

NEW WHITE FLIGHT FROM US HIGH SCHOOLS

Subverting the American dream

Asian Americans' success at high school, aiming for top-tier colleges, is causing white Americans to send their children to lower-achieving, less competitive, whiter schools

Richard Keiser | Original text in English

THE migration of African Americans from the South to the industrial cities of the north and mid-west of the US, from the second world war on, provoked a white flight of working-class families from neighbourhoods that were perceived to be less safe, declining in economic status, and with worsening schools. Whites rejected charges of racism and claimed they were protecting their financial investment and the safety of their children.

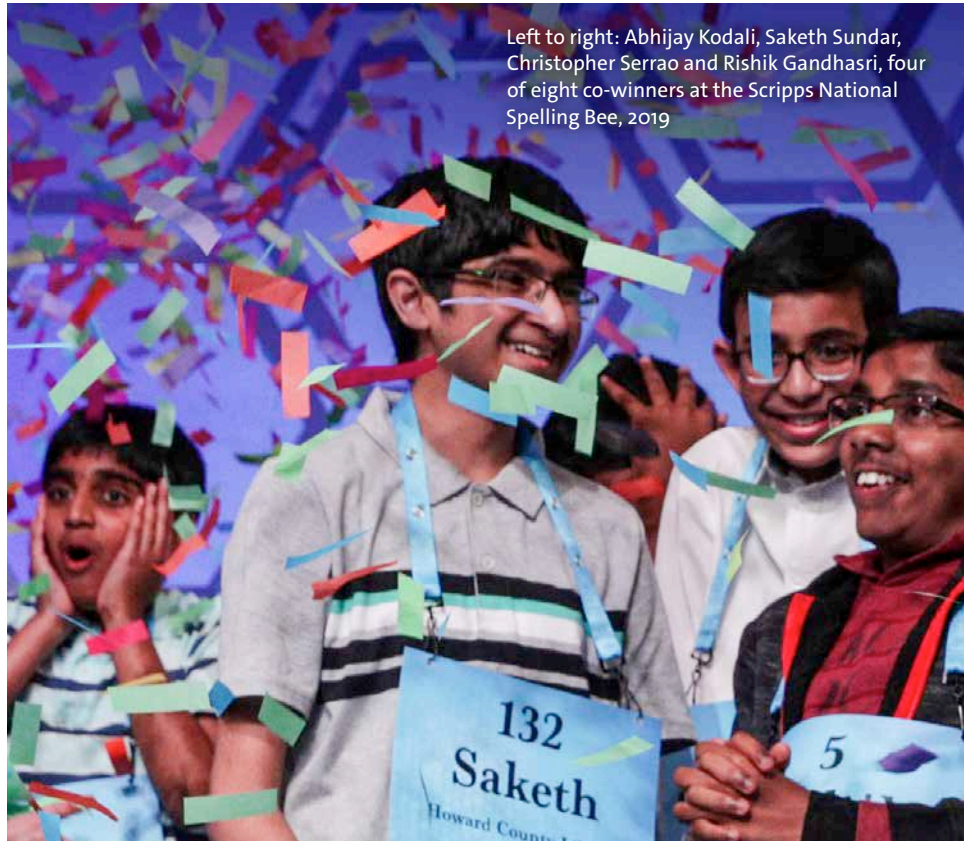
Today a new white flight is taking place. This time upper-middle-class white families are leaving neighbourhoods with increasing house values because Asian American families have moved in, whose children have become top achievers in public schools. Fleeing a neighbourhood with low crime, great schools and high prestige may not be a good financial strategy, but whites are again protecting their children by preserving their place at the top of the meritocratic hierarchy.

This new flight was first recognised in a 2005 *Wall Street Journal* article about the city of Cupertino, home to Apple and other tech companies. Similar dynamics have been seen in other northern California suburbs with sizeable Asian American populations and in Maryland, New Jersey and New York. These areas are all solidly middle-class with steadily appreciating housing values and very good schools. In a decade, many have doubled their Asian American second-generation population (mostly from Taiwan and India, with tech education), which are now 15-40% local. At Silicon Valley's Mission High School, ranked the number one comprehensive high school in the state, 84% of students were white in 1984, falling to 10% by 2010, while Asian American students rose to 83%.¹ White families often leave for nearby suburbs with far smaller proportions of Asians in the public schools.

Underachievers are 'whitewashed'

White parents complain that elementary schools (K-6, ages 5-13), the pathway to the most highly rated high schools (7-12, ages 14-18), are too competitively driven by Asian parents. Those who have switched their children from excellent high schools in California claim they are too focused on test scores and admission to top-tier colleges, achievements increasingly monopolised by Asian American students. The president of the parent-teacher association of a school with an influx of white students from another school with Asian-dominated advanced classes said, 'It does help to have a lower Asian population. I don't think our parents are as uptight.'² White parents and students feel stereotyped as underachievers: 'White kids are thought of as the dumb kids.'

The few Asian American students who do not conform to the stereotype of excellence are called 'whitewashed'. White parents feel that their children enter high school far behind Asian students, because when they play soccer and have fun, Asian children are sent to after-school programmes in high-school subjects. White parents think of sports and socialising as 'normal' activities in which Asian children do not participate as their parents see them as unimportant for college admission. In 2013 two North California professors concluded, 'Asianness is intimately associated with high achievement, hard work, and academic success. Whiteness, in contrast, stands for lower achievement, laziness, and academic mediocrity.'³



Left to right: Abhijay Kodali, Saketh Sundar, Christopher Serrao and Rishik Gandhasri, four of eight co-winners at the Scripps National Spelling Bee, 2019

Far from celebrating the superior academic achievements of Asian American students as the culmination of the American dream, white parents discredit these accomplishments as an excessively narrow focus on education

This is proved by the increasing number of white parents now moving their children to less competitive public schools – a response to upper-middle-class white precarity, the sense that the privileges that have been the birthright of whites are now threatened. At Mission High School, the majority of students on Advanced Placement (AP) courses, particularly in science and maths, are Asian American, while most students not enrolled in these more rigorous courses are white. Admissions officers at top-tier universities often only consider students in the top 15% of the class, and white parents switch schools to ensure that their children are in that prestigious segment.

There is no doubt that whites, particularly male, still dominate the heights of American capitalism; at Google, whites still take 66% of leadership

roles. But Asian American women overtook white women among new hires at Google in 2019; more Asian American men than white men were hired, for the first time, in 2020.⁴ The path to success is no longer the patrimony of whites; the educational hierarchy is being overturned.

White parents are also working to change the definition of excellence to include balance between high grades and test scores, and a newer concern with diversity of interests, well-roundedness, and less stressed, normal students.

What does normal mean?

What do normal and well-rounded actually mean? We need first to discover what is abnormal. Historically, male and white has been inherent in defining what is normal. Non-white has often meant abnormal or marginal. When women fought for suffrage and political equality, they were called irrational and excessively emotional: women in American politics continue to be portrayed by men as psychologically unfit. Similarly, the struggles for racial equality as well as the political rights of immigrants have had to refute claims of mental disability (low IQ) and psychological abnormality (absence of temperament for democracy).

Far from celebrating the superior academic achievements of Asian American students in top US high schools as the culmination of the American dream, white parents are discrediting these accomplishments as the product of an unhealthy, stress-inducing, excessively narrow focus on education that deprives youth of normal lives including leisure, sports and socialising. Rather than recognise that they are falling behind in a merit-based competition, white parents and children have defamed the competition and fled to new schools where merit will be measured by considerations of character as well as test scores.

This development is rich with irony. During the second half of the 20th century, whites called Asian Americans the model minority in comparison with African Americans and Latinx. This did not challenge the superordinate status and meaning of whiteness; rather, it reinforced white supremacy, and blamed the victims of structural discrimination by providing support for spurious claims of equal opportunity for people of colour when they were highly motivated.

America could portray itself as a land of opportunity, not of racial discrimination, and blame African Americans for being too lazy: Asian Americans showed that the economic ladder could be climbed. Asian Americans were lauded as a model of educational hard work because of strong family values. But now that they are displacing upper-middle-class white children and threatening the educational hierarchy, a new narrative devalues Asian American practices: their children aren't focused on sports, dance, after-school socialising and other indicators of social normalcy. The students are chided for being too driven, a term loaded with amateur psychological assessments.

Beyond irony, this unmasks the tactics deployed to maintain white supremacy in the social and economic hierarchy. These are not new tactics or discourses; they are like the treatment of Jews by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) establishment. Jerome Karabel has documented how the college admissions process shifted away from meritocratic competition when first- and second-generation Jews became the top achievers at high schools, in SAT tests and at elite colleges.

Karabel's research into the private papers of admissions personnel from Harvard, Yale and Princeton reveals a concerted effort to limit sharply the admission of Jewish students through new criteria that focused on character and such highly subjective qualities as manliness, personality and leadership. An admissions policy that mixed academic merit with character assessments based on interviews 'would undoubtedly reduce materially the number of those Jews who are of objectionable personality and manners.'⁵

The list of cultural disabilities, according to the Harvard Committee on Admissions during the 1950s, included the 'neurotic at odds with his community...the unstable' and those with 'homosexual tendencies and serious psychiatric problems'. Karabel concluded that 'the definition of "merit" is fluid and tends to reflect the values and interests of those who have the power to impose their particular cultural ideals.' The current white flight away from Asian American students who are not well rounded is producing new definitions of merit designed to preserve the power of the already powerful ●

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¹Willow S Lung-Amam, *Trespassers? Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2017 ²S Hwang, 'The New White Flight', *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2005 ³Tomas R Jiménez and Adam L Horowitz, 'When white is just alright: How immigrants redefine achievement and reconfigure the ethnoracial hierarchy', *American Sociological Review*, Washington DC, 30 August 2013 ⁴Allison Levitsky, 'For the first time, white men weren't the largest group of US hires at Google this year', *Silicon Valley Business Journal*, San Jose, 5 May 2020 ⁵This and the following quote are from Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, 2005

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