

STORIES OF EDUCATIONAL WAYFINDING:

Supporting the
Educational Voyages
of Native Hawaiian
and Pacific Islander
Students



Washington State Commission
on Asian Pacific American Affairs





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COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD

Our Community Advisory Board, consisting of *Sui-lan Ho'okano, Kiana McKenna, Inez Olive, Sili Savusa, and Adrianna Suluai*, provided critical input to the design, execution, and interpretation of the studies, and reflected and represented the views of their communities in these roles. We also acknowledge the Community Advisory Board for our sister study on Asian and Asian American youth – *Jen Chong Jewell, Erin Okuno, Ay Saechao, and Frieda Takamura* – for their involvement in the overall conception and design of the study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with a sense of responsibility and a spirit of serving communities that we present our report on educational opportunities among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NH/PI) students in Washington's K-12 schools.

These reports will provide the Committee on Asian Pacific American Affairs (CAPAA) and the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) with quantitative and qualitative data, along with community-driven recommendations, needed to inform policies and strategies to close educational opportunity gaps for NH/PI students. This work represents a collaborative effort on several levels. A research team consisting of researchers from the NH/PI and As/AsAm communities was assembled across the University of Washington's School of Social Work and College of Education. Our research team combined a wide range of expertise and resources to develop two distinct reports. Although study resources were shared, we have taken care to represent the unique needs and stories of each set of communities.

We appreciate the work of Leah Forester and UW School of Social Work Marketing and Communications on the graphic design and

layout of this report.

We are grateful to CAPAA and EOGOAC in driving this important work forward and prioritizing an update to the initial in-depth study completed by Drs. David Takeuchi & Shirley Hune in 2008. We also hope this report might serve as a resource for communities to use to build on community strengths and address community needs.

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Finally, we deeply appreciate the students, educators, administrators, and community advisory board members who participated in our research directly. Our communities shared their personal challenges and triumphs, as well as hopes and dreams for the education of NH/PI youth in Washington.



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SANTINO CAMACHO



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AN INTRODUCTION TO NH/PI YOUTH: GROWING, DIVERSE, AND INTERCONNECTED

Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NH/PI) youth and families are full and engaged participants in their learning communities. NH/PI persevere in the face of social and economic challenges, historical underrepresentation in the educator workforce and the school curriculum, and stereotypes about their personalities and academic skills. In recent years, strides have been made in NH/PI representation and equity in education data systems, including disaggregation of NH/PI data in federal and state systems from the antiquated “Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI)” category. Though there is an increasing awareness of NH/PI communities as a distinct group from Asians and Asian Americans with specific cultures, educational experiences, and learning, NH/PI continue to experience challenges in their education and wellbeing.

The NH/PI population is the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in Washington state, with 114,189 total residents as of the 2020 census, compared to 27,654 as reported in the 2008 Education Disparities Report. When considering the welfare of NH/PI students nationally, Washington is one of the most important states to consider, as Washington ranks in the top 5 by population share for Native Hawaiians, Sāmoans, Tongans, Chamorros, Marshallese, and Fijians. Due to differing histories of settler colonialism and Pacific nations’ political relationships with the US government, citizenship within NH/PI communities varies

greatly depending on the island(s) families are from. Citizenship status can impact access to economic benefits and healthcare in the US, which have direct impacts on the educational experiences of youth. Moreover, the challenges of navigating multiple cultures and political statuses are compounded by significant socioeconomic challenges, as over one-third of NH/PI families experience food insecurity.

NH/PI youth are also diverse, with NH/PI in Washington being indigenous to many different nations, states, and territories across Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia. In addition, 43% of NH/PI individuals in Washington identify as multiracial and an estimated 14% of NH/PI youth in OSPI schools identify as Queer or Transgender Pacific Islanders (QTPI). Rather than ignoring this diversity, we highlight it as a strength of the NH/PI community and acknowledge the complex ways in which NH/PI youth navigate systemic oppression within the education system.

In the current report, we sought not only to assess the current state of NH/PI educational achievement in Washington state as of 2025, but also to uplift the voices of students, educators, and community members in shaping recommendations to close achievement gaps and advance OSPI’s mission to serve all students.

THE CURRENT UPDATE: DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Using a mixed-methods approach, we collected both quantitative data and qualitative data to examine education disparities among NH/PI

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youth and to develop community-informed recommendations. Quantitative data included formal metrics such as grades, graduation rates, and standardized testing scores provided by the Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI), as well as measures of student wellbeing from the Washington Healthy Youth Survey administered to a representative sample of students statewide.

Qualitative data were gathered through focus groups and interviews with students, educators, and administrators who shared their perspectives on the needs and challenges of NH/PI youth.

To ensure that recommendations were grounded in community expertise, we convened a Community Advisory Board (CAB) composed of leaders in the Washington NH/PI community to help interpret findings and shape recommendations.

In our quantitative analysis, we intentionally disaggregated NH/PI data from Asian/Asian American (As/AsAm) data, and when possible, we examined data on specific NH/PI communities (e.g., Yapese, Chamorro). For qualitative data, we prioritized representation across diverse Pasifika backgrounds and regions within the state.

NH/PI ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT CONTINUES TO LAG BEHIND PEERS

Notwithstanding rich histories and ways of knowing among NH/PI communities, K-12 academic achievement data reveal persistent

and concerning disparities in educational outcomes for NH/PI youth that have not improved since the 2008 report. Whereas data on standardized test scores appear to reflect widening disparities across the intervening years, graduation data may provide some evidence of progress. Disaggregated data reflect variability in academic outcomes, with challenges for non-Chamorro Micronesian youth and relatively fewer challenges for Native Hawaiian and Chamorro youth.

These disparities start early – only 1 in 3 NH/PI youth enter kindergarten with the skills needed for a smooth transition. They persist through K-12 education – between 2010 and 2024, approximately 3 in 4 NH/PI students (73%) enrolled in OSPI high schools graduated within 4 years, as compared to 79% of all students. And when considering postsecondary outcomes, NH/PI youth were less likely than most other racial and ethnic groups to complete a 2-year degree (14%) or 4-year degree (21%) in the years following high school graduation. Among those who did complete these programs, however, wages were comparable to members of other racial and ethnic groups during the first few years in the workforce.

In interviews conducted for this 2025 study update, educators acknowledged (and at times perpetuated) the pervasive stereotypes and lack of representation that students often work against: “I hope that they can see it within themselves and getting out of that categorized mindset that just because you're a Poly boy doesn't mean you have to play football. Just because you're a Poly girl doesn't mean you have to play volleyball. Get into another career path. You don't have to fall under the

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categories of what society tells you are...go be a frickin' scientist." While educators expressed hope for their students' long-term success, they noted that there needed to be "more creative, more flexible ways that students can earn a diploma" because academic standards do not always align with to students' goals or interests.

BUILDING STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING & WELLBEING THROUGH CONNECTION & REPRESENTATION

Pasifika cultures share a holistic sense of wellbeing that values relationships with family members, ancestors, community members, land, oceans, and skies. This worldview can conflict with the American education system, leading to disidentification and disconnection. Students and educators drew a parallel between a lack of wellbeing and a feeling of disconnection to the school environment. One educator shared "they're not reflected in the curriculum at all. Or celebrated in their buildings for who they are..." A student shared, poignantly: "It just brings me back to my cousin's school. He goes to Utah, and...it's one of the most populated state of Tongans...they had the Tongan mat on the wall decoration 'cause there's that many Tongans and just seeing that...almost made me cry...I wish I had that."

NH/PI students in Washington experience significant challenges to their wellbeing, contrary to stereotypical beliefs that NH/PI youth are carefree. Statewide, NH/PI youth exhibited the highest rate of depression symptoms of all major racial and ethnic groups, with 2 in 5 (40%) reporting a period of feeling

depressed in the past year. Chamorro (53%), Marshallese (42%), Native Hawaiian (39%), and other combined NH/PI (Chuukese, Kosraean, Palauan, Yapese; 45%) youth were especially prone to depressive symptoms. Anxiety problems were also common among NH/PI youth, with more than 1 in 3 (34%) NH/PI youth reporting at least mild anxiety. Perhaps most alarmingly, nearly 1 in 5 (19%) NH/PI youth report having thoughts of suicide at least once in the past year. QTPI students, particularly Transgender QTPI students, had greater disparities in mental health outcomes compared to straight and cisgender NH/PI students where more than 1 in 3 (35%) of QTPI and 2 in 3 Transgender QTPI (67%) reporting having thoughts of suicide at least once in the past year.

INFUSING NH/PI CULTURES AND HISTORIES INTO K-12 EDUCATION

A consistent and emphatic theme shared by our NH/PI student and educator interviewees, as well as by our Community Advisory Board, was the importance of bringing Pasifika culture and history into the educational environment to build student belonging, engagement, and investment in their school communities. During our interviews, students and educators shared how NH/PI students had challenges connecting with their classes because they did not see much of their Indigenous cultures and histories represented in the standard curriculum. As one student shared, "You want to feel included and represented. We mostly hear about bad events, but I also want to learn how we came together as people – how we survived and thrived." Despite these challenges, schools can build

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connection with NH/PI students and communities by honoring Pasifika identities and allowing these identities to be celebrated in the school setting.

Fortunately, NH/PI communities have worked together to create outstanding models for integrating community and culture into schools. Creating institutional support through formal partnerships and acknowledging staff who go above and beyond can advance OSPI's mission of increasing student belonging and, in turn, educational outcomes.

For example, the United Territories of Pacific Islanders Association of Washington (UTOPIA WA) partners with King County and Pierce County schools to engage youth in programs that cultivate leadership, safety, and cultural identity among QTPI, QTBIPOC, and NH/PI youth.

These programs teach Siva Samoa (traditional Sāmoan dance) and other cultural practices through their Nuanua knowledge corner.

In Eastern Washington, Marshallese community members implemented a culture and language elective course that allowed students to engage academically with topics around their Marshallese genealogical practices, family, storytelling, language, and culture.

Finally, in the Enumclaw school district, an immersive educational experience based on Pacific Northwest Tribal Canoe Journeys emerged as a key program to increase engagement and graduation rates among Native youth. The potential for NH/PI youth to benefit from similar programs, given shared culture as seafaring Indigenous peoples, is high.



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CONFLICTING SCHOOL AND FAMILIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Having to choose between family, culture, and school is an impossible decision to make for NH/PI students in the Washington K-12 education system. Death, funerals, and grief are sacred moments in the lives of NH/PI peoples. Across Oceania there are distinct practices and ceremonies that are held to commemorate the life of a loved one and grieve their passing. These ceremonies can last anywhere from 1 week to 1 month. To our knowledge, there are currently no formal policies in Washington's K-12 education system that address student needs for extended bereavement, including accommodations for the length of time needed for cultural bereavement ceremonies. Creating an education system that cares for these cultural needs and celebrates NH/PI students is likely to have profound effects on their academic achievement.

UPLIFTING EDUCATOR REPRESENTATION AND DEVELOPING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATORS

When NH/PI students worked with NH/PI educators, paraeducators, and non-NH/PI teachers who had culturally responsive pedagogical practices, both students and educators noted the support, safety, and trust that these educators provided. NH/PI educators are severely underrepresented in identified as NH/PI (US Bureau of Labor

Statistics). In Washington's OSPI schools, these numbers are higher, but NH/PI students still struggle to see themselves represented in the educator workforce. Across districts, the percentage of teachers who identify as NH/PI ranges from 0.0% to 2.6%.

As one NH/PI paraeducator shared, "I think having teachers that represent our students is really important...students need to see that there are people who look like them, who understand their culture and are in places... where they can look up to, or people they can look up to...it does make a difference when there are teachers who truly represent their students". Having positive role models can help to counter harmful stereotypes experienced by NH/PI youth that can label them as unintelligent, aggressive, lazy, and/or exotic. Increasing NH/PI representation in schools also help call attention to these damaging beliefs.

DISABILITIES & ACCOMMODATIONS FOR NH/PI YOUTH

During the 2023-24 school year, the number one request from parents to the Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO) was for assistance related to special education, inclusion, and equitable access. NH/PI families were no different, with the highest proportion (60%) of requests to OEO involving special education. NH/PI students with disabilities face unique discrimination in special education spaces when these intersections interweave with NH/PI stereotypes that create perceptions of NH/PI students as aggressive and disruptive. One

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teacher even noted that NH/PI boys are sometimes put in special education classes when there isn't evidence to support that change because the threshold for "misbehavior" is lower for NH/PI boys. In addition, stigma remains within NH/PI cultures and other communities of color. Continued recognition, education, and endorsement of a strengths-based perspective when working with families, can address these challenges. In addition, high-quality language navigation services are critical for discussing these complex topics.

ROOTING LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL DREAMS

NH/PI students dream of futures filled with growth, achievement, and the ability to uplift their families and communities. One student expressed, "For me, it's...my older sister. She just recently graduated college, and she's also going towards the medical field...If I can dream it, then I can do it." Some students dreams were also tied to wanting greater representation in their education: "I've been wanting to be a teacher...I've never seen a Marshallese teacher... It influences me because like I could start something." These dreams also encompass certain non-negotiables in caring for family and community, as captured by a student: "You know, the Fa'a Samoa way. Take care of your own. Take care of your grandmother, you know they brought you here, so help them...Help them where they are."

NH/PI educators all shared dreams of generating an education system that centered Pasifika Indigenous cultural values: "Working harder to make more money is not the end

goal. But it's the other things that feel important...how are you in community with each other and with yourself, and what are the things you need to learn in order to do that? And what are the ways in which we need to think about our planet and like non-human parts of like how we interact with the world? I wonder if we were in a place, that with more of the aligned values...how our Pacific Islander students and families would show up differently, and what success would look like."

These educational dreams challenge us to reflect on whether our systems align with the values that we claim to hold: growth, achievement, family, and community. Within many NH/PI worldviews, right relationships with family, community, the natural environment, and ancestors are critical for wellbeing and, in turn, educational success. The following pages offer policy and program recommendations informed by students, educators, data, and community input, to transform Washington's K-12 education system to better support these dreams.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. BOLSTER LANGUAGE SERVICES FOR NH/PI FAMILIES.

Effective language navigation services in NH/PI languages (e.g., Marshallese) are essential for family engagement and educational support. Schools and districts should use administrative data and engage communities to identify language needs and share resources across districts, especially for less commonly spoken languages.

2. DISAGGREGATE NH/PI FROM AS/ASAM DATA IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES AND DISAGGREGATE NH/PI DATA TO THE ETHNIC GROUP LEVEL WHEN POSSIBLE.

Aggregating data can obscure inequities. Educational data on NH/PI should be disaggregated by ethnic group (e.g., Tongan, Yapese, Kosraean) whenever possible. OSPI and ERDC should offer training and guidance on disaggregation practices for educators and administrators. If small group data must be suppressed or combined, name the communities represented and consider qualitative approaches or partnerships with community-serving organizations to understand community needs and priorities.

“Double count” multiracial youth in educational data so they remain visible in community-specific data, and continue to develop guidance, with community input, for representing the growing number of multiracial youth in the statewide discourse on achievement and opportunity gaps.

3. PROMOTE CULTURAL HUMILITY FOR ALL EDUCATORS AND NH/PI HISTORICAL AWARENESS

All educators should receive training on NH/PI history, values, and relational wellbeing and reciprocity for Indigenous and NH/PI students. Incorporating frameworks such as Indigenous Connectedness can strengthen student bonds to school. Minimally, educators should meet the Professional Educator Standards Board's (PESB's) Cultural Competency, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (CCDEI) standards. Pre-service and in-service training for educators and administrators should heighten awareness of NH/PI students' high rates of mental health challenges.

4. INVEST IN AND SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH WORKFORCE AND NH/PI STAFF

Expand investments in school mental health, with attention to hiring, training, and retaining NH/PI professionals.

NH/PI educators and paraprofessionals often serve as informal counselors and should be supported and compensated for this work. Offer financial and professional development pathways, especially for paraeducators without 4-year degrees.

5. EMBED NH/PI CULTURE INTO SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS.

Support initiatives that bring NH/PI culture into schools, including credit-bearing activities through Mastery-Based Learning. Ethnic studies courses should include NH/PI histories, aligning with Washington State's ethnic studies graduation requirement.

6. INCREASE NH/PI REPRESENTATION IN THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE.

NH/PI teachers are the most underrepresented of all teachers. Invest in recruiting, training, and retaining NH/PI educators. Opportunities supported by the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) and Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) should be highlighted in particular: Recruiting Washington Teachers, Bilingual Educators Initiative, Paraeducator Certificate Programs, and Apprenticeship Programs. Cultural competence training should not rely on the "AAPI" umbrella term, but address the distinct experiences of NH/PI communities. Consistent with HB1541 (the Nothing About Us Without Us act), partner with and compensate NH/PI community organizations to develop these educational opportunities.

7. APPROACH DISABILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS WITH CULTURAL AND STRENGTHS-BASED PERSPECTIVES

When assessing disability and crafting individualized education plans, professionals should work against biases that may lead to overdiagnosis of behavioral problems and underdiagnosis of learning challenges. Embrace strengths-based approaches and address stigma within communities of color. School psychologists and service providers should use self-assessment tools to reflect on their practices.

Recognize cultural obligations (e.g., bereavement practices) and provide flexible accommodations so students and families are not forced to choose between school and family.

8. SUPPORT AND AFFIRM QUEER AND TRANSGENDER PACIFIC ISLANDER (QTPI) YOUTH

In line with OSPI's commitment to LGBTQIA+ students, interweave QTPI narratives into the development of NH/PI studies curriculum, cultural programs, and educator training. Collaborate with QTPI community groups to expand and improve data gender and sexual orientation data categories and ensure culturally specific identities are acknowledged. Provide school districts with community-driven resources and training.



LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR STUDY:

The QR code below leads to our research website containing a full report for this research endeavor, *Stories of Educational Wayfinding: Supporting the Educational Voyages of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Students*. Or go to the following website: <https://tinyurl.com/uwaanhpireport>



FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS?

Please reach out to Dr. Max Halvorson (maximum2@uw.edu) or Santino Camacho (sgtino@uw.edu) for inquiries and questions about the project.