

An Open Plea to New Yorkers:

What are we teaching our youth when we shame and dismiss their concerns about their own education?

The debate on reforming the Specialized High School admissions to be more equitable for New York City public school students has become vitriolic. It has fostered unsafe spaces for those with differing viewpoints. It has also been dominated by the voices of adults: parents, school administrators, elected officials, and alumni associations. This issue, which really speaks to the quality and fairness of public education for our young people, should be encouraging dialogue among youth and not silencing, shaming or attacking them, regardless of their stance.

We should be teaching our youth that their experiences and their concerns matter; that they have a right to be heard and to help shape their own education. We should be creating safe spaces for their voices to be heard.

Instead, as witnessed in recent public forums and hearings on the topic, civil discourse has broken down and legitimate concerns are dismissed, left unaddressed, and even worse, resulted in bullying. Young people and their families have been targeted, taunted, and insulted for simply voicing opinions and experiences.

Furthermore, the divisiveness, which is fueled by the model minority myth, pits Asian Pacific American (APA) youth against black and Latinx youth and betrays the overarching goal of public education as an equalizer. Many in this debate fail to recognize the structural racism that has shaped our public education system, and that is rooted in anti-blackness. But many also fail to understand histories of APA communities and the multiple struggles that APA families and children face in an education system that overlooks our communities' needs and renders our APA youth invisible.

We *MUST* take a step back and think: is this who we as a community want to be for our young people? For 15 years and counting, APA students, as part of CACF's Asian American Student Advocacy Project (ASAP), have been fighting for public school system curriculum that represents the histories and diverse landscapes of APA people; to have fully funded schools that can adequately meet the needs of APA students, including our English language-learning and immigrant students; and to appreciate how APA history links our struggles to the many faced by other people of color and marginalized communities. These issues are complex and compel us to come together; to create an environment that supports our young people and works to reform our public education system.

We *MUST* teach our youth that they are part of a democracy and that it is not only welcome but also imperative that youth take an active role in improving their lives. APA youth stories must be heard and it is time to provide safe and encouraging spaces so APA youth can speak. That means that we *MUST* stop taunting and discouraging young people and their families. We *MUST* stop using the public record and knowledge of students' addresses and online identities as vehicles for harassment and intimidation.

CACF is committed to continuing our work to lift APA youth voices in this and other debates on educational reform, and we stand in solidarity with ALL young people so they are not scared into silence. We commend each and every young person who speaks up every day for the betterment of our schools.

Sincerely,

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