

# CARE-ED

California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education

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## Ethnic Studies and Critical Multicultural Education: Educating for Democracy in California and Beyond

As the end of 2017 neared, a federal district court decision concluded a years-long legal battle over Mexican American Studies in Tucson public high schools. Seven years prior, the Arizona state legislature passed a law that prohibited courses that were “designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group,” that “promote resentment toward a race or class of people,” or that “promote the overthrow of the United States government,” allowing officials to end Tucson’s Mexican American Studies program by classifying its courses as reflective of such goals. The federal judge saw behind the rhetoric, and determined that the law was unconstitutional, violating students’ First Amendment rights and Fourteenth Amendment protections. He prohibited the state from enforcing the law or penalizing schools and districts that offer such courses, noting the law’s “invidious discriminatory racial purpose.”<sup>1</sup> The significance of this decision lies not only in affirming the legality of Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education in public schools, but also in debunking the rhetoric that frames such courses as anti-democratic.

Ironically, 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; critical multicultural education initially focused more on K-12 schools using critical, historical lenses to understand and challenge power relations, structural racism, and other injustices. Both Ethnic Studies and multicultural education can take a “soft,” liberal form that focuses on cultural contributions and celebrations. But both also take “critical” forms that

tackle racism and other injustices head on. We bring together these “critical” and intersectional legacies into a vision that holds much promise for educating for democracy.

Public schools, like the broader societies in which they serve, have been sites of struggle throughout our history as our increasingly diverse population tries to define who we are and what we aspire to be. Schools are not immune from the legacies of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, xenophobia, misogyny, homo- and transphobia, religious intolerance, particularly of Muslims, white supremacy, and other forces that are woven throughout U.S. history and culture. In this political moment when such ideologies and related policies and actions are increasingly amplified and normalized by hate groups all the way up to our country’s highest offices, and when historically marginalized groups are bearing the brunt of such repression, schools will reflect such ideologies even as they house ongoing struggles against them. Being silent, in other words, is akin to being complicit with, to perpetuating without question or critique, these repressive ideas and actions. Public education, therefore, has a responsibility to confront ignorance and misinformation, to contrast rhetoric with research, and to raise consciousness about what is really going on in our lives and how we can intervene in the world around us.

Furthermore, given that repressive regimes thrive on scapegoating those who are already on the margins, including communities of color, indigenous and immigrant communities, and other racialized groups, Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education become even more central today to advancing educational equity and democratic ideals by offering a more diverse and inclusive set of experiences and

perspectives of who “we” are, alternative lenses for viewing our world, an intersectional analysis of multiple forms of injustice (racism, misogyny, etc.), and cultural assets for rethinking human relationships, community building, social change, and personal healing.

*In this research brief, the California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education (CARE-ED), a statewide collaborative of educational researchers, analyzes the research basis for Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education in public schools. We examine the racial framing of traditional curriculum, and highlight research on the impact of traditional and alternative curriculums on students academically and personally. We turn specifically to California to see the seeds of hope and change already growing. We conclude with recommendations for educators, teacher educators, educational leaders, policy makers, and advocates for continuing to expand Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education as key levers for advancing democracy in schools and society.*

### **Traditional Curriculum: Incomplete, Misleading, and Anti-Democratic**

Curriculum can never be neutral on issues of diversity because it cannot help but include only certain events, experiences, perspectives, and actors, while excluding all others. The fact that curriculum is always and necessarily partial requires of any learned individual the capacity and commitment to ask: who or what is included and excluded, what is the story or message that results, and what is the impact of that underlying story on me and those around me? Decades of research on multicultural education, Ethnic Studies, whiteness studies, critical studies of race, and post-colonial studies<sup>2</sup> have detailed the Eurocentric, white-washed nature of traditional curriculum in U.S. public schools and the ways that such curriculum is incomplete in its exclusion of the experiences and perspectives of communities of color; is misleading in its privileging of whiteness as both normalized (equating Americanness with whiteness) and normative (equating whiteness with superiority); and is anti-democratic in its suppression of the central role of dissent, resistance, and revolution in the making of our country and the world. As a result, students are learning only a limited range of the knowledge and skills needed for critically understanding and questioning any topic at hand and then applying that to their lives in order to actively address injustices today.

For example, a recent study on how schools teach slavery found that such lessons are usually taught without adequate contextualization of broader historical, economic, political, and racial forces; and are largely centered on white experiences and perspectives, as well as on the South as exceptional, which together emphasize underlying narratives that our society has made much progress when it comes to race and racism.<sup>3</sup> Such lessons rarely connect with ongoing legacies of white supremacy and other injustices and their embeddedness through any number of laws and institutions, and as a result, many in the United States today have difficulty understanding, say, the demands of the Movement for Black Lives, the controversies over Confederate monuments and symbols, and the inadequacies of programs meant to alleviate the large and persistent wealth gap between African Americans and white Americans when they fail to tackle structural causes.

Some critics of Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education claim that these teach divisiveness and racism, but the critics fail to acknowledge how traditional curriculum already teaches about race, particularly in its normalizing of whiteness. Some critics claim that these forms of curriculum and pedagogy teach a limited or biased perspective of the world, but they fail to acknowledge how traditional curriculum effectively masks its own narrowness and bias, presented instead as neutral and foundational. Critics claim that Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education take time away from what schools should really be teaching, like the “three Rs” of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and/or the technical skills that presumably will help students to compete in the job market, but they fail to acknowledge how the traditional curriculum is failing to do precisely that, especially for students of color, as well as how the various disciplines can indeed be taught effectively through ethnic-studies and critical-multicultural lenses.

After all, while many educators and members of the broader public do not give much thought to whose perspectives have become standardized in the curriculum, many students of color do notice, especially regarding the absence of people like themselves, which contributes to their disengagement from school.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, textbooks have come to include a more diverse set of knowledges and perspectives, but a clear overall pattern persists of merely adding a few racial and ethnic minority contributions to the predominantly Euro-American-centered narrative. The use of scholarship by and about African Americans, Asian Americans and

Pacific Islanders, Chicana/Latinx, and Native Americans to frame subject matter is still very limited.<sup>5</sup> Such exclusion is reinforced by the standardization of curriculum that devalues not only multicultural content but also culturally responsive pedagogy that aims to increase critical consciousness and civic engagement.<sup>6</sup>

### Impact on Students of Color

All students are harmed by an incomplete, misleading, and anti-democratic curriculum. But students of color face additional burden as the target of such exclusion and misinformation. Not surprisingly, measures of academic achievement (how well they do in school), attainment (how far they progress), and even overall wellness (their health indicators) for students of color are much lower on average than for white students. These so-called “achievement gaps” or “opportunity gaps” have many causes and have existed since such measurements began. Initiatives like multicultural education and desegregation during the Civil Rights Movement helped to begin closing these gaps, but the gaps have since widened as we retreated from such initiatives while further narrowing and standardizing curriculum (among other moves to dismantle public schools), particularly in struggling schools with mostly students of color in high poverty areas.

*Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education directly counter the harmful aspects of traditional curriculum by centering what is too often pushed to the margins, namely, the knowledge and perspectives of historically marginalized groups, reflecting narratives and points of view rooted in their lived experiences and intellectual scholarship. Empirical research consistently finds that a rigorous and well-designed curriculum that is connected to students’ identities and lives, and taught in a culturally relevant manner with high academic expectations and concern for their livelihood, has a positive academic and attitudinal impact on them.*

In 2020, the most comprehensive review to date of the empirical research on the impact of Ethnic Studies on students of color was released.<sup>7</sup> According to this report, six out of seven studies found a positive link between Ethnic Studies programs that feature a curriculum designed and taught from the perspective of a historically marginalized group, and students’ ethnic identity development and sense of empowerment. Twelve out of fourteen studies found a positive impact of Ethnic Studies programs on students’ academic learning.

For example, Dee and Penner found that San Francisco Unified School District’s 9th grade Ethnic Studies program “increased ninth grade student attendance by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 grade points, and credits earned by 23” (p.217).<sup>8</sup> In a subsequent study, Bonilla, Dee, and Penner<sup>9</sup> found that students of color who took the Ethnic Studies course in 9th grade were more engaged in school going forward, more likely to graduate, and more likely to attend post-secondary education than comparable students who had not taken it. A study of Tucson’s Mexican American Studies program found that, although students entered the program with lower ninth- and tenth-grade GPAs and achievement-test scores than comparison-group students, by their twelfth-grade year students attained significantly higher rates of passing the high-stakes AIMS test and then graduating than their peers outside of the program, and the more Ethnic Studies courses that students took, the stronger the impact on their achievement.<sup>10</sup>

The review of research also found that Ethnic Studies have a positive impact on all students’ racial understanding, ability to see another perspective, empathy, and commitment to civic engagement. This is true particularly when the curriculum addresses the questions that students are already asking about race<sup>11</sup> and involves students in dialog and interaction across racial differences<sup>12</sup>.

### Classroom and Policy Implications for CA

California has the most diverse student population in the nation. As of school year 2016-2017 students in California schools were 54% Latino, 24% white, 9% Asian, 6% African American, 3% two or more races, 2% Filipino, 1% American Indian, and 1% Pacific Islander.<sup>13</sup> This rich diversity and the assets of our many racial and ethnic communities uniquely position California to lead the nation in improving public education through Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education. Towards this end, we recommend the following:

#### (1) Strengthen State and Local Policies on Ethnic Studies and Critical Multicultural Education

At the state level, California already has affirmed the value of Ethnic Studies in public schools through AB 101, enacted in 2021. AB 101 mandates that all high schools offer a one-semester course in Ethnic Studies starting in the 2025-2026 school year, with students in the class of 2030 being the first subject to completing at least one semester of Ethnic Studies as a graduation

requirement.<sup>14</sup> However, to date, there is no explicit policy that curriculum throughout the subject areas and grade levels be multicultural. *To state policy makers and agencies: we recommend building on AB 101 by mandating and supporting the development and offering of critical multicultural and Ethnic Studies curriculum in elementary and middle schools (in addition to high schools). We further recommend that AB 101 be funded by the state legislature as a part of its commitment to increasing the academic success of California's students, particularly those who historically have been underserved.*

At the same time, growing political pressure—especially around discussions of Palestine—has intensified efforts to undermine or eliminate Ethnic Studies altogether. Conservative organizations have increasingly targeted Ethnic Studies for including narratives about Palestinian history and human rights, framing these lessons as controversial. These attacks reflect a broader attempt to silence educators and censor critical conversations around justice and equity.

*To California Legislatures, district boards and leaders: we recommend ensuring that every district offers Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural curriculum with the necessary funding and resources in order for students to successfully complete Ethnic Studies courses for high-school graduation. Such curriculum should be more than one social studies course, and it should be across the disciplines and throughout the schooling years. The website [www.ethnicstudiesnow.com](http://www.ethnicstudiesnow.com) compiles resources to learn about the history of grassroots organizing for such district policies, as well as sample resolutions and communications.*

## **(2) Increase the Capacity of the Teaching Profession**

Students are not the only ones who need multicultural and Ethnic Studies; so, too, do we as educators, leaders, and other education personnel. Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education helps us to see the problems embedded in traditional curriculum, imagine a more democratic form of schooling, and learn more about the increasing diversity among our students and our communities. *To district and school leaders: we recommend supporting the ongoing professional development of all personnel and leaders in order to learn Ethnic Studies and critical multiculturalism, and learn how to transform their curriculum and pedagogy using such knowledge and approaches.*

Subsequently, educators and instructional support personnel then need to learn how to teach Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education, in various grade levels and content areas, drawing on knowledge from various racial and ethnic groups. And there is urgency because the increasing number of districts requiring Ethnic Studies coursework will demand a larger teaching force with the expertise and preparation—the knowledge, skills, and dispositions—needed to develop and teach such curriculum with culturally relevant instructional approaches. Such professional development can and should be ongoing throughout one's career, starting in pre-service preparation programs where prospective teachers should be taking Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education courses and where many other courses and experiences, from foundations and methods courses to placements and assessments, should incorporate and align with such curriculum.<sup>15</sup> All teachers need to be able to facilitate discussions and activities with students on controversial, uncomfortable, emotion-laden, hot-button issues, but also be able to critically self-reflect on their (the teachers') own perspectives, identities, and values, and how these have been shaped by racial ideologies. *To colleges and universities, and state agencies that concern teacher credentialing: we recommend centering Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education in pre-service teacher preparation programs and in ongoing professional development for practicing teachers, and critically reviewing certification requirements to make sure they support rather than hinder teachers' development of Ethnic Studies and multicultural content knowledge across the disciplines.*

A central challenge to teaching Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education is the pressure to meet a range of mandates, including teaching towards standards and related assessments. California has curriculum standards for various disciplines, including its recently overhauled social-studies standards that attend to multiculturalism much better than its earlier standards. In CARE-ED's first research brief<sup>16</sup>, we describe the concerns of many in the research community with both CCSS and SBAC. Nonetheless, in recognizing that curriculum standards still frame how many states, districts, schools, and individual teachers approach teaching and learning, that many teachers are mandated or pressured to teach towards state and/or national standards, and yet that no set of standards fully addresses the potential of Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural education, we wish to emphasize that standards are not necessarily incompatible with these. Although standards



and assessments contribute in some ways to the concerns about traditional curriculum outlined above, it is important to recognize that a curriculum that substantively reflects and engages diverse communities' knowledge and points of view can indeed be aligned with and build on the standards, if we know how to do so.<sup>17</sup> For example, the Math in a Cultural Context program connects the National Council for the Teaching of Mathematics Standards with Yup'ik (an Alaskan indigenous group) community knowledge, making math culturally relevant to Yup'ik students.<sup>18</sup> Key to connecting standards with Ethnic Studies and multicultural content knowledge is the identification of core concepts or "enduring understandings"<sup>19</sup> in the standards, of the knowledge base from various communities related to the core concepts, and of the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives brought by our students that relate to the specific concepts.<sup>20</sup> *To schools, districts, professional organizations, and universities: we recommend increasing the support offered to teachers to connect Ethnic Studies and critical multicultural content knowledge with mandated standards.*

Finally, we need to do more to diversify the teaching force, starting with the pipeline into teaching. Currently, California's teachers are 61% white, 21% Latino, 6% Asian, 4% African American, 2% Filipino, and 1% or less American Indian, and Pacific Islander, each.<sup>21</sup> Teachers of color generally bring a greater degree of multicultural knowledge, support for Ethnic Studies, and commitment to provide students of color with challenging curricula than do white teachers.<sup>22</sup> Although teacher preparation programs both locally and nationally continue to struggle to diversify their student enrollment, we can learn from innovative and successful models nationwide, and lessons learned therein.<sup>23</sup> *To districts, colleges and universities, professional organizations, and community-based organizations: we recommend working collectively to develop and invest in research-based strategies to diversify the teacher pipeline and the teaching profession, beginning with youth at the middle school level who may be interested in becoming teachers.*

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Contributing authors include Christine Sleeter, Kevin Kumashiro, Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath, Margarita Berta-Ávila, Miguel Zavala, Annamarie Francois, Nick Henning, and Michael Omi.

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**CARE-ED, the California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education, is a statewide collaborative of education researchers that aims to speak as educational researchers, collectively and publicly, and in solidarity with organizations and communities, to reframe the**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Strauss, V. (December 28, 2017). Federal judge tells Arizona it can't ban Mexican American studies. *Washington Post* [blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/12/28/federal-judge-tells-arizona-it-cant-ban-mexican-american-studies>.

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<sup>14</sup> See [https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202120220AB101](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB101).

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