

# Asians: Not just geeks, gangsters

Students, parents discuss solutions to pressures created by cultural myths during S.F. seminar

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Midway through a two-hour session Saturday on "How to be a cool parent," Iris Leung heard one word she'd never considered: listen.

Leung, her lachrymose eyes suddenly hopeful, said she had not considered listening to her teenage son. In Chinese culture, parents talk. Children listen.

The cultural distinction and revelation came during The City's first-ever Asian American education summit sponsored by the San Francisco Unified School District. The all-day conference at the Hotel Nikko near Union Square was attended by more than 600 parents, teachers, students and school officials and was the result of a year's planning by dozens of community groups and foundations.

The goal was to begin dispelling the myth that all Asians are the "model minority"; to help immigrant parents better understand their Westernized kids; to inform educators about Asian Pacific cultures, and to let Asian youth know that acceptance to San Francisco's prestigious Lowell High or UC-Berkeley doesn't define success or failure.

Although Asian Americans compose more than 50 percent of

total enrollment in San Francisco public schools — and make up 33 percent of The City's overall population — there has never been a conference to address their educational and social needs. The school district has hosted several large-scale education summits for black and Latino students, who make up 16 and 21 percent, respectively, of the district.

"Asian Americans are perceived as the model minority," said school board member Frank Chong, who conceptualized and organized the event. "Not all Asian children are doing great. And there's tremendous pressure on those who are doing great. Through the voices of parents, students and experts, we wanted to provide a more realistic picture of the issues Asian youth face, and show that this is not a monolithic community."

It is in school, Chong said, that a young generation of Americans can gain a clearer picture and understanding of Asian people and cultures. There are 11 million people of Asian descent in the United States.

School board member Eddie Chin, who attended San Francisco public schools and acknowledges he was not a "model minority," said, "Achievement of Asian students is directly correlated to their future economic well-being. It's a lot of pressure. They're also dealing with language and culture adjustments and parents who are working all hours to make due."

San Francisco schools have seen a dramatic change in student enrollment, with the greatest in-

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◆ SUMMIT from C-1

## S.F. summit helps Asian Americans

crease among Asians.

In 1967, when total enrollment was 93,710, Asians were 19 percent, whites 41 percent, blacks 26 percent and Latinos 13 percent, according to school district data. Thirty years later, in 1997, with a total enrollment of 63,961, Asians made up nearly 49 percent of enrollment, whites 13 percent, blacks 18 percent and Latinos 21 percent.

Because of the "model minority" stereotype, Asian youth say they are subjected to unrealistic expectations from parents and teachers and resentment from fellow non-Asian students.

"Sometimes my friends say, 'Can I borrow your notes?' They want them because I'm Asian and they assume I'm really smart," said Karissa Yee, a freshman at Lowell. "The other stereotype of Asians — if you aren't a model minority — is that you're in a gang."

Karissa said many of her Asian friends didn't want to attend Lowell, but their parents gave them no choice. "Asian students have interests other than test scores and going to UC-Berkeley. But, that gets lost."

Lowell sophomores Tim Kerk, who is Chinese and Thai, and George Louie, who is Chinese American, said Asians face a dif-

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— George Louie,  
Lowell High sophomore

ferent set of expectations than students of other races and ethnicities.

"Some teachers clearly favor different ethnic groups, and expect all Asians to get a 4.0 grade point average," Kerk said. "You feel a lot of pressure from your parents and your friends. What happens if you don't get into an Ivy League school?"

The students also said the stereotype affects their social lives.

"People look at Asians and think all you do is study and that you don't have a life," Louie said. "You get called geeks and dorks and brainiacs. People make fun of Asians and say all we do is study. But, we really do have a life outside of school."

Leung said she would do anything to reconnect with her increasingly insolent and distant son. With tears running down her face, she said she felt lost. Her son wants to be an American. She feels Chinese.

With translation help from Cytania Tam, a Cantonese bilingual counselor with Richmond Area Multi-Services who led the parent seminar, Leung said she had expected her children to listen the same way she listened to her parents.

"In Chinese culture, parents don't listen to children," said Leung, who was born and reared in Hong Kong. "They say, 'Do this now.' And kids do. Here, it's different."

Grateful for Tam's advice to start listening to her son, Leung said, "People in America say, 'You should be a friend to your kid.' But, I don't know how to do that. That's not Chinese culture. It's American. No one has ever, before now, suggested I stop telling my son what to do. I'm going to try to listen."

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