

High School Ethnic Studies Graduation Requirement  
State of California

Suggested Basic Curriculum Principles

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The California State Legislature is considering the establishment of an Ethnic Studies requirement for high school graduation. This raises a basic question: can state education leaders agree on a set of basic principles to help guide the teaching of high school Ethnic Studies? At the request of the California State Board of Education, I have developed the following suggested set of Ethnic Studies curriculum principles (my original draft was submitted on September 17, 2019). In developing these principles I have considered ideas presented in three documents:

(1) Assembly Bill No. 2016, Chapter 327, which was approved by the Governor on September 13, 2016 (hereafter referred to as Assembly Bill No. 2016).

(2) the California Department of Education's 2020 Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Guidelines (hereafter referred to as Guidelines).

(3) Chapter 1, Introduction and Overview, Why Teach Ethnic Studies?, submitted by the History-Social Science Subject Matter Committee on May 16, 2019 (hereafter referred to as Ethnic Studies Introduction).

In addition, for historical context on the development of Ethnic Studies, I revisited the seminal 1976 *Curriculum Guidelines for Multiethnic Education* of the National Council for the Social Studies, created by a task force headed by pioneering Ethnic Studies scholar James A. Banks. (Full disclosure: I was a member of that five-person task force.) Among other things, that document called for multiethnic education to help students develop "a better sense of self," "skills necessary for effective interpersonal and interethnic group interactions," and the ability "to view and interpret events, situations, and conflict from diverse ethnic perspectives and points of view."

In suggesting these Ethnic Studies principles, I have attempted to meet the Guidelines' appeal for clarity. In particular, the Guidelines (page 2) call for language that "is inclusive and supportive of multiple users, including teachers (single and multiple-subject), support staff, administrators, and the community." Obviously, a set of basic principles should help educators. Equally important, these principles should succinctly and clearly explain the purpose, scope, and value of Ethnic Studies so that students, parents, and other members of

the community, including those not conversant with educational jargon, can readily understand them. To that end, I have attempted to keep such jargon to a minimum, using it only in places where I felt it necessary.

After considering the three State documents, I have concluded that Ethnic Studies can make a significant contribution by adhering to the following eight basic principles:

- 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.

(1) Working toward greater inclusivity -- Assembly Bill No. 2016 states that two of California's educational core values should be equity and inclusiveness. The Guidelines (page 2) are more specific, calling for Ethnic Studies to "be inclusive, creating space for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or citizenship, to learn different perspectives." As the 2019 Ethnic Studies Introduction added (page 23), "Thus, it is vital for teachers to engage a multitude

of stories, narratives, sources, and contributions of everyone in America so that all students can see themselves as part and parcel of the grand American narrative."

In other words, California Ethnic Studies should emphasize educational equity by being inclusive of all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. This means clarifying the role of race and ethnicity in California and U.S. life while incorporating the experiences of a broad range of ethnic groups. Yet, due to curricular time constraints, difficult choices will have to be made at the district and classroom level.

In principle, Ethnic Studies should embrace all ethnic groups. However, it should also be recognized that the Ethnic Studies movement of the 1960's arose because of two particular circumstances. First, over the course of California and U.S. history, certain ethnic groups had been targeted by oppressive, demeaning, and marginalizing treatment, sometimes by government itself. Second, the school curriculum and textbooks had traditionally minimized the role and presence of women and people of color. In brief, the Ethnic Studies movement arose because of historical exclusion and pursued greater inclusion. Therefore, while Ethnic Studies should address ethnicity in the broadest sense, it should devote special emphasis to the varying experiences of people of color.

(2) Furthering self-understanding -- The Guidelines (page 2) call for pedagogies to "validate students' lived experience." Not every student has a strong sense of ethnic identity. However, all students have an ethnic heritage (or heritages) rooted in the histories of their ancestors. Building from the concept of student-based inquiry, Ethnic Studies should provide an opportunity for all students to examine their own ethnic heritages. Increasing numbers of student have multiple ethnic heritages.

For example, this search can involve the exploration of students' own family histories. Through oral histories of family members and, where available, the use of family records, students can develop a better understanding of their place and the place of their ancestors in the ethnic trajectory of California and the United States. For students with non-English-speaking family members, this would also provide an opportunity to develop research skills in multiple languages. However, educators should be sensitive to student and family privacy, while also recognizing that factors like adoption, divorce, and lack of access to family information may complicate this assignment for some students.

(3) Developing a better understanding of others -- The essential and complementary flip-side of self-understanding is the understanding of others. Ethnic Studies should not only

help students explore their own backgrounds. It should also help build bridges of intergroup understanding.

This interethnic bridge-building can be furthered in various ways. Obviously, it can be enhanced by exposing students to a wide variety of voices, stories, experiences, and perspectives through materials featuring people of myriad ethnic backgrounds. But bridge-building can also occur through the classroom sharing of students' personal stories and family histories. In this way students can simultaneously learn to understand ethnic differences while also identifying underlying commonalities and personal challenges.

(4) Recognizing intersectionality -- To this point I have attempted to limit my use of educational and academic jargon. However, one concept is so basic to the understanding of human experience that there is no way to avoid its use. That is the concept of intersectionality.

Obviously, Ethnic Studies focuses on the role of race and ethnicity. However, these are not the sole forces affecting personal identity, group identification, and the course of human experience. People, including students, are not only members of racial and ethnic groups. They also belong to many other types of social groups. These groups may be based on such factors as sex, religion, class, ability/disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship status, and language

use (Assembly Bill No. 2016 states that 92 languages other than English are spoken throughout California).

For each individual, these multiple social categories converge in a unique way. That confluence of groups is sometimes called intersectionality. Those myriad categories influence, but do not necessarily determine, one's life trajectory. Those categories may also influence how a person is perceived and treated by others, including both by individuals and by institutions. The inequitable institutional treatment of certain racial and ethnic groups is sometimes referred to as systemic racism.

To some degree, each person's individuality and identity are the result of intersectionality. The lens of intersectionality helps both to explore the richness of human experience and to highlight the variations that exist within ethnic diversity. By highlighting intragroup variations, intersectionality can also challenge group stereotyping and polarization.

(5) Pursuit of justice and equality -- Ethnic Studies did not arise in a vacuum. It arose with the intent of giving voice to stories long silenced, including stories of injustice, marginalization, and discrimination, as well as stories of those who became part of our nation in different ways, such as through slavery, conquest, colonization, and immigration. Ethnic

Studies should address those experiences, including systemic racism, with both honesty and nuance, drawing upon multiple perspectives. Ethnic Studies should also examine individual and collective efforts to challenge and overcome inequality and discriminatory treatment.

The Guidelines specify (page 2) that Ethnic Studies should promote “critical thinking and rigorous analysis” of “systems of oppression.” They also indicate (page 2) that Ethnic Studies should “encourage cultural understanding of how different groups have struggled and worked together.”

The exploration of injustice and inequality should not merely unearth the past. It should also create a better understanding of dissimilar and unequal ethnic trajectories in order to strive for a future of greater equity and inclusivity. In the pursuit of justice and equality, Ethnic Studies should help students comprehend the various manifestations of racism and other forms of ethnic bigotry, discrimination, and marginalization. It should also help students understand the role that they can play individually and collectively in challenging these inequity-producing forces, such as systemic racism.

(6) Promoting self-empowerment for civic engagement -- The Guidelines (page 1) call for the promotion of “the values of civic engagement and civic responsibility” as well as “self and



collective empowerment (page 2).” In striving for these goals, the Ethnic Studies Introduction (page 18) recommends the inclusion of “a community engagement/action project that allows for students to use their knowledge and voice to affect social transformation in their community.” In other words, Ethnic Studies should help students become more engaged locally and develop into effective civic participants, better able to contribute to constructive social change.

The promotion of empowerment through Ethnic Studies can occur in various ways. It can help students become more astute in critically analyzing documents, historical events, and multiple perspectives. It can help students learn to discuss difficult issues, particularly when race and ethnicity are important factors. It can help students learn to present their ideas in strong, compelling, jargon-free language.

It can help students assess various strategies for bringing about change. It can provide students with opportunities to experiment with different change strategies, while evaluating the strengths and limitations of each approach. In short, through Ethnic Studies students can develop civic participation skills, a greater sense of self empowerment, and a deeper commitment to life-long civic engagement.

(7) Supporting a community focus -- In terms of ethnic composition, California school districts vary widely. In

response to this variation, Assembly Bill No. 2016 calls for school districts "to adapt their courses to reflect the pupil demographics in their communities." In short, when it comes to Ethnic Studies, one size does not fit all.

Ethnic Studies in all California districts should address the basic contours of national and statewide ethnic experiences. This includes major events and phenomena that have shaped our diverse ethnic trajectories. However, individual school districts may choose to enrich their approach to Ethnic Studies by also devoting special attention to ethnic groups that have been significantly present in their own communities.

By shaping Ethnic Studies to include a focus on local ethnic groups, districts can enhance learning opportunities through student-based inquiry into the local community. Such research can draw on multiple sources, such as local records, census material, survey results, memoirs, and media coverage. It can also involve oral history, providing voice for members of different ethnic communities and allowing students to engage multiple ethnic perspectives. This local focus can also create additional opportunities for civic engagement, such as working with city government or presenting to school boards.

(8) Developing interpersonal communication -- Achieving the preceding principles will require one additional capability: effective communication. The Ethnic Studies Introduction (page

13) points to the importance of Ethnic Studies in helping students develop the ability "to effectively and powerfully read, write, speak, think critically, and engage in school."

Particularly considering California's extensive diversity, Ethnic Studies should help build effective communication across ethnic differences. This includes the ability to meet, discuss, and analyze sometimes hot-button topics. In other words, students should learn to participate in difficult dialogues.

Ethnic Studies should help students learn to communicate more effectively and constructively with students of other backgrounds. It should help them develop the ability to communicate with power and clarity, to interact with civility, to listen attentively, and to critically consider new ideas and perspectives. It should also encourage students to be willing to modify their positions in the light of new evidence and compelling arguments.

To enhance interpersonal communication, particularly among students of varying ethnic backgrounds, a number of topics need to be addressed. For example, there are expressions used within an ethnic group that may be out-of-bounds when used by those outside of that group. Students also need to develop a nuanced use of group labels, even when group members may disagree on their preferred labels and even though in-group preferences may change over time.

Even the terms "race" and "ethnicity" present challenges. What do they mean? How do they relate to each other? How has our understanding of that relationship changed over time? How is this relationship reflected in public documents, such as the U.S. census? Ethnic Studies should help students address these and other fundamental issues that complicate intergroup communication and understanding.

### Conclusion

Ethnic Studies should help bring students and communities together. This does not mean glossing over differences, avoiding difficult issues, or resorting to clichés about how we are all basically alike. It should do so by simultaneously doing three things: addressing ethnic experiences and differences as real and unique; building greater understanding and communication across ethnic differences; and revealing underlying commonalities that can bind by bringing individuals and groups together.

By operating on the basis of these eight principles, statewide Ethnic Studies can become a venue for developing a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges that come with ethnic diversity. It should advance the cause of equity and inclusivity, challenge systemic racism, foster self-understanding, build intergroup and intragroup bridges, enhance

civic engagement, and further a sense of human commonality. In this way, Ethnic Studies can help build stronger communities, a more equitably inclusive state, and a more just nation.