

From: Jon Windham

Sent: Tuesday, August 13, 2019 2:30 PM

To: Ethnic Studies ; Tony Thurmond

Subject: The Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum is deeply flawed

Having read all of chapters 1 and 4, and large portions of chapter 2 of the proposed Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC), I have a variety of observations, comments and suggestions. These are covered in detail in the attached memo. To facilitate review, each of my comments references the related chapter, page number and line number.

As I say at the outset of the memo, I fully endorse efforts to teach ethnic studies to California students. Throughout their time in public schools students should feel a positive connection to their cultures, their families and themselves, while at the same time developing knowledge and respect for people with differing backgrounds. My endorsement of Ethnic Studies as a concept for California, however, does not translate to enthusiasm for the proposed ESMC. **It is deeply flawed and needs to be extensively rewritten.**

I hope you will take the time to review my comments in full, and thoughtfully consider the specific recommendations for improving the ESMC.

Jon Windham

Atherton, CA

To: The Instructional Quality Commission of the California Board of Education
Tony Thurman, California Superintendent of Public Education

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The proposed Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum

Having read all of chapters 1 and 4, and large portions of chapter 2 of the proposed Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC), I have a variety of observations, comments and suggestions. These are discussed below.

Overall Perspective

I fully endorse efforts to teach ethnic studies to California students. Throughout their time in public schools students should feel a positive connection to their cultures, their families and themselves, while at the same time developing knowledge and respect for people with differing backgrounds.

My endorsement of Ethnic Studies as a concept for California, however, does not translate to enthusiasm for the proposed ESMC. **It is deeply flawed and needs to be extensively rewritten.**

Positive Feedback on Content

There is a great deal of good material in the ESMC. I benefitted from my exposure to it, and believe strongly that in these days of increasing social and political polarization our schools should work to build bridges by educating students about themselves and each other.

Many of the “sample lessons” do an excellent job of meeting the “values and principles” and broad goals of the ESMC. The following two are representative of these:

- **Redlining Real Estate in Communities** (Chapter 2, pages 5 – 14): This does an outstanding job of laying out the historic situation, making it palpable by including a deed with restrictive language, along with a detailed article on the impacts of redlining and restrictive deeds.
- **Develop or Preserve? The Shellmound Sacred Site Struggle** (Chapter 2, pages 203-208): After introducing relevant background information, this lesson plan provides readings on opposing sides of the issue. The main student assignment is to “write a persuasive essay noting whether they believe the sites should be preserved, destroyed and/or developed, or propose a solution that would address both sides.” This approach implicitly conveys that preservationists are

confident enough in their position to allow an opposing side to be heard. Moreover, it requires students to think through differing arguments, and then develop and justify their own opinions, rather than simply piling on to an ordained “truth” provided by the lesson.

Shortcomings of the ESMC

Chapter 1 states that “Ethnic Studies is designed to benefit all students. Christine Sleeter, Critical Education scholar, posits, ‘rather than being divisive, Ethnic Studies helps students to bridge differences that already exists in experiences and perspectives,’ highlighting that division is antithetical to Ethnic Studies.” This point is further stressed in the first of the ESMC’s stated values and principles: “cultivate empathy, community actualization, cultural perpetuity, self-worth, self-determination, and the holistic well-being of all participants.” Unfortunately, the ESMC doesn’t get a passing grade on this critically important area for two reasons:

- It inexplicably covers some ethnic groups, but not others.
- Some of the lesson plans are unbalanced, misleading, or needlessly hurtful.

Ethnic Groups Selected and Ignored

Counting the number of pages in Chapter 2 dedicated to specific themes and lessons can be misleading given the wide variation in the formatting and supporting materials. Nonetheless, it gives a rough idea of emphasis on each area of study. Here’s how Chapter 2 breaks down by content:

<u>Study Area</u>	<u>Content</u>	<u>Space</u>
Arab American Studies	4 lessons	55 pages (18% of total)
Asian American Studies	5 lessons	48 pages (16%)
Central American Studies	4 lessons	44 pages (15%)
African American Studies	3 lessons	29 pages (10%)
Native American Studies	4 lessons	33 pages (11%)
Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x Studies	3 lessons	27 pages (9%)
Systems of Power	2 lessons	26 pages (9%)
Social Movements	2 lessons	15 pages (5%)
Pacific Islander Studies	1 lesson	12 pages (4%)

The first thing that stands out looking at the above is the disproportionate emphasis given to Arab American Studies. The basis for this can’t be population size, given that Arab Americans in California (estimated by the Arab American Institute Foundation at 320,000) is far exceeded by the populations of some of the ethnic groups that are omitted. It can’t be due to educational deficiencies, given that one of the source documents provided (the Arab American Institute Foundation’s “Quick Facts About

Arab Americans” points out that “49% of Americans of Arab descent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 32% of Americans at large. Roughly 20% of Arab Americans have a post-graduate degree, which is nearly twice the American average of 12%.”

In contrast, many ethnic groups are inexplicably not mentioned. Most prominent among groups not included (listed with their approximate California population) are:

- Jews (1,000,000 to 1,200,000)
- Indo-Americans (600,000)
- Iranian-Americans (500,000)
- Armenian-Americans (260,000)
- Puerto Ricans (190,000)

Each of these omitted ethnic groups has larger California populations than (for example) the Pacific Islanders, Cambodian and Hmong groups that are included in the ESMC. There may be good reasons to include these smaller groups, but this raises the question: **Beyond the four original Ethnic Studies areas (African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x Studies, and Native American Studies) what criteria are used determine the ethnic groups to be included in the Ethnic Studies curriculum?** To minimize the role of politics in determining the content of the ESMC, these criteria should be clearly articulated and vetted.

FBI data for 2017 (the most recent available) shows that Jews were the target in 58.1% of all religion-based hate crimes in the U.S.; Muslims were targeted much less frequently – 18.6% of the time. Thus, if one goal of Ethnic Studies is the creation of students and adults who abhor racism and hate crimes, one or more lessons on Jewish Americans and anti-Semitism is warranted. The absence of this obvious topic in spite of high and growing levels of anti-Semitism calls into question the objectivity and motives of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Advisory Committee.

At Least Two Lesson Plans Coerce Biased Activism

Ethnic Studies should educate students and challenge them to go beyond their comfort zones on important social issues. Ideally, this will create individuals who take a more active and informed role in civic life. However, students should never be coerced to become public advocates on a topic of the teacher’s or curriculum’s choice. At least two of the model lesson plans explicitly require this and therefore need to be changed:

- **Cambodian Americans – Deportation Breaking Families Apart** (Chapter 2, page 191, line 3935) This lesson has the following inappropriate mandate to students:

“Action: To show evidence of your learning from this lesson you can choose one of the three options below:

- “Write a letter to or call your congressperson to advocate and end to these deportations as well as to the deportations of undocumented immigrants from the Latino community.
 - “Join one of the organizations that is working towards helping these families that are dealing with a loved one being deported and report back how you are participating.
 - “Create a public service announcement that educates others about this issue and post it on Instagram or Facebook. It must include a way for people to get involved.”
- **Islamophobia – What is it and how can it be challenged?** (Chapter 2, page 253, line 5405) As part of this lesson, students are required to produce a public service announcement on Islamophobia. This is a seemingly appropriate, creative and fun way to demonstrate new knowledge in this area. However, the assignment then states, “You must show your PSA to at least 10 of your friends.” This clearly steps over the line into unacceptably forcing students to become activists on a topic of the teacher’s choosing.

At Least Two Lesson Plans Lack Balance and Take Cheap Shots

- **Hip-hop as Resistance** (Chapter 2, page 253, line 5405) includes content which impugns Israel without providing context or balance. Given that our public school students include Israelis and Jewish-Americans, this is a clear violation of the first principle of the ESMC (Chapter 1, page 13): “cultivate empathy, community actualization, cultural perpetuity, self-worth, self-determination, and the holistic well-being of all participants.” It also fails to live up to the stated explanation of how Ethnic Studies is to operate (Chapter 1, page 15): “Students should be exposed to a variety of primary and secondary sources, learn how to process multiple and often competing sources of information, form and defend their own analyses that are based on evidence, and understand how to appropriately contextualize and evaluate sources of information by bringing them into conversation with other texts, significant events, people, theories, and ideas.”
- **Arab Immigration to the US** (Chapter 2, page 235, line 4977) includes the following in the description of Arab immigration in the middle of the twentieth century: “The largest single group was Palestinian, as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had been displaced in the Nakba (Arabic for ‘Catastrophe,’ the term

used to describe the dispossession and dispersal of many Palestinian Arabs from the new state of Israel in the 1948 Palestine War).” A balanced statement would be closer to the U.S. Department of State’s description of the conflict: “The Arab-Israeli War of 1948 broke out when five Arab nations invaded territory in the former Palestinian mandate immediately following the announcement of the independence of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948.”

References to the BDS Movement Should be Deleted

There are many reasons to drop the multiple references to the movement to Boycott, Divest from and Sanction Israel:

- BDS has nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of students in California. Its goal is to force a foreign country to change its policies. Statements from some BDS leaders suggest the real goal is the elimination of Israel. In any event, Ethnic Studies in California should not be about foreign policy initiatives.
- Most Jews and many other Americans view BDS as part of an orchestrated anti-Israel campaign. Referencing it in class would make Jewish and Israeli students uncomfortable, and could subject them to bias and abuse.
- BDS is a controversial topic, on which people with high levels of expertise disagree. Referencing it without presenting balanced and comprehensive background materials would be a disservice to students.
- California public schools should not be seen as endorsing divisive campaigns.

If the state Board of Education decides (mistakenly, in my view) that foreign policy initiatives are suitable for Ethnic Studies, it should set criteria for selecting which are appropriate to teach. It will have an endless number from which to choose: Free Tibet; Free Kashmir; China’s campaign against the Uyghurs; the Rohingya genocide; the Armenian Genocide; the treatment of foreign workers and women in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States; the elimination of dictators in dozens of countries around the world; and many, many more.

Question about African American “Significant Figures to Cover” (Chapter 2, page 49)

One striking thing about this list of 24 people significant to African American history and life (many of whom I admire greatly) are the names that are not on it. For example, towering historical figures such as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall and Jackie Robinson are not on the list. Currently prominent African Americans are also absent: Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, Barak Obama and Bryan Stevenson, among others. Is this because the discipline is still totally controlled by the militant thinking that dominated San Francisco State in the 1960s? If so, that is a sad. There was much about the militant stances taken back then about which I agreed. But surely after all these years even the militants of the 1960s must see that much good came out of the

mainstream Civil Rights movement led by Dr. King and others; that the political success of Black politicians is a good thing; and that inspirational (and highly skilled) work for justice by people such as Bryan Stevenson is worth noting and admiring.

Follow-up

I have high regard and a close emotional connection to California's public schools. My mother was a dedicated public school teacher. My brothers and I are products of public schools and the University of California. My children attended public schools. I strongly believe in the critically important role of public schools to develop thoughtful and responsible citizens for our democracy. Given this, I would be pleased to discuss and/or clarify my comments with any of the people charged with creating the high school Ethnic Studies curriculum. My hope is that a strong and effective Ethnic Studies program is developed and implemented.