

August 13, 2019

Ms. Soomin Chao  
Chair, Instructional Quality Commission  
California Department of Education  
1430 N Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814-5901

Dear Ms. Chao:

The American Jewish Committee (AJC) submits this comment on the proposed ethnic studies curriculum. We urge the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) to redraft the curriculum, which is replete with mischaracterizations and omissions of major California ethnic and religious groups. The communities highlighted in the current draft should be recognized, but not at the exclusion of everyone else. The America we seek and experience is not recognizable in this curriculum.

The problem isn't only—or even mostly—this or that mistaken or tendentious remark, nor even, as the Los Angeles Times has pointed out, the assumption that there is only one “correct” view of contemporary contentious issues. It is that the entire intellectual framework of this curriculum is wholly out-of-place in the public schools. It is not about the study of ethnic groups, but a political statement masquerading as education.

We do not engage in a line-by-line analysis of the curriculum because the individual errors and debatable propositions are not isolated occurrences inevitable in a project as large and complex as a curriculum, but manifestations of a highly ideological worldview—one which we emphatically reject. Teaching about that worldview as one among many would be acceptable. This curriculum does not do that; rather it dismisses all other views as continuing or condoning systematic oppression, and substitutes ideology for analysis, a false simplicity in place of a more complex reality.

AJC since its founding in 1906 has been committed to an America (and a world) where every individual is treated fairly and with dignity; where ethnic, religious and other groups are free to pursue and preserve their unique cultures and value systems as they choose or, if they choose, assimilate other value systems; and to a shared American community which is greater than the sum of its parts, in which the parts are recognized and respected, but which do not impede efforts to create an American community.

AJC does not close its eyes to the ugly reality that America often has, and still does fall short of those ideals, but, unlike the proposed ethnic studies curriculum, it recognizes and celebrates the progress America has made in rectifying those evils. AJC at once believes in recognizing past wrongs, but not in

accepting that Americans cannot move, or have not moved beyond them; it reject the assumption of the draft curriculum that

exercising power is necessarily an exercise in oppression; or that all blame for all that is wrong in the United States or the world rests on those with privilege or power. It favors an America in which grievances are addressed and rectified, not nurtured and glorified.

So that there is no mistake about our position, we say at the outset that AJC believes that the school curriculum must be inclusive of all groups who have contributed to the United States, in particular those groups who for too long were wrongfully excluded from the American narrative. Within the confines and limits of already over-burdened school curricula, history and literature courses should teach students not only America's successes, but its failures, too, and of the history and experience of all its constituent groups. But that teaching should be factual, not ideological, it must cover the full range of ethnic and religious identities, not a selected few, and it must also show the long-term trend towards the blending of individual communities into a larger, if ever changing, American whole.

A comprehensive ethnic studies curriculum in the first quarter of the 21st century must of course include African Americans, Latinos, Asians of various ethnicities and Arab-Americans. But it is puzzling that the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Advisory Committee (MCAC) saw it prudent to obscure the histories of other ethnic and religious groups, including groups as disparate as the Irish, Italians, Greeks, Armenians, Hindus, and Jews.

To highlight all ethnicities with very different, often difficult, histories would demonstrate that groups once demonized can and have successfully assimilated into American society without giving up their original culture. In fact, they have improved American society. Rather than treating them as an undifferentiated mass, their inclusion would be a powerful antidote to the existing curriculum's omission of Jews and other ethnic groups from the curriculum and ill-conceived philosophy of what America really is.

Many in the Jewish community have already justifiably commented critically on the omission of Jews, wherever they are from, from the ethnic history of this country; the unqualified endorsement of the BDS movement as a legitimate effort to achieve justice for Palestinians, even as its founder calls for the elimination of the world's only Jewish state; the curriculum's mind-bogglingly simplistic reduction of conflict in the Middle East to the product of American imperialism only—no mention of Britain or France, to say nothing of Russian meddling (before and after the fall of communism); Sunni-Shiite conflict; competition for oil; democrats vs. monarchists, and more.

Seen through a prism that identifies Israel as white (Western) imperialism with all the evils attributed to that status, it is likewise no accident that the curriculum explores the beliefs of Israel's critics, but not its supporters. These oversights stem directly from a worldview in which people who are "privileged" (white) are seen as inveterate oppressors; that non-white ("unprivileged") people are inevitably only victims. We suggest trying to explain that to victims of Palestinian terrorism, or for that matter the many minority communities that exist in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East such as Coptic Christians, Yezidis, and Tibetans. Communities that have often found refuge in America.

The narrative that Israel is a white privileged state—demographically false—likewise explains why the curriculum systematically ignores racially non-white Mizrahi Jews, of whom there are many in California, Jews whose origins are in Muslim countries. Jews fled those countries because they were expelled or made to feel unwanted in their home countries because all Jews were blamed for Israel's real or imagined faults. That narrative also explains why no mention is made of persistent efforts by many Arab countries to destroy Israel, or, for that matter, undercut the various peace accords Israel has reached with neighboring states.

This myopic worldview explains as well the absence of any discussion of anti-Semitism, a form of hatred emanating from both the political right and left. In short, the curriculum adopts politically tendentious views on race and identity which should not be taught as unchallenged truths in our state's public schools.

The adoption of this ideology would represent an indoctrination of contested ideas about intersectionality; marred by impenetrable reconfigured jargon (Chapter 1. Lines 67-71); and neologisms like "hxrstories." Though the curriculum proclaims the need for students to "make links across racial and ethnic lines (Chapter 2, lines 204-05) it then systematically refuses to do so in cases where the links should be obvious and called out for recognition. This flawed curriculum has no place in a public school in a democracy.

California high school students deserve an opportunity to learn the role of ethnicity, race and religion in the life of all its citizens, including especially those previously ignored. But the proposed curriculum would never achieve this admirable goal. It advances a narrow political agenda and does not reflect California's diverse population.

Teach ethnic studies—by all means. But not this one. This curriculum is not what California needs or deserves. It should be scrapped and replaced by one prepared by persons not wearing ideological blinders, determined to impose a narrow orthodoxy on all California's school children.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Serena Eisenberg".

Rabbi Serena Eisenberg  
Director, AJC Northern California

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dganit Abramoff".

Dganit Abramoff  
Acting Chief of Staff, AJC Los Angeles

Cc:

The Honorable Tony Thurmond, State Superintendent of Public Instruction

The Honorable Jose Medina, Assemblymember

The Honorable Ben Allen, State Senator, IQC member



The Honorable Jessie Gabriel, Assemblymember

The Honorable Patrick O'Donnell, Assemblymember

Jamie Callahan, Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Office of the Governor

Karen Stapf Walters, Executive Director of the California State Board of Education

Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, President of the California State Board of Education

Dr. Stephanie Gregson, Director, Instructional Quality Commission, and Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, Performance, Planning & Technology Branch

Sarah Neville-Morgan, Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, Teaching & Learning Support Branch

Dr. Kenneth McDonald, Lead Consultant for the 2020 Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum