

**From:** Erica Ballinger

**Sent:** Thursday, January 21, 2021 4:17 PM

**To:** Ethnic Studies; Superintendent; [email redacted]

**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] ethnic studies public comment

Dear Superintendent Thurmond, President Darling-Hammond and the CDEIQC:

Several years ago, my aunt donated money to plant trees in Israel in my late grandparents' names, a seemingly innocent act, she thought, to honor our Jewish elders. But, when she informed my father she did this, he erupted angrily and a heated family dispute ensued. His position was that the state of Israel had developed into a system of national oppression against an indigenous people and that Israel's actions (ongoing settlement expansion, violent purging of Palestinians from their land, suppression of human rights) are a cause of resurgent antisemitism in the world. He felt that donating money to plant these trees made our family complicit.

This family dispute caused me to want to learn more. I decided to join an interfaith delegation to Palestine to see first-hand what was going on. It was the most eye-opening experience of my life. One Palestinian man we met shared the story of being expelled at gunpoint from his childhood home, his entire village bulldozed over and later reforested (likely with trees donated by well-meaning Jews like my aunt) and made into a park that Palestinians are prohibited from visiting. I began to understand my father's anger. Trees had been used to cover up destroyed Palestinian villages and to reforest stolen lands so that the rightful owners could not return. Jews everywhere donate trees in this way, without even a hint of the political significance of the act. Other Palestinians we met talked about the regular harassment they experience, restrictions on their freedom of movement due to the hundreds of checkpoints, the nighttime raids which have a traumatic impact on children, and the restrictions on water access. For the first time, I began to understand how truly controlled the narrative is when it comes to Palestine. It is important to remind you that Zionism is a political ideology (not a religion) and Jews around the world have different opinions about that ideology. Many, including those in my own family, do not agree that a state should exist exclusively for Jewish people, who by nature of their religion have superior rights over a native population. Others agree in theory with the ideology but do not agree with the State of Israel's practices. Being critical of a government or the ideology does not make one anti-Semitic.

When I heard there was pressure from some vocal Zionist groups to censor the Arab American component of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, I was deeply troubled. Ethnic Studies is a discipline that encourages students to look critically at the structures of power in our society, at the institutions that exist, to see how narratives are controlled in ways that reinforce existing imbalances in power. If we have learned anything from recent events at our nation's capital and across the country, it is that now is the time to deconstruct history and events in ways that allow a more critical and rounded understanding. In no place is this more important than the question of Palestine, where the people's history and stories have been falsely narrated and long silenced.

Palestinians make up the longest and largest refugee population in the world. Over 8 million people have been displaced from their homes over decades. Some have resettled here. Their stories and experiences as Arab Americans seem wholly appropriate for an Ethnic Studies course. I urge the committee to re-empower experts in the field of Ethnic Studies to decide on revisions to the curriculum and to put Arab American Studies—including Palestine—back into the curriculum.

Thank you.

Erica Ballinger