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AAPI students, leaders in Ohio seek required teaching of Asian American history

Michael Lee The Columbus Dispatch

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When she was in the fourth grade, Nitya Nekkanti remembers her teacher telling the class they were going to learn about Indians.

But it wasn't what she thought.

She soon found out her teacher didn't mean people who came from the country India, but rather Native Americans.

"A lot of people who were born and raised here, but who still have Indian heritage, they don't understand a lot of where they come from, or their country," said Nekkanti, now a junior at Dublin Jerome High School.

Nekkanti and other Asian American and Pacific Islander students have felt like they have often been misrepresented, or not represented at all, when learning about history in K-12 schools.

But that could change soon, with an Ohio Senate bill that would require all public schools, community schools, STEM schools and college-preparatory boarding schools in the state to teach Asian American history in schools.

What's in the bill?

According to the bill, superintendents of Ohio K-12 school districts would have to develop curriculum focusing on not only Asian American history nationally but also the history of Asian Americans in Ohio and the Midwest.

The curriculum should include the contributions of Asian Americans to the local, state and federal governments; arts, humanities and sciences; and economic, cultural, social and

political development in the country.

The bill additionally requires teaching about the internment of Japanese Americans and two Japanese American combat units — the 100th infantry battalion and 442nd regimental combat team of the U.S. Army — during World War II.

Bill sponsor and state Sen. Tina Maharath, the first Asian American woman elected to the Ohio Senate, said she left the language of the bill an “open book” because there's a large variety of Asian Americans in Ohio. The Columbus Democrat added that Asian Americans in Ohio have often been seen as outsiders in their own state, even though they have been in Ohio for hundreds of years.

“With that type of perception ... it drives a lot of hate and racism,” she said. “It’s best that we educate Ohioans about our Asian American community so that we can draw a better picture of what Ohio truly looks like, which includes inclusion of Asian Americans.”

The bill is cosponsored by Senate Minority Leader Kenny Yuko, a Richmond Heights Democrat.

As of December, state Sen. Andrew Brenner, a Delaware Republican and chairman of the Ohio Senate's Primary & Secondary Education Committee, said he has not heard from Maharath on follow-up hearings for the bill. He added the Senate will have second hearings on other bills this month.

"You have people like (actor) George Takei who was placed in one of the [internment] camps in World War II, and that should obviously be part of our history," he said. "If she approaches us with some people wanting to give proponent testimony, I'd be happy to get another hearing going."

Brenner said he has not spoken to the Ohio Department of Education about what's in current history standards, but the bill would make sure that Asian American history is included.

Giving districts the power to make curricular choices is a reason for hope for the bill, said Nidhi Satiani, whose parents are immigrants from India. Satiani was elected to the Upper Arlington Board of Education in November's general election, and started her term this month.

“What is taught in a classroom should be decided by people who work in this field, so teachers, school leaders, these are the people who understand how to educate students,” she said.

She added that the bill is the first step in teaching a complete history, and the fact that it's being proposed is exciting for her, especially as someone who grew up as an Indian American in northeastern Ohio.

A step in the right direction, despite questions

Nekkanti is a part of the Asian Youth Union, a student club at Dublin Jerome High School. It was founded this school year after co-presidents Sophie Chu and Ananya Kamalakannan — both seniors — decided to create a safe space for Asian American students months after the shootings at three Atlanta-area spas in March where eight people died, including six Asian women.

In December, the club discussed Maharath's bill with students at their school.

Kamakannan said that many students were grateful for the bill, but some still have a few reservations about it.

She said part of the concerns involved possibly teaching mostly or only the contributions of Asian Americans. And while important, she said, it's not enough.

“We kind of felt that it in a way perpetuated the 'model minority' myth because we're only talking about what good Asian Americans have done for society, rather than the difficult parts and the discrimination we faced and things like that,” Kamalakannan said.

Chu added that she would like to hear stories of Asian Americans throughout history.

“I think just some history books in general, we're presented as a statistic. And there's no stories, there's no emotion, and there's no history behind it,” she said.

But to the students, the bill is still a start. Chu said it's something that will hopefully help humanize Asian Americans — especially amid the rise in anti-Asian violence and racism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“You get a lot of people saying like, ‘You're a dog-eater, or blah blah blah,’” she said. “They don't understand us and they don't know us. So I think having this bill, you can see the history of Asian Americans and that we're people, we have cultures, and we have our own holidays.”

Maharath said if the bill passes, she hopes to create an Asian American and Pacific Islander commission, which would provide the Asian American community with a bridge to the state

government, as well as state resources.

She added that she had originally wanted to create the commission before the AAPI history bill, but realized her colleagues had very little knowledge of the contributions that Asian Americans have made for the country.

“I thought, how about we start from the bottom, the basic questions, which is what kind of history are we talking about?” she said. “I’m hopeful that the basic education will create a different perception for some of my colleagues to see what it truly feels like to be Asian American here in Ohio.”

At the end of the day, the bill is about letting students like those in Dublin Jerome’s Asian Youth Union see themselves in history. And if the bill passes, the students said they hope there will be a way to make sure those teaching AAPI history in schools will accurately teach their history.

“Misrepresentation, I think it is worse than no representation at all,” Kamalakannan said. “Because you don’t want kids who don’t have any experience with Asian cultures to get the wrong idea.”

mylee@dispatch.com

@leem386