

To the California Department of Education and Instructional Quality Commission:

First, I commend the various departments of California state government for focusing on the importance of Ethnic Studies as a component of the educational curriculum for our students. Particularly in these times of political and social division, it is imperative that our public school curricula be designed to help students to appreciate the importance of ethnic diversity to our history, our culture and our economy, so that they respect and appreciate others who are different than they and take pride in their own backgrounds.

However, I strongly object to the approach that I see was taken in the proposed model curriculum. I became aware of this model curriculum only recently, and will not comment on it in detail. But it is clear to me that it reflects an effort to implement indoctrination of a narrow and biased political agenda rather than to educate students broadly on these important topics.

Much has been written in the media about how the drafters underemphasize the scale of hate crimes against Jews, relative to that against other ethnicities, and broadly use jargon that was created and used primarily, or exclusively, in the explication of a particular narrow political critique. In teaching students about our painful history of crimes against people of different ethnicities, it is wholly unacceptable to emphasize the importance of crimes against some minority groups over crimes against other minority groups. And, while it would be fine to teach critiques of our social order, each should be presented as a theory, with countervailing theories, and none should be elevated in importance over others.

I find it particularly troublesome that the curriculum discusses “capitalism” as a “system of power” in the same sense as “white supremacy” and “patriarchy” (line 87, Chapter 2: Sample Course Models). Any discussion of “capitalism” should include, at a minimum, (i) understanding of capitalism as an economic system, and (ii) comparison of capitalism to other economic systems, with an appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of each. There can be no doubt that unbridled capitalism can be a vehicle of oppression. But capitalism also is an engine of production that has been unmatched in the history of mankind. I would think that the drafters of the model curriculum would be aware that horrifying and systematic oppression and atrocities, on a scale that arguably exceeds anything we have seen in the US, occurred in socialist economies within the past 100 years. That is, socialism has also been used as a vehicle for oppression. My point is not that we shouldn’t teach the ways in which capitalism can oppress, but that the topic should be taught in the context of relevant choices, and opportunities for improvement. The subject is highly nuanced, and putting ‘capitalism’ in the same category as “white supremacy” reflects a narrow political view that is not consistent with teaching that nuance.

As I say, I learned about the model curriculum only recently and have not reviewed it in detail. But the examples I came across and cite above manifest that the drafters have sought to implement a narrow political agenda rather than to provide students a balanced array of views and interpretations. This is not consistent with the aspirations we should have for a school system financed by California taxpayers.

Very truly yours,

John A. Weissenbach