

**From:** Mark Powell

**Sent:** Monday, August 10, 2020 4:44 PM

**To:** Ethnic Studies

**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Public Comment: California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Leaves Many Cultures Out

## **California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Leaves Many Cultures Out**

Dear IQC Commissioners,

Thanks to the hard work of the California Department of Education, the new draft Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) is headed in the right direction, but many groups are still being left out and that is unacceptable. Ethnic studies has always focused on giving a voice to those who have historically been ignored, misunderstood, or marginalized and without question, African American, Latino American, Asian American, and Native American students deserve to have their stories better represented in our education system.

However, on the issue of inclusion, the ESMC still has room for improvement. A key example is the way Middle Eastern and West Asian populations are represented within Asian American studies. While Arab Americans are repeatedly highlighted, Iranians, Armenians, Mizrahi Jews, Assyrian Christians, and other Middle Eastern populations are ignored or minimized. While this was likely unintentional, there is no academic or demographic justification for this exclusionary approach. The ESMC should be revised to ensure no Middle Eastern community is favored over another.

I can relate to this personally, because I am the son of Sephardic Jewish refugees who were forced to leave Egypt due to religious persecution. Being the only Sephardic Jewish student attending elementary school in the 1960's was a bit lonely, there were no other students like me in the school or mention of students like me in any of the books. Our educational system has come a long way since then, nevertheless much more still needs to be done. There are other important ways the ESMC can be improved as well. The stated goals of the curriculum include promoting the values of civic engagement and civic responsibility, self and collective empowerment, cultural understanding of how different groups have struggled and worked together, and critical thinking. To accomplish those goals, the "Guiding Values and Principles" of the ESMC in Chapter 1 should be revised to add more clearly defined and inclusive terminology. For example, one Guiding Value and Principle is to "connect ourselves to past and contemporary resistance movements that struggle for social justice on the global and local levels". There are many ways this could be done constructively from an educational standpoint. Unfortunately, this language could also be very easily used

to justify exploiting schools to promote the types of divisive and hateful political agendas that were criticized in the first draft, including antisemitism.

While some university ethnic studies courses are taught from a particular political perspective, this is not appropriate for K-12 schools. Students must be exposed to many conflicting perspectives, learn how to analyze them, and come to their own conclusions. Ethnic studies has been taught in numerous California school districts for years, and some of them have developed strong guidelines around the issue of critical thinking. The Guiding Values and Principles of the ESMC should incorporate such guidelines.

Given that there is a bill in the California State Legislature to make ethnic studies a graduation requirement for public school students, it is more crucial than ever that we get this right. Many generations of students are depending on us to provide a curriculum that will give voice to the voiceless, contribute to healing our racial and ethnic divisions, and uplift all communities in our state. I encourage parents, students, educators, and all concerned Californians to read the new draft for themselves and get involved in this process.

***\*Mark Powell is a member of San Diego County Board of Education. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Board of Education or the San Diego County Office of Education.***

Sincerely,

Mark Powell