

**From:** Gil Graff

**Sent:** Wednesday, January 13, 2021 9:01 AM

**To:** Ethnic Studies

**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Comment on Current Draft of Model Ethnic Studies Curriculum

Dear CDE Staff:

I write to comment on the Model Ethnic Studies Curriculum, draft three. In August 2019, I read and commented on the initial draft put forward by CDE. I open with the observation that, in comparison to that draft, the version currently posted for comment represents significant progress toward a curriculum that might be described as a “model.” That said, it is my view – as set forth, below – that further revision is warranted, prior to its adoption/publication.

The introduction notes that “consistent with the legislation that called it into being, this document will: offer support for the inclusion of ethnic studies as either a stand-alone elective, or to be integrated into existing history-social science and English language courses.” Chapter three editorializes that “there are still many districts that have not offered the course for a multitude of reasons (e.g., budgetary and other infrastructural constraints, lack of instructional resources and curriculum support).” Consequently, the text continues, many teachers have worked diligently to incorporate the terms, ideas and themes developed in the curriculum into a broad variety of existing courses.

The authors of the curriculum not so implicitly posit that it is preferable to offer a distinct course rather than to develop integrated, multi-disciplinary approaches that offer a holistic educational experience to the student. Is it better to offer Euro-centric world history courses and accord little attention to Native Americans and African Americans in a course on U.S. history because these ethnicities will be “covered” in a distinct ethnic studies course, or is it better to look at social studies in a manner that incorporates the “four disciplines” referenced in the “model curriculum” as integral to students’ comprehensive course of study? If the expectation of the law is that ethnic studies are included in manner A or B, why should the curriculum (in effect) opine that a stand-alone course is the preferred path?

To the extent that a stand-alone course of study is selected as the vehicle of ethnic studies education, I would encourage – based on the content and choices made by the Department in developing this curriculum – consideration of the title: An Ethnic Studies Curriculum Primarily Focused on Four Disciplines: African American, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x, Native American, and Pacific Islander Studies. The fine print in the curriculum acknowledges that there are other ethnicities and proceeds to explain why the above-referenced “core” disciplines are its focus. For a student who identifies with an ethnic group that is not among those four, however, the title “A Model Ethnic Studies Curriculum” -- translating to specific ethnicities that do not include her/his own -- represents marginalization akin to calling something U.S. history and making only passing reference to Native Americans in the introduction to the course curriculum. If the title of an Ethnic Studies course clearly identifies the limited focus of the curriculum, it is forthright about what it will emphasize (and what it will not emphasize).

Lesson five, a lesson on narratives, pronounces categorically that the “War on Drugs” and associated policies “were meant to perpetuate racialized social control.” Do the authors of the curriculum presume to know that this was the motivation of all who supported this approach? It is one thing to comment on the consequence(s) of a policy; it is another to impute intent. The declaration flies in the face of the critical thinking that the lesson purports to encourage.

In lesson six, students are called upon to do research on one among many historical figures. Interestingly, Arab-Americans are accorded a list of significant personalities, alongside those of the “core four” disciplines. As an ethnic group that, as other ethnic groups, is surely worthy of understanding and appreciation, I do not reference this by way of critique; I merely note that this includes an ethnicity other than the four “core,” identified foci of the curriculum, for positive educational purposes.

What is disappointing about lesson six is that, in a course designed to strengthen critical thinking skills, students are asked – with reference to all the personalities on all the lists – only to look at the positive contributions of the individuals listed in advancing such matters as racial and economic equality. There is no call to consider what might have been objectionable (to the student, or to contemporaries of the persons profiled) about the ideas, approaches, and/or actions of the individuals researched, and reflection by the student – other than through a positive lens -- of those ideas, approaches and/or actions. Students are directed (only) to focus on what can be learned from the historical figure “about how we should challenge white supremacy today.”

In like manner to Arab Americans making a cameo appearance in lesson six, I would suggest that Jews appear in lesson seven. That lesson deals with housing discrimination. There is certainly no question that African Americans have experienced and continue to experience considerable housing discrimination; it is a matter that fully warrants the attention it receives in this curriculum. That said, many housing “covenants” throughout the state of California (as elsewhere) at mid-twentieth century excluded blacks and Jews.

Lesson forty-one – which might or might not make its way into a particular course of study – points out that it was not until the post-World War II era that some Jews (those whose appearance is white) came to be seen, by many, as white (although certainly not by white supremacists, then or now). Lesson seven, on housing discrimination, a lesson likely to be incorporated in a stand-alone course, might be an opportune occasion for relating to the phenomenon that “whiteness” as invoked by the curriculum does not attach to all who appear “white.” The power of the state has been galvanized but once to industrially murder millions of men, women and children of a particular ethnic group (not one of those highlighted in the curriculum); it is surely worthy of more than parenthetical note in a model ethnic studies curriculum. A primary document, from the not too distant past, showing the exclusion of blacks and Jews in California neighborhoods, might be instructive in this connection. I commend to the attention of those developing the curriculum an outstanding work by the eminent historian George L. Mosse, titled: *Toward the Final Solution – A History of European Racism*. This work traces the historical development of the very idea of racism, from its emergence during the European “Enlightenment,” into the twentieth century.

Lesson forty-one takes note of various groups of Jews. Ashkenazi Jews are described as Yiddish-speaking. If a high school student in a California public school were to ask a Jewish peer whether s/he speaks Yiddish, it would be the extremely rare instance (if at all) that the answer would be “yes.” Many of the immigrant Ashkenazi Jews (those from Eastern Europe) spoke Yiddish; many immigrant Ashkenazi Jews (from German-speaking lands) looked askance at Yiddish as a primitive jargon; they did not speak that language. Until two hundred fifty years (ten generations) ago the statement in the curriculum would have been reasonably accurate; it is no longer descriptive.

Reference is made to the origins of the Jewish people 3,000 years ago. Three thousand years ago there was an Israelite Kingdom, with its capital in Jerusalem. The origins of the Jewish people date to an earlier time.

I return to my opening observation. This draft is a significant improvement over the document posted for comment in summer 2019. I daresay that there will be many besides myself who take note of various aspects of the latest draft that should be re-visited with an eye to ensuring that the students of the State of California – builders of our collective future – are well served by the version of the curriculum that is, eventually, adopted. The current draft is a step in the right direction; thank you for your commitment to its further improvement, pre-publication.

With appreciation for your consideration,

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