

Advancing K-12 Asian American and Pacific Islander History:

Lessons From the Illinois TEAACH Act Executive Summary

March 2024

A field guide for **advocates, policymakers,** and **educators** to spark dialogues about inclusive education efforts in your state.





INTRODUCTION

Making History

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) history is American history. Yet the centuries-long presence, lived experiences, and transformative contributions of AAPIs — 24 million of whom currently call the U.S. home — have largely been excluded from our textbooks, classrooms, and campuses. The institutionalized invisibility of AAPI history, particularly in our nation’s K-12 schools, has normalized the prevailing idea that AAPIs do not belong in their own country. As anti-Asian hate dramatically resurged during the COVID-19 pandemic, there too emerged a dangerous consequence of continuing to view AAPIs as “perpetual foreigners.”

However, as AAPI history has taught us, moments of crisis have often been met by movements for justice. This truth was demonstrated in **July 2021**, when Illinois enacted the Teaching Equitable Asian American Community History (TEAACH) Act, becoming **the first U.S. state to mandate the teaching of Asian American history in public schools.**

*Throughout this summary, we intentionally shift between the pan-ethnic categories of “Asian American” and “AAPI.” For “Asian American,” we are referring to Illinois’ state-specific scope of the advocacy, passage, and implementation of the TEAACH Act. For “AAPI,” we are referring to the broader (and contentious) U.S. Census-derived category and multiple movements advocating for both Asian American and Pacific Islander K-12 history. This is why we have decided to insert “Pacific Islander” into the guide’s title, as we hope this guide will go beyond Illinois’s scope to support Pacific Islander as well as Asian American history efforts across the U.S.

A groundbreaking victory

Enacting the TEAACH Act was not only a groundbreaking victory for those who had been tirelessly advocating for the teaching of Asian American history in schools as a long-term solution to anti-Asian violence but for all who believe in the transformative power of inclusive history education to empower students with the skills to examine the past to critically address current inequities.

TEAACH advocates — as well as new partners, such as The Asian American Foundation (TAAF) — came together to support Illinois' public elementary and secondary schools in implementing a unit of instruction on Asian American history for the 2022-23 academic year.

In 2022, TAAF interviewed advocates, partners, and additional supporters involved in creating, passing, and implementing the TEAACH Act so others can learn from this crucial and necessary work.

“

You cannot tell American history without Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander history as well.”

Dr. Erika Lee
Bae Family Professor of History,
Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences

THIS SUMMARY IS FOR:

- Advocates and activists, including students, educators, parents, and other community members
- State-level practitioners
- State education agencies (SEAs) and departments of education
- District administrators and leaders
- Elected officials such as school board members and state legislators
- Policymakers
- Teacher professional organizations and unions
- Foundations and funders
- Nonprofit education and advocacy organizations
- Changemaking organizations focused on racial equity in the K-12 space

The following is an executive summary of key lessons and recommendations for those seeking to standardize the teaching of AAPI history for K-12 students and further advance inclusive history education.

STRUCTURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This executive summary follows the TEACH work across three phases.

PHASE 1

Building a Movement

PHASE 2

Creating a Mandate

PHASE 3

**Implementing Change in
Classrooms and Communities**

PHASE 1

Building a Movement

SUMMARY

A nationwide resurgence of anti-Asian hate in 2020, culminating with the 2021 Atlanta Spa Massacre, highlighted the longstanding perception of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” and the multiple forms of structural violence inflicted upon Asian Americans in the U.S., as well as the need for Asian American stories in all spaces, especially our K-12 classrooms. In Illinois, Asian American organizations mobilized within this context of tragedy, which simultaneously created a favorable sociopolitical landscape to advocate for the inclusion of Asian American history in public schools.

LESSON LEARNED #1

A robust, pre-existing Asian American advocacy ecosystem in Illinois incubated the K-12 Asian American history movement.

Under the banner of the Pan-Asian Voter Empowerment (PAVE) Coalition, Asian American community-based organizations in Illinois had jointly advocated for policy change for nearly a decade. The history of collaboration — combined with advocacy expertise and strong legislative relationships that were built over time — enabled the success of the TEAACH Act.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Conduct a comprehensive landscape audit of pre-existing advocacy ecosystems.

Advocacy groups that have worked toward equity should be identified across race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. The audit should also assess broader political, social, and civic structures to determine whether a community (or district/state) has the necessary systems, resources, and allies in place to build a movement for inclusive history.

3 Draw upon the community's prior education advocacy work.

Seek guidance from those who identify with and represent the group whose history is being advocated.

2 Consider various approaches to advance inclusive history education.

Some approaches include revising state education standards or shifting local district policies and practices. Remember: Pushing for legislative policy, e.g., an instructional mandate, isn't the only solution and may not always be the most effective in terms of content, reach, and impact. Student learning should always be the end goal and determine your contextualized approach.

4 Consider building a longer-term advocacy infrastructure while weighing various approaches. Don't rush.

It's better to move strategically, purposefully and collaboratively than it is to move fast and alone.



“

[The movement that led to TEAACH] probably would not have happened without the death of George Floyd and the alliance with the Black Lives Matters movement that bore a lot of Asian American solidarity. There was so much public outrage when it came to anti-Asian American violence, that [the movement] was able to be strategic in a way that in the past there was not enough support and attention to drive change.”

Dr. Yoon Pak

Professor of Asian American Studies; Head of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

LESSON LEARNED #2

A favorable political context in Illinois — along with a heartbreaking tragedy — provided advantageous conditions for the passage of the TEAACH Act.

In 2021, the Democratic Party controlled the governor’s office and both chambers of the Illinois General Assembly. A record number of Asian Americans, many of whom had personally experienced the omission of Asian American history from their education, were elected to state office from 2016 to 2020. Illinois’s growing Asian American Caucus enjoyed strong relationships with their Black and Latinx Caucus counterparts. Meanwhile, the March 2021 Atlanta spa shootings generated additional urgency and political will to pass the TEAACH Act, directly contributing to the overwhelming bipartisan majorities that approved the bill.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Develop a narrative strategy of compelling stories

based on the lived experiences of community members who identify with and represent the proposed inclusive history to activate proponents and sway neutral groups. **Prioritize student voices.** Amplify their personal stories to humanize this movement and make it tangible.

2 Anticipate and prepare for disagreement

among groups working together and **potential opposition from outside groups.** Engage with **mission-aligned teachers first** while building and **supporting multiracial coalitions.** These efforts will make advocating for inclusive history education more strategic and sustainable.

PHASE 2

Creating a Mandate

SUMMARY

Prior mandates for inclusive history in Illinois established a favorable, intersectional environment for creating and passing TEACH. However, the prior mandates' main weaknesses — lack of instructional clarity and implementation funding — were also replicated in the TEACH bill. Similar efforts should not simply mimic past bills and legislations but improve upon them.

LESSON LEARNED #1

Pre-existing education instructional mandates for inclusive history enabled the creation and passage of an Asian American history mandate.

The Illinois school code already included mandates for Black history; women's history; Holocaust and genocide history; Holocaust and Genocide Study; LGBTQ+ history; and people with disabilities history. The TEAACH Act, including its final language, was based on the Illinois' Black History mandate (passed in 1990), which made legislative adoption easier.

RECOMMENDATION

Pursue broader coalitional movements for ethnic studies.

If no inclusive history mandates exist, then create a more comprehensive solution to tell the stories of all marginalized communities.

LESSON LEARNED #2

Related news events can heighten a sense of urgency and accelerate passage.

Increased attacks and discrimination against Asian Americans in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic created a sense of urgency, prompting Asian Americans nationwide, including in Illinois, to mobilize and call for solutions to anti-Asian racism. In Illinois, this included a call for passing an Asian American history mandate.

RECOMMENDATION

Convey the message of the moment to drive change.

Capitalize on the momentum, urgency and need of the moment the community calls for.

LESSON LEARNED #3

Lack of clarity in mandate language = lack of clarity for execution.

The Illinois school code already included mandates for Black history; women's history; Holocaust and genocide history; Holocaust and Genocide Study; LGBTQ+ history; and people with disabilities history. The TEAACH Act, including its final language, was based on the Illinois' Black History mandate (passed in 1990), which made legislative adoption easier.

RECOMMENDATION

Be specific with legislative language.

Include the "what" and the "how" of implementation for accountability, and specify that accountability structures should support fidelity in implementation.

(Note: It's important to strike a balance. The language should be prescriptive enough to give clear implementation directions to teachers and districts without being overly prescriptive to limit what teachers can do, how they should do it, etc.)

LESSON LEARNED #4

Lack of funding for new mandates can result in outside organizations doing the work for which state agencies or districts should be responsible.

The Illinois Black History mandate in 1990 had no funding for implementation and no clear accountability system. This mandate led to sparse implementation. Although additional legislation was passed 25 years later to support implementation, funding and accountability should have been made clear at the outset.

RECOMMENDATION

Make funding and resourcing a priority

Capitalize on the momentum, urgency and need of the moment the community calls for.



PHASE 3

Implementing Change in Classrooms and Communities

SUMMARY

Passing TEAACH was hard; implementing it is even more challenging. Ensuring K-12 educators effectively deliver Asian American history throughout Illinois has required the collaboration of multiple stakeholders. With a shared vision, clear roles and targeted resources, the TEAACH Collaborative trained almost 2,500 educators in the first year.



“

Success is an unlearning of something, and requires some sort of intervention and curriculum that untangles the things that have been problematic. There should be an ‘aha’ moment that drives reflective, sustained change in the process.”

Dr. Sharon Lee
Teaching Assistant Professor, University
of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

LESSON LEARNED #1

Defining success supports actionable change.

Before legislation was passed, implementation success was broadly defined as teaching Asian American history within schools. This definition sharpened over time. Having clear guidelines on what success “looks like” can help stakeholders stay focused, push the work further, and measure results.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop a vision for implementation success.

in the classrooms and lead with that vision in creating professional development, curriculum, and collaborative opportunities among teachers.

LESSON LEARNED #2

Working in silos can result in slow, redundant and ineffective impact. Choosing partners who are right for the work is essential.

Various individuals and organizations across the state were involved in inclusive history work before TEAACH but worked in their silos with limited reach. Coordination took time with plenty of trial and error but reduced redundancies and multiplied impact. **Passing a bill is the beginning** of the implementation work. It can take decades to make fundamental changes in education. **Choosing the right partners** can help ensure lasting momentum with steady impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 **Build a collaborative ecosystem of people and organizations to affect change.**

Build the ecosystem early with partners with the right expertise, reach, roles, resources and a clear shared purpose. What worked well in Illinois was a **public-private collaboration** between the state education agency; higher education (teacher preparation and history/ethnic studies); teacher leaders; private funders; and local community organizations.

3 **Make the case for funding early and often.**

TAAF pooled private funding to catalyze state funding. This effort multiplied the effectiveness of initial implementation efforts. Both private and public funding are key. While private funding can be quicker to activate than public funding, public funding increases the likelihood of longevity in resourcing.

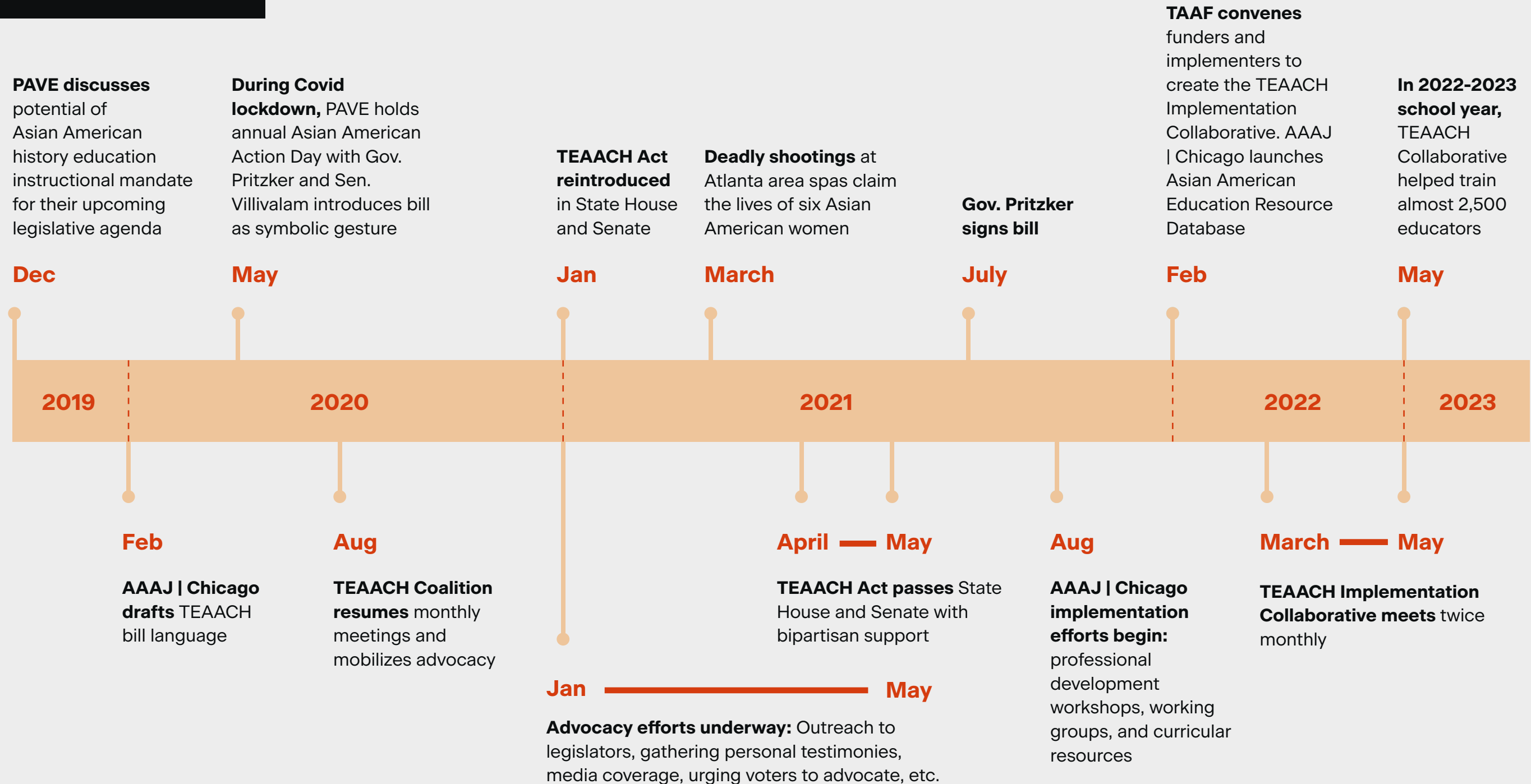
2 **Appoint or hire an individual.**

It's critical to have someone dedicate at least part of their time acting as coordinator of a collaborative ecosystem. Collaborative efforts tend to slow down unless there is one person to lead.

4 **Ensure change spreads throughout the state by supporting teacher leadership.**

Implementation across a diverse state requires individuals knowledgeable about their community's inclusive history and the educational needs of their local community.

KEY MOMENTS TIMELINE



TEAACH BY THE NUMBERS

In the 2022-2023 school year, the TEAACH Collaborative's reach and impact included:

1,725

K-12 teachers trained

1,478 by AAAJ | Chicago

227 by UIUC College of Education

20 by Asian American Caucus - Education Fund

30,015

students taught

2,475

total educators trained

750

administrators and other educators trained about TEAACH and the updated social science standards

113

professional development and public workshops offered



“

As someone who has helped to prepare teachers in the past, sat on boards of education, etc., we have to start with the teachers. We have teachers who were not taught better, therefore it is so hard to do better.”

Dr. Erica Thieman
Director, Standards and Instruction Department,
Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)

OUR VISION

TEAACH Collaborative: A Vision for Implementation

Below is our mission, roles, and responsibilities for the TEAACH collaborative. Rather than a prescriptive formula, we've laid out a recommended architecture of implementation for other states that can and should be tailored according to local conditions.

Mission for the TEAACH Collaborative: To change the Illinois public education system and beyond by empowering the next generation of students to be more inclusive and contributive citizens. We'll do this by teaching an accurate, honest, and complete history of Asian Americans as an integral part of American history.

ROLES + RESPONSIBILITIES



Progressive Advocate

AAAJ | Chicago (Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago) provides professional development for K-12 educators and advocates legislatively to improve institutional support and resources from the state for implementation of inclusive history mandates. In addition, AAAJ | Chicago supports organizations in other Midwest states to advocate for inclusive history in their local contexts.



Operational Coordinator

ISBE (Illinois State Board of Education) supports the Collaborative with its vast institutional knowledge and insight into systems and programs at the statewide level while coordinating efforts amongst the Collaborative's members through regular meetings, convenings, and strategic synchronizing of efforts.



Amplifying Funder

TAAF (The Asian American Foundation) provides financial support for the Collaborative's members while amplifying the work to other states through convenings, resource sharing, and connections



Research and Development Hub

UIUC (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) creates resources and training to develop culturally responsive teachers while also building a network of higher education institutions committed to developing culturally responsive pre-service educators. UIUC will also assess and research TEAACH outcomes.

CONCLUSION

A Mirror to Our Past, a Window to Our Future

Educator Emily Style proposes the “Mirrors and Windows” concept as a framework for creating an inclusive education. She suggests that students need two types of representation in their curriculum: content in which they can see themselves (mirrors) and content in which they learn about others (windows). Mirrors increase belonging for historically marginalized groups, while windows increase understanding by members of historically privileged groups. The full, accurate, and honest teaching of AAPI history in K-12 classrooms is needed for AAPI students to see their worth reflected back to themselves, while it offers non-AAPI students a clear view of the full humanity of AAPIs. Both are needed in our country to create a safer, more equitable America for all.

We hope that this TEAACH Act Executive Summary helps accelerate the inclusion of AAPIs and other marginalized communities whose histories deserve to be taught and learned, and that we can all work together for meaningful change for this generation and generations to come.



A young boy with short dark hair, wearing a light blue shirt, is looking towards a woman. The woman has long dark hair tied back with a colorful scrunchie and is wearing a light blue shirt. They are in a classroom setting with other children in the background.

“

We are in an unprecedented moment of crisis and change. Let's use this time as an opportunity to build bridges and promote equity in the classroom and beyond.”

Grace Pai

Executive Director, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Asian American Foundation Education Team thanks the following individuals for their inputs, insights, and guidance on the executive summary:

- Dr. Sohyun An
- Georgette Bhathena
- Dr. Jason Chang
- Norman Chen
- Kathy Ko Chin
- Venu Gupta
- Manami Kano
- Diana Khartman
- Dr. Sharon Lee
- State Rep. Dr. Theresa Mah
- Dr. Yoon Pak
- Sendhil Revuluri
- Weonhee Anne Shin
- Dr. Erica Thieman
- Lily Trieu
- Dr. April Yee

Additionally, we are grateful to the following for their copy and design support:

- Sharline Chiang
- Jennifer Kim Van Nguyen
- Polly Fong
- Kim Phillips

Partners

- Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)
- Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago
- University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign College of Education
- Asian American Caucus Education Fund

Funders





- John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- Capital One
- Lloyd A. Fry Foundation
- Chicago Community Trust
- Woods Fund Chicago

Authors

- **Jordan Andrew Weatherl, Ed.M.**
Candidate, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- **Dr. Terry K Park**
Education Program Officer,
The Asian American Foundation
- **Grace K. Pai**
Executive Director, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago

Contact

Website: taaf.org
Email: info@taaf.org

-  @taaforg
-  @taaforg
-  /taaforg
-  /taaforg