

From: Clyde Leland
Sent: Sunday, August 9, 2020 4:21 PM
To: Ethnic Studies; [email redacted]; Superintendent
Cc: [email redacted]
Subject: [EXTERNAL]

This is a long email about the proposed ethnic studies curriculum - - so long that I have also attached it as a PDF.

Clyde Leland, [address redacted], Berkeley.

The currently recommended changes to the state's proposed ethnic studies curriculum and its materials must be rejected as they undermine the very purpose of the curriculum. As a Jewish American and a member of Jewish Voice for Peace, as a teacher, and as a parent and grandparent, I want to express my support for the demand that the curriculum include separate sections on Arab Americans and Pacific Islanders, as it originally did. I have four major objections to the changes:

- 1) After a group of experts in ethnic studies spent years developing this curriculum, their expertise is being ignored, and changes are being implemented by people who are not expert in the field but who have political, not pedagogical, motivation. Ignoring the wisdom of these experts is a little like denying climate change or refusing to wear a mask: Those who know what they're talking about agree almost unanimously about what we should do, while politicians and political groups pretending they know better reject the educated conclusions of the experts, and substitute their prejudices for the scholarly recommendations.
- 2) Essential to the entire ethnic studies framework are two things: the value of empathy through understanding the experiences of others, and the recognition that history taught only through the lens of white people is necessarily inadequate. The idea is not simply to say what happened, but to tell the whole story through the eyes of a group whose perspective has not been included in the history texts that high schools use. For example, it is one thing to say the Indian Wars and the Trail of Tears were awful things; it is different—children will learn differently—to show what it was like to be a Native American in the early 19th century and relate it to the present. By eliminating that simple framework, the newly proposed curriculum changes from ethnic studies to multiculturalism. While multiculturalism is not a bad thing, it is not the same thing as ethnic studies and does not accomplish the same things. The problem is compounded by suggesting that “social justice” is acceptable as a substitute for ethnic studies, which force the defenders of ethnic studies to sound like we're opposed to social justice, which we obviously are not. When the Legislature directed the Department of Education to develop an ethnic studies curriculum, however, they weren't saying, “Let's have some socially relevant classes,” or even “ . . . some progressive classes”; rather they were embracing the pedagogical conclusion that a very good way to teach community and social justice is through ethnic studies: the study of

the experience of others (and a deeper understanding of one's own history)—a conclusion made more clear and more urgent by what has happened since George Floyd's murder and the NY Times' 1619 project.

3) The new proposal eliminates lessons focused on Arab Americans and on Pacific Islanders, which the proponents of the change say can be covered adequately as an Asian American lesson. Again, the point is not merely to say who was where, when, and why, but to chronicle the experiences of different people, people whose experiences have historically not been the focus of discussion. To suggest that the experience of Chinese Americans is the same as that of Arab-Americans because both are Asian is just stupid. You might as well say we don't need ethnic studies at all because we're all Americans. This is especially important to me as a Jew who was literally told "There is no such thing as a Palestinian" when I was in high school. Only when I learned Palestinian history and hear Palestinians talk about their lives did I recognize that their lives matter. I should have learned that a long time ago.

4) Most important, the motivation behind the changes that have now been proposed was not to improve the education we provide in California high schools; rather, it was to eliminate the reference to Palestinian Americans and their experience in diaspora from a nation that has been colonized and their experience as members of an oppressed ethnic group. In advancing the argument that the discussion of Palestine, and specifically the mere acknowledgement of the campaign to pressure Israel to change its mistreatment of Palestinians, is somehow anti-semitic, the proponents of the changes distort the meaning of anti-semitism and falsely claim to represent the Jewish community. They distort the meaning of anti-semitism by equating it with opposition to Israel. I am an American Jew with neither loyalty to nor dependence on the state of Israel. I realize that those objecting to the scholarly curriculum feel differently, thinking of themselves almost as dual citizens (which indeed some of them are). But they don't get to say all Jews feel as they do, or that it is anti-semitic not to feel as they do. Importantly, it is no more anti-semitic to challenge Israel's treatment of Palestinians than it is anti-White to say Black lives matter (remember when Fox News said President Obama hated White people?). Indeed, it isn't even anti-Israel to challenge their violations of international law any more than it is anti-American to oppose sending federal troops to Portland.

In addition to those four objections, it is important to recognize how the statewide curriculum will be used by teachers. As the current pandemic has made even clearer, high school teachers are overworked and need all the help they can get. By providing lesson plans as part of the ethnic studies curriculum, the state steers the busy teacher to those topics that are provided. By limiting which ethnic groups are covered—by eliminating groups that the experts thought should be included—the state makes it far less likely that those groups will be covered. Thus, arguing, as the proponents of the changes do, that a teacher, school or district is free to teach about Pacific Islanders under the rubric of Asian Americans, is to demand that the busy teachers develop new curriculum. It makes their jobs harder, not easier.

Finally, one cannot ignore the irony of a program intended to undermine prejudice itself being undermined by prejudice. The objections to the curriculum began with objections to discussion of the BDS movement and morphed into more generic, and therefore more presentable, complaints. And the objections to discussion of the BDS movement as it relates to Palestine, but not as it relates to the movement to end apartheid, is based on prejudice; indeed, it is based on racism.

Please do all you can to save the curriculum and materials that were so well prepared for our high-school teachers and students.

Clyde Leland
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