



July 7, 2020

California Department of Education
1430 N St #5901
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum – Middle East and North Africa

To: Governor Gavin Newsom, Superintendent Tony Thurmond, State Board of Education President Linda Darling-Hammond, Deputy Superintendent Stephanie Gregson, Instructional Quality Commission Chair Jose Iniguez, and Instructional Quality Commission Executive Director Shanine Coats

We, the undersigned organizations are writing to request revisions be made to the draft Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC).

Together our groups comprise a minority-majority coalition representing an estimated combined total population of over 500,000, or at least 60%, of the Middle Eastern diasporic population in California (4,5). Our communities are racially, ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse yet we all identify as groups indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (1) – most of whom fled oppression and persecution to ultimately settle in our beautiful State of California.

Despite our high numbers, our communities and stories were omitted from the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum. The curriculum, as it was written, does not reflect Middle Eastern pupil demographics in the State of California nor *“allow school districts to adapt their courses to reflect the pupil demographics in*

their communities” as AB 2016 (CA Education Code Section 51226.7(b)) requires.

The Middle East and North Africa, which was once one of the most ethnically and racially diverse areas of the world, is quickly becoming homogenous as a result of the types of oppressions that an Ethnic Studies pedagogy is committed to teaching. Our Middle Eastern and North African diasporic community’s experiences as persecuted, indigenous, minorities - and later as refugees and immigrants attests to this. Much of the MENA region continues to be plagued by civil war and social strife. With high levels of female unemployment (~40%), nearly half of MENA’s population lives on less than US\$5.50 per day. (2)

As refugees and immigrants, many of us continue to face discrimination in this country, at school, and in our communities with our centers frequent targets of hate crimes. We fear that our exclusion from a curriculum, which we support, would contribute to the ongoing cultural genocide and erasure of minority voices from the Middle East and North Africa. Our inclusion in the curriculum would affirm the important and compelling minority voices from the MENA region.

While the ESMC has a lesson on students mapping the MENA region (3), it only explores in depth one, non-representative, regional ethno-religious group leaving educators and students to falsely conflate all Middle Easterners as “Muslims” and “Arabs.” In fact, of the estimated 720,000 individuals of MENA origin in California, 54% are not Arabs and an estimated 31% are not Muslim. (4,5) The ESMC’s current narrow and misleading focus deprives students of a critical framework for learning about the full panoply of MENA Americans’ experiences.

At a time when there is great need to provide our students with the highest-quality education related to race, ethnicity, and nation our hope is to see the ESMC include us. We suggest changing the “Arab American Studies” course outline to “Middle Eastern American Studies” so the vast majority of Middle Eastern and North African children can see themselves reflected in the California curriculum and their classmates can learn their family and communal stories too.

We'd like to reference the California State Board of Education's 2013 "Social Content Standards" (6) as they were so beautifully written and if taken into consideration would provide a wonderful reframing for a Middle Eastern American Studies Course that is inclusive of diverse MENA communities. These standards are focused on diversity and proportions of portrayals -- that *"help end stereotyping [by] portray[ing] accurately and equitably the cultural and racial diversity of American society [including] women and minorities in other societies."* Similarly, the State Board of Education's approved Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Guidelines require *"balance"* and that it *"validate students' lived experiences,"* and be *"inclusive."* (7)

The relevant Social Content Standards include (6):

1. Ethnic and Cultural Groups. To *"instill in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage, develop a feeling of self-worth [and] eradicate the roots of prejudice:"*
2. Proportion of portrayals. *"must portray accurately, to the extent possible, the roles and contributions of a fair proportion of diverse ethnic groups."*
3. Religion. To *"enable all students to become aware and accepting of religious diversity while being allowed to remain secure in any religious beliefs they may already have ...without displaying bias toward or prejudice against any of those beliefs"*

Employing these required standards will produce an ethnic studies course that teaches students about the communities most likely enrolled in their schools. For instance: Palestinian-Americans, who comprise an estimated 3% (4) of California's MENA population (7), are featured in the Arab American Studies course outline and mentioned in the Introduction as well as the Glossary. Yet, the two largest MENA groups in California – Iranians, who comprise 26% (4) of California's MENA population; and Israelis and Jews of MENA descent, who comprise 28% (4,5) -- are not mentioned at all. Also not mentioned are MENA Christians (Assyrian Christians, Coptic Christians, and non-Muslim Middle Eastern Christian) who also comprise a sizable portion of California's MENA population.

We ask that the California Department of Education consider the inclusion of lesson plans, or educational content, written by scholars from the following religious and ethnic communities; Zoroastrians, Coptic-Christians, Assyrian-Christians, Mizrahi Jews, Baha'is, Yezidis, Iranians, and Kurds.

We commend the California Department of Education and the ESMC writers and advisory committee members for their hard work and desire to provide our students with a high-quality Ethnic Studies curriculum.

We stand ready to support you in developing this curriculum to provide accurate, balanced, high-quality content addressing our histories and cultures, as well as racism, justice, and equality, to empower all of our State's students.

Thank you,

30 Years After

Assyrian Association of Southern California

Coptic Solidarity

JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa

Kurdish Community of Southern California

Los Angeles Baha'i Center

Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans

Zoroastrian Association of California

Footnotes:

1. Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen.
2. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/overview>
3. ESMC Chapter 2, pages 237 and 275.
4. 2018 US Census Data, People Reporting Ancestry.
<https://bit.ly/2YeEDAh>
5. Berman Jewish Databank, US Jewish Population, 2018 (with MENA Jews accounting for an estimated 25% of California's Jewish population) <https://bit.ly/3hGTqvl>
6. Content Standards <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/lc.asp>
7. ESMC Guidelines.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ethnicguidelines.asp>