

Pacific Islander Students in California's TK-12 Schools

An Analysis of Enrollment, Opportunity, Achievement, and College-Going

September 2026

Executive Summary

Pacific Islander students carry generations of knowledge, language, culture, and community into California classrooms. They are scholars, leaders, artists, athletes, organizers, and caregivers with aspirations for themselves, their families, and their communities. California's responsibility is to ensure its education system provides the opportunities and conditions they need to flourish.

Yet across several measures of opportunity and outcomes, California's education system is not yet meeting that responsibility. Nearly one in three Pacific Islander students (31.3%) is chronically absent, compared with 19.4% statewide.¹ Pacific Islander students are suspended at nearly 1.5 times the statewide rate (4.3% vs. 2.9%).² Fewer than half of Pacific Islander graduates complete the A-G coursework required for admission to the University of California and California State University.³ Fewer than four in ten meet the state standard in English language arts and just over one in four meet the standard in mathematics.⁴

Only 44% of Pacific Islander graduates were supported to complete the A-G course sequence required for 4-year university, compared with 54% statewide

These patterns continue as students approach higher education. While Pacific Islander students graduate from high school at a rate close to the statewide average, only 57.4% of Pacific Islander high school graduates in 2022-23 enrolled in college, compared with 65.7% statewide.⁵ These numbers do not tell us what Pacific Islander students are capable of. They tell us where California must do better.

For too long, Pacific Islander students have been counted but not prioritized, folded into broader categories, and left out of the decisions that shape their schools. That status quo is no longer acceptable. California has a new opportunity to reset its commitments for Pacific Islander students and families.

This brief maps Pacific Islander students across California's TK-12 system and their transition to college. It also highlights community-led approaches already showing promise – such as San Francisco Unified's Fa'a Samoa Initiative – and names the evaluation gap that keeps effective practices from being scaled. The path forward begins with seeing our students clearly, listening to Pacific Islander communities, investing in their success, and building an education system where every Pacific Islander student has the opportunity to thrive.

Who Are California's Pacific Islander Students?

California's Pacific Islander communities include Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Chamorros, Tongans, Fijians, Marshallese, and people with roots across Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia – they bring distinct languages, histories, cultures, and migration experiences. There is no single Pacific Islander experience.

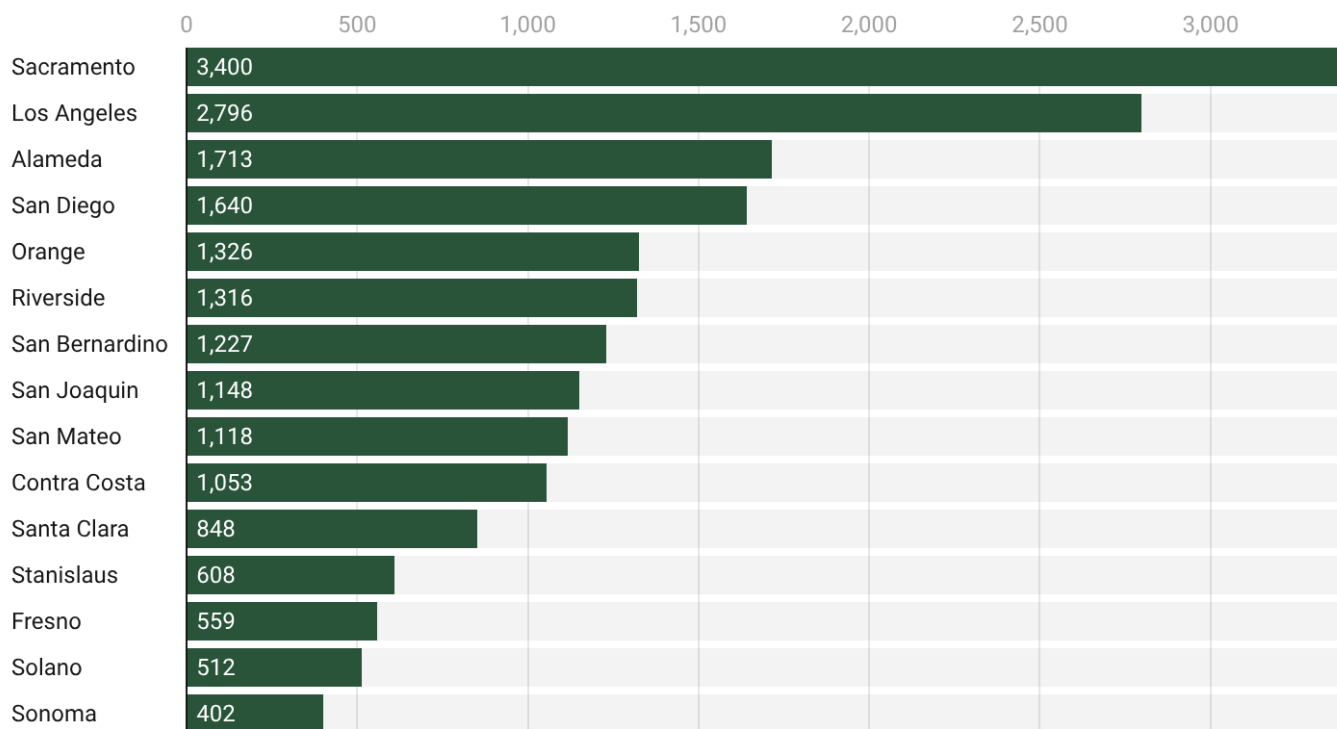
Yet Pacific Islander students are often treated as one small population within California's education system, and in some data systems they are still grouped with Asian Americans under the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander (AANHPI) umbrella. Even when Pacific Islander data are reported separately, statewide averages hide what is hap-

pening within individual communities and in the places where Pacific Islander students are concentrated. That matters, because Pacific Islander students are not evenly distributed across the state.

In 2025-26, 22,692 Pacific Islander students were enrolled in California public schools,⁶ about 0.4% of the state's roughly 5.7 million TK-12 students, making them easily overlooked. Those students are concentrated in a relatively small number of counties. Sacramento enrolls the most, followed by Los Angeles and a cluster of Bay Area, Central Valley, and Southern California counties, enrolling 87% of California's Pacific Islander students.

Where California's Pacific Islander Students Attend School

The 15 California counties with the largest Pacific Islander TK-12 enrollment, 2025–26

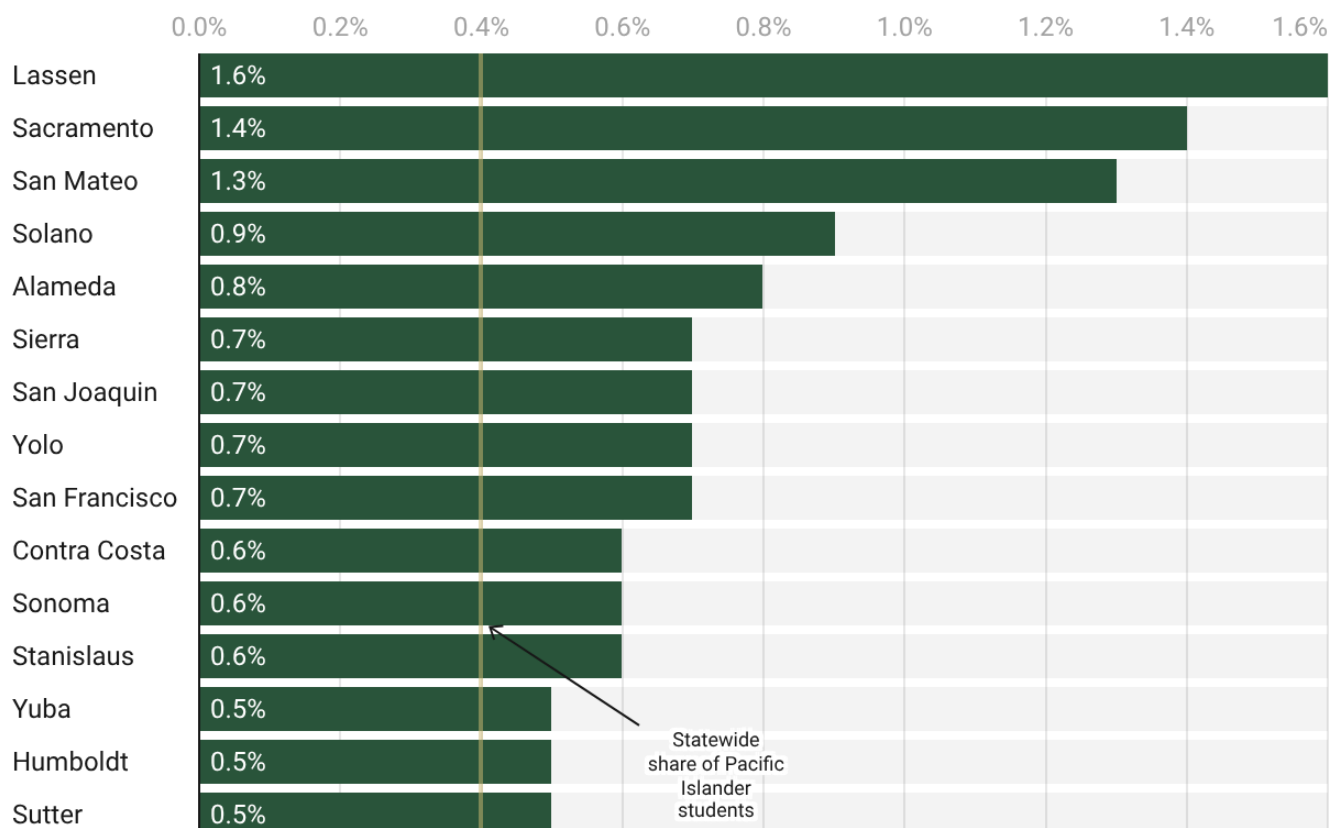


Pacific Islander refers to students reported as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander in CDE enrollment data

Source: California Department of Education, 2025–26 Census Day Enrollment

Pacific Islander Students Make Up A Larger Share of Enrollment in Northern & Central California Counties

Pacific Islander students as a percentage of total TK-12 public school enrollment, by county, 2025-26.



Counties shown are the 15 with the highest percentage of students identified as Pacific Islander. Percentages are calculated using Census Day enrollment. Race/ethnicity reflects CDE reporting categories.

Source: California Department of Education, 2025–26 Census Day Enrollment

Raw counts, though, understate Pacific Islander students in some communities. Measured as a share of local enrollment, Pacific Islander students are far more visible in specific counties, a pattern that points to where targeted, culturally grounded investment would reach the most students. In Lassen, Sacramento, and San Mateo counties, Pacific Islander students' share of enrollment is more than three times their statewide share. Percentages in small counties such as Lassen

and Sierra reflect small numbers of Pacific Islander students. These concentrations matter for state and local policy. They show where culturally responsive programs, community partnerships, and targeted outreach can reach significant numbers of Pacific Islander students and families – and they challenge the idea that a population must be large statewide before its needs deserve attention. For Pacific Islander students, visibility is the first step toward equity.

Pacific Islander Assets, Aspirations, and Excellence

Any conversation about Pacific Islander education must begin with what our students bring with them. Across California, Pacific Islander students grow up within families and communities rich in language, cultural knowledge, faith traditions, creativity, and responsibility to one another.⁷ Many move across multiple cultural worlds every day, learning from parents, grandparents, elders, churches, community organizations, coaches, educators, and extended family. Many also come from multilingual households⁸ where language carries history, identity, and ways of

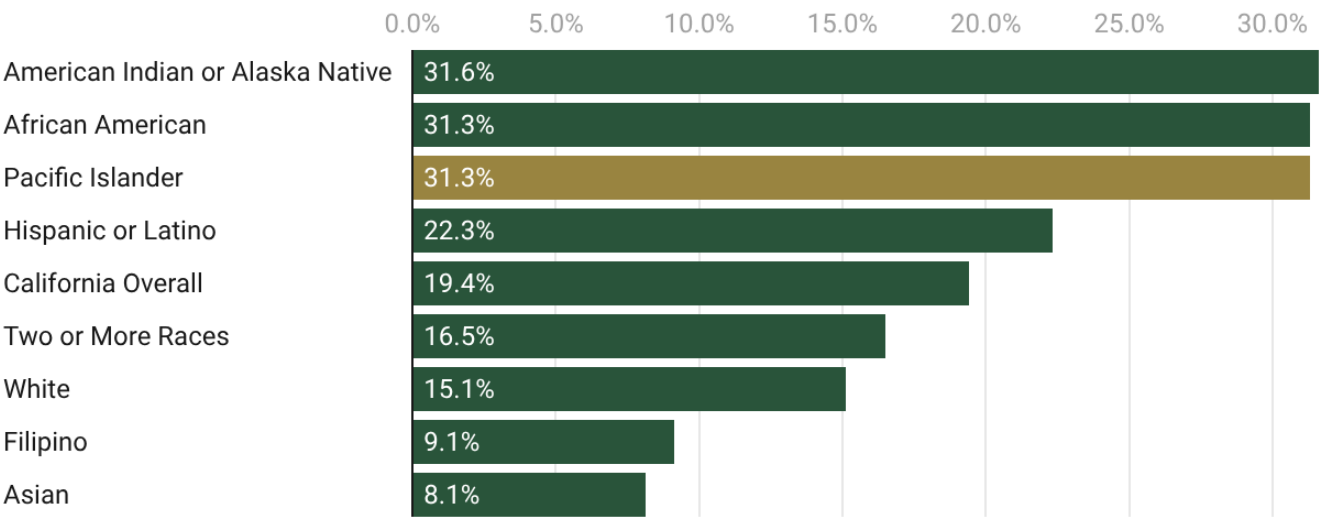
understanding the world. These strengths are educational assets. Schools should be places where those assets are recognized and developed – where students see their communities reflected in what they learn, families are treated as partners, multilingualism is cultivated, and students have access to rigorous coursework, strong instruction, college and career guidance, and educators who understand the communities they serve. The gaps that follow are not a measure of Pacific Islander potential – they are a call to examine the opportunities students receive.

Conditions for Learning

Recognizing those assets also means asking whether schools create the conditions for students to use them. Students cannot fully benefit from school when they are disconnected from it, and Pacific Islander students face barriers on several fronts. First, chronic absence is widespread:

Nearly 1 in 3 Pacific Islander Students Are Chronically Absent

Share of California students who were chronically absent, by race and ethnicity, 2024–25.



Students are considered chronically absent when they miss 10% or more of the instructional days they were enrolled to attend.

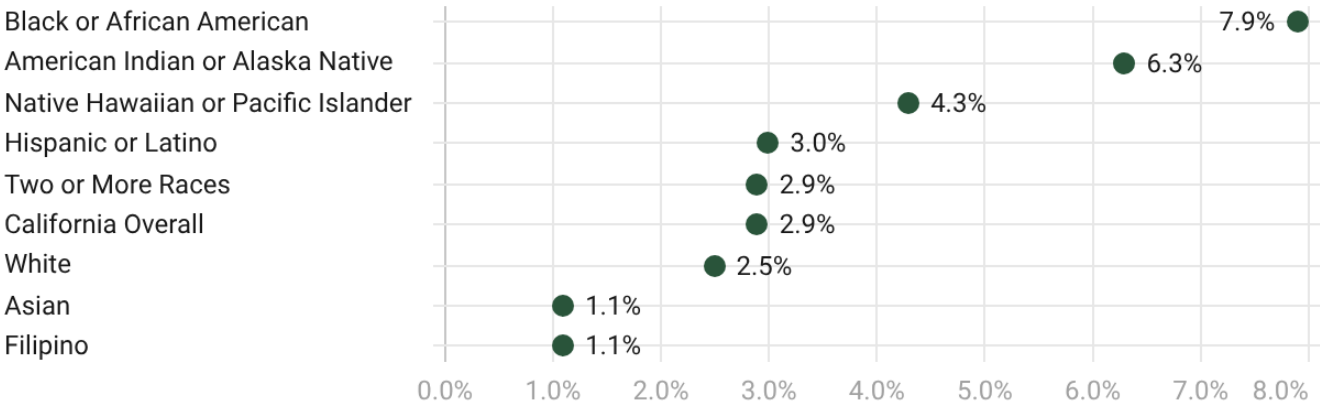
Source: California Department of Education, 2024–25 Chronic Absenteeism Rate

Pacific Islander students are chronically absent at 1.6 times the statewide rate (31.3% vs 19.4%), tied with African American students for the second-highest rate of any group. The statewide rate alone cannot tell us why Pacific Islander students are missing school, but the scale warrants attention. Understanding why requires local, community-informed responses that examine factors such as transportation, health, family responsibilities, and whether students feel they belong at school.

At the same time, Pacific Islander students are more likely than their peers statewide to lose time to exclusionary discipline. In 2024-25, Pacific Islander students were suspended at 4.3%, about 1.5 times the statewide rate of 2.9% and the third-highest rate of any group. The gap persists even as California has moved away from exclusionary discipline. SB 419⁹ (2019) banned willful defiance suspensions in grades TK-8 and SB 274¹⁰ (2023) extended the ban to all grades beginning in 2024-25. With defiance suspensions nearly eliminated, the suspensions that remain stem from other offenses, and Pacific Islander students still face them at elevated rates. Closing this gap will require understanding what drives suspensions in the schools Pacific Islander students attend and investing in supports including restorative practices, mental health services, and stronger relationships between schools and Pacific Islander families.

Pacific Islander Students Are Suspended at Higher Rates Than the Statewide Average

Share of California public school students receiving one or more suspensions, by race and ethnicity, 2024–25.

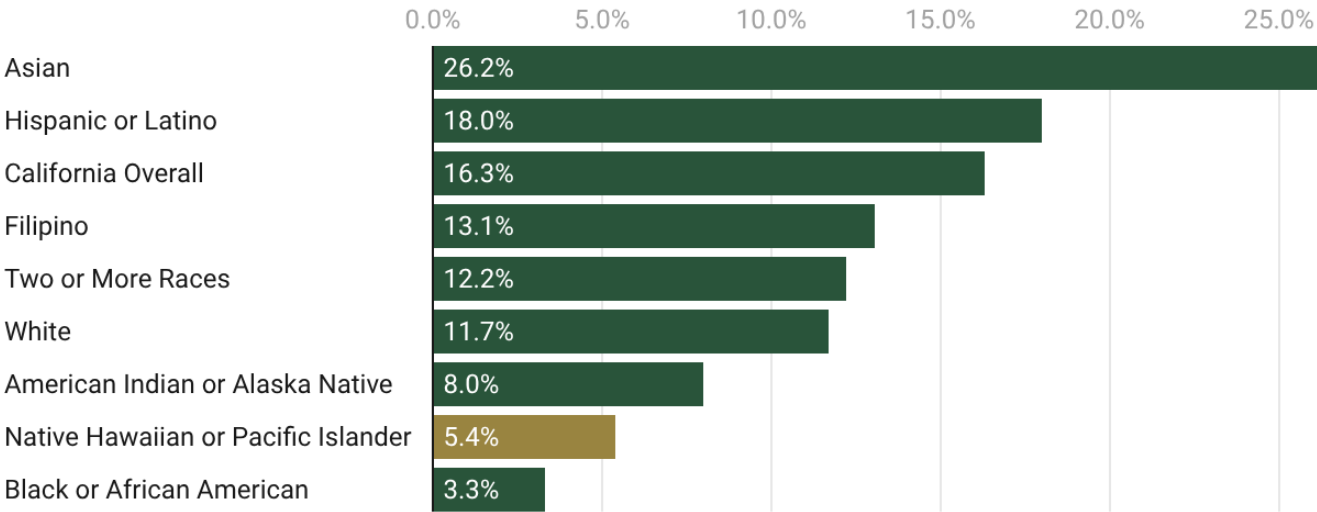


Suspension rates are based on the unduplicated number of students suspended during the academic year.
Source: California Department of Education, 2024–25 Suspension Rate

A third indicator asks whether schools recognize the assets students already bring. Pacific Islander graduates earn California's State Seal of Biliteracy at the second-lowest rate of any group, 5.4%, about one-third of the statewide rate (16.3%). This is not because the multilingual knowledge isn't there, but because schools may not be identifying, developing, and formally recognizing it. Earning the Seal requires demonstrating proficiency in English and another language, yet few schools offer clear pathways to assess proficiency in Samoan, Hawaiian, or other Pacific languages.

Pacific Islander Graduates Have the Second-Lowest State Seal of Biliteracy Rate

Share of California public high school graduates earning the State Seal of Biliteracy, by race and ethnicity, 2024–25.



The State Seal of Biliteracy recognizes graduates who demonstrate a high level of proficiency in English and at least one additional language.

Source: California Department of Education, 2024–25 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

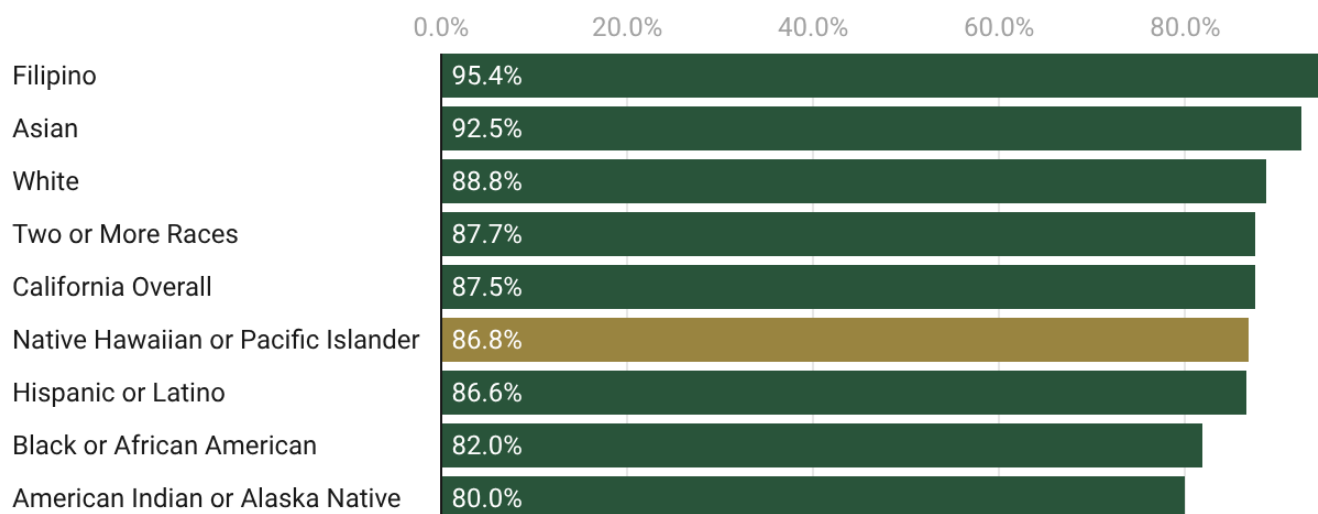
Pathways to College Readiness

Graduating from high school is an important milestone, and Pacific Islanders are reaching it at rising rates, with their four-year graduation rate rising 4.1 points in 2024-25. In the Class of 2025, 86.8% of Pacific Islanders graduated on time, within one percentage point of the statewide rate, 87.5%.¹¹

That near-average rate, however, masks two gaps. The first is students who do not finish at all. Among the class of 2025, 9.1% of Pacific Islander students dropped out of high school, compared with 8.0% statewide.¹² That is roughly 1 in 11 Pacific Islander students leaving without a diploma, the third-highest dropout rate of any racial or ethnic group.

Pacific Islander Students Graduate High School at Rates Near the Statewide Average

Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate for California public high school students, by race and ethnicity, 2024–25.



Graduation rates represent the share of students in the four-year adjusted cohort who earned a regular high school diploma.

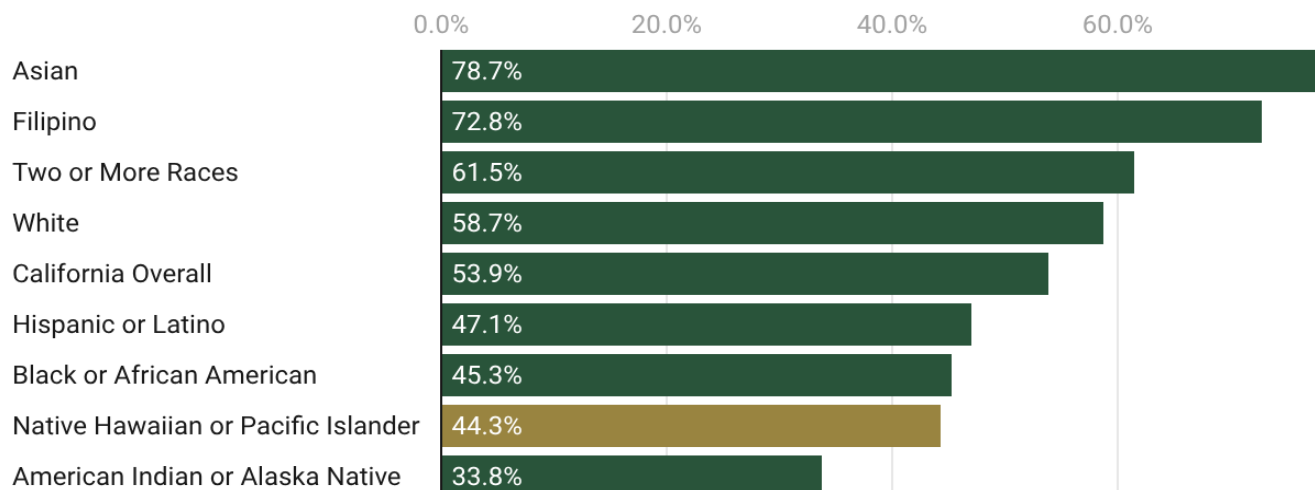
Source: California Department of Education, 2024–25 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

The second gap affects students who do graduate, because a diploma alone does not mean a student leaves prepared to enter California public universities. To graduate, state law requires three years of English and two of math (including Algebra 1)¹³, while UC and CSU eligibility requires four years of English and three of math.¹⁴ A student can also graduate without any world language or arts coursework, since one course in visual

or performing arts, world language, or career technical education satisfies the state requirement.¹⁵ A-G, the course sequence of 15 year-long college-preparatory courses needed for UC and CSU admission, by contrast, requires two years of a language other than English and a year of visual or performing arts, and every A-G course must be completed with a grade of C or better.¹⁶ The result is two different finish lines.

Fewer Than Half of Pacific Islander Graduates Are Supported to Complete A-G Requirements

Share of California public high school graduates completing the courses required for admission to the University of California and California State University, by race and ethnicity, 2024–25.



Rates are calculated among students earning a regular high school diploma.

Source: California Department of Education, 2024–25 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

Pacific Islanders are far less likely to reach the second one. Only 44.3% completed the A-G sequence in 2024-25, nearly 10 percentage points below the statewide rate of 53.9%¹⁷ even though their graduation rate is less than one point below. A student can do everything required to walk across the graduation stage and still leave without the courses needed to

apply directly to a four-year public university. California should examine when students gain access to A-G coursework, how they are placed into classes, and whether advising and intervention come early enough for Pacific Islanders – well before senior year.

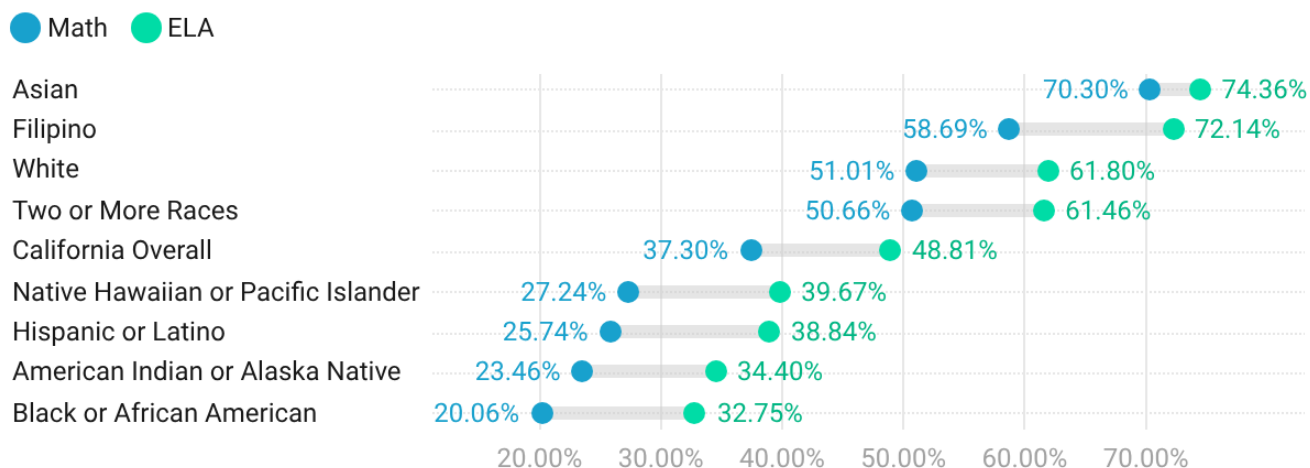
Unequal Opportunities, Unequal Outcomes

The A-G gap shows how unequal access to coursework shapes students' paths. State assessments show where those unequal opportunities lead. Each spring, students in grades 3-8 and 11 take California's Smarter Balanced assessments, which measure whether they are meeting grade-level standards in English

language arts and mathematics. In 2024-25, Pacific Islander students met or exceeded those standards at rates well below the statewide average in both subjects.¹⁸

Pacific Islander Students Face Persistent Gaps in Both Math and English Language Arts

Share of California students meeting or exceeding Smarter Balanced standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy, by race and ethnicity, 2024–25.



Results include students across all tested grades.

Source: California Department of Education, 2024–25 CAASPP Results

Only 39.7% of Pacific Islander students met or exceeded the standard in English language arts, compared with 48.8% statewide, and 27.2% did so in mathematics, compared with 37.3% statewide.¹⁹ These gaps persist even as statewide results improve: the share of students meeting standards rose 1.8 percentage points in both subjects in 2024-25.²⁰

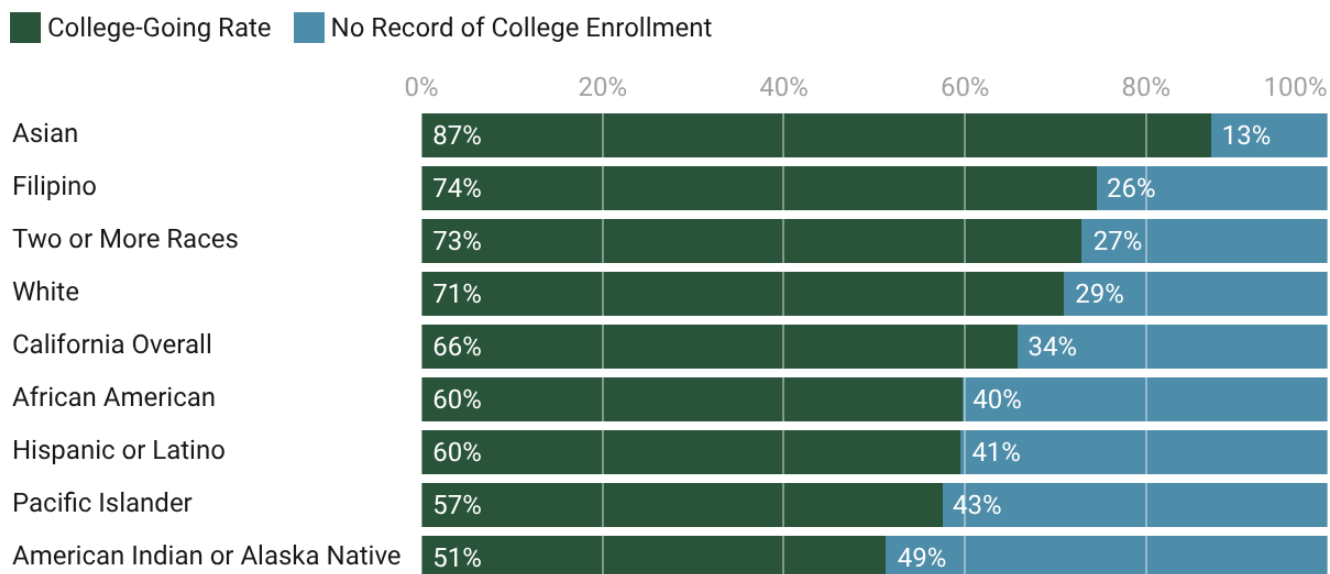
These results should not be read as measures of intelligence or potential. Test scores sit downstream from access to strong instruction, rigorous coursework, academic support, consistent attendance, and a positive school climate. Read alongside chronic absence, elevated suspension and dropout rates, and the A-G gap, they describe connected parts of a single educational pathway, not isolated shortfalls.

Transition to Higher Education

The effects of unequal opportunity do not end at graduation – they shape what happens next. California measures this through its college-going rate, the share of public high school completers who enroll in any public or private college or university in the United States, in-state or out-of-state, within 12 months of finishing high school.²¹ By that measure, Pacific Islander students enroll in college at a markedly lower rate than their peers statewide:

Too Few Pacific Islander Students Are Supported to Make the Transition to College

Share of California public high school completers who enrolled in college and those with no record of college enrollment, by race and ethnicity.



College-going rates represent the share of high school completers with a record of postsecondary enrollment. "No record of college enrollment" represents completers for whom no postsecondary enrollment was identified.

Source: California Department of Education, 2022–23 College-Going Rate

Among students who completed high school in 2022-23, 57.4% of Pacific Islander students enrolled in college, compared with 65.7% statewide.²² More than 4 in 10 Pacific Islander completers had no record of college enrollment, compared with about one-third of students statewide. College access is shaped long before students apply. Course placement, A-G access, advising, financial aid information, and a sense of belonging all matter. Financial aid can pose added barriers for some Pacific Islander families, particularly those of the Freely Associated States (the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau), who are eligible for Pell grants and certain campus-based aid, but not for federal Direct Loans.²³ For Pacific Islander students, the path to higher education cannot begin in the final years of high school. California cannot close postsecondary equity gaps without addressing the opportunities students receive throughout TK-12.

Emerging Approaches for Pacific Islander Student Success

The gaps above are not the whole story. Across California, a handful of districts and community organizations are building responses designed with, not just for, Pacific

Islander communities. These efforts are promising and instructive, even where their long-term outcomes have not yet been formally evaluated.

San Francisco Unified

SFUSD's Fa'a Samoa Initiative (FASI) grew from the district's 2018 HAPI Resolution supporting Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, families, and staff.²⁴ In 2020, the board expanded that commitment with a PreK-14 educational pathway rooted in Samoa aganu'u, cultural and indigenous practices, with families guiding the work through the Mātua Parent Advisory Council.²⁵ In 2021, the district launched the first PreK Samoan dual language program in California.²⁶ The pathway continues with Samoan and Tongan language courses in middle and high school and the VĀSĀ High School pathway, a two-course dual enrollment offering that awards a City College of San Francisco certificate in Critical Pacific Islands and Oceania Studies.²⁷ How the district counts its students matters too. In 2025-26, SFUSD counted roughly 1,012 Pacific Islander students²⁸, a count that, unlike state reporting, can include students who identify as Pacific Islander alongside another race. As one community leader put it: "When we are counted, we are seen. When we are seen, needs can be met."²⁹

Oakland Unified

Oakland Unified's Asian Pacific Islander Student Achievement (APISA) Office runs a targeted literacy program for Pacific Islander students.³⁰ Its Pacific Islander work is led with IKUNA, a trusted Pacific Islander communi-

ty partner. IKUNA partners with schools on family outreach and engagement to support literacy and brings cultural education into schools through its Fananga Cultural Event Series.³¹ The model pairs asset-based literacy support with near-peer mentoring, Tongan-language family engagement, and outreach to boost early childhood enrollment, all delivered through school and district-backed investments.

San Bernardino City Unified

San Bernardino City Unified's Pacific Islander Equity program is designed to address academic achievement gaps through meaningful family engagement, student engagement, and academic success, ranging from cultural workshops to student conferences to an annual Pacific Islander graduation.³²

What These Models Show

What these models share is deep and culturally-grounded, community partnership and design. What some may also lack is published, independent evaluation of their effects on attendance, achievement, and college-going. Without disaggregated Pacific Islander data and funded evaluation, promising practices cannot be compared, improved, or scaled, and districts are left rebuilding from scratch. Investing in both evidence-based programs as well as measurement is a precondition for turning local promise into state-wide progress.

**"When we are counted, we are seen. When we are seen,
needs can be met."**

COMMUNITY LEADER, SAN FRANCISCO

Policy Recommendations

A Framework for Cultivating Pacific Islander Student Excellence

The recommendations below turn this brief's findings into actions. California needs a coordinated approach built on four commitments — visibility, belonging, opportunity, and partnership — with clear roles for state leaders, education leaders, county offices, school districts, and community organizations. Many build on efforts already underway so California can expand what works rather than start from scratch.

1 See Pacific Islander students clearly

- **Count every NHPI student.** The California Department of Education (CDE) should publicly report NHPI students "alone or in combination," including multiracial students now reported only as "Two or More Races," alongside current single-race figures.
- **Keep small populations visible.** Where NHPI student groups fall below minimum reporting sizes, CDE should use multi-year or regional data so their outcomes still appear in public reports and accountability tools.

2 Affirm identity, culture, and language

- **Fund NHPI-led organizations.** The state should create multi-year, flexible grants for NHPI community-based organizations that partner with schools on literacy, attendance, mentoring, and family engagement.
- **Recognize Pacific languages.** CDE should support districts in developing assessments and pathways for students to earn the State Seal of Biliteracy in Samoan and other Pacific languages.
- **Grow NHPI educators and curriculum.** The state should invest in pathways that bring NHPI community members into teaching and counseling. Districts implementing the ethnic studies graduation requirement should include Pacific Islander histories and perspectives.

3 Expand access to opportunity

- **Address the drivers of absence and discipline.** Districts should work with NHPI families and organizations to understand local causes of chronic absence, and monitor NHPI suspensions by offense type to ensure SB 274's shift toward in-school supports reaches Pacific Islander students.
- **Start college preparation early.** Districts should ensure NHPI students have access to A-G coursework, dual enrollment, advising, and financial aid guidance well before senior year.

4 Build with Pacific Islander communities

- **California should build a regional NHPI support network,** anchored in county offices of education. These networks would help counties and districts use NHPI data, adapt proven models, and connect with community partners.
- **Fund, evaluate, and share what works.** The state should build independent evaluation into funding for NHPI programs and share findings through a statewide collection of promising practices.

Conclusion

The data in this brief describe a single, connected pathway. Pacific Islander students enter school carrying brilliance, culture, and community. Along the way, too many face chronic absence and exclusionary discipline, leave high school without a diploma or A-G eligibility, fall below grade-level standards in reading and math, and miss the transition to college. Each gap feeds the next, and each reflects the opportunities and conditions California has built around these students.

The work underway in San Francisco, Oakland, and San Bernardino points to a different path. When Pacific Islander communities are seen, resourced, and treated as partners, schools can build programs that keep students connected to learning and to who they are. Promising solutions already exist. California now needs the commitment, investment, and evaluation to take them to scale.

California has counted its Pacific Islander students for decades now. The task now is to cultivate them to build an education system where every Pacific Islander student has the learning, supports, belonging, and opportunity to flourish. With new state leadership arriving in 2027 and a statewide Pacific Islander coalition ready to partner, the moment is here.

About the Data

This brief uses publicly available California Department of Education data from 2022-23 through 2025-26, the most recent available for each measure. "Pacific Islander" refers to students in CDE's Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander category, which includes only students who identify with no other race; multiracial Pacific Islander students are reported as "Two or More Races," and Hispanic Pacific Islander students as Hispanic, so these figures likely undercount Pacific Islander students. "Statewide" refers to all California public school students. District figures and program descriptions come from district materials and community input and may use different definitions.

Endnotes

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