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American Sephardi Federation

*Preserving & perpetuating the history, traditions, & rich mosaic culture of
Greater Sephardi communities as an integral part of the Jewish experience*

14 February 2021

State Board of Education
Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional Resources Division
1430 N Street, Suite 3207, Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear California State Board of Education Members,

We are writing to you in our capacity representing the Board of Directors of the American Sephardi Federation (ASF). We are a founding partner and integral organization within the Center for Jewish History, New York, with an over 50-year history.

This letter is written out of great concern about the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC), which, even with the 3rd draft's fixes, remains antithetical to perpetuating the United States' pluralist society and liberal democracy. Not only are historical inaccuracies sprinkled throughout, but the Jewish people's identity is racialized and put into anti-Semitic terms. The ESMC will contribute to more ignorance and likely rising antisemitism in the United States, particularly on college campuses, and create a vicious cycle that needs to be opposed now, at its root. This curriculum should not be done in the name of Sephardic Jews, nor should this be taken as an opportunistic moment to push agendas for those who are ignorant of the vast, diverse histories of world and American Jewry.

The ASF's mission is to preserve, promote, and perpetuate the history, traditions, and rich mosaic culture of the Greater Sephardic Jewish communities (with "Sephardic" we refer to the definition of being of "Greater Sephardic" background, which includes the Jews not only from the Iberian Peninsula, but also the Jews that remained primarily in the Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African Diaspora—previously often referred to as "Mizrahi"—and that all share so many similar traditions, culture, and outlook).

The two Sample Lesson Plans—"40: Antisemitism and Jewish Middle Eastern Americans" and "41: Jewish Americans: Identity, Intersectionality, and Complicating Ideas of Race"—were clearly prepared without enough consideration for the full breadth of the Jewish experience. These Lesson Plans divide the Jewish people into conflicting identities; they define Jews exclusively by the hateful beliefs and behaviors of others; and they deny Jewish agency and achievement, especially here in America.

This is well expressed by Rabbi Rachel Isaacs, Dorothy "Bibby" Levine Alford Chair in Jewish Studies at Colby College, who asserts that:

Historians play a very important role right now both in the academy and the political arena because I think there is a move... to try to create these rigid categories of identity—that are hierarchical, that are moralized that are static, that obscure and do violence to the real complexity of the history of the Jewish people...



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...We are a people who really undermines and challenges categories and hierarchies and simplistic narratives about history. I think that is one of the gifts that Jewish history gives to the academy more broadly. I think that is also why Jewish Studies is often left out of the pantheon of Ethnic Studies because it challenges all of those sort of simplistic views about power, oppression, and 'whiteness'—all those things. We're the ones who muddy the waters....

Sample Lesson 40 purports to introduce “students to antisemitism and its manifestations through the lens of Jewish Middle Eastern Americans, also known as Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews, whose contemporary history is defined by recent struggles as targets of discrimination, prejudice and hate crimes in the United States and globally.”

We reject the notion that what California students should learn about Jews, and especially Greater Sephardic communities, is that our history is defined by anti-Semites, and/or that Jewish identity is only interesting in terms of intersectionality.

No, the beauty, depth, diversity, and vitality of the Jewish intellectual and cultural legacy, which is rooted in classic Sephardic history and tradition, is not reducible to an expedient victimhood narrative.

There is, moreover, simply no comparison between the anti-Semitism faced today by Persian Jews who found refuge in California after 1979, and their friends and relatives still in Iran, who suffer daily from state-sanctioned discrimination and social stigma or “otherization” under the current regime. Nevertheless, Sample Lesson 40 cites the despicable attack on the Nessah Synagogue in Beverly Hills, but not the devastating desecration of the synagogue at the Shrine to Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan, Iran.

More absurdly, Sample Lesson 40 privileges a single instance of vandalism (because it occurred at a Sephardi synagogue) over many recent cases of violence, including the fatal, anti-Semitic attack on the Chabad of Poway. Anti-Semites, of course, do not discriminate between the types of Jews they hate, but rather hate all Jews. The deliberate omission of Poway is problematic in another sense: the attack’s hero, Officer Jonathan Morales, who courageously confronted and chased the so-called “white supremacist” away before more innocents were killed or injured, discovered he has converso or Sephardi Crypto-Jewish roots.

Confirmation coverage of Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, the 1st member of the Ladino-speaking American Sephardi community to serve in the Cabinet, largely failed to mention that he is a Sephardic Jew. It hardly helps to see Sepharadim mentioned in the ESMC almost solely on account of anti-Semitism and, even then, not a single word about the much-neglected tragic impact of the Holocaust on Sephardic communities in Greece, North Africa, and the Middle East.



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Sample Lesson 41 does contain a worthy recommendation for students to read *I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, and includes excerpts from the book written by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Senator Diane Feinstein, and Sir Naim Dangoor, amongst others.

We understand that the ESMC has undergone multiple revisions and more may still be made ahead of the vote in March. Yet claims that the ESMC can progress beyond its flawed premises remain unpersuasive.

Sincerely,

David E.R. Dangoor
President

Jason Guberman-P.
Executive Director

P.S. The experiences of Sephardic Jews throughout history are significantly different from Ashkenazi/European Jews, yet are a vital, expansive part of the Jewish experience. In fact, most of these Sephardic Jewish communities predate in what became mainly Arab/Muslim lands and were established over 2,600 years ago and were only driven to exile in the period 1948 – 1970 as a result of the establishment of Israel as a state. Today, over 50% of Israel's population have their roots in the region from countries like Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, et al. The Iranian exodus started after 1979 when Iran went from being an ally of Israel to its mortal enemy. Very many fleeing Iranian Jews settled in and around Los Angeles after having enjoyed many centuries of a secure, fruitful, and successful life in Iran.