

August 14, 2019

Ms Soomin Chao  
Chair, Instructional Quality Commission  
California Department of Education  
1430 N Street, Suite 5111  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum

Dear Chair Chao:

I am a proud graduate of California public schools; kindergarten through graduate school. And for ten years I taught in California public high schools, including three years in a school with many students who had lived in foreign countries while their parents served in the U.S. military. Even though they'd usually lived on base, they had some awareness of the world outside the United States.

I also taught for seven years in a school with an economically- and an ethnically-diverse student population, including African American students and students who were first- or second-generation Americans.

Thus I have a knowledgeable basis for my strong support for adding **honest** and **meaningful** ethnic studies to California high school curricula.

I Ethnic diversity is one of our finest qualities as a state and a nation, but our on-going stereotyping and denigration of groups who make up that diversity is one of our major defects. Both realities make ethnic studies instruction essential.

Unfamiliar truths of our past and present make some in our communities so uncomfortable that they launch silencing campaigns: New Mexico's banning certain books from classroom use; the Texas board of education rejecting any textbook which depicts Islam "too positively;" and the over-scrutiny of Middle East studies courses and those who teach them.

**Therefore, "How to Discuss Difficult Topics" should be a core component of any ethnic studies curriculum.**

II Much of what we think about Arabs – and thus Arab Americans -- is shaped by movies and television; almost invariably negative caricature/stereotypes: evil, stupid, greedy, lustful, etc. In a 2019 article, a reviewer called the 1981 film, *Lion of the Desert*, "one of the few" movies which presents an Arab in a positive way.

The documentary *Valentino's Ghost: Why We Hate Arabs* provides a 100-year overview of this. It begins with 'Romancing Arabia' (handsome Rudolf Valentino in exotic locations) and progresses through decades of phases: 'Arab as Redskin,' 'Arab as Loser/Refugee,' 'Arab as Christ's Enemy,' 'Disobedient Muslim,' 'Arab as Savage,' 'Muslim as Nightmare,' among others.

**Therefore, the ethnic studies curriculum should recognize this pervasive anti-Arab bias. Teachers should find *Valentino's Ghost* a helpful resource for their lesson planning.**

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III News generally feature the unusual and awful. Thus news about the U.S.'s wars in the Middle East will tend to reinforce negative entertainment stereotypes about Arabs/Arab Americans. Additionally, our news too often present happenings in Israel/Palestine through interviews with Israeli government spokesperson, who tell us about individuals and tell us these Israelis' names, ages, and stories. Conversely, affected Palestinians remain anonymous -- simply *numbers*.

The documentary *Occupation of the American Mind: Israel's Public Relations War in the United States* provides examples of the major U.S. networks' each one using the Israeli spokesperson of the moment, showing the same video footage -- be it CBS or CNN or Fox or whatever -- followed by a repeat of the Israeli's talking points.

**Therefore, the ethnic studies curriculum should include awareness of this news media laziness and how it can result in biased perceptions. Teachers should find *Occupation of the American Mind: Israel's Public Relations War in the United States* a helpful resource for their lesson planning.**

IV Appreciating the Arab American experience in the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> centuries requires and understanding of the personal and family upheavals which are part of, and continue to occur since, the establishment of the State of Israel in the midst of the Arab world. No matter from which country their families emigrated, the Palestinian people's expulsion, property expropriation and decades-long subjugation looms large.

American students from *Jewish Voice for Peace*, *Students for Justice in Palestine*, and campus religious and ethnic groups have introduced the civil society action called boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) onto college and university campuses. Other campus groups, e.g., *Aggies for Israel*, etc., oppose BDS and opposition is sometimes stimulated and funded by non-campus entities, even entities related to the government of Israel.

Realities in the Arab world and the support for BDS on U.S. college/university campuses are part of the current Arab American experience.

**Therefore BDS and its real world context need to be part of an honest and meaningful ethnic studies curriculum. Differing perspectives and perceptions about these realities present the opportunity to listen, learn, and contemplate other points of view. Establishing respectful *How to Discuss Difficult Topics* ground rules early on is key for productive dialog hereof.**

I appreciate the opportunity to provide comment on the May 2019 draft Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum and look forward to reviewing the next iteration thereof. Should you have questions or wish to discuss the above, please contact me at (916) 944-3834.

Sincerely,

*Signed original hand-delivered to Chair Chao's office 08/15/2019*

Brigitte Jaensch