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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2026 Volume III: Asian American History and the Making of the U.S. Immigration System

Who Belongs? Immigration, Disability, and the Making of Belonging

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Children notice inclusion and exclusion long before they have the language to explain what they are seeing. They recognize when someone is welcomed, when someone is left out, and when something feels unfair. As they grow, those observations become questions: Why was someone treated differently? Who made that rule? Was it fair? This curriculum unit uses Asian American immigration history to give students the historical knowledge and vocabulary to investigate the questions they are already asking about fairness, identity, and belonging.

Through the experiences of Asian American immigrants, students will explore how laws, government institutions, public health systems, and communities shaped who was permitted to enter, settle, and claim belonging in the United States, as well as how individuals and communities challenged those decisions. Using photographs, maps, artwork, oral histories, memoirs, poetry, and historical documents, students will discover that belonging is not simply a personal feeling but a historical process shaped by power, policy, and human action.

Students will examine Asian American immigration from the nineteenth century through the present, investigating how immigration policy, public health practices, disability classifications, and ideas about citizenship influenced who was welcomed and who was excluded. They will explore places such as Angel Island Immigration Station and encounter the voices of individuals and families whose lives were shaped by these systems. Rather than studying these events as isolated moments, students will identify recurring historical patterns and examine how people resisted exclusion, built communities, and expanded the meaning of belonging.

Throughout the unit, students will engage in a six-day Historical Connections Framework that moves from historical investigation to contemporary parallels and personal reflection. They will analyze primary and secondary sources, participate in collaborative discussions, develop academic vocabulary through repeated exposure to key concepts, and construct evidence-based responses supported by historical sources. Designed for multilingual learners and students with intellectual disabilities, the unit uses explicit vocabulary instruction, multimodal texts, structured inquiry, and predictable instructional routines to make rigorous historical thinking accessible to all learners. By the end of the unit, students will understand that belonging is continually shaped, challenged, and redefined through the actions of governments, communities, and ordinary people.

(Developed for ELA, grades 5-8; recommended for ELA, grades 4-12)

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