GROWING PRESENCE, EMERGING VOICES: PACIFIC ISLANDERS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN WASHINGTON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared by:
David T. Takeuchi, Ph.D.
Shirley Hune, Ph.D.
University of Washington Seattle

PURPOSE:

The State Legislature requested a study on academic achievement focusing exclusively on Pacific Islanders. This report fulfills the requirement of Section 119 of Engrossed Substitute House Bill (Chapter 329, Laws of 2008) to conduct a study of the achievement gap among Pacific Islanders. Similar, but not identical, studies on academic achievement have been conducted for African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. This study began on August 1, 2008, and consists of a review of the available empirical literature, analysis of the U.S. Census data, analyses of enrollment and achievement data from the Office of the Superintendent and Public Instruction (OSPI), review of pertinent academic performance data from other sources, and a few original data collection activities such as a teacher survey and key informant interviews with Pacific Islander students who graduated from Washington public schools. We also held monthly meetings with an advisory committee comprising representatives from the Pacific Islander community.

OVERVIEW OF PACIFIC ISLANDERS:

Pacific Islanders have made lasting contributions in the United States and the State of Washington for a long period of time, and they continue to leave their mark. Despite their social and cultural presence in communities across the state, Pacific Islanders are often overlooked in Washington. One clear marker of this oversight is that Pacific Islanders are frequently categorized together with Asian Americans in data collection activities and government reports. This is especially true when examining the educational achievement of Pacific Islanders. A consequence of this "lumping together" with Asian Americans is that it makes invisible the unique strengths and challenges within the Pacific Islander community. Pacific Islanders have histories, cultures, and social circumstances distinct from those of Asian Americans, and they have made their own impressive and lasting contributions to the economic, social, and cultural development and well-being of the state.

Pacific Islanders comprise a diverse number of ethnic groups that share ancestral origins to common geographic locations that include Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia. Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Tongans, Guamanians or Chamorros, and Fijians are the largest ethnic groups among Pacific Islanders. Pacific Islanders currently constitute a larger proportion of Washington State's population than of the United States as a whole. Recent estimates show that Pacific Islanders totaled 434,675 or 0.1% of the U.S. population. In Washington, the estimated number of Pacific Islanders totaled 27,564 or 0.4% of the State's population.

Although Pacific Islanders have a relatively small population size, their numbers have increased at a faster pace when compared with the overall population in the State. They are diverse in their origins and in their demographic characteristics. Whereas Native Hawaiians are the largest Pacific Islander ethnic group in the United States (33%), Samoans are the largest group in Washington State (31%), followed by Guamanians, Native Hawaiians, and Fijians (23%, 13%, and 4%, respectively). A substantial number live in poverty and a sizable

proportion are from different countries. Approximately 16% of Pacific Islanders in Washington State live in poverty, which is a rate much higher than the State poverty rate of 11% and 17% of Pacific Islanders in Washington State are born in another country. Despite their growing presence, unique characteristics, and pressing challenges, their voices about their quality of life have not been heard. One reason Pacific Islanders have been missing from discussions is that they are often categorized with Asian Americans.

PACIFIC ISLANDERS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:

Pacific Islander students composed 0.6% of the total student population in Washington public schools in 2007, having a larger number in the younger grades. Although three quarter of Pacific Islander students speak English as their primary language, 2% of Pacific Islander students is enrolled in the Transitional Bilingual Instruction Program (TBIP), ELL participation. Pacific Islanders are frequently at a disadvantage in Washington State: First, they are more likely, on average, to come from poor families and are often enrolled in schools in low income neighborhoods. For example, 77% of Samoan students in Seattle public school are receiving Free/Reduced Price Lunch, and they are more likely to live in single- or no-parent households. Second, they are often less engaged in school (e.g., higher absences), showing higher rates of daily absence (16%), short-term suspensions (11%), and dropout (10%). Third, a substantial number of public school students are not meeting the academic standards based on the WASL tests. Fourth, Pacific Islanders are not faring well in the WASL science and math tests. About half of Samoan high school students are at great risk of failing to graduate. Finally, these data show again the wisdom of separating Pacific Islanders from Asian Americans. The average tests scores indicate a substantial difference between the two groups.

PACIFIC ISLANDER PERSPECTIVES:

With the exception of Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders generally have a lower percentage of students who want to obtain a college degree than students from other ethnic groups. A large discrepancy is apparent when students are asked whether they expect to achieve a college degree. For Pacific Islanders, the difference between their hopes and their realistic expectations is substantial. Pacific Islander students may anticipate or already encounter obstacles that deter them from realizing their dreams.

The notion that Pacific Islander students defer or do not fulfill their dreams is supported by other data. A substantial proportion of Pacific Islanders do not reach college even when they have made plans to do so. Moreover, many Pacific Islander students who plan on attending a four-year college do not fulfill their goals a year after graduating from college.

It is noteworthy that Pacific Islander parents have high aspirations and expectations for their children. A sizeable proportion of parents fully expect their children to receive a college degree. In addition, parents are involved to some extent in the educational experiences of their children.

Pacific Islander teachers provide their experiences with Pacific Islander students and some critical insights about some of the effective strategies in working with Pacific Islander

students. Their interactions with Pacific Islander students tended to be positive and meaningful. Most of them stated that they have a better understanding of Pacific Islander students and families due to their own personal heritage and/or language abilities, and recognize that their heritage, background, and/or experiences in dual cultures are important in teaching. Some Pacific Islander teachers believed that best teaching practices for Pacific Islanders are "the same for all students"; others recommended a variety of strategies, for example, providing students with culturally relevant, authentic tasks, connecting with their community by visiting their homes and treating them with respect.

Some of these strategies are supported by Pacific Islander students, particularly ones who are sensitive to their culture. In key informant interviews with Pacific Islander students, they were queried about factors that led to their success in high school. The former students stated that the following were especially important: (1) hands-on training for Pacific Islander youth who want to learn more about their own culture (i.e., language, dance, history, etc.) and (2) activities that come from the Pacific Islander culture so that other students are able to learn about it as well.

DISCUSSION:

Our analyses show that Pacific Islanders represent a target group of people who do not receive the maximum benefit from their schooling in Washington State. There is an exceedingly high percentage of Pacific Islanders who do not pass different content test areas. A large percentage of Pacific Islanders do not expect to receive a college degree and different Pacific Islander groups anticipate some problems in meeting their occupational plans. The good news is that Pacific Islander parents and students seem to have high aspirations; that is, a majority of parents hope their children receive a college degree, and students similarly have high aspirations after college. Something happens while they are in school and in their adolescent years that is distracting them from realizing their educational goals. Survey data and our key informant interviews suggest that some of these factors include discrimination in school and neighborhoods, poor relationships with teachers and parents, a negative school climate for minority students, curricula that may not be sensitive to the learning styles of different cultural groups, and limited after-school activities.

What factors contribute to the achievement gap, especially in the WASL test scores, the major test in Washington State that affects high school graduation? It is commendable that the state has a long-standing interest in standardizing the measurement of student progress and proficiencies in different subject matters. Standardization allows for performance indicators to be defined and a common metric used to assess whether students reach them. However, it is clear that the WASL is a controversial measure of student progress and outcome. It is equally clear that the WASL has not been validated extensively among different cultural groups, including Pacific Islanders. The extent to which the WASL sufficiently and appropriately measures academic achievement at requisite grade levels for different cultural groups is not evident.

Beyond the actual test itself, past studies and recent public reports, including the METT document, suggest that reducing the academic achievement gap is a multifaceted challenge and

requires collaborative efforts among different parties in the state. The empirical literature on Pacific Islander educational achievement is quite limited, making it difficult to more precisely address this issue. However, it is possible to outline some general themes derived from past work on this topic. Economic considerations must be factored into educational reform. Data on the socioeconomic status of Pacific Islander families reinforce how closely economic disparities are tied to educational outcomes. Financial assistance and scholarship programs that target disadvantaged Pacific Islanders may play a critical role in increasing postsecondary opportunities for them. Closely related to economic factors is access to strong early childhood education, because it often helps to reduce the consequences of early child development problems. Experiences in childhood often have consequences into adulthood. Programs and policies that can support family child care arrangements among Pacific Islander families may be potentially useful practices.

Culture-based education (CBE) provides the model of best practice for Pacific Islander students. It has shown great promise among other native minority groups and has been shown to be compatible with conventional research-based best practices. Models of CBE also have demonstrated success in incorporating family and community into educational content. Culture-based education also incorporates active and experiential learning, where lessons are framed within authentic experiences, projects, and places. Thus, schools can make the education experience more relevant to Pacific Islander students. In addition to its careful consideration of cultural inclusion, CBE has the potential to increase the flow of information among school, family, and community in a meaningful way. One advantage to the CBE model is that teachers do not need to be experts or the sole source of providing culturally relevant experiences. Through CBE, the value of family and community embraces the notion that teachers can harness the knowledge, skills, and experience of family and community members for the benefit of their classes. The value of an approach in the CBE model benefits all students, not only for Pacific Islanders.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Develop and implement a strategic plan that fosters the cultural responsiveness of the school system.

   A comprehensive plan should include:

   - Institutional changes that effectively reduce the barriers that deter Pacific Islander students from reaching their academic potential.
   - Recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators from Pacific Islander communities.
   - Training teachers and administrators to more effectively teach Pacific Islander students and work with their families.

2. Initiate more extensive partnerships with existing Pacific Islander community groups.

   To reach that goal, the following are recommended:

- Collaborate with community-based organizations to (a) increase resources, including tapping linguistic and cultural experts, and (b) identify appropriate target groups.
- Hold information meetings for families on community sites with translators.
- Consult with Pacific Islander teachers, administrators, other school personnel, and specialists on Pacific Islander education.
- Develop partnerships with higher education institutions (two-year and four-year colleges). Key units include teacher education, ethnic studies, social work, and student affairs, all of whom have some students who are interested in K-12 experiences. Pacific Islander students, in particular, can serve as role models.

3. Develop and implement a research and evaluation plan that assesses the reduction of the achievement gap over time.

   The plan should include the following:

   - Disaggregate the different Pacific Islander groups in data collection and analyses to the extent possible that does not compromise human subjects consideration. As shown in this report, there are substantive differences among the different Pacific Islander ethnic groups.
   - Establish data linkages between the CSRS and other data sets including WASL. We found discrepancies in data elements for the same students such as in ethnicity and school district when different datasets were compared. Work should begin to insure that data are consistent across data sets and that linkages can occur. Without such longitudinal data, efforts to examine the factors that contribute to improvement over time will be severely limited.
   - In consultation with Pacific Islander groups, identify research questions about academic achievement that are meaningful for the schools and pacific Islander communities
   - Conduct follow up of students who graduate from Washington State High School.