



ASIAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND

99 HUDSON STREET, 12 FL • NEW YORK, NY 10013 • TEL 212.966.5932 • FAX 212.966.4303 • INFO@AALDEF.ORG

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Terrebonne Parish School Board
201 Stadium Drive
Houma, LA 70360

An Open Letter to the Terrebonne Parish School Board:

The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) and undersigned members of the National Asian American Education Advocates (NAAEA) Network are dismayed that certain members of the Terrebonne Parish School Board have recommended prohibiting the use of non-English languages during commencement ceremonies. Such a policy would infringe upon students' freedom of expression, discriminate against language minorities, and ultimately perpetuate cultural intolerance within the school system. Therefore, we respectfully ask the School Board to issue a public statement collectively denouncing such recommendations and reassuring the community that such an English-only policy will not be proposed in this fall's commencement ceremony review process.

AALDEF is a 34-year-old national organization that protects and promotes the civil rights of Asian Americans. Among other things, our Educational Equity and Youth Rights Project defends Asian American students against racial and national origin discrimination in public schools. We coordinate the NAAEA Network, which is comprised of Asian American youth groups, youth organizers, and youth advocates from across the country. The NAAEA Network is dedicated to promoting the educational rights of Asian American young people. AALDEF and the NAAEA Network are working alongside the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans to monitor this situation. We support their efforts to uphold free speech and promote tolerance in the Terrebonne Parish School District.

A policy prohibiting the use of non-English languages during commencement raises First Amendment free speech issues as well as national origin discrimination concerns. While certain categories of student speech can be regulated by public school districts, mandating English-only commencement speeches is excessive. It serves no rational purpose in creating a safe, welcoming school environment. Instead, it devalues students' linguistic abilities and curtails self expression. Furthermore, such a policy would illegally target language minorities. It would deny limited English proficient parents and relatives the opportunity to meaningfully participate in commencement activities. Explicit restriction of non-English languages constitutes a denial of equal access.

An English-only policy undermines the inclusiveness of a multicultural school system. Rather than facilitating cultural awareness and celebrating diversity, it codifies exclusion and perpetuates intolerance. It puts English speakers at the center, while pushing students with other language abilities and heritages to the margins. The elimination of such exclusion and intolerance is precisely why our organizations exist. As Asian American youth-serving organizations and civil rights advocates, we work primarily with students from immigrant and refugee households, many

of whom speak multiple languages. We help fill the void of cultural identity exploration in public schools by empowering youth to embrace their unique heritages. However, our programs are not enough. School communities must also value the diverse cultural identities within their student bodies. Some students' language backgrounds should not be promoted above those of others. All language abilities should be celebrated rather than repressed.

We hope you consider these arguments carefully, and urge you to refrain from enacting an English-only commencement policy. We trust that you will do your best to promote the success of all Terrebonne Parish students, remembering that there is great diversity among them. To follow up on any of the concerns raised in this letter, please contact AALDEF Staff Attorney Khin Mai Aung at (212)-966-5932 x219 or via email at kaung@aaldef.org

Very truly yours,

Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (New York, NY)

Asian American Leadership Empowerment and Development (Washington, DC)

Asian Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (San Francisco, CA)

Boston Allies Working with Asian American Youth (Boston, MA)

Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia (Philadelphia, PA)

Chinese for Affirmative Action (San Francisco, CA)

Center for Pan Asian Community Services (Atlanta, GA)

Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (New York, NY)

Detroit Asian Youth Project (Detroit, MI)

Hmong Youth Education Services (St. Paul, MN)

Khmer Girls in Action (Long Beach, CA)

Korean American Resource and Cultural Center (Chicago, IL)

Korean Resource Center (Los Angeles, CA)

Lowell Community Health Center, Cambodian Youth Development Partnership (Lowell, MA)

Multicultural Youth Project (Chicago, IL)

National Korean American Service and Education Consortium (Los Angeles, CA)

Providence Youth Student Movement (Providence, RI)

South Asian Youth Action! (New York, NY)

YKASEC – Empowering the Korean American Community (New York, NY)