



CALIFORNIA ARMENIAN LEGISLATIVE CAUCUS

July 17, 2020

The Honorable Tony Thurmond
State Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of California
1430 N Street, Suite 5602
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Inclusion of Armenian Americans in Ethnic Studies Curriculum

Dear Superintendent Thurmond:

We respectfully request your strong support for the inclusion of the Armenia-American experience along with those of other ethnic groups already approved for inclusion within the draft Ethnic Studies Curriculum. It would be inexcusable for discussions of ethnic communities and their contributions to the United States and California to unfairly disregard the contributions of Armenian-Americans to our great nation. Efforts to exclude ethnic communities, narrows the scope and devalues the importance of ethnic studies. It would be a mistake to exclude proud, vibrant and significant communities from ethnic studies curriculum in a state that celebrates its diversity, like California. It is imperative that the draft curriculum be widely circulated for appropriate comment and verification so that it reflects accurately the diverse communities living and thriving in California.

The Armenian-American experience and contribution to the history, progression, and the success of the United States and California is very similar to the other ethnic minority groups within the curriculum. Armenian-Americans have been the target of racism for years. Dating back to the 1920s, we have seen Armenian immigrants denied citizenship because of racial and ethnic stereotyping. There is a long history of Armenian adults and children regularly faced racial attacks.

Fresno, California was a hub for Armenian immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They faced exclusion from social events and discrimination in landowning and employment, and were even excluded from a Protestant church they helped create. Armenian-Americans in this city

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faced more institutional forms of discrimination and racism, like restrictive housing contracts, until about the mid-twentieth century.

It is understandably a difficult task to decide where to draw the line when selecting the ethnic communities that should be included in the ethnic studies curriculum. However, it should be fairly easy to understand why Armenian-Americans should be included. The very dollars that we use every day would not exist in their form without the contributions of Armenian chemist, Christopher Der-Seropian. He is credited to have invented the black and green inks that is used in our currency.

Steven Zaillian, an Armenian screenwriter, director, film editor, and producer who was born in Fresno, California, has contributed to several critically acclaimed films. One of his earliest contributions would be the screenplay he wrote for *Schindler's List*. This film is still debated in history classes across the state in order to teach students about the Holocaust. Most recently, he wrote the screenplay for Netflix's *The Irishmen*.

Another Armenian California native, William Saroyan, has also greatly contributed to the history of this nation. He was a renowned novelist, playwright and short story writer. One of his best novels, *The Human Comedy*, awarded him the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and an Academy Award for the film adaptation of it. Saroyan's creative and unique storytelling ability has kept him alive all these years. He has written about how Armenians were considered inferior and that they were hated in his hometown of Fresno. William Saroyan has been recognized in the California State Legislature for enriching the cultural diversity of the state. This kind of talent does not exist everywhere, which is why contributors alike need to be discussed and studied, especially when they are native to California.

Kerkor "Kirk" Kerkorian, also born in Fresno, California, was an Armenian-American businessman, investor, and philanthropist. Along with architect Martin Stern, Jr., Kerkorian was a significant character in the shaping of Las Vegas. He has been described as the "father of the mega-resort" after building a few of the largest hotels in Las Vegas: the MGM Grand Hotel, the MGM Grand, and the International Hotel. Kerkorian also entirely funded the movie, "The Promise," a film about the Armenian Genocide, which premiered in April 2017 in the United States. However, before Kerkorian had evolved in the business world, he received his

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commercial pilot's certificate and in the beginning of 1942 and risked his life to deliver Canadian-built Mosquito bombers from Labrador to Scotland. He saved the money that he made from the trips and bought himself a small charter business in 1947, which led to the beginning of his flourishing business empire.

Rouben Mamoulian, an Armenian-American film and theatre director, is known for his innovative use of camera movement and sound, which was seen in his first feature film, *Applause* (1929) that was shot during the early years of sound films. Other notable 1930s films that Mamoulian has directed include *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931)—which is regularly considered the best version of the tale—and *Queen Christina* (1933). Mamoulian was the first to stage notable Broadway works *Oaklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), and *Lost in the Stars* (1949).

Alex Manoogian was an industrial engineer, businessman, entrepreneur and philanthropist who was the founder of Masco Corporation, a home improvement and new home constructions manufacturer. Under his leadership, the company grew exponentially and joined the Fortune 500 list of largest U.S. corporations. Manoogian patented the first successful washerless ball valve, the Delta faucet, which is a common type of faucet that can be found in most homes and even businesses. His successful investment is a footprint that he has left everywhere—not just in the United States.

Not too long ago, we had the first and only Armenian governor of California, the late George Deukmejian, who has changed the history of the state. The late Deukmejian was born in the United States because his parents emigrated from the Ottoman Empire in the early 1900s in order to escape the Armenian Genocide. It is important that students know this information and understand the significance of this ethnic group's struggles because their sacrifices and endeavors have changed the course of California history.

Armenian-Americans have been crucial to the contributions in the history of the United States and California since the major wave of Armenian settlers came here in the late 1890s. The United States' foreign aid that helped relieve and save Middle Eastern refugees has allowed our great nation to be what it is today. It is significant to note that amidst their contributions, they have been discriminated against and isolated—characteristics that we have seen in the treatment of minority groups throughout the histories of the United States and California.

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Armenian-Americans have contributed significantly to California's success, have faced discrimination on parallel with other ethnic communities and should be included in the Ethnic Studies Curriculum created to educate California's diverse student population. Armenians in California have accomplished so much, not just for themselves, but for the health and welfare of our society.

If you would like to discuss this further, please contact Dan Savage at (916) 319-2046 or (916) 747-1510. Thank you for your attention and consideration on this matter.

Sincerely,

Senator
Anthony Portantino

Senator
Scott Wilk

Assemblymember
Laura Friedman

Assemblymember
Adrin Nazarian

cc: The Honorable Toni Atkins, California State Senate President pro Tempore
The Honorable Anthony Rendon, Speaker of the California State Assembly
The Honorable Shirley Weber, Assemblymember, 79th District
The Honorable Jose Medina, Assemblymember, 61st District

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