

Schools Aim to Improve Education for Asians

By Michael Days

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Lan Zhuang knows well the problems of Asian students in Philadelphia public schools. The stereotype of the Asian superachiever is far from reality for most of these children, who are refugees from their native lands.

"The children come from poor families who often are illiterate," said Zhuang, who runs a tutoring program in Logan. "The parents don't know English, so they can't help their children. Unfortunately, there's just not enough support."

Now, as a result of class-action lawsuit filed against the School District almost three years ago, Asian children struggling with a new language and a new culture likely will receive additional help in school as early as September.

Under a proposal approved last night by the Board of Education, the district would hire at least 21 counseling assistants who speak Asian languages and place them in schools that have at least 100 Asian students.

While each assistant wouldn't be expected to be fluent in all of the languages used by Southeast Asian refugees, school officials believe they can cluster assistants to cover each area of the School District.

In addition, the district would begin a new pilot program in three schools — Southwark Elementary, Jay Cooke Middle School and Furness High School. At Cooke and Furness, Asian students who do not read and write either English or their native tongue would be taught most of their core classes, such as mathematics and science, together.

And at Southwark Elementary, Asian children with similar deficiencies could spend more than two hours each in a class designed to teach speaking, reading and writing in English.

Once the pilot plan has been fine-tuned, it would be placed in all schools with a significant Asian population.

U.S. District Court would have to approve the proposal. In the meantime, the School District plans to translate and circulate the proposal in the Southeast Asian community.

The Education Law Center Inc., a non-profit Philadelphia law firm, filed a suit in 1986 in federal court

alleging that the School District had failed to take sufficient steps to address problems Asian students face because of their lack of knowledge of English.

In February, the district said it would not contest the allegations and agreed to develop a plan to address the language barrier.

Rita C. Altman, an associate superintendent in charge of the plan, acknowledged yesterday that one key component in any successful program is recruiting teachers to the district who are bilingual in Asian languages, a venture that districts throughout the country are finding difficult.

To help boost the number of teachers fluent in Asian languages, the district already has asked the state to grant emergency teaching certificates to Asian teachers who are fluent in English.

Altman said people who once taught in Laos or Cambodia have destroyed all records of their teaching credentials, making it difficult for the district to check an individual's teaching background.

Currently, there are 22 Asian teachers and one Asian principal in the district. While there are about 6,751 Asian students in the public schools — about 3.5 percent of the 200,000 public school students — most are concentrated in about 25 schools in West Philadelphia, South Philadelphia, Logan and Olney.