

August 20, 2019

Chair Soomin Chao

Instructional Quality Commission

California Department of Education

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Re: Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am writing concerning the proposed draft of the State of California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum ("ESMC"). As discussed in more detail below, I believe the proposed ESMC fails to comply with the standards set forth in AB 2016 (Chapter 327 of the Statutes of 2016), which states that the purpose of the ESMC is to "prepar[e] pupils to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures."

In Chapter 1 of the ESMC, The Introduction and Overview, the ESMC posits the following: "At its core, the field of Ethnic Studies is the interdisciplinary study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity with an emphasis on experiences of people of color in the United States." There is no doubt that all California high school students would benefit from engaging in the interdisciplinary study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity with an emphasis on experiences of people of color in the United States. A curriculum that engages students in such an interdisciplinary study with the goal of preparing them to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures would be fantastic. Sadly, the proposed ESMC does not meet the goals set forth in AB 2016.

There are many ways in which an Ethnic Studies curriculum could introduce California's high school students to the field of Ethnic Studies. The proposed model ESMC chooses to take the approach that the field of Ethnic Studies "critically grapples with the various power structures and forms of oppression, including, but not limited to, white supremacy, race and racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, islamophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia, that continue to impact the social, emotional, cultural, economic, and political experiences of Native People/s and people of color." By taking that limited and limiting approach, I believe the proposed ESMC fails to prepare California's students to be global citizens.

While various power structures and forms of oppression, including, but not limited to, white supremacy, race and racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, islamophobia,

transphobia, and xenophobia are issues that should be addressed, limiting the curriculum to the study of the impact of those issues on the social, emotional, cultural, economic, and political experiences of Native People/s and people of color falls short of the goal of preparing all students to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures. Yes, the Ethnic Studies curriculum should emphasize the contributions of ethnic groups that have been historically left out of mainstream textbooks. Yet, by focusing only on the impact on Native People/s and people of color, the curriculum in effect is itself choosing winners and losers.

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On lines 59-62 on page 3 of the Introduction and Overview of the proposed ESMC, the document states the following: "Beyond providing a history and analysis of oppression and power, Ethnic Studies offers a dynamic inquiry-based approach to the study of Native People/s and communities of color that encourages utilizing transnational and comparative frameworks." By limiting Ethnic Studies to the study of Native People/s and communities of color, the proposed ESMC fails to meet the mandate of AB 2016. Had the legislature intended to limit the proposed Ethnic Studies curriculum to the study of Native People/s and communities of color, it would have done so. Instead, it called for "an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures." Again, it is entirely appropriate for the Ethnic Studies curriculum to focus on cultures that historically have been minimized or ignored in traditional textbooks. Not all such cultures, however, are Native People/s or communities of color. One example is the Jewish people. While some Jewish people are people of color, and are in fact both Arab-American and Jewish American, most are not. Yet, can there be any doubt that Jewish Americans have been the victims of white supremacy and anti-Semitism? Are the authors of the proposed curriculum familiar with the anti-Semitic diatribes of Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin? If you are not familiar with the tremendous contributions of Jewish Americans to American culture and values, perhaps it is because those contributions have been excluded from mainstream textbooks and course materials.

In fact, the proposed draft of the ESMC excludes any mention of the contribution of Jewish Americans and any discussion of the topic of anti-Semitism. It is shocking to me that a cultural group that has suffered so much at the hands of bigots and has contributed so much to the success of our State and Nation, should not be prominently featured in the State's ethnic studies curriculum.

Equally appalling is the fact that the proposed curriculum contains references to the Boycott Divestment and Sanction (BDS) movement, which is perceived by many as being anti-Semitic. Why should a curriculum that is supposed to be training our State's students to appreciate the contributions of multiple cultures address in any way in the situation in the Middle East? As a person who is very well educated about Israel, its relationship with the Palestinian people, and its relationship with its neighboring countries, as well as the treatment of Jewish people and other minority groups (such as women and LGBTQ people) throughout the Middle East, I can assure you that the situation there is so complicated it is the subject of many semester-long college courses. Suffice it to say that a discussion of the BDS movement, let alone implied support for the BDS movement, have no place in a curriculum intended to help California's high school students better appreciate the contributions of multiple cultures.

I support AB 2016's principle that "the state's educational standards should be guided by core values of equity, inclusiveness, and universally high expectations." Sadly, the proposed ESMC curriculum falls far short of that guiding principal insofar as it excludes discussion of Jewish-American culture and the contribution American Jews have made to our State and Nation, and actually violates that guiding principle by its inclusion of anti-Semitic and anti-Israel language.

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Among the California Department of Education's General Principles for the ESMC are that it "include accurate information based on current and confirmed research," and "Encourage cultural understanding of how different groups have struggled and worked together, highlighting core ethnic studies concepts such as equality, justice, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, etc." A great example of how different groups have struggled and worked together is the way in which the Jewish community supported the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Many Jewish people lost their lives in the struggle for civil rights. The partnership between the Jewish-American and the African-American communities during the 1960's could be a great way to highlight disparate communities struggling and working together. The proposed curriculum provides an example of a restrictive covenant that prohibits the sale of homes in certain areas to various ethnic groups. It is not mentioned in the proposed curriculum, but one of those ethnic groups was Jewish people. By excluding Jewish Americans as an ethnic group from, and including anti-Semitic and anti-Israel language in, the proposed curriculum, the proposed draft of the ESMC fails to comply with the California Department of Education's General Principles.

I urge the people drafting the proposed ESMC curriculum to work with knowledgeable members of the Jewish community to properly include a discussion of Jewish-American culture in the ESMC curriculum and to delete from that curriculum any language that is perceived by many as anti-Semitic or anti-Israel. A good place to start would be to work with an organization such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) on the next draft of the ESMC curriculum. The ADL is committed to fighting hate and fostering better understanding among disparate groups. Not changing the proposed ESMC to delete from that curriculum any language that is perceived by many as anti-Semitic or anti-Israel, and to properly include a discussion of the Jewish-American culture, would result in Jewish students feeling threatened and may be perceived as giving permission to others to attack the Jewish community. That result would be the exact opposite of what was intended by the California legislature in adopting AB 2016.

Please contact me with any questions you may have concerning this matter.

Sincerely,

Abraham Presser

