

From: Neil Sheff

Sent: Tuesday, August 11, 2020 6:34 PM

To: Ethnic Studies; [emails redacted]

Subject: Middle Eastern Jewish Curriculum

Dear Educational and Political Leaders of California,

I am the International President of the Sephardic Educational Center (SEC), a resident of Beverly Hills, CA and native of Los Angeles. My grandparents were Sephardic immigrants to this country from the Ottoman Empire and I grew up with the unique Sephardic experience from my home, speaking the old Judeo-Spanish language and observing centuries old customs that were not widely known and continue to be a largely untold part of Jewish history. My grandparents came to this country fleeing mandatory conscription, economic hardship and a severe rise of Anti-Semitism that culminated in the Holocaust.

I would like to thank the California Department of Education for working so hard to improve the first draft of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum. It is important we give a well- rounded, fair and unbiased education of Jewish history in the Middle East to our California students. However, as President of the SEC, I represent the 500,000 Californians of Jewish-Middle Eastern heritage who were ignored in the revised Ethnic Studies curriculum. Their families come from a region of the world that is racially, ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse yet the revised Ethnic Studies curriculum fails to reflect these demographics both here and abroad.

In keeping with AB 2016's objective of "preparing pupils to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures," our community deserve equal representation and inclusion in the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum. Jews have lived in the Middle East and North Africa for thousands of years, mainly under Islam, they spoke Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and the many languages of the local culture, as my grandparents did. They endured anti-Semitic attacks and ultimately expulsion from their homes in the Middle East and North

Africa, mainly because of the disdain of an idea of a Jewish homeland, but also at times out of pure hatred.

This story must be told along every other story of the history of the Middle East.

2018 California Hate Crime Statistics noted that Anti-Jewish events increased by over twenty percent while Anti-Muslim bias events decreased by more than forty percent. As a Jewish person who has experienced/witnessed religiously motivated hate, I believe our students deserve to learn about both Islamophobia and Antisemitism in an ethnic studies framework.

When the primary reference of Jews in the revised Ethnic Studies curriculum is in the context of our communities being the beneficiaries of white privilege – my Middle Eastern Jewish community, which is comprised of multiple immigrants and people of color, is completely erased. I fear this unit will contribute to the dangerous antisemitic trope that, “Jews Have Too Much Power.” Furthermore, this reference ignores the experiences of European Jews who continue to be personally impacted by violent white-supremacy, genocide, and acts of antisemitism.

At a time when there is great need to provide our students with high-quality educational content related to bigotry, it is essential to incorporate adequate instructional material on antisemitism – not just simplistic references to it.

Therefore, all references to Middle Eastern people in the curriculum should include, specifically name, and teach on the diverse groups of Mizrahi Jews, Coptic Christians, Kurds, Iranians, Assyrians, and other minority groups from the region who together represent 60% of California’s Middle Eastern population and have asked for inclusion. In order for the curriculum to avoid an essentialist understanding of Arabs and the Middle East, and in order to be well balanced, each group should be equally and equitably represented in the Ethnic Studies Curriculum.

We would all like to see the next draft of the curriculum include a lesson plan about Antisemitism and its affect on Middle Eastern-American Jews, as it will provide students with high-quality instruction on contemporary issues of antisemitism, bigotry, and the Middle Eastern-American Jewish experience. This JIMENA lesson plan was written by a scholar of Middle Eastern education specifically to fit into California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum and is most appropriate.

Thank you,

Neil Sheff