



Los Angeles CA

August 15, 2019

Ms. Soomin Chao
Chair, Instructional Quality Commission
California Department of Education

Sacramento, CA

Dear Chairwoman Chao and members of the Instructional Quality Commission:

We write to you on behalf of the California Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC-CA), the statewide social justice effort of the Reform Jewish Movement, the largest Jewish denomination, representing almost 100 congregations and 150,000 Reform Jews in California. We write to share with you our deep concern about the current draft of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) which conspicuously fails to include the Jewish experience and omits anti-Semitism from the discussion of oppressions that Californians face.

At the outset, we would like to state our strong support for the idea of an ethnic studies curriculum. California has been strengthened by the presence of strong ethnic communities that bring their different experiences, traditions and culture into the life of our state. At the same time, California has been challenged by systematic xenophobia and hatred of minority groups that are viewed as threatening by some members of the majority group. Our state would be strengthened by a high school curriculum that celebrates Californians' different experiences and cultures and examines the oppressions that have targeted our minority groups.

While we support the idea of Ethnic Studies, we must oppose this current draft of the ESMC which erases the Jewish experience. As you know, the Jewish community has been a vital part of shaping California, just as it has shaped the United States. At the same time as Jews have contributed to and benefited from being part of California, the Jewish community has also been the target of anti-Semitic discrimination, hatred and violence in California as in the rest of the United States. The recent shooting at a synagogue in Poway is an indication that anti-Semitism continues to be a problem in California.



The Religious Action Center pursues social justice and religious liberty by mobilizing the Reform Jewish community and serving as its advocate in Washington, D.C. The Center is led by the Commission on Social Action of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union for Reform Judaism (and its affiliates) and is supported by the congregations of the Union.



Further, anti-Semitism is manifest not only in high profile, violent attacks. It is also apparent in the stereotypes that paint Jews as rich, cheap and the puppet master manipulating world events behind the scenes. Anti-Semitism mistakenly views the Jewish community as monolithic racially, politically, economically and even religiously. But while Jews are not ethnically homogenous, Jewishness is nonetheless an ethnic category (as well as a religious one) – or rather many ethnic categories, stemming from the many cultural and ancestral subgroups of our people that have developed throughout our history.

Any Ethnic Studies Curriculum in California must have a specific curriculum on the Jewish experience, much as the current ESMC has curricula on African Americans, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Arab Americans, Pacific Islanders. It must address anti-Semitism as it addresses racism, white supremacy, Islamophobia, and other oppressions.

A specific unit addressing anti-Semitism and the Jewish experience must be added to the ESMC. In addition, the ESMC's general framework must be modified. First, anti-Semitism cannot be omitted from the list of intersectional oppressions (as it is for example in intro/overview, p2, lines 27-31; intro/overview, p13 lines 306-308; sample ESMC p. 2 line 45-48). There may be some who wish to dismiss anti-Semitism from the ESMC because it seems somehow weaker or less destructive than racism and other oppressions. This exclusion is wrong for two reasons. First, anti-Semitism has real effects on people's lives, up to and including the deaths by anti-Semitic violence in Poway and other places. Second, anti-Semitism has a central place in the ideology of white supremacy, and its promotion is used not only to hurt Jews but also to undermine democracy and hurt movements of non-Jewish working class people and people of color (see Eric Ward's [Skin in the Game](#), Political Research Associates, 2017). The ESMC must include a definition of anti-Semitism in its glossary as it includes definitions of racism, classism, Islamophobia, and other oppressions. It must list anti-Semitism in the list of key concepts (ESMC draft, p. 3-4, lines 61-79). Anti-Semitism must be discussed in the introductory, framing sections of the ESMC as well as in a curriculum on the Jewish experience, which is now missing.

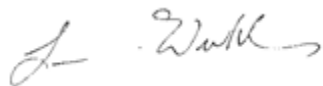
The framework of the ESMC is based on the Black/White divide in the United States and uses racism as the central oppression upon which all others in our country are modeled. But oppression is more complicated than that. Like the Latinx community, the Jewish community is very diverse, including people of many race. Room must be made in the theoretical framework of the ESMC for minority communities that contribute to California and face oppression but don't neatly fit into the category "communities of color." For example, p. 3 lines 59-62 of the intro/overview states: "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." The ESMC must explicitly say that this inquiry includes communities like the Jewish community and other minority communities that are also multiracial and include both whites and people of color.

Our final part concerns the discussion of Israel in the ESMC. For many Jews, the historical and current connection to Israel is integral to the Jewish American experience in California. It is important that any curriculum that addresses the state of Israel whether connected to the Jewish narrative or another,

must be careful to present a balanced and complex view of the relationship of American ethnic groups to the region.

We are happy to assist the Instructional Quality Commission in a second draft of the ESMC that does not exclude the Jewish experience and omit discussion of anti-Semitism. We look forward to a draft of the ESMC that we can support.

Sincerely,



Lee Winkelman
California Organizing Director



Rabbi Julie Saxe-Taller
Senior California Organizer

cc. The Honorable Tony Thurmond, State Superintendent of Instruction
Senator Ben Allen, chair of the California Legislative Jewish Taskforce
Assemblymember Jesse Gabriel, vice-chair of the California Legislative Jewish Taskforce