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Goleta, CA 93117

August 15, 2019

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

Re: Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are writing concerning the proposed draft of the State of California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum ("ESMC"). As discussed in more detail below, we believe that the proposed ESMC fails to comply with the standards set forth in AB 2016 (Chapter 327 of the Statutes of 2016), which states that the purpose of the ESMC is to "prepar[e] pupils to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures."

In Chapter 1 of the ESMC, The Introduction and Overview, the ESMC posits the following: "At its core, the field of Ethnic Studies is the interdisciplinary study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity with an emphasis on experiences of people of color in the United States." All California high school students would benefit from engaging in the interdisciplinary study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity with an emphasis on experiences of people of color in the United States. A curriculum is required that engages students in such an interdisciplinary study with the goal of preparing them to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures. The proposed ESMC fails to meet the goals set forth in AB 2016.

There are many ways in which an Ethnic Studies curriculum could introduce California's high school students to the field of Ethnic Studies. The proposed model ESMC chooses to take the approach that the field of Ethnic Studies "critically grapples with the various power structures and forms of oppression, including, but not limited to, white supremacy, race and racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, islamophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia, that continue to impact the social, emotional, cultural, economic, and political experiences of Native People/s and people of color." This restrictive approach fails to prepare California's students to be global citizens. Yes, the Ethnic Studies curriculum should emphasize the contributions of ethnic groups that have been historically left out of mainstream textbooks. Yet, by focusing only on the impact of Native People/s and people of color, the curriculum inappropriately restrictive.

On lines 59-62 on page 3 of the Introduction and Overview of the proposed ESMC, the document states the following: “Beyond providing a history and analysis of oppression and power, Ethnic Studies offers a dynamic inquiry-based approach to the study of Native People/s and communities of color that encourages utilizing transnational and comparative frameworks.” By limiting Ethnic Studies to the study of Native People/s and communities of color, the proposed ESMC fails to meet the mandate of AB 2016. Had the legislature intended to limit the proposed Ethnic Studies curriculum to the study of Native People/s and communities of color, it would have done so. Instead, it called for “an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures.” Not all such cultures, however, are Native People/s or communities of color. One example is the Jewish people. While some Jewish people are people of color, and are in fact both Arab-American and Jewish American, most are not. The clear historical evidence is that Jewish Americans have been the victims of anti-Semitism. If the IQC is unfamiliar with the important contributions of Jewish Americans to American culture and values, perhaps it is because in the past those contributions have generally been excluded from mainstream textbooks and course materials.

In fact, the proposed draft of the ESMC excludes any mention of the contribution of Jewish Americans as well as any discussion of the topic of anti-Semitism. Our grandparents had to overcome both anti-immigrant sentiment and rampant anti-Semitism. It is shocking to us that the Jewish experience should not be prominently featured in the State’s ethnic studies curriculum.

Equally appalling is the fact that the proposed curriculum implies support for the Boycott Divesture and Sanction (BDS) movement, which is both anti-Israel and anti-Semitic.

We support AB 2016’s principle that “the state’s educational standards should be guided by core values of equity, inclusiveness, and universally high expectations.” Sadly, the proposed ESMC curriculum falls far short of that guiding principal insofar as it excludes discussion of Jewish-American culture and the contribution American Jews have made to our State and Nation, and actually violates that guiding principle by its inclusion of anti-Semitic and anti-Israel language.

Among the California Department of Education's General Principles for the ESMC are that it should "include accurate information based on current and confirmed research," and "Encourage cultural understanding of how different groups have struggled and worked together, highlighting core ethnic studies concepts such as equality, justice, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, etc." A great example of how different groups have struggled and worked together is the way in which the Jewish community supported the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Many Jewish people lost their lives in the struggle for civil rights. The partnership between the Jewish-American and the African-American communities during the 1960's could be a great way to highlight disparate communities struggling and working together. The proposed curriculum provides an example of a restrictive covenant that prohibits the sale of homes in certain areas to various ethnic groups. It is not mentioned in the proposed curriculum, but one of those ethnic groups was Jewish Americans. By excluding Jewish Americans as an ethnic group from the proposed and including anti-Semitic and anti-Israel language, the proposed draft of the ESMC fails to comply with the California Department of Education's General Principles.

We urge the IQC to work with members of the Jewish community to properly include a discussion of Jewish-American culture in the ESMC curriculum and to delete from that curriculum any language that is anti-Semitic or anti-Israel. We encourage the IQC to work with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and with Jewish-American cultural institutions such as the American Jewish Museum in Philadelphia on accurately representing the Jewish-American experience in the ESMC curriculum.

Please contact us with any questions you may have concerning this matter.

Sincerely,

Barry Belkin
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