

Dear Instructional Quality Commission

I would like to take this opportunity to respond to the proposed 2020 Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum.

I have read the materials made available on the website

(<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/esmcpubcomment.asp>), and believe there are some areas that present an anti-Jewish bias and thus require significant revision. Before I offer my comments, I think it is important for you to know a little about me.

First, I am a parent whose children attended California public schools (Claremont Unified School District), and whose two sons graduated from Claremont High School in 2008 and 2012.

Second, I am a third generation Californian, who was born and raised in California, and whose family has been living in this state for a century. All of my grandparents were the children of immigrants, and came to live in California by the 1920s.

Third, I am an academic who specializes in religious studies, and teaches courses on Jewish history and thought and comparative courses involving Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Fourth, I support the introduction of ethnic studies into the curriculum of California's schools. I believe the legislation passed in 2016 can have a very positive effect in educating young people in this state as they engage with the wonderfully rich and diverse population and cultures that exists in California and the United States more broadly.

As a parent, Californian, academic, and supporter of the teaching of ethnic studies, I would point to several areas of the curriculum that I find problematic and that I would urge you to reconsider and revise.

Glossary and Bibliography

Under the letter "B" is an entry for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) (Glossary and Bibliography, lines 29-40). Regardless of whether one supports or opposes BDS, the definition provided here is incomplete and misleading. I would point to two major problems. First, the definition does not distinguish between Israel itself and territories, primarily the West Bank, that Israel has occupied since 1967. Whatever one thinks of Israel's occupation in the territories, Israel itself is not an apartheid state and the situation of Arab Israelis is not comparable to Blacks living in apartheid South Africa. In Israel, Arab Israelis have equal individual rights, among them the right to vote, hold public office, live in a place of their choosing (see Kaadan vs. ILA), receive state supported education including admission to Israeli universities. A reasonable person reading this definition could very well conclude that Israel as a whole is an apartheid state. Such a conclusion would be both factually wrong and would contribute to an unwarranted bias against Israel and those persons who support Israel.

The second problem with the definition is that it entirely omits the stated and real goal of the BDS movement, namely the eradication of the state of Israel. Omar Barghouti, one of the founders of the movement, has said, "A Jewish state in Palestine in any shape or form cannot but contravene the basic rights of the indigenous Palestinian population and perpetuate a system of racial discrimination that ought to be opposed categorically" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/27/world/middleeast/bds-israel-boycott-antisemitic.html>). The objective of the BDS movement is not, as the definition here would

make it seem, to have Israel comply with international law, but to terminate the very existence of Israel as a nation.

The problem with this definition is not only that it is factually inaccurate, misleading, and defamatory, but that it contravenes the very goals of this curriculum, namely to “reduce stereotype threat” (Overview, line 146), “critically analyze...social issues (Overview, lines 150-151), build bridges and not be divisive (Overview, lines 168-171), and to benefit all students (Overview, line 168). Rather, this definition creates new stereotypes, is uncritical in its presentation of complex social/political issues, is thoroughly divisive, and may benefit some students while certainly demeaning and harming others.

Representation of Jews in the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum

The Sample Course Models contained in chapter two address six core groups, Black/African Americans, Chicano/as, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Arab American, and Pacific Islanders (SCM, lines 14-22). The inclusion of the last two groups “is a direct response to specific concerns of representation by Arab American and Pacific Islander communities.” (SCM, lines 21-22). Omitted entirely from the curriculum is the experience of Jewish Americans, the significant contributions they have made to California, and the numerous forms of discrimination and hatred they have faced both historically and in the present. While there are numerous references to important and influential figures in the African American and Chicano/a communities, the single mention of a Jew in the SCM is Lionel Cohen (SCM, lines 4723-4724). First, his full name was Joshua Lionel Cowen (ne Cohen). Second, while born Cohen (the name used in the document), he legally changed his name to Cowen, no doubt because he recognized the difficulties of doing business as an entrepreneur with a distinctively Jewish last name, an experience, completely ignored in this curriculum. Third, his work and his company were based in New York. Would it not have been possible to name one of the thousands of eminent California Jews? This curriculum presents a history as if Jews never existed in the state, never made economic, cultural, and economic contributions to the state, and never faced the types of ethnic prejudice and hostility that this curriculum seeks to examine.

It might be argued that the language of the curriculum leaves open the possibility that this document, “can serve as a model for other communities of color who do not see their unique experiences represented in current course offerings” (SCM, lines 22-24). While that may be true in theory, in practice this seems to be unlikely in that it places a heavy burden on local school districts, which already have a long list of priorities, to develop new modules. The practical result of such the curriculum as currently presented will be the complete erasure of Jews as an important ethnic community in the state and the country more broadly.

In addition, the curriculum simplifies and ignores the real complexities of ethnic identity in general and Jewish identity in particular. For instance, the curriculum offers no recognition to the over 200,000 persons living the United States who identify both as Latino *and* Jewish, many or even most of whom live in California (<https://jewishjournal.com/news/nation/217785/surprising-results-revealed-survey-latino-jews-living-u-s/>).

Finally, and most problematic, the curriculum ignores the very real history of discrimination and violence perpetrated against Jews. The Glossary contains an appropriate entry for “Islamophobia” (Glossary, lines 239-240), but no entry for “Antisemitism.” Such an omission is at the very least questionable, and an implicit denial that this form of discrimination and hatred is a problem.

Other than Lionel Cowen, the only other time mention is made of something connected with Jewish identity is the “Letra de ‘Somos Sur,’” featuring Shadia Mansour. Towards the end of the song, the Arabic Verse rapped by Mansour features the statements, “for every free political prisoner, an Israeli colony is expanded; for each greeting, a thousand houses were demolished; they use the press so they can manufacture (SCM, line 5802-5803). The inclusion of the song in this curriculum is problematic for two reasons. First, it takes a particular point of view in the Israel-Palestine conflict. While there is nothing wrong with expressing such a perspective in a song, its inclusion in this curriculum, particularly given the complete exclusion of any other perspective in the highly complex political situation, only serves to demonize Israel and the vast majority of American Jews for whom Israel is an important part of their ethnic and religious identities. Second, by speaking of how “they” use the press, the song traffics in negative and damaging stereotypes of Jews as persons who control the media. I can only assume that members of the Commission are aware of such pernicious stereotypes and would not want to perpetuate them. Such examples should be removed from the curriculum.

The curriculum as currently presented is not only a betrayal of the millions and millions of Jews who have been an important part of the American experience, including and especially in California, it is also a betrayal of the very values of “humanization of critical consciousness” (Overview, line 294) that this curriculum seeks to promote. I hope that the Commission will review the problems addressed here, and make the necessary corrections so that this curriculum can fulfill the high ideals it espouses and help prepare California’s students to appreciate themselves and the many others who call this state and this country their home.

Sincerely,

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