

**From:** Liz Lonky  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 23, 2020 7:25 AM  
**To:** Ethnic Studies <EthnicStudies@cde.ca.gov>  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum

o Whom It May Concern,

I applaud the California Department of Education (CDE) for making important and positive changes to the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC), and thank you for your hard work during this difficult time. These changes demonstrate a conscious effort to fix numerous problems in the first draft, which were highlighted in thousands of critical comments submitted by the public last year. While this new draft is clearly a step in the right direction, I urge you to make further changes to address a number of specific issues identified in the following pages.

I appreciate the removal of explicitly anti-Israel and antisemitic content from the ESMC, and the inclusion of some important references to the Jewish American experience. In light of the LA Times criticizing the first draft for, “imposing predigested political views,” I also applaud the addition of guidance encouraging teachers to expose students to “multiple and often competing sources of information”. Finally, I am thankful for the strong language urging school districts to be transparent and actively seek public input when they implement ethnic studies locally. Some of the comments in this document note specific positive changes which I strongly support.

That said, there are still significant areas of concern in the ESMC which must be addressed, including the following:

- The “Guiding Values and Principles” of the ESMC directly reference and are partly based on specific pages from a book called *Education at War*. The relevant section of the book effectively encourages teachers to “develop solidarity and create linkages” with anti-Zionism, BDS, and anti-Israel narratives. The guiding values and principles should be revised to ensure that they cannot be used to justify promoting such hateful agendas in the classroom.
- In multiple places the language used to describe Jews and various immigrant populations from the Middle East is not inclusive enough. Mizrahi Jews and other Middle Eastern communities should be represented on an equal basis with Arab

Americans in the ESMC. There are an estimated 500,000 Californians from non-Arab or non-Muslim Middle Eastern groups, who should not be simply lumped together as “other Middle Easterners”. Similarly, references to American Jews should be edited to explicitly mention the experiences of Mizrahi Jews, Jews of color, Jews from the Former Soviet Union, and other Jewish communities in California whose stories are less widely acknowledged.

- There are numerous sections of the ESMC where it is essential to expand upon or reinforce the importance of exposing students to “multiple and often competing sources of information” and ensuring that “diverse viewpoints are respected”.

In closing, I urge the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) and CDE to make further changes to the ESMC, in order to fix problems which are described in detail below. I thank you once again for your hard work and hope you will accept my constructive feedback regarding this crucially important curriculum for our state.

### **Positive additions to the ESMC**

#### **Chapter 2, Page 10, Lines 239-245:**

I commend CDE for adding language about transparency and public input regarding the development of local ethnic studies curriculums. This point should be strongly emphasized in communications about the ESMC.

#### **Chapter 3, Page 5, Lines 108-112:**

I commend CDE for adding crucial language calling for students to be exposed to “multiple and often competing sources of information”. This point should be strongly emphasized in communications about the ESMC.

#### **Chapter 3, Page 11, Lines 265-266:**

I commend CDE for urging educators to ensure that, “diverse viewpoints are respected”. This point should be strongly emphasized in communications about the ESMC.

#### **Appendix C, Page 119, Lines 119-130:**

I commend the CDE for including resources from the Anti-Defamation League and Facing History and Ourselves in the ESMC.

**Positive additions to the ESMC that should be expanded upon in the next round of revisions**

**Chapter 3, Page 11, Lines 309-320:**

I commend CDE for including guidelines about what teachers need in order to “effectively engage students in productive conversations and learning activities around difficult and important issues”. I strongly urge you to add one more point to this section:

- “Careful attention to their own political viewpoints and potential biases, to ensure students are empowered to form their own opinions rather than simply adopting the views of the teacher or particular educational materials.”

**Chapter 3, Page 29, Line 780:**

I commend the CDE for including “the recent rise in anti-Semitic violence” as a topic for study in the ESMC. However, I believe this line should be edited to say “the recent rise in anti-Semitic violence, hatred, and rhetoric”.

Jewish students in California and Jews in general have also experienced a rise in antisemitic harassment, vandalism, discrimination, and rhetoric which may not fit within the category of “violence,” but should still be discussed.

**Chapter 3, Page 31, Line 838-839:**

I commend the CDE for including “the effect that World War II and the Holocaust had upon the American Jewish population” in the ESMC. However, I believe this should be broadened to be more representative of California’s diverse Jewish immigrant communities. The following language is an example of how to do this:

- “Another example is the American Jewish population, including those who immigrated to California from Europe after World War II and the Holocaust, from Arab states after facing escalating oppression and violence, from Iran after the

*Islamic Revolution, and from the former Soviet Union after a decades-long struggle to be granted the right to leave.”*

**Shortcomings which should be addressed and important guidance which should be added in the next round of revisions**

**Key Points (followed by details below):**

- The “Guiding Values and Principles” of the ESMC directly reference and are partly based on specific pages from a book called *Education at War*. The relevant section of the book effectively encourages teachers to “develop solidarity and create linkages” with anti-Zionism, BDS, and anti-Israel narratives. The guiding values and principles should be revised to ensure that they cannot be used to justify promoting such hateful agendas in the classroom.
- The relevant section of *Education at War* also states, “Schools are battlefields where war is waged...”
- The experiences of Mizrahi Jews, Iranians, Kurds, Assyrian-Christians and other immigrant communities must be represented on an equal basis with Arab Americans in the ESMC. They should not be simply lumped together as, “Arab Americans and other Middle Easterners”. The current language unwittingly reflects a long history and ongoing reality of imperialist oppression and erasure of non-Arab and non-Muslim ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East.
- References to American Jews should be edited to explicitly mention the experiences of Mizrahi Jews, Jews of color, Jews from the Former Soviet Union, and other Jewish communities in California whose stories are less widely acknowledged.
- Guidelines should be added or reinforced to ensure that ethnic studies courses focus on giving students a depth of understanding about ethnic groups, social issues, and civic engagement, rather than promoting specific political viewpoints, ideologies, or movements.

**Chapter 1, Page 9, Lines 179-194:**

The “Guiding Values and Principles of Ethnic Studies” should be edited to very explicitly define the terms used and clarify the guiding values and principles of the curriculum. For example, value and principle #6 is to “connect ourselves to past and contemporary resistance movements that struggle for social justice on the global and local levels”. What is the definition of “resistance movements” in this section and which specific movements should teachers and students connect themselves to? The lack of clarity leaves the door open to interpretations that will be harmful when the ESMC is used in classrooms.

This concern is not simply theoretical. While the ESMC does not define the terms used in the “Guiding Values and Principles”, it does have footnotes showing where the language comes from. Footnote #20 references a chapter called *Pedagogies of Resistance*, from the book *Education at War*. *Pedagogies of Resistance* includes a section titled “Connecting Ourselves to Historical and Contemporary Resistance Movements That Struggle for Social Justice on the Global and Local Levels,” which matches value and principle #6 in the ESMC.

Which “resistance movements” does it suggest teachers and students should connect themselves to? *Pedagogies of Resistance* explains that educators should “develop solidarity and create linkages,” with other movements, referring directly to works (*Maira and Shihade 2006 & Spade 2011*) which promote anti-Zionism, BDS and one-sided anti-Israel narratives (see below for details).

While this may have been unintentional, it is deeply problematic that the very Guiding Values and Principles of the ESMC reference a book which promotes “solidarity and linkages” with anti-Zionism and BDS. The guiding values and principles should be revised to ensure that they cannot be used to justify promoting such hateful agendas in the classroom.

*Excerpt from Pedagogies of Resistance*

- *Maira and Shihade 2006* calls Israel a “settler-colonial” state - terminology which erases over 3,000 years of Jewish history, identity, and rights in the historic home of the Jewish people. It also falsely accuses Israel of “annexation of the West Bank and Gaza” in 1967. In fact, Israel did not annex these territories after the 1967 War.

Most critically in regards to Principle #6, Maira and Shihade call for “Grappling with ways to connect anti-Zionism in the context of Middle East politics to anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements in the U.S.” That is, they advocate for connecting an ideology opposed to Israel’s existence with subjects covered in the ESMC.

Maira and Shihade also attack the ADL, an organization that the CDE has committed to partnering with on an antisemitism curriculum.

Lastly, Maira and Shihade tokenize a small minority of Jews in order to advance the notion that opposing Israel’s existence is not a form of antisemitism. This erases the voices of the vast majority of Jews, who believe that opposing Israel’s existence is, in fact, a form of antisemitism.

Maira and Shihade attempt to use the framework of “anti-racism” and “anti-colonialism” to shield themselves and others from being criticized for rhetoric which denies the right of Jews to self-determination, while supporting that exact same right for Palestinians.

This approach fundamentally conflicts with Guiding Value and Principle #1: “cultivate empathy... self-determination, and the holistic well-being of all participants”.

- *Spade 2011* promotes the “Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Israeli apartheid” - the type of one-sided anti-Israel advocacy that was widely criticized in the first draft of the ESMC.

Other parts of *Education at War* include additional one-sided references to Israel and public discourse about it.

The book refers to Israel as a “settler project” (p. 244) - terminology which erases over 3,000 years of Jewish history, identity, and rights in the historic home of the Jewish people.

Steven Salaita is described as innocently, “using Twitter to criticize Israel’s 2014 siege on Gaza,” in reference to numerous hateful statements he made, such as:

- “I think of all the pain Israelis have caused, their smugness, their greed, their violence, and yet I smile, because it's all only temporary.”
- “Understand that whenever a Zionist frets about Palestinian violence, it is a projection of his own brute psyche.”
- “I wish all the fucking West Bank settlers would go missing.” (posted after three Israeli teens were kidnapped and murdered).

Such biased content should not be part of the reference point for the ESMC's Guiding Values and Principles.

**Chapter 1, Page 9, Line 194:**

Related to the previous comment, the pages in *Pedagogies of Resistance* referenced in Footnote #20 include the following line:

- “The United States *is* war. Schools are battlefields where war is waged, and the fight is between the imperial and the colonized, white supremacy and antiracism, and dominance and resistance.”

Is this part of the vision that will now guide the ESMC and even the State of California's education system?

If so, this should be clearly stated within the ESMC so that Californians can decide if we agree with this vision or not. If describing schools as “battlefields where war is waged” does not align with the ESMC's values and goals, that should be clarified. This example illustrates the crucial importance of revising the “Guiding Values and Principles of Ethnic Studies”.

**Chapter 3, Page 7, Lines 177-196:**

It is very important for this section to include clearer guidance about the role of educators in student community engagement projects. LAUSD's ethnic studies instructional materials include valuable guidelines that should be incorporated:

- "An ethnic studies course should provide students with depth of understanding in relation to ethnic and social issues, rather than promoting **specific** political activism, demonstration, protest or the like. Ethnic studies is a scientific inquiry of ethnic groups and their interrelations (Yang, 2010, pg. 14)."
- "An Ethnic Studies course:
  - Should include examples of civic engagement (e.g., voting and other peaceful social justice activities) and the impact they have had on United States history. Students who are considering volunteering, social justice activities, community engagement, etc., should consult with their school teacher/advisor and parents/guardians to evaluate that the activities are lawful, peaceful, and nonviolent.
- "Whenever possible, should [create] opportunities for participation and for reflection on the responsibilities of citizens in a free society" (History Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, 2016, p. 19)."

### **Chapter 3, Page 20, Lines 527-528:**

"the unique experiences of Arabs and other Middle Easterners" should be edited to specifically name other Middle Eastern immigrant populations that have explicitly asked for inclusion in the ESMC. This could be done as follows:

- "the unique experiences of Middle Eastern populations such as Arabs, Mizrahi Jews, Iranians, Kurds, Coptic-Christians, Yezidis, and others"

The Middle Eastern immigrant communities that have asked to be represented in the curriculum include:

- Mizrahi Jews
- Iranians
- Kurds



- Assyrian-Christians
- Coptic-Christians
- Yezidis
- Baha'is
- Zoroastrians

These diverse communities represent “an estimated combined total population of over 500,000, or at least 60%, of the Middle Eastern diasporic population in California”. They should not be simply lumped together using the term “other Middle Easterners”.

**Overall, it is essential that these groups be represented on an equal basis with Arab Americans in the ESMC.** Otherwise, the ESMC will unwittingly reproduce a long history and ongoing reality of imperialist oppression and erasure of non-Arab and non-Muslim ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East.

While it is good that “Assyrians and Jews” are mentioned in line 607 of this chapter, this is not sufficient because they are not identified as Middle Eastern immigrant communities or presented on an equal basis with Arab Americans.

#### **Appendix A, Page 6, Line 8166-67:**

While it is important to acknowledge the times when Jewish and Irish immigrants and their descendants faced significant discrimination, the following assignment is problematic for reasons given below:

“Students will write a paper detailing certain events in American history that have led to Jewish and Irish Americans gaining racial privilege.”

- The assumption in this sentence flattens out the Jewish experience in the U.S. by casting *all* Jews as white. This disregards the diversity within the American Jewish community, which includes Mizrahi Jewish immigrants from Arab countries, Iran and other Muslim majority states where Jews fled persecution. It also ignores Sephardic Jews, Black Jews, Latino Jews and the emerging Jewish-identified descendants of Spanish Jews whose ancestors were forced to convert to Christianity and flee the Inquisition.

- It ignores the experience of “white” Jews (mostly from Eastern Europe) who are specifically targeted today by “white nationalists” for violence, such as the synagogue attacks in Pittsburgh, PA and Poway, California. The victims were murdered because of the perpetrators’ perceptions that they are non-white and are enemies of the “white race.”
- This is significant given that the Holocaust is still in living memory of many Ashkenazi Jews, and its traumas passed on to 2nd and 3rd generation descendants. To be experiencing neo-Nazi violence of this type in 21st century America is particularly traumatizing.

Irish Americans today do not face this kind of violence by white supremacists.

**Appendix A, Page 6, Line 8159-69:**

Given the problems listed in the previous comment, this should not be the only example of a unit covering the experiences of Jewish Americans that teachers have access to in the ESMC. At minimum, the following educational materials should be included or referenced in the curriculum:

- Antisemitism and Middle Eastern-American Jews, 9–12
- Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era
- Working Definition of Antisemitism

**Appendix B, Page 6, Lines 287-302:**

This section should include references to Chapter 3, Page 5 where it says students should be exposed to “multiple and often competing sources of information”. It should also reference Chapter 3, Page 11 regarding respect for diverse viewpoints and guidelines to “effectively engage students in productive conversations and learning activities around difficult and important issues”.

These guidelines should be referenced specifically to address the possibility that a movement chosen by a teacher or student has faced criticism that students should consider, including from individuals, organizations, intellectuals, and leaders who are part of various ethnic minority groups.

## **Appendix B, Page 41**

Defining “interpersonal racism” as something only white people do would prevent a full understanding of interpersonal oppression and potentially decrease accountability for individuals from other communities who engage in various forms of interpersonal hate. For example, individuals from many different backgrounds engage in antisemitism targeting Jews from many different backgrounds. Language about racism by white people against people of color should certainly remain in this section, with edits to ensure that other forms of interpersonal hate are acknowledged as well.

Thank you,

Liz Lonky