



July 16, 2020

Tony Thurmond
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
California Department of Education
1430 N Street
Sacramento, CA 95814-5901

Dear Tony,

I write to urge you to make sure that substantial Arab American, Central American, and Pacific Islander Studies are included in California's new Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum as a critical step toward addressing deep histories of racism in our state and country and moving toward racial healing and a more inclusive society.

My parents helped found Asian American Studies at UC Berkeley in the late 1960s, as students fighting for their ethnic groups to be acknowledged and seen in the school curriculum. They wanted a university that was in service of high-need communities in the Bay Area. As veterans of the Third World Liberation Front, they agree that the Arab world is part of the Third World framework. The number of Arab Americans in California has grown over sevenfold in the last four decades, inching closer to a million residents every year, part of an estimated 3.7 million Arab Americans across the country. Ethnic Studies veterans agree that Arab Americans, coming in large numbers to California beginning in the 1920s, should be included in our state's Ethnic Studies curriculum and would be if they were in the Bay Area in larger numbers in the 1960s. However, anti-Asian immigration policies in place from the 1870s to the 1960s kept those numbers down. The 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act included immigrants from the Middle East and Central Asia, along with South Asians, Southeast Asians, and East Asians. I learned this history as an Asian American Studies Major at Columbia University - but had learned none of it in my K-12 education in the Oakland Unified School District. Finally learning about my community's history transformed my life, identity, and trajectory.

In the Bay Area and in Oakland, Yemeni students were one of the fastest-growing populations before President Trump's Muslim Travel Ban was recently implemented. Yemeni Americans were part of the United Farmworkers and present throughout California since the 1960s, but their history is not taught in our schools. In OUSD, we serve students from Yemen, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Syria, Algeria, Egypt, and Palestine as part of our Asian Pacific Islander Student Achievement programs since our inception, as they are included as Southwest Asians and are an underserved group with some of the



lowest rates of standardized test scores in the entire district. In discussions of the achievement and opportunity gap, Arab American students are often left out of the discussion, largely because the lack of data disaggregation at federal and state levels and our inability to accurately count and track these students in our K-12 system renders them invisible. Since many of these students are fleeing wars as refugees, with many of the schools in their home countries being bombed, destroyed, and closed, they face tremendous barriers of language, catching up, economics and politics to reach equity. On top of this, they face extremely high rates of bullying based on Islamophobia - I have heard endless stories of students being called “terrorists,” girls’ hijabs torn off, and witnessed my students being abused on the street and told to “go back to where they came from” - most of those students were born in California. It is clear that a lack of education about Islam, the Middle East, Arab history and the study of racism as it relates to Islamophobia and colonialism is at the root of much bullying in schools and racist violence in our communities.

When we talk about the need for Ethnic Studies, we talk about the need to dismantle racism and frameworks such as Islamophobia. We study race and white supremacist systems throughout time, and how they have shaped our country and world. With the New Zealand massacre and countless attacks on Muslim communities escalating around the world, it’s more important than ever to elevate the teaching of Arab American Studies in the United States - when our hate-crimes and massacres are at an all-time high. Ignorance breeds hatred, fear, and violence. As you know, the key is education, teaching people from childhood about our different communities, our global communities, and how to critically understand and dismantle systems of oppression.

OUSD has embarked on the much needed and long overdue task of integrating Ethnic Studies into our K-12 public schools in one of the most diverse cities in California. Per legislative directive and moral imperative, APISA is developing Ethnic Studies curriculum and resources that reflect our populations, including Arab, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander communities which are at times left out of API curriculum due to hegemony. Through our targeted literacy work, we learned that Arab and Pacific Islander students have some of the lowest rates of literacy in OUSD. We are now implementing culturally responsive curricula and strategies for our Arab and Pacific Islander students, in addition to integrating inclusive and reflective lesson plans into universal curricula for all students. We are bringing more bilingual books and books about Arab and Pacific Islander culture and stories to engage our students and help them see themselves reflected in classroom materials. The increased excitement about reading and learning from students is undeniable. Matched with bringing in more diverse educators, we believe this will help close achievement gaps, as well as cultural gaps between school staff and students. This work increases understanding and reduces the potential for bias, insensitivity, and bullying - both by students and staff. OUSD teachers have been amongst the most vocal asking for



more training and education about our Arab, Pacific Islander, and Central American communities. They know that our education systems have been insufficient and that a focus on these communities is very much needed to achieve equity in our schools. Our Pacific Islander families have been migrating to Oakland since the 1960s, and our Central American population is one of our fastest growing and most high-need. As smaller groups, we need officials to lead in modeling inclusion.

I'm deeply concerned about anti-Arab tendencies within some of the political interest groups in Sacramento, and their reactionary move to try to remove Arab American and Palestinian American Studies from the curriculum content created by Ethnic Studies experts. As a Senior Field Representative working within the State Assembly from 2011-12, I witnessed the passing of a resolution by Jewish legislators that included condemning constitutionally protected rights of protest that include divestment as a proven strategy of social change modeled after activists fighting South African white supremacist apartheid. This action I believe crossed the line by revealing a clear political agenda, and I'm afraid the same thing is happening now - at the expense of our students. I am disturbed that any exploration of racism in the United States and globally would be removed from an Ethnic Studies curriculum based largely on the political lobbying of one interest group that has little expertise in the development or field of Ethnic Studies.

Based on our work together, I know that you are a champion of racial justice and equity. I hope that you will stand on the right side of history and stand with our Arab American communities fighting to be included in this very important and historic model curriculum for the Ethnic Studies framework in California. I am concerned about CDE's recent focus on only the four founding areas of the 1960s, because California has become much more diverse since then and our curriculum should evolve over time. Each group outlined in the ESMC deserves its own course outline. I hope that you will honor the Ethnic Studies struggles my parents and so many others put their bodies and their education on the line for, which - simply put - pushed systems to make our schools more relevant to and reflective of all of our diverse California communities.

Sincerely,

Lailan Sandra Huen

Asian Pacific Islander Student Achievement

OUSD Office of Equity