

State Board Voice

The Struggle to Be Seen and Feel Safe

While everyone experienced school year 2020–21 as unlike any other, for me and millions of other Asian Americans, it was particularly painful to live through a parallel pandemic. Given the violence against the most vulnerable of the community of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) that plays out in news report after news report, with women and the elderly attacked and even killed, it is not surprising that Asian Americans reported more stress from anti-Asian racism than from COVID-19 itself.

There is evidence of this stress in families and schools. Almost 7 in 10 Asian American K-12 students were still learning exclusively online even in February 2021, according to a U.S. Department of Education survey. This stress was also evident when my sister, due to daily reports of anti-Asian incidents, forbade my family to take the subway when we were visiting her in New York City. It was evident when two members of the AAPI community in Arizona gave public comment to the Arizona State Board of Education not only about the anxiety they feel for their children going to school but also about the lack of representation of AAPI in the curriculum. These comments illuminated what the larger AAPI population is sensing at this moment: a struggle to be seen and to feel safe.

At a NASBE New Member Institute, I learned that all state boards have three critical powers: adopting and revising policies that promote educational excellence and equity, convening experts and stakeholders to serve as a bridge between policymakers and citizens, and

raising questions. I was reminded that my colleagues and I can leverage these combined powers with and for students, educators, and families.

The New York Board of Regents set out to do precisely this with its release of guidance about how to create more equity in school curricula. Chancellor Lester Young said, “We recognize the role that race and racism plays, and we recognize our obligation to remove barriers.” Citing a rise in local anti-Asian hate incidents, the DC State Board of Education released a statement of solidarity with the AAPI community during their April meeting, committing to greater investment in restorative justice and social-emotional supports. In July, Illinois became the first state to require public schools to teach a unit of Asian American history, starting in the 2022–23 school year. In Arizona, the AAPI community will be represented on the Equitable and Inclusive Practices Advisory Council; having a seat at the table is a first step in the journey to being seen. Together, state boards are helping AAPI students be seen and feel safe.

As Yvonne So, board chair of the Greater Phoenix Chapter of OCA, put it: “Chinese immigration to Arizona precedes our statehood.... Nevertheless, we tend to brush over these chapters of our history, and they are often ignored within today’s classrooms and public discourse. More than ever, it is important to recognize that our roots in this nation run deep and our accomplishments to the social, economic, and cultural fabric of America are valued, appreciated, and celebrated.” ■



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