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Study says Asians are sprinkled in schools

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BETSY HAMMOND

Asian American schoolchildren are more evenly distributed across the Portland area's elementary schools than anywhere else in the country, a new study says.

Asian American pupils are enrolled in nearly every school in greater Portland, with sizable clusters in Beaverton, Milwaukie, Aloha, Tigard and Vancouver, Wash., as well as in every quadrant of Portland.

That's a striking contrast with other metropolitan areas, including Minneapolis, New York City and San Francisco, where Asian American pupils are highly concentrated in a few, mainly inner-city schools.

The study of school integration nationwide, conducted at the Lewis Mumford Center at the State University of New York at Albany, portrays Portland's integrated schools as a great setting for Asian American children. The authors say segregation harms children of color by isolating them in schools where most of their classmates are poor, where there is diminished access to the best teachers and where achievement lags.

But the high degree of school integration in the area has trade-offs for Asian American pupils, according to area parents, educators, students and Asian American activists.

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Highly integrated schools mean Asian American families aren't shut out of any neighborhood, and their children can enjoy the same quality teachers, academic expectations, programs and materials as white students, activists and parents say. The area's integrated schools also let Asian American children spend their days in multicultural settings that prepare them for adult life in the United States in the 21st century.

"Those of us who have come to the Pacific Northwest as immigrants and refugees have found good acceptance and had a lot more pleasant experience than immigrants in some other parts of the country," says Lee Cha, family services director of the Asian Family Center in Northeast Portland.

Asian American students are diffused among 317 of the Portland area's 330 elementary schools, but they represent less than one-tenth of the student body in nearly all of them. That means Asian American students and those of Pacific Island origin aren't the top concern anywhere, which can create problems, says Thach Nguyen, head of the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon.

Cha and Nguyen say Asian American pupils and their families have particular needs -- to have their cultures honored and understood; to have their school connect with them in an array of languages including Vietnamese, Korean, Urdu, Laotian, Mandarin and Hmong; and to have educators see beyond the stereotype of the Asian American math whiz or super-scholar.

But those often fall off the radar screen at the typical school where whites dominate, Hispanics are the next largest group and Asian Americans students are sprinkled two or three to a classroom, Asian American parents and activists say.

For example, Nguyen says, many Asian American males don't graduate high school in four years in Portland high schools, but that gets little public attention.

The pluses and minuses of Asian American pupils being so widely dispersed around Portland can be seen in the life of Cassandra Nguyen, 11.

The sixth-grader, daughter of a Vietnamese refugees, attends a school with typical racial make-up: Menlo Park Elementary, in the David Douglas district in Northeast Portland. The school was about 80 percent white when she started kindergarten. It has grown more diverse during her years there but still is 70 percent white and about 7 percent Asian American.

Cassandra has searing memories of being viewed as different and inferior.

"Ever since I was in kindergarten, I have been made fun of a lot," she says. "Kids in my class had never heard of my last name, so they would make fun of it. My friends would want to find out each other's middle names. They couldn't pronounce mine. They would laugh and talk with each other about it and make up different ways to say it. . . . There have been a lot of times that I've cried."

But Cassandra and her father say she has benefited academically and socially from being educated in the mainstream, not an Asian American niche. Menlo Park is where Cassandra met her best friend, Emily Strong, who has been a source of unwavering support. And Cassandra says she feels great about her school and her place in it right now.

Her teacher, Grace Scholl, decided to emphasize a topic that got only quick treatment in the sixth-grade world cultures textbook: immigrants.

Scholl made the choice to better connect her students' lives to their schoolwork. In her class of 32, she says, there are two students whose families immigrated from Russia, one from Ukraine, four from Mexico, one from Laos plus Cassandra.

Cassandra asked if she could read her father's life story to the class. Scholl eagerly agreed.

Cassandra feels something very important changed as a result.

"When I was done reading the story, a whole bunch of people in the class came up to me and they were saying thank you and asking me a whole bunch of questions about it," she says. "And the field trip (to Portland's Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization) was really helpful to opening people's eyes. Our whole class went, and they were amazed at how many people IRCO helps every year. I think it really helped them to understand people who are a lot different than they are."

It takes a schoolwide effort to create a climate of respect and honor for students' diverse cultures, says Patty Book, principal of McKinley Elementary in Beaverton, which is about 60 percent white, 20 percent Hispanic and nearly 15 percent Asian American. Teachers must model appreciation for language and culture. Outreach to families requires extra time and energy. Staff members must come from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

But the payoff is rich: Students learn more about the world, understand each other better and achieve at higher academic levels, Book says.

"When I got here, I didn't know how to speak English that much," says Nini Khunsamart, whose family moved from Thailand to Beaverton less than two years ago. "But some kids here want to know about Thailand. And now I have a lot of friends."

Read the study online at mumford1.dyndns.org/cen2000/report.html. Reach Betsy Hammond at betsyhammond@news.oregonian.com or at 503-294-7623.

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