

Bills Without Backing Cannot Be Enough: Why Education Reform Requires More Than Just Legislation

In January 2022, New Jersey State legislature passed Law S4021 mandating the inclusion of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) history and contributions in all New Jersey public school curriculums from Kindergarten to Grade 12.¹ The goal of the bill: through greater education at a younger age, bias, racism, and exclusion would diminish. This should have been a watershed moment in New Jersey for AAPI history; instead, without funding attached, the adoption and impact were minimal. The law's main purpose was clearly politically driven.

At the time, New Jersey had over 1.05 million people, or 11 percent of the state's total population, that identified as AAPI, yet their contributions had been overlooked by the state's education system.² New Jersey's Department of Education would use the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum, the department's monitoring and district self-evaluation system, to assess the adoption of the AAPI curriculum.³

The Curriculum

A government bill is not effective if it lacks financial support and organizational leadership in its implementation. This was the case for Law S4021; the bill did not come with additional funding to schools or training for teachers, and the speed expected for curriculum delivery only highlighted the lack of resources and need for leadership to combat oversight. This

¹ "Governor Murphy Signs Legislation Ensuring AAPI-Inclusive Curriculum is Taught in New Jersey Schools," *Office of the Governor*, State of New Jersey, January 18, 2022, <https://www.nj.gov/governor/news/news/562022/20220118c.shtml>.

² "How Make Us Visible New Jersey Created AAPI Representation in Every Classroom," Rutgers GSE Alternate Route (Rutgers University), April 14, 2023, <https://njalternateroute.rutgers.edu/blog/how-make-us-visible-new-jersey-created-aapi-representation-every-classroom>.

³ "NJ Law Requires Teach Asian American Pacific Island History but Impediments, Funding, Teacher Training." NJ Spotlight News, September 2022. <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2022/09/nj-law-requires-teach-asian-american-pacific-island-history-but-impediments-funding-teacher-training/>

is where the work of many AAPI advocacy groups, such as “Make Us Visible,” “Teach Asian American Stories” and “AAPI New Jersey,” have developed their own educational resources.⁴ These offerings are not compulsory, vary in subject matter and quality, and are the product of volunteers and the private sector. What ability do these advocacy groups have to reach areas most in need of the AAPI curriculum? It seems very little. They are useful references for passionate AAPI advocates like Dakashna Lang, an 8th-grade teacher in Livingston, NJ. Lang made her curriculum more inclusive of AAPI content long before the state mandate. She now points out how, “The issue with teachers doing the work individually is that it’s not formalized into the curriculum.”⁵ This lack of formality emphasizes the need for coordination of resources and leadership. The criteria for compliance with the law have not been disclosed, and the enactment has done little to affect the incongruent nature in which AAPI studies are taught.

The School Districts and Teachers

The enforcement, enactment, and execution of this new curriculum is to be undertaken at the school district level, by the schools and teachers themselves, revealing another flaw in its integration. New Jersey has 590 different school boards with 116,879 different teachers.⁶ The next closest state in terms of population, Virginia, has 132 school districts.⁷ Each school district has its own demographics, lack of resources, and motivations, some of which are slowing the adoption of AAPI curriculum.

⁴ “Education Advocacy Toolbox,” AAPI New Jersey, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://aapinewjersey.org/our-work/education/education-advocacy-toolbox/>.

⁵ “NJ Law Requires Teach Asian-American, Pacific Islander History — But Impediments: Funding, Teacher Training,” *NJ Spotlight News*, September 2022, <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2022/09/nj-law-requires-teach-asian-american-pacific-island-history-but-impediments-funding-teacher-training/>.

⁶ “New Jersey Public Schools Fact Sheet 2024-2025,” *New Jersey Department of Education*, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://www.nj.gov/education/doedata/fact.shtml>.

⁷ “Virginia Public School Listing by Division,” *Virginia Department of Education*, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/about-vdoe/virginia-school-directories/virginia-public-school-listing-by-division>.

The last project of this scale occurred in 2019 when New Jersey mandated the teaching of LGBTQ curriculum. Similarly to AAPI, the law had no funding, and left many educators unprepared and confused in regard to how they could be compliant. Likewise, the appetite for LGBTQ education varied between schools and between districts. The laws were heavily pushed and supported by advocacy groups like Kani Ilangovan’s “Make Us Visible,” who said, “In New Jersey, each district is like its own kingdom. They decide individually how they are going to implement the mandate.”⁸ This begs the question: how many of these districts and schools are non-compliant? Are they non-compliant due to a disagreement in educational values, or simply lack the funding, training, and resources to teach the new law-mandated curriculums? What is the benchmark for compliance? Moreover, to what standards are any of these new curriculums being held, evaluated, and enforced? Sadly, none of this data is being tracked or disclosed by the Department of Education, according to advocacy groups.⁹ The ultimate fear is that the AAPI curriculum will follow the path of the LGBTQ mandated curriculum. Ilangovan reveals that, “With the LGBTQ bill, some students are complaining that nothing is happening, or the teacher will say, ‘There are gay people. The end.’”¹⁰ The enforcement and establishment of formal standards and requirements are critical to the adoption of any new curriculum.

⁸“NJ Law Requires Teach Asian-American, Pacific Islander History — But Impediments: Funding, Teacher Training,” *NJ Spotlight News*, September 2022, <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2022/09/nj-law-requires-teach-asian-american-pacific-island-history-but-impediments-funding-teacher-training/>.

⁹“NJ LGBTQ Curriculum Mandated 2019 — But Still Not Widely Implemented,” *NJ Spotlight News*, April 2022, <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2022/04/nj-lgbtq-curriculum-mandated-2019-but-still-not-widely-implemented/>.

¹⁰ “NJ Law Requires Teach Asian-American, Pacific Islander History — But Impediments: Funding, Teacher Training,” *NJ Spotlight News*, September 2022, <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2022/09/nj-law-requires-teach-asian-american-pacific-island-history-but-impediments-funding-teacher-training/>.

83% of teachers in New Jersey are white, while only 9% are Asian.¹¹ This is not to say that the AAPI curriculum can only be taught by Asians, but this statistic reveals a need for training and awareness within the state and profession. A more diverse teaching base would certainly help in the teaching of AAPI curriculum in an organic and authentic way, but how can the state and districts encourage more diversity in its hiring and employment of teachers while the current federal government administration has discouraged DEI hiring practices?¹² While it is clear that the state would benefit from additional minority teachers, and that the need predated the current executive branch, those hires can no longer be prioritized because to do so would go against federal policy. If hiring more diverse teachers cannot be done, the current base of minority teachers must be leveraged more effectively.

Systemic Problems

New Jersey public schools are segregated despite the fact that the Supreme Court deemed segregation illegal in 1954.¹³ A housing crisis combined with a policy that students are required to go to the school district closest to where they live, has led to many schools being segregated by race.¹⁴ A lawsuit filed in 2018, which is still pending, has gained national attention, claiming that segregation has divided races, socioeconomic groups, and access to opportunities. An unfortunate by-product of this is the galvanization of racial groups against each other.

¹¹ "Teacher-Student Diversity Gap Widens in New Jersey," *New Jersey Monitor*, September 9, 2022, by Dana DiFilippo and Sophie Nieto-Munoz, <https://newjerseymonitor.com/2022/09/09/teacher-student-diversity-gap-widens-in-new-jersey/>

¹² Tracy Richelle High, Julia M. Jordan, and Ann-Elizabeth Ostrager, "President Trump Acts to Roll Back DEI Initiatives," *Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance*, February 10, 2025, <https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2025/02/10/president-trump-acts-to-roll-back-dei-initiatives/>.

¹³ *SegregatedNJ: A special project examining New Jersey schools*, *NJ Spotlight News*, accessed September 13, 2025, https://www.njspotlightnews.org/special-report/segregatednj/?utm_source=centraldesi.beehiiv.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=segregated-a-special-project-examining-new-jersey-schools.

¹⁴ "In NJ, AAPI Students Find Community and Exclusion Among Segregated Schools," *WNYC*, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/nj-aapi-students-find-community-and-exclusion-among-segregated-schools/>

The plight of segregation as it pertains to the AAPI curriculum is illustrated in the case of John Adams Middle School in Edison, New Jersey. In the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet* during the 2022-23 academic year, Michael Trumbauer used a Bollywood rendition to teach his class. It should be noted that 87% of his class was Asian and predominantly Indian at John Adams.¹⁵ At face value, this might seem a progressive approach. However, education should be embraced by all races, not just the ones represented in AAPI, or any single culture or race within AAPI. The purpose of the law was to broaden and enlighten *all* students to a history and culture unfamiliar to them but embodied by people in their country. Practices like these only dig each individual school and minority deeper into their own silo and bunker.

While the demographic data overall points to New Jersey being a very diverse state, this is not the case at the school level. 68 schools in New Jersey have a majority of their students identifying as Asian, with 16 of them being over 75%. This presents a fertile ground for AAPI curiosity and education; it also comes with downsides. Upon moving to a school where Asians were no longer the majority, Trumbauer and other teachers reported Swastikas drawn on classroom blackboards, “White Lives Matter” stickers, and numerous racial slurs used by students.¹⁶ Their colleagues also mocked the idea of creating “another safe space” to support minorities in predominantly white schools. It could be argued that this is where AAPI education is most needed: in areas where ignorance, racism, and indifference reside. Yet the problems of access to resources, unwillingness to teach or learn AAPI curriculum, and segregation make the

¹⁵“Video Report on Impact of NJ School Segregation on Asian American Students,” *NJ Spotlight News*, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/special-report/video-report-on-impact-of-nj-school-segregation-on-asian-american-students/>

¹⁶“Segregated: A Special Project Examining New Jersey Schools,” *Central Desi*, July 13, 2023, <https://centraldesi.beehiiv.com/p/seggregated-special-project-examining-new-jersey-schools>.

curriculum integration virtually impossible. Hate, jealousy, and ignorance are natural consequences of living a disproportionate and segregated life.

The Solution

The passing of Law S4021 can be seen in two ways. Cynically, it was a response to the rise in Asian hate crimes that occurred during the Covid pandemic and a way for government officials to curry favor with ethnic groups. Conversely, it could be viewed as sincere in its sentiment to honor AAPI history, and Asian American citizens, to increase their visibility and recognition through education.

For this to happen successfully, there are a few things that must be done at multiple levels. Forcing a new curriculum onto teachers and school boards without funding creates ineffective and incongruent results. State educational funding needs to be provided to help develop resources, train teachers, and establish oversight and standards for compliance. Districts and teachers need to take more creative pedagogical approaches and roles when teaching AAPI. This may include guest speakers, teachers with Asian backgrounds leading clubs, events, or classes beyond their regular purview, or leveraging advocacy groups and online learning to bring in subject matter experts. The state education board also needs to diversify its leadership and teacher base, whether they recruit from other states and jurisdictions or promote its own talent; more representation is required. Lastly, it is necessary to prioritize desegregation.

Simply enacting these measures will not guarantee the adoption of AAPI education in New Jersey any more than the education will end the ignorance and racism that Asian Americans face. It is, however, a reminder that meaningful change has to be thoughtful, sincere, and deliberate if it is to be lasting.