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Ethnic Studies in San Francisco High Schools: A Model for the U.S.?

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In San Francisco, including ethnic studies as a high school humanities course embodies important steps towards transforming the curriculum in our public schools. In 2010, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) passed [Resolution 101-26A1](#) “In Support of an Ethnic Studies Program” to develop and implement a pilot ethnic studies curriculum. In 2015, the school board unanimously approved a [proposal](#) to make ethnic studies courses based on this curriculum available to students in all of San Francisco’s 17 high schools. The resulting ethnic studies courses allowed teachers at different schools to utilize and adapt the district-wide model. The courses are typically year-long, offered to ninth graders, and focus on five key themes: love and respect, hope, community, solidarity, and self-determination. Teachers build on these themes to explore systems of oppression and engage youth in the processes of naming, studying, and honoring the cultural legacies of their families and communities. Ethnic studies teachers collaborate across school sites and continue to develop the pedagogies and curriculum offered. Further, they work with district officials, researchers, and local politicians to advocate for ethnic studies as a required course for high school graduation.

Why require ethnic studies in public schools is an important and valid question. In a recent study—involving over 1400 students—teachers partnered with researchers from Stanford University and investigated the impact of student

participation in an ethnic studies course in SFUSD using a Regression Discontinuity Design. They found that students who took an ethnic studies course had an increase in attendance, grades, and credits earned (Dee & Penner, 2017). While these variables only touch upon the value of such courses, when these findings are combined with the powerful testimonials provided by students enrolled in ethnic studies courses, data suggest that spreading ethnic studies across the state as a required course is a key step to transforming curriculum. Through the grassroots efforts of teachers, the institutional support within districts like SFUSD, and continued organizing efforts by youth and politicians across the state, the movement towards required ethnic studies courses is gaining momentum.

As a state, California has been instrumental in this movement. For example, new teachers in San Jose are leading efforts to [formalize ethnic studies curriculum](#) in neighboring districts. And, in 2016 Governor Jerry Brown signed [Assembly Bill 2016](#) requiring the state to develop a model ethnic studies program to be implemented statewide by 2020. In June 2018, Assembly Bill 2772 – which would require one ethnic studies course for high school graduation for the roughly 1.7 million students in California high schools – passed the Senate Education Committee. Unfortunately, Governor Jerry Brown [vetoed](#) this Bill in September 2018 which impacts 11 school districts. However, some districts have taken matters in their own hands. For example, this past November, Santa Barbara voted to require ethnic studies coursework as a graduation prerequisite beginning in 2023.

Among other declarations about the importance of ethnic studies courses as a part of the quality education all Californians shall receive, the 2016 Bill declares, “There is a growing body of academic research that shows the importance of culturally meaningful and relevant curriculum.” Although AB 2772 only requires one ethnic studies course, this is an important step in the inclusion of multiple perspectives of history, in critically analyzing experiences and patterns of oppression, and honoring civil rights activists and leaders as essential aspects of student learning. Political action such as this shows the ways in which activities from local classrooms to signed legislation can work together and bring about strategic change – change that honors the diversity of cultural experiences that many Californians embody.

As a former public school teacher and current professor in teacher education, I believe California must lead the way towards a new approach to teaching and education that values students and teachers – and prioritizes their ethnic identities and the communities from which they come. As communities of Color continue to grow in California, it is imperative that we support initiatives to incentivize local

teachers to work in their own communities and engage young people in the critical thinking skills necessary to view school not as a place to memorize facts and take tests but as a community-embedded transformative context that brings about positive social change by re-imagining previously oppressive structures. The centering of ethnic studies is one way to embark on this quest—students and teachers alike are encouraged to honor and learn about their own cultural legacies, develop understandings across ethnic and racial categories, and critically engage in curriculum that contests the normalization of white, middle class values in our education system and in society at large.

The journey towards the transformation of our public schools – into educational spaces in which all students have equitable opportunities to succeed – is long and arduous. Fostering initiatives that value the lived experiences and cultural histories of communities of Color and prioritizing ethnic studies as an essential aspect of meaningful learning in school is vital as we move toward substantive change in our educational system and larger society. Although AB 2772 was vetoed, there is still an opportunity for ethnic studies courses to play a role in the transformation of public schools.

Noah Borrero is a professor of Teacher Education at USF where he works with pre-service teachers in the Urban Education and Social Justice Masters Program. His writing focuses on issues of equity and access in urban, K-12 public schools.

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