

CARE-ED

California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education

The Benefits of Ethnic Studies

February 2021

February 22, 2021

Dear Superintendent Tony Thurmond and the CA State Board of Education:

In a January 21, 2021 [letter](#) addressed to the Superintendent and SBE President, thirty-five academics argued that the draft CA Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC), section titled “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies,” made unsubstantiated claims about the benefits of Ethnic Studies, and requested removing that section or its claims. Subsequently, a January 27th [press release](#) by AMCHA, an organization closely tied to the letter, contextualized the letter in a broader critique of “Critical Ethnic Studies” as socially “divisive,” a form of political “indoctrination,” and anti-Semitic. We disagree.

We, a statewide alliance of educational scholars across California, urge you to retain and bolster the section on “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies,” and more generally, we urge you to support the continued development and offering of authentic Ethnic Studies curriculum in public schools across the state. In what follows, we offer research to strengthen the section, “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies,” and the ESMC as a whole.

THE NEED FOR ETHNIC STUDIES. We begin by reiterating what scholars, educators, students, and families have argued for decades, and what [over 2300 educators and organizations](#) across the country stated collectively just a few months ago, namely, that racism and other inequities have long existed and continue to exist; that we cannot advance justice without learning in deep and rigorous ways about racism and other inequities; that the traditional, whitewashed curriculum of U.S. education obscures these realities and, therefore, is harmful to all students and counter to our nation’s ideals of democracy and freedom; and that education can do better through such movements as Ethnic Studies and multicultural education. The statement by over 2300 educators also explains why the rhetoric of “divisiveness” and “indoctrination” when referring to all Ethnic Studies curriculum is misinformation at best, and disinformation at worst.

Our 2018 research brief on [Ethnic Studies and Critical Multicultural Education](#) clarifies that, as in any field, there are different approaches to anti-racist curriculum, and that we advocate for “critical” and intersectional approaches, arguing that “it was the recognition of the anti-democratic, monocultural nature of U.S. public education that catalyzed the emergence or expansion of ethnic studies and multicultural education during the Civil Rights Movement decades ago. . . .Ethnic studies as a field first emerged in universities to understand and reclaim the cultural identities, experiences, and knowledge of racialized groups.” Ethnic Studies teaches about different groups, but also teaches about broader systems of oppression, including those along multiple dimensions of diversity. Our 2018 research brief points to many additional resources for those interested in learning exactly what Ethnic Studies does and does not do.

Ethnic Studies responds to the exclusion that many students from minoritized groups (i.e., African American, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Chicanx/Latinx, and Native American) contend with when being taught a biased K-12 curriculum that (based on analyses of textbooks) continues to represent white people exponentially more, and more complexly, than both the Native peoples of the land where the course is taught, and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) generally and specifically. Students notice who is and is not in the curriculum they are supposed to learn, as numerous case studies based on interviewing students show. This representative quotation by a Black high school student illustrates the concern:

“It’s basically what you know, what you need to know to graduate...not like the real history of the world, just like what your teacher thinks important ... I know that a lot of our history, like Black women and things we did as maybe civil rights leaders in history is missing. It’s what you supposed to know to get through this system, you know, to graduate...just to keep your teachers or the testers happy.” (Woodson, 2015, p. 62, as cited in Sleeter & Zavala, *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools*, 2020)

THE RESEARCH BASIS FOR ETHNIC STUDIES. The January 21st letter argues that all of the ESMC claims were unsubstantiated because of either a lack or a mischaracterization of empirical research. Although the ESMC, like any reporting of research, may not have been persuasive to some readers about the substantiation of its claims, and may not have presented a comprehensive review and meta-analysis, we disagree that the claims are actually unsubstantiated, for at least three reasons.

First, we value different research methodologies and designs for making claims about the value and impact of Ethnic Studies. One of the main concerns in the January 21st letter is methodological, as when critiquing small-scale and/or non-experimental studies as ungeneralizable or otherwise not warranting claims of impact. The letter emphasizes that most of the studies cited were small-scale in nature; or when critiquing the method of statistical analysis of one study, the letter takes issue with its use of regression discontinuity analysis rather than experimental group comparison. As scholars with expertise in a wide range of research

methodologies, we disagree with the letter’s narrow criteria for determining which types of study designs offer “evidence.” Furthermore, much more research exists than what the ESMC was able to discuss. Consider, for example, quasi-experimental quantitative studies published recently, which we point to in Appendix A. By valuing different research methodologies and designs, we disagree with the letter that the cited studies were unjustified in their claims or that, in general, the ESMC overreached in its summaries of the research.

Second, we have reviewed the growing body of research, which we believe makes clear that Ethnic Studies benefits all students. Due to time constraints, the ESMC relied heavily on the 2011 review of research by C. Sleeter, and perhaps not surprisingly, the January 21st letter focused primarily on critiquing either that review’s summaries of the studies or the design of the cited studies themselves. As noted above, we value a range of research methodologies, and therefore, we do not agree with such critiques of the 2011 review; in fact, we know that that review informed arguments in the landmark *Arce et. al. v. Huppenthal* court case in Arizona regarding the value of Ethnic Studies and the legality and ethics of banning it (a ban the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals found to be unconstitutional and based on racial animus). But as if that was not compelling enough, we point you to C. Sleeter’s updated and expanded review of research, published last year in [*Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools*](#)—we categorized and summarized the relevant studies in three charts in Appendix A. As you will notice, 26 of the 28 cited studies found a positive impact on students.

Third, we listen to our students, as we know that you do as well. It is not difficult to find evidence that, as we hear countless students of color report, “Ethnic Studies saved my life.” As educational scholars, we value experimental group comparison, but we also value the wisdom and guidance as captured in the voices of those who are most impacted by an education that strives as boldly toward democracy and justice as does the type of Ethnic Studies animated in the ESMC.

We believe it is important to clarify that the ESMC is an illustration of what can be taught, and not a script of what must be taught, even if and when Ethnic Studies becomes required curriculum. We support requiring Ethnic Studies for all California students, and supporting schools and educators in teaching Ethnic Studies as described above. Such legislation and concomitant resources would be a historic step towards racial and educational justice.

To support these goals, we urge the State Board of Education to take the following four steps:

- 1) Retain and expand the ESMC section on “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies.” We offer a summary of relevant research in three charts in Appendix A, and suggested edits to the ESMC in Appendix B.

- 2) Provide sufficient financial and other resources and support for researchers to examine and document the impact of Ethnic Studies on K-12 students in California. Important research already exists, but more is needed about any number of topics—from curriculum design to student impact to teacher preparation to community capacity building—and using any number of research designs—from large-scale experimental design to case studies to teacher and student testimonies.
- 3) Designate Ethnic Studies as a field for credentialing teachers, and provide sufficient financial and other resources and support for teacher-preparation pre-service programs and professional-development programs to offer pathways to Ethnic Studies teaching credentials and preparedness. The ESMC illustrates what is possible, but as with any field of study, the quality of teachers matters, and we should insist that teachers of Ethnic Studies be well-prepared to do so.
- 4) Ensure that decisions about Ethnic Studies centrally involve expert practitioners and scholars, including decisions about curricular frameworks and content and professional development and certification. For example, as the ESMC continues to undergo revision, and more urgently, as the SBE considers revisions for its March 17th meeting, we ask that you bring the final State Superintendent/CDE recommended ESMC edits to a place strong and authentic enough that the original ESMC writers, advisory committee members, and Ethnic Studies expert practitioners and scholars can once again support.

An accurate, bold, authentic, and research-based Ethnic Studies curriculum is needed now more than ever. We stand ready to work with you to make that happen.

CARE-ED: California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education

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As of February 22, the following 442 educational scholars in California have endorsed this letter (affiliations are listed for identification purposes only):

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Ruth Cálcanas, Adjunct Professor, Fullerton College
Ruth Silver Taube, Adjunct Professor, Santa Clara University School of Law
Ryan Strole, Teacher, Napa Valley Unified School District
Sam Johnson, Professor, City College Of San Francisco
Samia Shoman, Administrator/Teacher, SMUHSD
Sapna Chopra , Professor , California State University Fullerton
Sarah Crabtree, Professor, San Francisco State University
Shannon Ito, Teacher, Fresno
Sheena Evans , Special Education Teacher, Bakersfield City School District
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Stacey Greer, Academic Coordinator, UC Davis History Project
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Appendix A: Three Charts of Research about Benefits of Ethnic Studies

Appendix A
Three Charts of Research about Benefits of Ethnic Studies

1. Ethnic Studies Curriculum and Student Achievement

Author(s)	Curriculum	Level	Research Design	Outcome(s)	Impact
Dee, Penner, 2017	SFUSD Ethnic Studies	9th grade	Quasi-experimental	GPA, attendance, credits toward grad	Positive
Cabrera et al., 2014	TUSD's MAS program	High school	Quasi-experimental	Standardized tests, graduation rates	Positive
Cammarota, Romero, 2009	TUSD's Social Justice Ed Project	High school	Pre-post no control group, interviews	Test scores, grad rates, sense of empowerment	Positive
Kisker, et al., 2012	Math in a Cultural Context	2 nd grade	Pre-post control group	Math achievement tests	Positive
Lipka, et al., 2005	Math in a Cultural Context	6 th grade	Pre-post control group	Benchmark achievement texts	Positive
McCarty & Lee, 2014	Native American Community Academy	Middle, H.S.	Qualitative; pre-post no control gp	Basic skills achievement	Positive
McCarty, 1993	Rough Rock Navajo English-Lang Arts	Elem	Qualitative	Reading scores	Positive

Matthews & Smith, 1994	Culturally relevant science, Am Indian	4-8 th grades	Pre-post control group	Science achievement, attitudes toward science & Native Americans	Positive
Green-Gibson & Collett, 2014	African American cultural infusion	3 rd -6 th grades	Causal comparative	School AYP	Positive
Duncan, 2012	Africentric U.S. history course	8 th grade	Quasi-experimental	Academic achievement, student self-efficacy	Positive
Baker, 2017	Afrocentric curriculum	3 - 5 th	correlational	Reading scores	Positive
Clark, 2017	Culturally relevant texts	1-5 th grade	Quasi-experimental control group	Reading comprehension, word recognition	Positive
Rickford, 2001	Culturally relevant texts	Middle school	Post-interviews, no control	Comprehension, higher order thinking	Positive
Tyson, 2002	Multicultural literature in social studies class	Middle school	Interviews, classroom observations	Use of text, knowledge of social issues	Positive

Ginwright, 2000	Afrocentric culture infused through curriculum and school	High school	Qualitative case study	Academic achievement, academic participation	No impact
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2. Ethnic Studies Curriculum + Asset-Based Pedagogies

Author(s),	Curriculum	Level	Research Design	Outcome(s)	Impact
López, 2016, 2017, 2018; Sharif Matthews & López, 2018	Asset-based pedagogy: academic expectations, critical awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural content integration, beliefs about/use of Spanish language	3 rd -5 th grade	Correlation	Reading scores, math scores, ethnic identity affirmation, achievement identity	Positive
Lee, 1995;2001; 2006; 2007	Cultural modeling (Literature courses)	High school	Pre-post control group	Literary analysis skills	Positive
Krater et al., 1994; Krater & Zeni, 1995	African American literature infused	Middle, high school	Pre-post, no control group	Writing skills	Positive
Adjapong, Emdin, 2015	Hip hop in science classroom	Middle school	Qualitative	Understanding, enjoyment of science	Positive
Stone & Stewart, 2016	Critical Hip Hop Rhetoric Pedagogy	Higher education	Qualitative	Successful course completion	Positive
Hall & Martin, 2013	Critical hip hop pedagogy	Higher education	Qualitative	Engagement, retention	Positive

3. Ethnic Studies Curriculum and Student Identity, Sense of Self

Author(s)	Curriculum	Level	Research Design	Outcome(s)	Impact
Lewis, Sullivan & Bybee, 2006	Project EXCEL, an African-centered one-semester class	8 th grade	Pre-post control group	Communalism, achievement motivation	Positive
Lewis, et al, 2012	Project EXCEL, an African-centered one-semester class	8 th grade	Pre-post control group	Ethnic identity	Negative
Thomas, et al., 2008	African American after school program	High school	Pre-post, no control	Ethnic identity, sense of empowerment	Positive
Belgrave, et al, 2000	Africentric extracurric program	Ages 10-12	Pre-post control group	Ethnic identity, self-concept	Positive
Wiggan & Watson-Vendiver, 2018	Multicultural and African-centered school	High school	Case study	Academic achievement, critical thinking, identity	Positive
Halagao, 2004 2010	Pinoy Teach: Filipino studies class	Higher ed	Interviews	Critical thinking, identity, empowerment	Positive
Vasquez, 2005	Chicano literature class	Higher ed	Interviews	Ethnic identity	Positive

Appendix B

Recommended Edits for ESMC “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies” Appendix B. Recommended Edits for ESMC “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies”

Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum ***The Benefits of Ethnic Studies*** **With Our Recommended Edits to Strengthen Section**

Benefits of Ethnic Studies

In a 2011 report for the National Education Association entitled *The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies*, Christine Sleeter stated that:

There is considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students. Curricula are designed and taught somewhat differently depending on the ethnic composition of the class or school and the subsequent experiences students bring, but both students of color and white students have been found to benefit from ethnic studies.^[1]

As the demographics continue to shift in California to an increasingly diverse population—for example, with Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x students comprising a majority in our public schools and students of two or more races comprising the fastest growing demographic group—there is a legitimate need to address the academic and social needs of such a population. All students should be better equipped with the knowledge and skills to successfully navigate our increasingly diverse society.^[2] Ethnic studies provides the space for all students and teachers to begin having these conversations. Furthermore, ethnic studies scholars and classroom teachers established through research and classroom experiences, respectively, that courses in the field have shown they can:

- Help students develop a strong sense of identity^[3]
- Contribute to students’ sense of agency and academic motivation^[4]
- Provide students with skills and language to critically analyze, respond to, and speak out on social issues through community responsive youth civic engagement^[5]

- Increase critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and interpersonal communication skills^[6]
- Lead to an increase in attendance^[7]
- Lead to an increase in standardized test scores^[8]
- Lead to an increase in GPA, especially in math and science^[9]
- Lead to an increase in graduation and college enrollment rates^[10]
- Introduce students to college level academic frameworks, theories, terms, and research methods^[11]
- Strengthen social and cultural awareness^[12]
- Help to foster a classroom environment of trust between students and teachers, enabling them to discuss contentious issues and topics, as well as current events
- Help students connect to their historical and ancestral origins
- Reduce stereotype threat
- Aid in the social-emotional wellness of students

[1] Christine Sleeter, *The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies*, p. viii.

[2] California Department of Education, *2018–2019 Enrollment by Ethnicity and Grade* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, n.d.), <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cds=00&aggllevel=state&year=2018-19> (accessed July 23, 2020).

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