

# New York City Eyes Shortage of Asian Public-School Teachers

By Farah Akbar | February 17, 2016



Adi Talwar

*Nahrin Chowdhury, whose family comes from Bangladesh, teaches math in a Brooklyn high school but was originally on track to become a pharmacist, a path that many family members urged her to maintain.*

Tayebina Deb, 33 is a Bangladeshi-American who is studying to become an early childhood teacher at St. Johns University. It made sense for her to become a teacher as she comes from a family of educators: Two of her aunts are teachers back in Bangladesh and her grandfather worked in education as well. Once she graduates, she hopes to teach in a New York City Public School. She is passionate about teaching young children and calls it a "feel-good" career.

But Asian-Americans, like Deb, are a minority in teacher-training programs all across the United States. This is particularly apparent in New York City where nearly 15 percent of all public-school students are of Asian origin yet under 6 percent of the teaching force is, though the numbers are slowly growing (<http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2014teacherdemographics.pdf>).

Asians are a diverse group of people who bring with them a host of distinct cultures from dozens of countries and a multitude of different languages—45 to be exact. New York City contains the highest total Asian population of any U.S. city with over one million people.

"It's very important that there be more Asian teachers and teachers of color," says Sonia Bhuta, the Executive Director of the Queens-based non-profit group South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!), which works to provide youth with tools to help them thrive in school and in their own personal lives. "There's a lot to be said about young people having teachers that can relate to them and understand their culture and family," she says.

Students may benefit academically as well when they have a teacher who "looks like them." A 2015 study found positive effects in math performance when black, white and Asian students studied under teachers who were of the same race as them (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272775715000084>).

So where, then, are all the Asian teachers? A lack of encouragement from the community and a fear of the "unknown" may be partly to blame.

Felicia Chang, 28 teaches 9th grade statistics at a Brooklyn high school and is the daughter of Chinese immigrants. "Of course, like every immigrant family, they wanted me to pursue something in the law or medical field," she says. "But when I explained to them that it was not what I wanted to do, they understood."

Children of Asian immigrants joke that becoming a doctor, lawyer or engineer is part of the proverbial "checklist" of things they need to accomplish to be successful. "Most Asians tend to be drawn to careers that offer stability and financial success," says Bhuta. "This is particularly important for children who come from families who struggle financially." Today, around 20 percent of U.S. medical school students are of Asian origin and over 15 percent of Masters degrees in engineering were awarded to Asian-Americans in 2011 though they are only 5.6 percent of the total U.S. population (<https://www.asee.org/papers-and-publications/publications/college-profiles/2011-profile-engineering-statistics.pdf>).

This mentality derives at least in part from the history of Asians in the United States. Having highly skilled jobs is what allowed many Asians to emigrate here in the first place.

Asians were virtually excluded from emigrating to the United States for years until the 1965 Immigration Act was enacted. That law ushered in a wave of skilled workers including nurses, doctors and engineers from Asian countries, ending the previous discriminatory quota-based immigration system that was based on countries of origin that favored Europeans.

Many of the younger generation of Asians today wind up following the footsteps of their parents.

Nahrin Chowdhury, 35, whose family comes from Bangladesh, teaches math in a Brooklyn high school but was originally on track to become a pharmacist, just like her father. She remembers that many family and community members, quite a few of whom are pharmacists and doctors, made impassioned pleas for her not to stray from pharmacy.

"Not following their footsteps and leaving to do something that would result in lower status and lower salaries just didn't make sense to any of the adults," she says, looking back.

"Careers in nonprofit, education and social work are very unknown to newer immigrants," says Bhuta. "It can be a real culture shift." She says that SAYA helps South Asian youth explore such careers, which she says are often times overlooked by Asians.

Language barriers may be preventing Asians from becoming teachers as well. According to the Asian-American Federation, many Asian immigrant adults have "limited English proficiency," making it highly challenging or impossible to graduate from teacher training programs and pass all the requisite exams to become certified to teach. Sixty-three percent of Chinese adults in New York City have difficulty speaking English or cannot speak the language at all. The same applies to more half of Bangladeshi adults (<http://www.aafny.org/cic/briefs/chinese2013.pdf>) in New York City.

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One teacher of Asian origin who did not want to be identified, says that because of her limitations as an English speaker, she had to take the Liberal Arts and Sciences Test (L.A.S.T.), one of the required exams for teacher certification, six times before finally passing it. The test covers science, math, history and art and consists of an essay question. She took all the other requisite teacher exams two times before passing. She knows of other Asians who simply gave up trying to become teachers after failing the exams.

The city has made efforts to hire more Asian teachers and teachers of color. Just last year, Mayor Bill de Blasio along with the New York City's Young Men's Initiative launched a \$16.5 million campaign to recruit 1,000 black, Latino and Asian men to become public-school teachers over a period of three years. Presently, over 40 percent of male public-school students are children of color while only around 8 percent of teachers are men of color.

"It's a shared responsibility for everyone, from community members to city agencies, to place more value on teaching and non-profit careers," says Bhuta, who is also on the Advisory Board of the Young Men's Initiative.

Public schools currently provide bilingual and English as a Second Language classes to more than 150,000 students, but the need to hire teachers who have knowledge of certain Asian languages is acute, especially in "high demand" languages like Chinese and Bengali. Chinese is the home language of almost 14 percent of English Language Learners (ELL) while Bengali is the home language ([http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/FD5EB945-5C27-44F8-BE4B-E4C65D7176F8/0/2013DemographicReport\\_june2013\\_revised.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/FD5EB945-5C27-44F8-BE4B-E4C65D7176F8/0/2013DemographicReport_june2013_revised.pdf)) of almost 4 percent of ELL students, according to the Department of Education.

The Department of Education offered to subsidize coursework for appointed teachers to become certified in bilingual education during the 2015-2016 school year in both of those languages (<http://teachnyc.net/why-teach-nyc/high-need-subjects>) to address the need.

The DOE also opened 25 new dual-language programs this year alone, that included classes in Chinese and Japanese. (Three Bengali dual-language programs already existed along with numerous Chinese classes and one Korean class). Last October, New York representatives Grace Meng and Joseph Crowley appealed to Schools' Chancellor Carmen Fariña to open additional dual-language programs in South Asian languages such as Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi (<https://meng.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/meng-and-crowley-call-on-nyc-school-system-to-create-dual-language>) to accommodate Limited English Proficient (LEP) Speakers. In dual-language classes, 50 percent of students are English Language Learners (ELL) and 50 percent are English-proficient students and instruction is conducted in both English and a different language.

Chowdhury often translates for Bengali-speaking parents during meetings and has taken the initiative to act as a mentor to Bangladeshi students. Things have improved at home too—she says that the mindset of her family and community have changed for the better and she's received a lot of support since then.

Deb considers herself "lucky" that her family supported her decision to become a teacher. She says that she may even consider a career in a dual-language or bilingual program when she graduates, thus utilizing her Bengali speaking skills. "I want to make a difference in children's lives and I want to help my community grow and be successful," she says. "Why not have a hand in it?"