

From: Joan

Sent: Monday, August 10, 2020 7:07 PM

To: Ethnic Studies; [emails redacted]

Subject: [EXTERNAL] Include Antisemitism and the Middle Eastern-American Experience

Good afternoon. My name is Joan Kirschenbaum, and I've been a California resident since 1970. I'm a retired public school teacher and for the last 35 years of my career, I specialized in second-language acquisition. I was an active member of the California Language Teachers' Association (CLTA), and a teacher-training-teachers in Orange County's COACH program. Before moving to the Saddleback Unified School District in 1985, I was a business and ESL teacher in San Bernardino Unified, an ESL and Spanish teacher/mentor teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District. I taught colleagues for several summers at the CLTA programs at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and have been honored by receiving Teacher of the Year awards both within the my school district and the language teaching community in the State.

Through the California Department of Education's cutting edge programs, I was able to study in Costa Rica for several summers, as well as Oviedo, Asturias, Spain. I have lived in Mexico, both as a graduate student and teacher/teacher trainer at the Mexico/North American Cultural Center. Later, I spent a sabbatical in Madrid with Middlebury College getting a Master's Degree in Spanish with a concentration on theater.

Why the whole background? Because I know personally how important ethnic studies—inclusive ethnic studies—are to our students. We all face the world through our own filters of experiences, and have the tendency to reduce beliefs, rituals, customs and language to the "ours" and "theirs". We need to open our students to viewing life through similarities, and comparisons, and shared understanding. The "ours" have to be expanded because of our social/educational/religious social circles, and we need to learn not only how to talk with one another, but what to talk about.

Back in the 1970's, the CA Dept of Ed had a "Mosaic Program" where teacher training included bits of different cultures. As a Jew, it was interesting to watch the reactions of my colleagues as it was explained that Jewish parents might respond badly to learn that their student had earned "only" a B. It was true! I knew how to respond as it was my culture, but other teachers weren't prepared for the response. By the way, I miss the Mosaic Program, and have incorporated it into curriculum.

Here in southern Orange County, I have had some very unsettling experiences. Example: A very well-known megachurch had a widely attended youth session that many of my students participated in. The following Monday was tough for me: every period students told me how much they cared for me and respected me, and the thought that I would never get to heaven, and worse yet, burn in hell, because I hadn't taken their congregation's beliefs into my heart was traumatizing for them, and I had to reassure them (stop some girls from crying), that it would work out well.

Example: On Wednesdays, the Christian students were encouraged to meet at the flagpole for a prayer session before school. Where were non-Christian students supposed enter? How were they supposed to react?

Example: Local Little League team photos were scheduled on the Jewish High Holy Days, and students were assigned homework due on the same days. Rabbis had to reach out to the school district and Little League leadership that skipping out of synagogue on those occasions is not an option.

On the other hand, sharing culture within the curriculum can be so rewarding for everyone. In preparation for celebrating Mexico's Day of the Dead, my students got to talk to their own families: what do we do when someone passes? Do we have funerals? wakes? annual remembrances? What are our symbols? How do we dress? Are we happy for the person or sad?

What about coming-of-age recognition: a bar/bat mitzvah? a quinceañera? confirmation? a Sweet 16? Why do girls get more celebrations than boys (or do they?).

What about fasting? Lent? Ramadan? Eating raw fish? Forty kinds of ham? Vegetarian? Let's all cook.

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A very important aspect of "ethnic" studies has to be current politics. The idea of Chinese Americans being blamed for Covid 19; or all people of Middle Eastern descent being held responsible for 9/11; or American Jews being seen as repressors of Palestinians due to Israeli politics: all of these stances demonstrate a lack of context, history, and reliable background information.

For all of these reasons, and many more, I applaud the California Department of Education for instituting an ethnic studies requirement, and ask that it include antisemitism and the Middle Eastern-American experience.

Antisemitism in California is pervasive. We've got to eradicate through education and friendship all the hate we can.

Thank you.

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