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Testimony in **SUPPORT of Senate Bill 304**
Education - Public Schools - Asian American History Curriculum Requirement

Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
February 3, 2022
1:00 PM ET

Presented to: Paul G. Pinsky, Chairman

By: **Phil Tajitsu Nash**, AAST Co-Founder and Adjunct Lecturer, former Smithsonian Curator,
and Co-President of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF)

FAVORABLE

As a co-founder and member of the faculty of the Asian American Studies Program (AASST) at the University of Maryland and an expert in Asian American History, I **urge a favorable report on SB 304**, which would require the State Board of Education to develop curriculum materials on Asian American History for use in Maryland's public schools. Appropriately, this Bill allows local boards to determine the amount of instruction and implementation of these standards. However, by making a state-wide commitment to teaching this history, Maryland will be taking a nationally-recognized stand for inclusion and understanding -- and against bigotry, hatred and anti-Asian American violence.

I am speaking here on behalf of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, which strongly supports this bill, but not officially on behalf of AAST. Dr. Julie Park, our Director, will be providing the official AAST testimony.

I have taught Asian American History for 38 years at City College of New York, Yale University, and, for the last 26 years, at AAST here in College Park. As a Staff Attorney, Board Member and now Co-President of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), I have spent over 40 years participating in Asian American History through projects such as the historic movement to redress Japanese Americans wrongfully interned behind barbed wire during World War II. As the Curator of the Asian Pacific American Program at the 2010 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, I led one of the nation's largest celebrations of Asian American History -- with 1200 members of the local Asian American community entertaining millions of visitors on the National Mall and online during ten days of music, dance, storytelling, cooking, and other activities. As a community advocate, I have given thousands of speeches, trainings, classroom presentations, and informal talks to K-12, university, corporate, non-profit, military, and governmental audiences on many aspects of Asian American History.

Through these decades of activity, I have come to see the importance of education to build pride, counter misinformation, and combat stereotypes. Like immigrants from every shore, Asian Americans have come to this country to better ourselves, to raise families, to create communities, and to strengthen the “more perfect union” that is the United States. We have accepted the challenge to grow the crops, build the railroads, iron the shirts, and cook the meals. We have provided a disproportionate number of the nation’s nurses and doctors, as well as business and science professionals. Yet we also are represented on Broadway, in public school classrooms, on the baseball diamond, and behind the wheel of your taxi.

Asian Americans are about 6% of the US population and over 370,000 people (6.1%) of the Maryland population. A recent study found that the nation’s 2.6 million Asian American K-12 students make up 5.4% of all students nationwide.

Instead of just going to school and focusing on their studies, however, a recent national report by Stop AAPI Hate found that 30% of Asian American parents had children who had experienced a hate incident at school in the previous year. While some might say this is related to the horrific spa killings in Atlanta last March, Asian American History teaches us that there have been many incidents like this over the years, as well as incidents of bullying, harassment, expulsions, and more.

This new curriculum mandated by **SB 304** should start by celebrating the successes of Asian American individuals and communities. However, the full story of Asian American History also includes two other parts: barriers that have held us back, and stories of those who overcame those barriers and, in the process, vindicated rights that are enjoyed today by people of all backgrounds.

Presenting Asian American History in this three-part format will show us as human beings who have taken charge of our own lives and who are bettering society as a whole by standing up for our rights. It also shows history as a process that each of us can shape by our actions, not a one-dimensional snapshot that paints us as Model Minorities or Perpetual Foreigners.

By ensuring that a unit of Asian American History is taught at least once during elementary, middle and high school, **SB 304** will go a long way toward vaccinating our state’s children against the scourge of racial intolerance, and help them to grow up with the Cultural Competence Toolkit they need to be productive and effective participants in an increasingly interconnected world. Instead of walking on eggshells, Maryland children of every background will develop the confidence that comes from understanding those around them and working with them to build a sustainable world of peace, justice and understanding.

In sum, I want to thank you for your consideration, and **strongly urge a favorable report on SB 304.**