rates of their AAPI students. By doing so, I was able to analyze patterns in the graduation rates of AAPI students in high schools that have a higher (or lower) percentage of AAPI teachers, as well as in counties with a higher (or lower) AAPI population.

¹ From paragraph 11 of "California's shortage of diverse teachers is hurting students, educators say" (2023) by Vanessa Arredondo

² From page 1 of "Asian American and Pacific Islander Students in Focus: Demographics and Enrollment Data" (2021) by Jeremy Anderson

³ From paragraph 1 of "California is Investing in Bilingual Educators in Asian Languages. What Does This Mean for AAPI Educators and Students?" (2023) by Jessica Fregni

⁴ Out of the 58 counties in California, eight did not have data on high school graduation rates for AAPI students, so they have been omitted from this study

Significance:

Diversity in the classroom is incredibly important, especially in the formative years of a student's life. The California Department of Education reports that teachers of color boost the academic performance of students of color including improved test scores, graduation rates, and aspirations to attend college. Additionally, students of color and white students generally hold positive perceptions of their teachers of color, an indication that fostering a diverse school environment could produce happier students and a more welcoming community which is important for public high schools⁵.

As it pertains to AAPI students and teachers, hiring more AAPI educators can provide a sense of empowerment for AAPI students and can bring a sense of cultural competence and awareness to students from other racial or ethnic backgrounds⁶. On a grander scale, this means that having AAPI teachers in California public high schools can alleviate a variety of social issues faced by the AAPI community. According to a survey held by the University of California, Los Angeles, 71% of AAPI respondents in California feel as though anti-Asian racism and discrimination persist in the United States; 33% of AAPI respondents in California feel as though they are viewed as perpetual foreigners, meaning they are perceived to be more loyal to their countries of origin rather than to the United States; and 58% of all respondents in California were unable to name a prominent Asian America⁷. The consensus of many AAPI

⁵ From paragraph 3 of "Diversifying the Teacher Workforce" (2022) by the California Department of Education

⁶ From paragraph 19 of "California is Investing in Bilingual Educators in Asian Languages. What Does This Mean for AAPI Educators and Students?" (2023) by Jessica Fregni

⁷ From "Asian American Studies Center to create free resource for high school teachers" (2022) by Melany De La Cruz-Viesca

individuals is that anti-Asian discrimination is still very much alive in America's society and culture, and this could be due to a lack of visibility in the media. When AAPI individuals are represented in education, through a growing population of AAPI students or teachers, the AAPI community can be empowered and feel less invisible.

Background:

In the Californian public school system, many efforts have been made to increase the amount of AAPI representation to accommodate the rapidly growing AAPI student population. These reforms have come in the form of initiatives to diversify the teacher/faculty population, increase ethnic studies programs, and expand dual-language programs.

On March 18, 2021, the State Board of Education (SBE) adopted the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, which includes lessons "dismantling the model minority myth, xenophobia, bigotry and other forms of institutional privilege"⁸. These social issues are faced by the AAPI community, proving that increasing AAPI representation not only dismantles harmful social perceptions from outside the AAPI community but also within the AAPI community. These lessons would also educate non-AAPI staff and students and recognize that the AAPI community has not overcome racism and prejudice as some perceive it to be⁹.

In July 2022, California "allocated \$5 million in the 2022-2023 state budget to invest in recruiting and training teachers seeking accreditation to teach dual-language immersion programs in an Asian language"¹⁰. This funding also provides aid to students in the teacher program to eliminate financial barriers that discourage these students from entering the

⁸ From paragraph 6 of "Schools are starting to mandate Asian American studies. More could follow suit." (2022) by Tat Bellamy-Walker

⁹ From paragraph 7 of "Schools are starting to mandate Asian American studies. More could follow suit." (2022) by Tat Bellamy-Walker

¹⁰ From paragraph 3 of "California is Investing in Bilingual Educators in Asian Languages. What Does This Mean for AAPI Educators and Students?" (2023) by Jessica Fregni

educational field as new teachers. Not only does this budget remedy the issue of difficult access to dual-language programs in California, but it also aims to resolve the severe lack of AAPI teachers in California.

In July 2022, the UCLA Asian American Studies Center received \$10 million in state funding toward the development of a free multimedia learning experience that provides teachers with materials to teach about the experiences of the AAPI community¹¹. According to Assemblymember Al Muratsuchi, the AAPI Multimedia Textbook serves as a resource for California public high schools and colleges to strengthen their ethnic studies¹². Assemblymember Mike Fong stated that the increase in anti-AAPI hate crimes is an indication of a lack of understanding and appreciation for the contributions to California's history made by the AAPI community¹³. While the AAPI Multimedia Textbook does not increase AAPI representation in public high schools via increased staff or students, it serves to empower AAPI students and educate non-AAPI students nonetheless.

These efforts increase AAPI visibility in the classroom – thereby increasing feelings of acceptance and support on the basis of race and culture – which could be beneficial for some AAPI students' journey to graduating high school. Furthermore, these additional efforts to educate students on the AAPI community's history in the United States could decrease negative perceptions and attitudes toward AAPI, and AAPI students by proxy, which could also increase feelings of support and empowerment for AAPI students in the classroom.

¹¹ From paragraph 1 of "Asian American Studies Center to create free resource for high school teachers" (2022) by Melany De La Cruz-Viesca

¹² From paragraph 6 of "Asian American Studies Center to create free resource for high school teachers" (2022) by Melany De La Cruz-Viesca

¹³ From paragraph 8 of "Asian American Studies Center to create free resource for high school teachers" (2022) by Melany De La Cruz-Viesca

Other discussions include increasing the retention of AAPI teachers, especially in communities where the AAPI population is low. While AAPI students may face a version of alienation and invisibility in these communities, AAPI teachers go through a similar experience and often have to deal with racism by their coworkers and school districts. Examples of the forms of racism that AAPI teachers face are the undermining of necessary teaching experience, the Anglicization¹⁴ of names, and negative perceptions of the AAPI community¹⁵. Experiences such as these often deter AAPI teachers from continuing to work in the educational field, especially when they have the option to leave. In counties where the AAPI population is low, both teachers and students are faced with feelings of alienation and a lack of support or empowerment in their academic communities.

While flaws in the educational system prevent AAPI from working as educators, a major factor in the shortage of AAPI teachers in the K-12 education level is the effect of cultural values and social perceptions of this career path¹⁶. The socio-cultural expectations perpetuated onto and within the AAPI community often discourage AAPI individuals from becoming public school teachers. These expectations include the model minority myth¹⁷ and pressure to enter career paths that offer higher paying salaries. This creates a paradox in which AAPI students are often credited with high achievements in education, but do not move on to education the next generation of AAPI students and leaders¹⁸. The recent legislative action furthering AAPI

¹⁴ Requesting AAPI teachers or students to simplify ethnic sounding names to be simpler or easier to pronounce (usually by assimilating them to names associated with American names)

¹⁵ From page 2 of “Asian American Teachers in Predominantly White Education Systems” (2019) by Candis Lee Eckert

¹⁶ From paragraph 1 of “Recruiting and Retaining Asian American Teachers” (2017) by George Huynh

¹⁷ AAPI individuals are often portrayed as intelligent and hardworking and therefore academically, socially, and economically more successful than other minority groups. However, this often leads to toxic comparisons and expectations to be thrown on AAPI individuals and leads to less AAPI taking on various careers in society (such as teachers).

¹⁸ From paragraph 7 of “Recruiting and Retaining Asian American Teachers” (2017) by George Huynh

representation through the recruitment and training of AAPI teachers, as well as furthering AAPI ethnic studies in California public schools, is a step in the right direction when it comes to incentivizing and motivating more AAPI individuals toward a career in education.

Theory and Argument:

Regarding my research question, I hypothesize that AAPI representation in public high schools in California is positively correlated with the high school graduation rates of AAPI students. My second hypothesis is that AAPI representation in education may have a greater impact on the graduation rates of AAPI students in counties where the AAPI population is lower. My independent variables in this study are AAPI representation in education and AAPI representation in the population. The dependent variable in this study is the high school graduation rates of AAPI students.

I hypothesize that more AAPI representation will lead to higher graduation rates among AAPI public high school students because of the sense of support and empowerment that AAPI students may feel when having a mentor or role model in an academic setting. Other possible causal mechanisms may include a shift in attitudes toward AAPI students by having positive AAPI educators present at the school; by having a positive AAPI role model present in an academic setting and thereby increasing positive AAPI visibility, non-AAPI students may develop more positive attitudes toward their AAPI peers since positive AAPI representation helps to dismantle harmful social perceptions. By creating a learning environment that is more positive towards its AAPI students, AAPI students may perform better and yield higher graduation rates from public high schools in California.

Multiple studies have shown that students consistently score higher on standardized tests when they are assigned a teacher who shares ethnic likeness¹⁹. This is especially true for low-performing students, proving that having this racial or ethnic commonality with a trusted role model in an academic setting has positive effects. When put into the context of this project, AAPI students who may be low performing and therefore at risk of failing to graduate from high school would benefit from having AAPI representation in the classroom. Additional studies show that when students are placed in a classroom with a teacher who shares racial characteristics, they are more likely to have positive perceptions of their teachers, feel more cared for, display interest in their schoolwork, and aspire to attend college²⁰. When students have an academic role model that they hold in a positive light who shares common characteristics with themselves, they feel more interested in learning and their schoolwork. This could potentially lead to higher high school graduation rates, especially as it pertains to students who hold higher aspirations to go to college or university given the positive perceptions towards their teachers.

I also hypothesize that this effect may be magnified in counties where the AAPI population is lower because AAPI students in these counties may not have as many AAPI peers in the classroom alongside them. This absence of peers of a similar culture can cause AAPI students in such counties to feel a sense of cultural invisibility; they may feel as though they are different from their other peers in situations where they are a clear minority. Even in situations where AAPI students feel supported and empowered through other facets of their identity, a lack of cultural likeness could potentially affect AAPI students' success. In such scenarios, an AAPI teacher, who could serve as a mentor or a role model, could be incredibly important to an AAPI

¹⁹ From the highlights of "Representation in the classroom: The effect of own-race teachers on student achievement" (2015) by Anna Egalite, Brian Kisida, and Marcus Winters

²⁰ From the discussion of "The Effects of Teacher Match on Students' Academic Perceptions and Attitudes" (2017) by Anna Egalite and Brian Kisida

student's path toward high school graduation. Compare this case to AAPI students in counties where the AAPI population is high. In these counties, AAPI students are much more likely to have other AAPI peers surrounding them in an academic setting. Therefore, having an AAPI teacher – while it does hold potential benefits – would not contribute as much to these students' sense of cultural belonging or support as they would in lower-AAPI-populated counties.

Research Design and Data:

To test my hypothesis, I created a large-n study in which I analyzed data on the county level from 42 California counties from 2018-2019. This study was centered around three variables: AAPI representation in education, AAPI representation in the population, and AAPI high school graduation rates. California is one of the most diverse states in the country, with the AAPI population (of residents and teachers varying greatly by county. To generalize the AAPI population at a level broader than the county level would not address the nuances of the effect of AAPI representation on AAPI high school graduation rates, especially since most states in the United States do not hold such diverse populations of AAPI individuals. By gathering data under these three variables on the county level, I was able to succinctly measure and compare the effect and extent to which AAPI representation influenced AAPI high school graduation rates.

In order to measure AAPI representation in education, I found the percentage of AAPI teachers in public schools from 2018-2019. When it comes to leading and cultivating communities within the classroom, teachers have the strongest influence. Additionally, teachers have the highest amount of interaction with their students out of all school faculty. Since the causal mechanism behind my hypothesis – AAPI high school graduation rates increase alongside AAPI representation in education – is feelings of acceptance and empowerment in the classroom,

I used teachers as this measure because they are most likely to influence these feelings in an academic classroom setting. It is important to note that although teachers are a strong symbol of AAPI representation in the classroom, they do not fully encompass this concept since there are other factors (such as representation through educational content or through AAPI figures working in school districts) that contribute to AAPI representation in education. The racial demographics of AAPI teachers were found on Ed-Data's website²¹, with the most recent data being from 2018-2019. In this study, AAPI teachers consisted of teachers who identified as Asian, Filipino, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander since these communities all fall under the larger AAPI community.

In order to measure AAPI representation in the population, I found the percentage of AAPI residents at the county level from 2018-2019. I then divided the counties into lower than 10% (low-AAPI populated counties) and greater than 10% (high-AAPI populated counties). The low-AAPI populated counties group consisted of 28 counties and the high-AAPI populated counties group consisted of 14 counties. By dividing the counties into these groups, I was able to assess how the graduation rates of low-AAPI counties differed from the high-AAPI-populated counties. This largely relates to my second hypothesis of AAPI representation in education having a greater impact in low-AAPI-populated counties. Although I expect AAPI high school graduation rates to increase across both of these groups, I expect that the correlation between AAPI representation and AAPI graduation rates will be stronger in low-AAPI populated counties in comparison to high-AAPI populated counties. The percentage of AAPI in the population of these 42 counties was found on the United States Census Bureau website. In this study, AAPI

²¹ Ed-Data is a resource that is partnered with the California Department of Education, EdSource, and the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team/California School Information Services (FCMAT/CSIS) that provides data on K-12 education in California

residents included individuals who identified as Asian alone and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander alone.

Finally, I analyzed the AAPI high school graduation rates at the county level in the 2018-2019 school year to be consistent with the other variables in this study. This data was found on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's website in their Kids Count Data Center²². In this study, the category for AAPI students included those identifying as Asian, Pacific Islander, or Filipino. This variable proved to be the most restrictive of the variables since 16 of the 58 counties in California did not have available or stable data regarding the graduation rates of their AAPI students. These 16 counties were omitted from the study, resulting in a large-n study covering 42 of the 58 counties²³.

²² The Annie E. Casey Foundation provides data through their Kids Count Data Center from more than 50 state organizations

²³ The counties omitted from this study are: Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Colusa, Del Norte, Imperial, Inyo, Lake, Lassen, Modoc, Mono, Plumas, Sierra, Sisikiyou, Trinity, and Tuolumne

Analyses, Conclusion, and Implications:

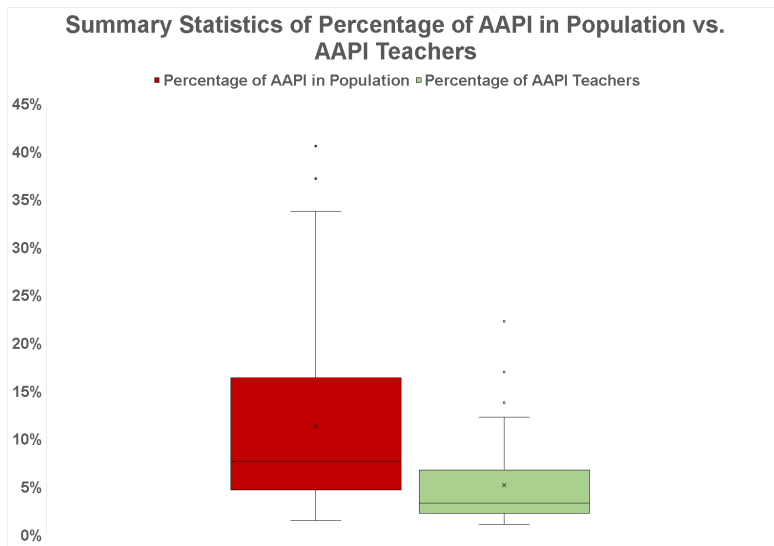


Figure 1: Percentages of AAPI Individuals and AAPI Teachers per County

Data Source: United States Census Bureau (2019), Ed-Data (2019)

Graduation Rates of AAPI Students and Percentage of AAPI Teachers

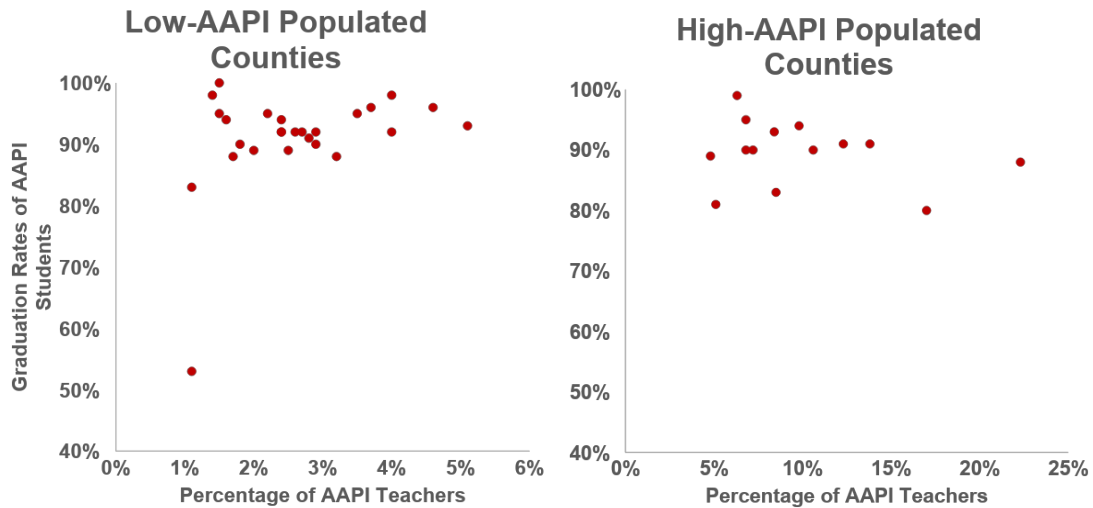


Figure 2: Comparison of AAPI Graduation Rates and Percentages of AAPI Teachers in Low vs.

High AAPI-populated counties

Data Source: Ed-Data (2019), Annie E. Casey Foundation (2019)

The data culminated in the visuals shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 1 displays the distribution of the percentages of AAPI in the population alongside the distribution of the percentages of AAPI teachers across the 42 counties in the side-to-side box and whisker plots, and exhibits the disproportionate representation of AAPI in education. While the distribution of percentages of AAPI in the population is widespread with an interquartile range from around 5% to 16%, the distribution of percentages of AAPI teachers is much smaller and lower with an interquartile range from around 3% to 6%.

Figure 2 displays the 42 counties' percentages of AAPI teachers and their AAPI high school graduation rates. The plots in the figure are separated by the low-AAPI populated and high-AAPI populated groups with each data point representing one county. In the low-AAPI population graph, the relationship between the percentage of AAPI teachers and AAPI high school graduation rates is positive, but relatively weak with a correlation value of 0.3474. As AAPI representation in education increases, the AAPI high school graduation rate also increases. While most counties have an AAPI high school graduation rate greater than 80%, there is one outlier county with an AAPI graduation rate of 53%²⁴.

In the high-AAPI population graph, the relationship between the percentage of AAPI teachers and AAPI high school graduation rates is negative and weaker than that in the low-AAPI populated counties, with a correlation value of -0.2455. As AAPI representation in education increases, the AAPI high school graduation decreases. The distribution of AAPI high school graduation rates is also slightly lower. While most points are focused around 90% or

²⁴ This outlier point was found in Nevada County. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the graduation rates of nonwhite students were significantly lower than those of white students in 2019. So while this outlier may point to an issue regarding students of color in Nevada County, this phenomenon was not specific to AAPI students.

above, there are more points that are closer to 80% in the high-AAPI populated counties than in the low-AAPI populated counties.

As shown in Figure 2, I discussed the differences between low-AAPI populated counties and high-AAPI populated counties. In low-AAPI populated counties, there is a weak but positive correlation between the percentage of AAPI teachers and AAPI high school graduation rates. This means that as AAPI representation in education increases, AAPI high school graduation rates can be expected to also increase. This also means that AAPI representation in education has a positive effect on AAPI high school graduation rates in counties where AAPI representation in the population is low. Although this relationship is weak, it is slightly stronger than that in high-AAPI-populated counties. In high-AAPI populated counties, there is a weaker and negative correlation between the percentage of AAPI teachers and AAPI high school graduation rates. This means that as AAPI representation in education increases, AAPI high school graduation rates have a tendency to decrease but this outcome cannot always be expected. This also indicates that AAPI representation in education does not have a strong effect on AAPI high school graduation rates in counties with high AAPI representation in the population.

In the context of my hypotheses²⁵, my first hypothesis is not supported since the high school graduation rates of AAPI students decreased when AAPI representation in education increased in counties with a high representation in the population. This decrease in AAPI high school graduation rates is likely caused by factors other than AAPI representation, such as the socioeconomic status of these counties which could lead to broader institutional factors that generally affect graduation rates (economic stability, access to educational and remedial

²⁵ First hypothesis: as AAPI representation in education increases, the high school graduation rates of AAPI students will also increase

Second hypothesis: AAPI representation in education may have a greater impact on AAPI graduation rates in counties with a low AAPI population

programs, heightened family responsibilities, etc.)²⁶. However, my second hypothesis was supported by the gathered data. Since AAPI representation does have a positive effect on AAPI graduation rates in counties with low representation in the population, it is reasonable to conclude that an emphasis on recruiting AAPI teachers in counties with less than 10% of AAPI in their population could yield higher graduation rates for AAPI high school students.

As discussed, a large factor contributing to the lack of AAPI teachers is the lack of AAPI individuals choosing to pursue careers in K-12 education. While it would be unethical to pass legislation that prioritizes recruiting AAPI teachers over other teachers on the basis of race and ethnicity, a budget that incentivizes AAPI individuals to join the workforce as educators could be a plausible remedy to the AAPI teacher shortage. Given the enacted legislation in the past year that created a budget specifically designed to recruit and train AAPI teachers and to increase ethnic studies, an increase in AAPI teachers may be seen in the future. These policy actions are interlinked and have a positive feedback effect on each other. As more AAPI teachers are recruited, the demand for AAPI ethnic studies increases which in turn attracts more AAPI teachers since they are most likely to be knowledgeable on such subjects. These policies could also pose a positive effect on the graduation rates of AAPI students since research suggests graduation rates are highly affected by the students' motivation to learn²⁷. AAPI students are more likely to be motivated to learn if they are culturally empowered by faculty and their curriculum in schools.

If I were to continue this study with further research, I would look to explore the effectiveness of AAPI representation in education through other avenues, such as through ethnic

²⁶ From paragraph 2 of "High School Graduation"(n.d.) by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

²⁷ From paragraph 37 of "What is the Impact of High School Graduation Rates?" (2023) by Kate Barrington

studies programs. Increasing ethnic studies programs is a policy priority in California²⁸, which indicates that such programs may have a significant influence on students including AAPI students graduating from high school. Additionally, California is the first state to require ethnic studies in public high schools, indicating its importance to the state²⁹. This could also potentially open the study to the statewide national level rather than the county level in California since ethnic studies programs vary significantly from state to state (but not necessarily county to county).

Since this study was conducted based on data from 2018-2019 before the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, I would also analyze any potential effects of the pandemic on AAPI high school graduation rates. For many AAPI communities across the country, the pandemic meant a spike in anti-Asian sentiment in the forms of racism, xenophobia, and in its most extreme form, hate crimes and incidents³⁰. This study could be conducted on the state level or on the county level in California since attitudes toward the AAPI community differed on both levels. The unit of measure for this aspect of study is further complicated since states with a less diverse population generally shared similar sentiments whereas states with a more diverse population held sentiments that differed between counties. I would analyze whether this spike affected AAPI students in the academic setting as it relates to feelings of acceptance and empowerment in the classroom. Since these incidents were often sprawled on popular media and highly resonated with the AAPI community, I would also analyze the effects of AAPI representation on the mental health of AAPI students and on their high school graduation rates.

²⁸ From paragraph 1 of “API Legislative Caucus Priority Legislation on Ethnic Studies Signed Into Law” (2021) by the CA Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus

²⁹ From paragraph 1 of “California becomes first state to require ethnic studies in high school” (2021) by John Fensterwald

³⁰ From paragraph 2 of “The Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 Racial and Ethnic Discrimination Against Asian American and Pacific Islanders” (2021) by Rachel Banawa, Hans Oh, and Sasha Zhou

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