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**To:** Ethnic Studies

**Cc:** Shanine Coats

**Subject:** Public Comment from Facing History and Ourselves on Ethnic Studies Curriculum revision

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On behalf of Facing History and Ourselves, I respectfully submit these comments for consideration by the CDE as they seek to refine the Model Ethnic Studies Curriculum.

Carlos Cortes suggested (and submitted to public comment) 8 principles to guide ethnic studies:

1. working toward greater inclusivity
2. furthering self-understanding
3. developing a better understanding of others
4. recognizing intersectionality
5. pursuing greater justice and equality
6. promoting self-empowerment for civic engagement
7. supporting a community focus
8. developing interpersonal communication

We concur with these principles, and would expound on a few of them as follows.

Students need the opportunity to see themselves as part of the American narrative, and they need to be exposed to a wide variety of other voices and personal stories for interethnic bridge-building. Teachers also play a role in helping students find themselves in the stories of others. The learning, then, goes beyond differences and commonalities to provide a foundation for empathy. One poignant example of this is the discovery by [Julius Lester](#) of haiku as an important step in finding his own voice on his way to becoming a renowned author of "To Be a Slave" and other narratives that illuminate the experience of enslavement.

When it comes to promoting self-empowerment for civic engagement, we would add that teachers have the opportunity to help students understand agency, identifying the factors that expand or constrain the choices available to us. Civic engagement is much larger than the "project" or "campaign" model, but is embedded in all of the choices we make in our interdependent world. This approach asks students to consider the broadest range of historical actors, including the agency and impact of individuals from across marginalized groups. (see Keith Barton's ["Agency, Choice, and Historical Action: How history teaching can help students think about democratic decision-making"](#))

As noted below, creating a reflective classroom culture is a foundation for building students capacities as civic actors themselves - practicing the daily decision-making that impacts others in their community. Educator Diane Moore has argued that encouraging students to take themselves seriously and inspiring in them the confidence to do so are two of the most important roles of an educator in a multicultural democracy" (Moore, 2006, p. 11). John Dewey has argued that classrooms like these are not training grounds for *future* democratic action but rather places where democracy is already enacted (Dewey, 1916). (quoted in Barr & Bardige 2012, p. 672)

This is also true in application to incorporation of literature in an Ethnic Studies course. Students need to experience a diverse range of complex stories to help them understand themselves and others. Annual trends analyzed since the 1960s show that over 85% of books published for children and young adults feature white characters, and when characters of color or other

marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+, do appear, they are portrayed as stereotypes or exist at the fringes of the story. Scholar and author Ebony Elizabeth Thomas warns that this exclusion is creating an “imagination gap” where children are growing up without experiencing what Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop described as the “windows, mirrors, and doors” of literature: “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.” (Sims 1990, ix-xi) By centering the voices that have been traditionally marginalized or excluded from the curriculum and applying a critical lens to texts, teachers provide opportunities to develop students’ critical literacy skills, while also allowing them to see themselves in the literature they read and expand the range of stories that they have about others in the world.

We would also suggest adding or clarifying as key principles:

In regard to principle 3 - developing a better understanding of others - we recommend attention be given to trauma-informed educational practices. The primary sources included in a community focus could expand beyond local records and verbal materials to include art, memorials, and community-based institutions/organizations.

In regard to principle 8 - developing interpersonal communication - in view of the goal of an ethnic studies curriculum presents a different set of skills than is generally a focus in the development of persuasive essays or debate arguments. Within Ethnic Studies, the goal is to understand historical experience and contemporary perspectives which have not been as consistently presented in K-12 education. Therefore, rather than a debate model with students focused on positions and compelling arguments, we respectfully suggest a model of engagement which places greater priority on seeking to understand than seeking to convince. Through narrative writing, students deepen their own understanding of the material, themselves, and the world. Students need to write for the lives they are leading now and the lives they will lead in the future, and that preparation involves writing across genres, for a range of purposes and audiences, on paper and online.

We also offer the following as practical pieces for teachers implementing an Ethnic Studies approach to their courses.

Creating a reflective classroom community

An ethnic studies approach which explores historical analysis, asks students to grow in self-awareness, and illuminates multiple perspectives, requires creation of a reflective classroom community. To create such an environment, teachers must (1) promote a climate of respect, (2) model a culture of questioning, (3) nurture student voice, (4) create space for diverse viewpoints, (5) deepen reflection through thoughtful silence, and (6) honor different learning styles.

Educators today have a tremendous responsibility: teaching students content, cultivating their social-emotional skills, and preparing them to be informed and active global citizens.

“In reflective classrooms, students’ knowledge is constructed rather than passively absorbed. Students are prompted to join with teachers in posing problems to foster “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1994). In reflective classrooms, teaching and learning are conceived as social endeavors in which a healthy exchange of ideas is welcome. Students are encouraged to engage in dialogue within a community of learners, to look deeply, to question underlying assumptions, and to discern underlying values being presented. Students are encouraged to

voice their own opinions and to actively listen to others, to treat different students and different perspectives with patience and respect, and to recognize that there are always more perspectives and more to learn. Learning in these contexts nurtures students' humility as well as confidence - humility because they come to see that they have no "corner" on the truth, and confidence because they know their opinion will still be taken seriously." (Barr & Bardige, 2012, p. 672)

Additional resources for thinking about a reflective classroom:

- [8 Components of a Reflective Classroom](#)
- [Fostering a Reflective Classroom](#)

Foundational strategies for teachers

Building "safe," "democratic," "empowering" classrooms is both art and science. Skilled teachers use a variety of techniques to create a sense of trust and openness, to encourage students to speak and listen to each other, to make space and time for silent reflection, to offer multiple avenues for participation and learning, and to help students appreciate the points of view, talents, and contributions of less vocal members.

Facilitating thoughtful, respectful, and generative discussions of controversial issues can be especially challenging in classrooms where students bring a diversity of social, personal, and academic backgrounds to the conversation. Yet the richness of these discussions and their importance for future citizenship drives many teachers whose classes are relatively homogeneous to seek out opportunities for their students to engage with counterparts of very different backgrounds.

It is equally difficult to consistently facilitate honest dialogue in classrooms where there is a greater degree of social, personal, and/or political homogeneity. By prioritizing student-centered approaches and utilizing a wide variety of discussion protocols, teachers can provide opportunities for students to engage critically in the gray areas of controversial topics with peers who may share similar viewpoints.

What do teachers need in order to effectively engage students in productive conversations and learning activities around difficult and important issues? Simply put:

- Sufficient understanding of the subject matter to provide basic context and select a set of authentic and varied readings, coupled with genuine curiosity and an awareness of the limitations of their knowledge
- Knowledge of their students – coupled with genuine curiosity and a set of tools that help them to elicit students' questions and perspectives, monitor their understanding, complicate their thinking and help them tolerate and work through the disequilibrium, and appreciate their insights, wisdom, and moral courage
- A map of the minefields – and a set of strategies, supports, and mentors that they can turn to when students' confusion, lack of engagement, misconceptions, prejudices, or hurtful comments and behavior prove challenging
- Awareness and active monitoring of their own thinking and learning – and other adults who can join them in the inquiry, help them to articulate their questions and insights, and further stimulate their thinking

These strategies may be helpful for teachers seeking to create reflective classrooms and engage student voice:

- [Contracting](#)
- [Journaling](#)

- [Text-Text, Text-Self, Text-World](#)
- [Big Paper](#)
- [Save the Last Word For Me](#)
- [Give one get one](#)
- [Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn](#)
- Introductory Unit: [Back to School Toolkit](#)

And these strategies are particularly helpful for exploring multiple viewpoints on controversial topics

- [Human Barometer](#)
- [Four Corners](#)
- [Gallery Walk](#)
- [Cafe Conversation](#)
- [Fishbowl](#)

All of these and more can be found in detail on our website at:  
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies>

Advice for schools and districts

To become effective educators, teachers first need time to step back and reflect together with colleagues. Providing professional development seminars and workshops which specifically create time for teachers to be learners, allows them to explore core concepts and to deepen their understanding of the history they intend to teach while simultaneously exploring their own identity, the way their identity has affected and been affected by their experiences, and how their identity influences their perspective and the way they are seen by others, including their students. In community with other educators, teachers gain insight from others' experiences and perspectives, and build relationships for ongoing exploration which may be useful as they then create reflective communities for their students..

We believe schools and districts can learn from the model Facing History and Ourselves has implemented.

In its teacher preparation efforts, Facing History and Ourselves is explicit both about the need for support and effective methods of obtaining it. Administrators and supervisors need to understand the program and value its aims and content so that they can adjust schedules and respond to parent and community concerns when needed and can foster a school-wide culture that builds upon the lessons of Facing History and Ourselves and supports civic learning beyond its classrooms. Facing History and Ourselves urges teachers to make their efforts visible – to parents, other teachers, administrators, and community members – inviting them to sit in on classes and professional discussions, offering curriculum night presentations or extended study group opportunities, or linking them with adult education offerings in the community. Facing History and Ourselves staff continually follow-up with teachers who have attended their institutes, listening to teachers' observations and concerns, suggesting additional resources, arranging for speakers, and sharing the joys of uncovering students' moral insights and growing sense of the importance of their education and of their "choices to participate."

And finally, the following framing may be helpful for some of the themes being explored in a general Ethnic Studies course.

**Identity and Ideology**

“Adolescence is, by definition, a time of transition, when young people begin to take their places as responsible and participating members of their communities. As young people weigh their future choices, they wrestle with issues of loyalty and belief. The adolescent’s central developmental questions are “Who am I?” “Do I matter?” and “How can I make a difference?” They seek people and paths that are worthy of their loyalty and commitment, challenge hypocrisy, and bring passion and new perspectives to enterprises that capture their imaginations and engage their involvement. ‘(Barr and Bardige, p. 666)

Adolescence brings with it new abilities to think abstractly and meta-cognitively, so this exploration of identity and ideology is developmentally responsive. The high-engagement reflection on ourselves, who we are, how we are perceived by others, and how our identity influences our perspective, choices, and impact,. builds schema for a more sophisticated understanding of agency and for deep ethical reflection. It also provides an initial basis for delving into the tension between the universal and particular - understanding and drawing out universal lessons on human behavior while respecting the integrity of particular moments and experiences.

Essential Questions for exploring Identity:

1. What is the relationship between the individual and society?
2. What factors shape our identities? What parts of our identities do we choose for ourselves? What parts are determined for us by others, by society, or by chance?
3. What dilemmas arise when others view us differently than we view ourselves?
4. How do our identities influence our choices and the choices available to us?
5. What factors influence our identity, and in turn, the choices we make?
6. How is identity shaped and reshaped by my circumstances?

Our society—through its particular culture, customs, institutions, and more—provides us with the labels we use to categorize the people we encounter. These labels are based on beliefs about race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, and more. Sometimes our beliefs about these categories are so strong that they prevent us from seeing the unique identities of others. Sometimes these beliefs also make us feel suspicion, fear, or hatred toward some members of our society. Other times, especially when we are able to get to know a person, we are able to see past labels and, perhaps, find common ground

These two chapters offer a range of stories which might be included as resources in this exploration:

- [Individual and Society](#)
- [We and They](#)

And these additional strategies provide an opportunity for students to explore their own identity, how they are perceived by others, and the complexity of identity:

- [Identity Charts](#)
- [Bio Poem](#)
- [Stick Figure Quotes](#)

Additional possibilities for Essential questions and resources across core themes for Ethnic Studies:

**Ideology**

1. In what ways does an ideology create “in” groups and “out” groups?
2. How does it appeal to people’s hearts and minds?
3. In what ways does an ideology get expressed in laws and institutions?
4. What does it mean to be an outsider or even a dissenter in an ideologically-based society? What does it mean to be an insider?

The Eugenics movement is one ideology whose legacy continues to impact American society. These resources can be helpful:

- [Book: Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement](#)
- [Model Lesson exploring the legacy of eugenics](#)

This strategy can be helpful to analyze the deep impact of an ideology:

- [Iceberg Diagram](#)

## Migration

1. What does it mean to live on this land? Who may become an American? What happens when multiple narratives are layered on top of each other?
2. How should societies integrate newcomers? How do newcomers develop a sense of belonging to the places where they have arrived
3. How does migration affect the identities of individuals, communities and nations?
4. How do ideas about who may belong in a nation affect immigration policy, the lives of immigrants, and host communities?
5. What role have immigrants played in defining notions of democracy?

These resources may be helpful in a study of migration:

- [Teaching Idea: Why Do People Migrate?](#)
- [Explainer: Migration](#)
- [Global Migration](#) Gallery Walk
- [Stories of Identity: Religion, Migration, and Belonging in a Changing World](#)
- Digital book and unit outline: [Stolen Lives](#)
- Film and Study Guide: [Becoming American](#)
- Unit: [My Part of the Story](#)
- Teaching Guide: [Teaching Enrique’s Journey](#)
- [Webinar for teaching Enrique’s Journey](#)

## Systems of Power

- Why do people turn to ideologies that promote "We and They" divisions in society?
- How do notions of race influence the choices we make?

- How do other constructed aspects of identity influence the choices we make?
- What are the implications for a society when it categorizes people into a social hierarchy?

These resources may be helpful:

- [Book: Race and Membership in American History: the Eugenics Movement](#)
- Digital book and unit outline: [Stolen Lives](#)

### **Social Movements and Equity**

- What debates and dilemmas from past historical moments remain unresolved?
- How can one make a difference in the community?
- What skills and tools are needed to create change in society?

These resources may be helpful:

- Lessons: [Latinx Rights in 1960s California](#)
- [Standing Up to Hatred and Intolerance](#)
- [Chapter: Choosing to Participate](#)
- Unit: [Facing Ferguson: News Literacy in a Digital Age](#)
- Unit: [10 Questions for Young Changemakers](#)
- Film and Study Guide: [Eyes on the Prize](#)
- Unit: [Eyes on the Prize](#)
- Choosing to Participate Toolkit: [From Reflection to Action](#)

**Respectfully submitted by Mary Hendra, Program Director for Los Angeles and Organizational Innovation, on behalf of Facing History and Ourselves.**

Facing History and Ourselves offers an interdisciplinary model for middle and high schools that integrates civic education, social–emotional learning, academic rigor, and attention to equity, in order to fulfill the central goal of American public education: preparing all students for life in a democracy. Facing History helps teachers develop reflective, inclusive classrooms designed to support social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD). In Facing History classrooms, teachers promote a climate of respect; model a culture of questioning; nurture student voice; create space for diverse identities, viewpoints, and lived experience; deepen reflection through thoughtful silence; and honor different learning styles. This student-centered learning environment provides the underlying foundation for implementing Facing History’s content and pedagogy.

References:



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