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California Department of Education
Public Comment on the Draft 2020 Ethnic Studies Curriculum
1430 N Street
Sacramento, CA 95814-5901
By EMAIL

To Whom It May Concern:

As was noted on your web page:

I am providing feedback to the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum.

I should note that I am an Associate Professor of Psychology at California State University, Northridge; a former synagogue president at Temple Etz Chaim of Thousand Oaks, California; the incoming Western Region President of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs; and a licensed psychologist in the state of California. I point out these associations so that the reader of this letter is aware of my own cultural framework and potential biases and to assert that the opinions in this letter do not reflect those of my employer (CSU-Northridge) or my volunteer associations (Temple Etz Chaim and the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs).

The Northridge campus of the California State University system is among the most culturally diverse institutions of higher learning in the United States with more than 20,000 undergraduate students from traditionally underserved ethnic groups enrolled in the Fall 2018 semester. I have taught undergraduate courses where students from as many as 15 different countries were represented in a single classroom and I have been involved in the development and review of undergraduate and graduate-level curriculum at the university level for just over 20 years. While my teaching expertise includes coursework in cultural competence as it applies to professional ethics in psychology and behavior analysis, I do not consider myself to be expert in the field of cultural psychology. However, considering my experience in college-level curricular development and review and my academic teaching interests in cultural competence, I believe I have an ability to evaluate the proposed Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum in a professional manner.

It is my hope that my comments will be considered by the Instructional Quality Commission in its review following the public commentary and that my suggestions will be included in the draft that is presented to the State Board. I have spent several hours reading all of the documents included in the model curriculum and trust that the effort I have spent will be commensurate with the efforts made in reviewing this letter.

The proposed Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum clearly steps forward in providing K-12 students in the California public school system a range of material that covers the resilience and strength of several traditionally underserved ethnic groups. It is clear that the authors of this material made great effort to be respectful to a range of teachers, communities, and students from a

broad array of cultural identities including the use of non-traditional spelling of the word “history” as “hxstory” and the acknowledgement of preferred pronouns and other aspects of inclusive language. The authors bring up recent material regarding microaggressions and take great pains in some of the curricular materials to advise teachers where to modify certain material to better fit the socio-geographic milieu in which some of the material may be taught. Despite these efforts, there appears to be a pervasive lack of sensitivity to the plight of Jewish-American immigrants throughout the curriculum, an absence of context for materials covering the common and unique differences that Jewish-American immigrants faced during the time periods covered in the curricular materials, and a common theme of antisemitic tropes used across some of the teaching materials. Given the efforts made by the authors of these materials to avoid offending, triggering, or microaggressing against students of color and other “hxhistorically marginalized” groups, I am dismayed that these efforts do not appear to have been made in the direction of Jewish-American immigrants and their descendants.

I will outline my concerns in this letter using page numbers of documents that were available for download and review on your web page.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

Page 2 – Lines 27-31

“The field 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.”

Anti-Semitism is missing from this admittedly non-exclusive list. White supremacy, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism were responsible for the deaths of more than 6 million people in Nazi Germany. Of these, only anti-Semitism is excluded from the exemplars in the opening pages of the curricula. Los Angeles is the home to the second-largest population of Jewish people in the United States; this absence is notable. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has noted that in 2018, more than 1800 anti-Semitic incidents occurred throughout the United States including the deadliest attack on Jewish in the history of the United States in Pittsburgh, PA. Violent anti-Semitic incidents have increased 105% over 2017, according to the ADL. In the past year, California has experienced 583 anti-Semitic incidents including a shooting in a Poway synagogue days after the Pittsburgh shooting. I have friends from Pittsburgh who were directly impacted by the murderous anti-Semitic rampage; people who were killed for simply being Jewish and worshipping as Jewish Americans.

Pages 3-6

The document lays out the context for the development of the field drawing from the oppression of people of color. The material provides documented evidence of clear advantages to the field of ethnic studies in a manner that highlights the plight largely of

people of color. This is important; however, there are other ethnic groups who have also struggled and may not identify with the same narrative of struggle of people of color. LGBTQ youth of the dominant white culture have had very different struggles. Jewish children of today may be more assimilated and less “visibly Jewish” than their same-aged peers of 80 to 100 years ago.

The Introduction and Overview Chapter is difficult to read for those who are fearful of; have experienced; or are triggered by anti-Semitism. During my tenure as a synagogue president, we received a threatening anti-Semitic phone call to our congregation that was reported to local and federal law enforcement. The impact of this reverberated through my community; however, we were lucky that no gunman appeared on our campus.

Chapter 2: Sample Course Models

Page 5

The lesson on redlining and the activity included in this lesson is helpful in bringing this awful practice to light and to life for students. However, this lesson misses a significant amount of history of oppression of other groups (e.g., “exclusive neighborhoods”) in the 1940s and 1950s, which would “exclude” Jews and other ethnic minorities.

Page 32

While the other curricular materials are notably important, only by the time that we reach page 32 do we find a meaningful example of oppression aimed at folks who are not traditionally described as people of color (i.e., “Japanese American Redress and Reparations”). What about the Jews and the Red Scare of McCarthyism in the 1950s? The Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case and cries of anti-Semitism that rang through the USA at that time?

Page 35

An unchecked presentation of the BDS movement as a valid social movement is – at best – harmful to Jewish students in the CA public school system. There is also no comment on the role that the Black Lives Matter movement has played with its apparent association with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement.

Page 41

The discussion of historical immigration waves into the United States starts in 1910 but does not mention the quotas imposed during the Holocaust in Europe that led to the extermination of millions of Jews, Catholics, Romanians, homosexuals, and individuals with a range of physical and mental disabilities. This discussion of historical immigration waves also does not mention the influx of Jewish and other European immigrants through Ellis Island between the late 19th and middle 20th centuries. Nearly 12 million immigrants came through Ellis Island in what is certainly a “great wave” of immigration in this time period. The curricular material is blind to these issues.

Page 46

Oral histories are a natural way for students to discover culture. What is missing here is any reference to the tremendous resource available from the Shoah foundation of oral histories of thousands of immigrants who fled Nazi-occupied Europe.

Page 61

The lesson plan examining legal “arguments” for oppression of Black people misses the historical context of the Nuremberg laws or the Russian Pogroms of the mid-19th century. These laws and actions were specifically passed and enforced to justify the oppression of Jews in Europe and Asia. This gives the intellectually dishonest impression that legal oppression of minorities has no historical precedent.

Conversely, this lesson plan provides a nice, unbiased coverage of oppression of Latinx and Xicanx populations. The use of food and diet provides an inherently interesting “hook” for students to study not only cultural aspects of food regarding colonialism and oppression but also to highlight sustainability concepts

Page 108

The historical discussion of problems with US Immigration Policy begins in 1965 in these materials. This is surprising as it clearly ignores the historical context of immigration policies of the original Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 (which, ironically is mentioned by name in the lesson plans). This Act set in motion immigration restrictions tied to national origin, introduced the term “racially undesirable,” and it was applied to European Jews. Omitting this critical historical background is intellectually dishonest – it gives the student the impression that government-sponsored racial oppression “sprung out of nowhere” in the 1960s.

Page 129

The lesson here investigating the role of DACA and TPS appears quite balanced and well-contextualized. There is an issue here in that Jewish children in US clearly have the benefit of privilege that other ethnic minorities do not have in that they are not “visible” minorities. However, this also “trains” Jewish children to hide or be ashamed of their Jewish heritage. Is this not counter to the aim of this curriculum? Anti-Semitism and anti-Israel bias has recently taken on an aspect of an “acceptable” and “trendy” object of protest. This is unacceptable in the context of this curriculum.

Page 156

I found the material on oppression of Filipinos and link with the Cesar Chavez UFW movement to be fascinating. I also enjoyed the use of song and lyric to highlight plight of farmworkers.

Page 171 - 198

The material covering Chinese railroad laborers is relevant and well written. It is also relevant to many students who may be unaware of the role of these laborers in the

development of commerce in the United States as well as in California. Similar objective and factual coverage appear with regard to the plight of Cambodians (Page 191) and Native Americans (Page 198).

Page 233

The Arab-American Studies Course Outline appears to have had good intentions but is riddled with anti-Israel and antisemitic content that will undoubtedly be extremely hurtful to Jewish students. While there is little dispute as to the extent to which Islamophobia is present in the current United States, bringing in the hypocritical, intellectually bankrupt, and hateful BDS movement does little to advance this cause in an honest manner.

Linda Sarsour has been aligned with Louis Farrakhan and has refused to denounce his anti-Israel, antisemitic, and homophobic statements. Rashida Harbi Tlaib has been a pioneer in the US Government; however, she has repeated an old antisemitic trope of “dual loyalty” by US government representatives and the Israeli government. Ilhan Abdullahi Omar has also been a pioneer in the US Government and has repeated antisemitic tropes of Jews and finances but has apologized for some of these comments. These people have no place in a curriculum designed to be INCLUSIVE, humanistic, and peace loving.

Page 242

The use of the word “Nakba” without a balanced perspective from an Israeli point of view is – at best – hurtful. The material in this sample lesson is clearly one-sided and historically inaccurate. In this material, the 1948 conflict is called the “War for Israeli Independence” in Israel and by many Jewish people. Presenting it solely as the “Palestinian War” is intellectually dishonest.

There has been a Jewish presence in Israel back to antiquity, documented by anthropological and archeological evidence. This is decidedly different from colonialism as discussed in this curriculum elsewhere. In addition, the lesson misses an opportunity to teach about colonialism with regard to the British Occupation of Palestine and the early Haganah movement in Israel in the early 20th century.

The history included in this curricular material avoids any mention of the Partition Plan for Palestine that was adopted by the UN in 1947. While this was opposed by Arab countries from the outset, the UN Plan called for a partition of the land into Jewish and Arab regions, which the Arabs rejected out of hand. The Jewish agencies, on the contrary, accepted this plan. Without any ability to negotiate, Israel declared its independence in 1948 and immediately was attacked by Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, and Iraq. Yemen, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan joined shortly thereafter. To be clear – the Arab states were the aggressors here. This narrative is completely ignored by the curriculum at this point.

Page 249 – Rashida Tlaib’s oral history

“I think someone had mentioned this at one of the panels that we had, that there was this idea of putting us in camps, and I didn’t remember that until that person said that but it was true. I remember, oh my God are they going to put us in camps, like they did people who were from Japan? I mean we were really scared because we knew the FBI was going to come door knocking, and they did.”

In Europe, Jews were ‘put in camps’ before the Japanese were interned in the United States. This is another example of a lack of context. This is also a missed opportunity to compare the experience of Jews in concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Europe and how it relates to the Arab-Israeli conflict at present.

Page 259

In this material, I find myself not only baffled but also reacting quite angrily. Why are the antisemitic and anti-Israeli comments in quotes? Is the implication that this is not true? Clearly not all Arabs reflect this ideology; however, the charter document of the current Palestinian government calls for the extermination of Israel.

Page 274

The sample lesson in Islamophobia seems to imply that the sole source of the rise in this terrible societal behavior is due to the current political climate and our current president – particularly the teacher notes on page 281. Rarely are large-scale societal problems due to a single source. Indeed, if you look at the rise in Islamophobia after 9/11/2001 – fifteen years BEFORE our current president took office, this suggests that the problem is clearly multifaceted. This sample lesson oversimplifies the causes of this notable societal problem.

The material in Chapter 2 could be much better balanced with regard to the culture and experiences of Jewish American students. It is not necessary to include blatant anti-Semitic material to teach much of the lessons in this chapter.

I do not review the material in Chapter 3 here as this chapter appears more focused on the structure of course outlines and does not include much content.

Chapter 4: Glossary and Bibliography

Page 2

The entry for BDS is clearly one-sided and over-represents the reach and justification for this movement. The BDS movement is not “global” in nature yet is globally complicated. The definition uses the “apartheid” trope, drawn from the struggles of black South Africans under the white government in the 1960s – 1990s; however, the differences between the “apartheid” state in South Africa and the state of the Arabs in Israel could not be more different. In South Africa, blacks were disenfranchised and could not hold political office. In Israel, Arabs vote, hold regional and national offices, and serve in the military. In South Africa, racial segregation was defined by law; in Israel, all laws apply

equally to all citizens. In South Africa, the free movement of black citizens was infringed upon by the South African government. In Israel, the free movement of citizens between Gaza and the West Bank is restricted – but Gaza and the West Bank are not Israeli land. The US restricts movement between Canada and the US – this is clearly not apartheid. If the antisemitic apartheid trope is to be applied to Israel through a discussion of BDS, why aren't similar discussions being held about the restriction of movement of women in Arab countries? Why aren't similar discussions being held about the prevention of individuals entering Arab countries like Dubai with Israeli stamps on their passports? Why aren't similar discussions being held about the persecution of Arab-state minorities in Arab states?

Appendix

In the appendix, only three sample course outlines even mention the plight of Jewish immigrants to America in the 205 pages of the appendix.

I would earnestly like to believe that the intentions of the committee that developed this document were positive and that the energies put into these curricular materials were for the betterment of the K-12 students in the California public school system. It appears to me that great effort was made to make these materials accessible and non-threatening to a wide range of educational constituencies throughout the state. The notable exception to these efforts appears to be students who identify as Jewish. The absence of historical context for the oppression of many groups mentioned in these materials as it applies to the centuries of oppression of the Jewish people prior to and since immigrating to the United States is shocking. The fact that such efforts have been made to not trigger or present microaggressions toward such a wide range of students yet have been nearly completely absent for our Jewish students is shocking to me. Worse yet, the use of antisemitic tropes and the adoration given to pioneers in the field of Islamic-American relations without critical review is clearly apparent.

I would imagine that you will be receiving a significant quantity of comments claiming that the entirety of these curricular materials is offensive or even anti-Semitic. I would counter that there is much to be gained by using *parts* of these curricular materials; however, the striking absence of material covering the plight of Jewish immigrants, the lack of context and critical evaluation of the plight of other underrepresented groups, and the clear use of antisemitic tropes renders much of this curricula highly problematic.

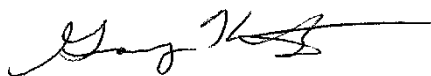
I would strongly recommend that the authors of these materials consider reading them as if they were an elementary school student from a Jewish family. How would you feel reading about the Nakba as “the catastrophe” when your ancestors were killed in Europe because there was no Jewish state for anyone to seek refuge? Imagine if you were a high school student who was the grandchild or great-grandchild of a Holocaust survivor and you were reading about Islamic-Americans fearing “camps” yet commenting on the “dual loyalty” of other United States elected representatives? The authors of this curriculum make the point early in their work that children from underrepresented groups suffer a range of maladaptive outcomes when they are conditioned to hide or become embarrassed by their non-dominant ethnic or cultural identity.

Yet, throughout the curricular materials, children with even a modest Jewish identity and a modicum of Jewish education and cultural historical knowledge would likely find much of these materials difficult, if not offensive. Imagine you were a Jewish middle school student with Arab-American classmates, and you are reading about the “dispossession and dispersal of many Palestinian Arabs from the new state of Israel in 1948.” How do you think the Arab-American students will view the Jewish students after reviewing this clearly biased recounting of this conflict? Most importantly, if this material is presented objectively, how much better could this discussion become?

While the authors of these materials do not appear to be publicly available, I would strongly recommend that the composition of the committee enjoined to revise the curricular materials include individuals from University departments of Jewish Studies as well as other academic departments representing other underrepresented students. To me, it appears unlikely that there was a Jewish committee member developing the first draft of these materials.

I look forward to your response to my comments and to reading what “adjustments” are made to this draft. If you have any further questions about my comments, I am more than happy to discuss them further with the committee.

Best regards,



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