

August 29, 2019

To: Tony Thurmond, Superintendent  
California Board of Education  
Ethnic Studies Curriculum Committee

CC: Dustin Gardiner, San Francisco Chronicle

To All:

I am just a citizen. Not an academic, nor a politician nor an activist; just a citizen. But one with a keen interest in civil rights, creating a better opportunity society and forming a more perfect union.

Arguably, we in California live in the most diverse place on earth. Our task is to learn how to, and show that we can, build a just and harmonious society while sharing common values amid such diversity. Out of many, one. Can we both preserve the many while strengthening the one?

So the recent controversy about the Model Ethnic Studies Curriculum caught my eye. I read an article in the San Francisco Chronicle that included examples of the contentious issues. They were indeed troubling, but I kept open to the thought that perhaps they were one-offs in a more appropriate curriculum. So I got a copy of the proposed materials and read through them. While there were some laudable philosophic principles stated in the plan, and some of the sample exercises were intriguing, the sum of the proposal was unworthy of the task, and the vision stated was not fulfilled.

Much of the published criticism surrounded the curriculum's focus on the "core four" and that other religions and ethnicities grievances were not included. This misses the mark as well. I strongly urge you to start over, not just tack on a few more groups to the existing structure of the curriculum. The underlying foundation and the proposed implementations are deeply flawed.

To be successful will also require starting with a new committee composed of different, more representative individuals. I understand that it is hard not to be defensive when your work is being criticized- something you've poured your heart into, and is your passion. But of the committee members I have seen speak up since, it is clear that they are not listening. They are only digging in heels, defending and girding for a fight. That will get us nowhere. A successful outcome will not be adding a few more groups to the sample exercises to quiet the aggrieved, similar the tack-on of Middle Easterners and Muslims in the draft, or making superficial changes to save face. I don't think a committee composed pretty much completely of academics who teach variations of ethnic studies under the same current pedagogy is diverse or representative. More varied voices are needed to create a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to ethnic or diversity studies.

My observations about the draft:

**It Lacks Balance and Context; It is Less Education than Indoctrination into a Dogmatic World View**

My childhood education began in the late 1950's. What we learned about our nation, our people and our history was decidedly rosy- patriotic and triumphal- aren't we great! That was incomplete. There are many things to be proud of, but also many to be ashamed of that were bypassed or not sufficiently explored. And there were other proud and important stories across the spectrum of our people that were not told. There was no balance, no clear-eyed context, an incomplete story. As an adult I began to learn a more complete and nuanced truth through my own self-education.

The draft proposal goes in the opposite of my formal education, and it is equally unhelpful. There is so much gray in this world. There are times when the “power structures” of our government answer to our better angels but our social “power structures” do not. And sometimes vice-versa, both or neither. Often there is a range of principled opposing views and there is great value in exploring across that spectrum. The draft proposal misses opportunities to explore these nuances and dilemmas because it is impaired by its own dogma and agenda. It is too often too intent on steering to a specific perspective to see the opportunity to explore varying ones.

There are so many examples in the sample course models. Here are a few to illustrate my point:

The “Take Your Shot” basket exercise was really intriguing and an interesting illustration of the concept of privilege. Unfortunately, the lead-in was a misquote and a misattribution that also belies the bias of the curriculum:

“Privilege is waking up on third base and thinking you hit a triple”- Anne Richards

I can find no evidence of a quote with this wording or anything similar attributable to Anne Richards. The somewhat similar quote is commonly, though not universally, attributed to Barry Switzer:

“Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple.”

There is a subtle but significant difference between “Privilege is...” and “Some people are...” Switzer’s quote is certainly true. In addition, however, some people know they started on 3<sup>rd</sup> base and devote generously of their privilege to others not so blessed- in the context of the shot game- they bring others closer to the basket. And being privileged isn’t always starting from 3<sup>rd</sup> base. It is often more subtle. Sometimes the umpire gives you a generous call that gets you to first base. But you still have to work and earn your way around the bases to get home. I think that’s what stable homes, educated parents, safe neighborhoods, mentoring programs, scholarships and affirmative action are- generous calls that help you get to first base.

And so, the missed opportunity in “Take Your Shot” is that by the introductory manipulation of the quote, and the specific approach to the exercise, it creates a false choice. Privilege or Merit. Privilege vs. Merit. But it is not a dichotomy. Privilege can be abused or give an unfair advantage. But there are a lot of privileged people who are smart and meritorious. If a couple busts their tails on multiple jobs so their child can go to school debt free, the child is privileged. That’s wrong? Affirmative action is a gift of privilege to the under-privileged. That’s wrong? And judging merit gets more complex all the time as we introduce more subjective measures to rightly try and broaden access. A little creativity applied to this intriguing exercise could increase its sophistication and value and remove the dogma that diminishes it.

The exercise on redlining is another missed opportunity. It completely ignores a salient point- redlining and restrictive covenants have been illegal for decades. But we all know redlining continues and that both racism and amoral financial calculations (two different things) perpetuate it. What a rich opportunity to explore the differences between de jure and de facto. But the exercise sidetracks to reparations. The concept of reparations raises great passions among people and deserves serious dialog and consideration. But to zip past the real learning opportunity related to redlining by changing the subject to reparations is an agenda looking for a landing spot. It diminishes both topics.

The definition of “Capitalism” is so laden with opinion as to be totally unworthy. A useful curriculum could explore how economic systems can be oppressive. Market economies certainly can run amok, but we also have 100 years of 100% failure and oppression by socialist and communist governments. A useful segment could explore ways to mitigate the excesses of various economic system (eg. regulated market economies, social democracy, etc.). But this could not be fairly done by those with the bias revealed in the glossary’s definition.

This committee and its outcome are similar to the radical conservatives who hijacked the curricula in places like Kansas and Texas and put their ideological brands on history and evolution/creation curricula. Same concept, just a different set of radical views that are both subliminally and overtly inculcated in the draft proposal.

### **It is Anachronistic 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dogma for a 21<sup>st</sup> Need**

At least one of the exercises is primarily a pat on the back to the San Francisco State protests, the Third World Liberation Front and the birth of ethnic studies. Fifty years! Congratulations. Societies need people who rattle cages. Making sure that we spotlight both our successes and our shortcomings is important. But you know what? The draft curriculum feels 50 years old, too. It is old and tired. It is time to think about ways to evolve our thinking and approaches beyond only ethnicity and the two-dimensional world view that infects the draft.

I agree with the Op-Ed by Claude Goldenberg in the 8/24/19 San Francisco Chronicle. One valuable evolution would be to transition to diversity studies more broadly. That phrase doesn’t roll off the tongue, but the concept is important. Every day more of our population is multi-ethnic or multi-racial, but cognizance of that and how it shapes us as individuals and societies is missing from the curriculum. Religion is a critical element in the make-up of culture, and sometimes in the clash of culture. It belongs in the dialog, but is missing other than in decrying Islamophobia.

Another observation relates to use of the phrase “People of Color”. I know it is in common usage and has become the go-to phrase, but California could show forward-thinking by contributing to the demise of that phrase. Let me explain. Labels cycle in and out, and “minority” appears out, but the one thing going for it is that it focused on the power in relationships. Oppressions arise from misuse of power. A key concept in our form of government is to protect against the tyranny of the majority. It has always been our aspiration, however imperfectly we do it. But “People of Color” changes it from power to race-whites vs. everybody else. The broader oppressions in the U.S. are largely, though not always, by whites because of their economic and numeric advantages. But smaller oppressions are perpetrated every day, many by People of Color themselves. Oppression is a power disease, not a white person’s disease. Lumping everyone into “People of Color” vs. whites is most unfortunate and, frankly, racist. There is also a long and glorious history of whites supporting civil rights and fighting oppression, and you do a grave disservice by using a label that turns this into a racial all of us vs. them.

And while it is true that our governmental institutions have been and still are complicit in or at the fore of many oppressions, those same institutions have been and are the ones unraveling them. Ours is a history and a society of contradictions. Acknowledgement of that, rather than the relentless singular perspective, would show more intellectual honesty.

### **It Provides No Tools for Positive, Respectful Navigation in a Multi-Cultural Society**

The draft focuses mostly on providing students the opportunity to give voice to their experiences, feelings and grievances, and encouraging them to become a next generation of social activists. Those

are worthy aspects of a more holistic approach to cultural studies. But they should not be the whole. Students should be given practical tools that promote cultural competency and the ability to navigate a multi-cultural society with respect, acceptance and understanding. The draft curriculum does not do that.

Among the most eye-opening and valuable learnings I've had was listening to the Great Courses lecture series by Dr. David Livermore entitled, "Customs of the World: Using Cultural Intelligence to Adapt, Wherever You Are". I have attended numerous cultural awareness lectures and trainings, and read materials, and none have given me the insight, practical tools and understanding that this series did. Any ethnic/cultural studies instructor worth their salt should be aware of Dr. Livermore and his teachings, and use or adapt them in their own teachings. Such tools would add practical value to the curriculum.

### **The Committee is not Representative**

In a society with such heightened awareness of and sensitivity to diversity and being representative, it is ironic that the committee appears to be of such sameness. Since I don't know the hearts and minds of the committee, I want to be careful not to assume. I do not question any individual's ethics, knowledge, intelligence or passion to make an important contribution. But a bunch of academics in the same field of study and committed to the current pedagogy is not a recipe for insight or innovation. It looks more like an echo chamber, and the product bears this out. Other voices would enrich the process.

Four pages! I guess you can tell that I care about this subject. If you have stayed with me through it all, thank you for your consideration and respect; I hope this will be of some value to the process.

Respectfully Submitted,

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