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# Implementing Ethnic Studies in California Public Schools

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## Abstract

This paper explores the fight for ethnic studies in California public schools from two angles: the legislative push for the state to take action, and grassroots organizing by community organizers, students, teachers, parents, and others. Considering the success of grassroots organizing in implementing ethnic studies programming on a district-by-district basis, in contrast with the stalling of legislative action, I propose a policy move that mobilizes the state to actively support local organizing within individual districts. California educational law mandates the deliberate engagement of targeted stakeholders in local school decision-making. Therefore, the state should fund and facilitate the regular convening of relevant grassroots actors to be able to form purposeful coalitions towards implementation. Building and sharing collective knowledge on the ethnic studies movement allows us to take advantage of existing knowledge to inform future practice as the movement works to expand in schools who might otherwise not have the resources on their own to begin.

*Keywords:* ethnic studies, California public schools

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## 1. The Problem of Implementing Ethnic Studies

Ethnic studies has become widely recognized for its educational and social benefits in providing students an academic program that centralizes the salience of race and the experiences of people of color (de los Ríos et al., 2015). The struggle towards ethnic studies is not a new one—student protests on the secondary school level have occurred since the period of the civil rights movement as a way to move away from race-neutral curricular content in U.S. schools (de los Ríos et al., 2015).

Ethnic studies courses are interdisciplinary and focus on the experiences of people of color, looking at identity-related issues and the histories of groups that have traditionally not been taught (Donald, 2016). What is especially distinctive in ethnic studies courses is that they largely “aim to enhance social and political awareness” by using culturally relevant pedagogy, or pedagogy that seeks to connect students’ out-of-school experiences with what happens inside the classroom (Wilson, 2016). In doing so, ethnic studies coursework engages with the idea that students need to “learn America’s inconvenient and necessary truths,” as sociology professor Camille Charles puts it (as cited in Anderson, 2016). Beyond simply studying histories of oppression, there is also a focus on people’s struggles and movements towards social justice (Dee & Penner 2016).

Ethnic studies’ reputation is not without controversy, and its reception varies from state to state. However, in California’s public schools, the fight for ethnic studies curriculum has been steadily moving towards mainstream incorporation by schools and the state. There has been a push on multiple levels for schools to offer courses that reflect the perspectives of California’s extremely diverse student populations. Various actors like lawmakers, teachers, administrators, and students have all been working to include ethnic studies in some way in schools. This has been met with moderate success, as there has been implementation of ethnic studies on a local, district-by-district basis, but it has failed to be broadly institutionalized on the state level.

In light of the state of California’s resistance to take on the project of defining and implementing ethnic studies curricula, I ask three broad questions regarding ethnic studies policy. In what way do we envision ethnic studies being institutionalized, either on the local or state level? What are the strategies that will bring us to the realization of that goal? And, lastly, what is the role of the state in backing ethnic studies? This policy proposal seeks to take into account both the reluctance of the state and the strength of grassroots mobilization by proposing a way to support the mobilization of local actors with the institutional backing of the state. I propose that by asking for the state of California’s financial and strategic support for existing grassroots movements, we would be able to engage in more rapid and politically viable avenues to pursue the goal of providing ethnic studies curriculum to students. Doing so would allow us to take advantage of the momentum of existing successful local movements, bypassing (for the moment) the slow bureaucracy of a reluctant state in favor of creating infrastructure that would

continuously support the efforts of enthusiastic stakeholders like students, teachers, and parents.

## **2. Background**

In this section, I briefly review the scholarship that illustrates the specific benefits of ethnic studies before reviewing the landscape of current ethnic studies implementation in California. I conclude by discussing why ethnic studies is urgently needed, particularly in light of California's specific demographics.

The justification that propels the fight for ethnic studies includes research that shows that a well-designed ethnic studies program has strong academic benefits in supporting critical thinking in all students (Sleeter, 2011). Further, there are definitive social benefits to engaging with ethnic studies content, as students often experience a personal change in the way they view and engage with the world because of the ideas they are exposed to (Sleeter, 2011). Students of color can also feel their racial or ethnic identity validated by the introduction of this content in schools that may have previously felt unengaging (Molina, 2014; Hay, 2015). There is a myriad of other benefits that cross social and academic borders. For instance, in a pilot program for at-risk youth, ethnic studies courses not only boost GPA, but also have helped reduce unexcused absences (Clark, 2015). These same students also performed better in math and science, leading researchers to note that overall, positive results to this magnitude are rarely if ever seen in other interventions with at-risk youth (Wilson, 2016).

Ethnic studies courses are already offered throughout the state of California, but only haphazardly. In 2013, approximately 100 schools offered over 400 ethnic studies courses, with a total enrollment of over 4300 students (Caesar, 2014). The practical aspect of offering ethnic studies can take a number of different forms, from a single, mandatory, all-encompassing ethnic studies course, to more specialized and elective niche courses in larger schools. For instance, Appendix A shows a current list of ethnic studies courses offered by the Los Angeles Unified School District that count towards its new ethnic studies graduation requirement. In this example, there are a range of levels available, up to Advanced Placement languages and cultures, as well as a diversity in the ethnic and racial groups being studied. In this district, ethnic studies is not merely incorporated into history curriculum, but it also exists

and is validated as a separate study of literatures, cultures, and languages as well.

The explicit focus on studying nonwhite histories is important because 75% of California's public student body is composed of students of color, a dynamic that should not be ignored, and further, should be actively reflected in curricula (see Appendix B). Though the lack of standardization is frustrating in that students are not benefitting equally from the same courses, it also presents an opening for intervention in which we are able to see the test-runs of how different districts approach the same goal of implementation.

### **3. Pre-Existing Policies & Actors**

In thinking about what infrastructure already exists in the ethnic studies movement, we can transition to examining the grassroots efforts occurring among invested local stakeholders like students, teachers, and community groups. Turning to some specific school districts as examples illustrates how communities push for and enact these policies, and also demonstrates how the logistics of implementation prove to be a significant challenge for many districts. In this section I also look at the failures in the legislative push for ethnic studies as a statewide effort.

Grassroots actors have been pushing school boards to consider further implementation of ethnic studies programs into individual school districts. This approach has been successful in that there have been eight school districts that, independent of the state, have created ethnic studies graduation requirements for their students. These school districts include some of the largest in California, like Los Angeles Unified, San Francisco Unified, Sacramento Unified, and Oakland Unified. In this section, I look at a few different examples—Santa Rosa City, San Francisco, and El Rancho Unified—to see more specifically how each district achieved implementation in their schools.

Santa Rosa City is one example of a district where the school board deliberated over the incorporation of ethnic studies as either an elective or a graduation requirement (Hay, 2015). A local community coalition organization had been pushing an ethnic studies proposal since March 2015, which meant engaging in talks with teachers and the school board over what form it could take, and how to develop an accompanying curriculum. It took the involvement of youth organizers and university professors to work out what the course could look like. A coordinator from Ethnic Studies Now (2015), a coalition of educators and civil rights groups, noted that the real challenge

was not in arguing for the salience of ethnic studies, but in working through the logistics of training teachers, deciding credit values, creating an implementation timeline, among other challenges. This example is reassuring in that the initial hurdle of having to argue for ethnic studies' importance is not the main issue in this district, but it also introduces other important problems about what it will take in practicality to bring this vision to life.

Turning to San Francisco, we can see an example of how some of the practical considerations might be addressed. In San Francisco Unified School District, a special coalition was formed, with input from 10 school teachers from the district, and faculty from San Francisco State University (Dee & Penner, 2016). This Ethnic Studies Curriculum Collective created course frameworks with examples from other districts, and met twice a month to critique plans and engage in teacher development. Thomas Dee and Emily Penner, the Stanford researchers who were part of this coalition, attributed the success of the program to teacher support, alongside with "careful planning, professional development, and teacher collaboration," (Wilson, 2016). That this program was so successful suggests that careful coalition-building should be integral to pursuing implementation, something that I work to address later on in my proposal.

A local report on implementation in El Rancho Unified School District reveals similar community responses and logistical considerations, followed by the decision to build a coalition as well. In this case, the requirement would replace a geography credit, but with the possibility of expanding into more electives (Molina, 2014). Of particular interest is that the district revealed that ethnic studies scholars had reached out to the school to help shape the curriculum, furthering my belief in the possibility of large-scale coalition-building.

As a contrast to the successes of the grassroots movement, I now turn to the state-level efforts, where there have been setbacks in the legislative push to support ethnic studies in California. In January 2015, Assemblyman Luis Alejo sent forward bill AB 101 that would require the state to create an advisory panel to develop an optional statewide model curriculum for ethnic studies. Though this bill passed in both the House and the Senate, the governor eventually vetoed it. In a brief memo, the governor argued that the State Department of Education's creation of a state-developed model ethnic studies curriculum would be a redundant process (Office of the Governor, 2015). The reason given was that another advisory board was already revising the general history-social studies standards to include "guidance on ethnic

studies courses” (Office of the Governor, 2015). It is not clear how the general history-social studies curriculum is being altered to include guidance from ethnic studies courses, or whether or not this change is in-depth enough to maintain the critical focus of ethnic studies. I would argue that this ambiguity is not surprising, as the state does not have a vested interest in maintaining the focus of ethnic studies on disrupting systems. Recognizing the limitations of what we can expect the state to do is key to my policy proposal, as I go on in the next section to argue that grassroots organizers are the best positioned to make change that is in step with the initial spirit of what ethnic studies is, as an educational but also political endeavor. These examples show that there are already alliances being built across different actors that suggest we may be able to bypass the state’s reluctance to take on more work.

#### **4. Policy Proposal**

The successes and potential logistical hurdles of district-level reform alongside the state’s unwillingness to engage with further ethnic studies curriculum guides the following policy proposal. In creating this policy, I centered two texts as direct influences: Laurel Weldon’s “The Advocacy State” (2011) and Edwin Mayorga’s “Critical Policy Studies Reading Guide.” Fundamentally, this proposal was inspired by the theories on state support of social movements outlined in Weldon’s chapter. Weldon argues that democratic states should actively provide openings for marginalized groups to independently mobilize (155). This could mean that the state provides cash support that ultimately supports the inclusion in policy-making of the diversity of opinions that may otherwise not have been able to sufficiently mobilize (in this case, parents and students) (157/7). Mayorga’s text mirrors this point in arguing for the deliberate recognition of who is involved and who is excluded in the formation of policy. Therefore, I purposefully center teacher knowledge, as well as making clear the inclusion of students, parents, and community organizations.

In brief, I argue in favor of continuing the grassroots efforts that support districts’ implementation of ethnic studies electives and graduation requirements, regardless of the state’s legislative veto and resistance. I assign the role of the state to financially support the facilitation of the ethnic studies movement, as well as to provide funds for the hiring and training of teachers and purchasing of appropriate course materials for districts with more

limited budgets. In this section I also address the need to address political viability and the need to keep the critical rigor of ethnic studies courses from becoming just more testable material to memorize and not deeply engage with.

In regards to the state's role, I draw from Weldon's theory to propose that the state would help facilitate the regular meeting of relevant actors that work to organize ethnic studies for their respective schools. These conferences would primarily give teachers and administrators the opportunity to exchange ideas and strategies on ethnic studies curriculum and implementation. Further, conferences would actively bring together interested students, parents, scholars, community organizations as key stakeholders. The role of the state therefore is in providing space for the process of building and borrowing from a collective knowledge to reach a common goal.

There is already precedence in California state law for engaging with the community in making district-wide decisions. Established in 2013–2014, California's school finance system, the Local Control Funding Formula, dictates that the state requires parent and community engagement in local budgeting decisions as an accountability measure. All local educational agencies have to develop three-year plans of the actions and expenditures they are undertaking to support positive student outcomes, also known as the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) (Developing a Quality Local Control, 2014). The first part of these mandatory plans is a section regarding Stakeholder Engagement, where schools must show how they are holding public meetings for transparency and input from relevant actors. "Teachers, principals, administrators, other school staff, local bargaining units, parents, and students must be consulted to inform the LCAP's development," (Making a Plan to Develop the LCAP, 2014). California's legal commitment to bringing together these voices supports the feasibility of the first part of my proposal, and the emphasis on local control brings me to the second.

The second part of facilitated convenings would be the allocation of funds for districts with less extensive budgets to support training and the hiring of teachers qualified to teach ethnic studies, and the purchasing of materials needed to support the teaching of ethnic studies. Logistical challenges seem to be a salient factor identified by many teachers and administrators who hope to offer ethnic studies courses. This fund is in direct response to concerns that some teachers would need training materials before they were ready to engage with additional content. The decision of how to allocate this pool of money would be a system where districts can submit proposals

for funds, to be reviewed by members of these regular conferences. Again, this type of proposal is in line with California's state laws regarding local control in education. "Although the California public schools system is under the policy direction of the Legislature, more local responsibility is legally granted to school districts and county education officials than to other government entities and officials" (Local Control-Districts and Counties, 2016). The precedence to grant more local autonomy on decisions works well with this proposal on shifting the labor of individual decision-making from the state to the actors closely invested in the issue.

I move now to the influence of Mayorga's text on purposefully engaging with all actors in policymaking. My focus is particularly on teacher knowledge, which would mean to look towards them as experts in what is occurring in classrooms, and as uniquely qualified to provide expertise in advising on the practicality of new potential measures or curricular efforts in the classroom. While there is an obvious role for outside experts, it is important that teachers' experiences in developing and teaching ethnic studies programs be continuously centered in creating new policies, rather than simply consulted at one stage of developing a policy report.

Maintaining a district-level policy focus allows local teachers and school administrators to consult with the expertise and experiences of other districts to adapt existing strategies and programs to the needs of their own schools. Recall earlier the worry regarding the logistics of implementation, like assigning credit value or finding teachers to teach content. If the state were to redirect its energy away from creating (already existing) curricula, then it could instead focus on supporting those who work with what grassroots actors argue is the real problem —training teachers and finding funding.

A major influence on this policy proposal was the importance of appropriately framing a recommendation to keep it politically viable to pass. It is necessary that the state be involved to provide support for ethnic studies implementation. However, what is challenging is the need to put policy recommendations into politically palatable terms so it will be supported, but not allowing its full co-optation by the state because of the possibility that a movement could lose "its critical edge" (Weldon, 2011, p. 155). Regarding the potential to lose the critical and questioning nature of ethnic studies, one concern I have about integration into general history curriculum is that the content will be reduced to test-knowledge, where students are only engaging with a new set of facts and figures to memorize for state exams. If schools had the flexibility to shape their own ethnic studies electives or requirements

based on the local demographics and histories of the communities the school is located in, outside of the scope of state-mandated curriculum, we might have the benefit of avoiding this reduction of the purpose of ethnic studies, which, if we recall our earlier definition, is about a critical understanding of race and ethnicity.

## **5. Evaluating Proposal and Moving it into Action**

In keeping with the spirit of centering local concerns and experiences, this policy would be considered successful if districts were able to develop action plans with timelines for implementing their choice of either ethnic studies electives or graduation requirements, depending on their circumstance. Some school districts that lack the existing ethnic studies infrastructure may set slower timelines, or may elect to only provide an elective first before graduation requirement.

In order to move this proposal into action, we need to secure the support of a number of actors. First and foremost, any plan of action must engage the state in supporting the advocacy work of ethnic studies actors. The state would not be willing to engage with policy that it believes is replicating existing programs. Therefore, in returning to Weldon's and Mayorga's concern about political feasibility, it will likely help to frame these conferences and additional funding in terms of teacher-training to teach ethnic studies content (considering that ethnic studies is already going into general curriculum), and in terms of improving academic experiences and achievements of students of color. Though we may have a goal of validating students' cultures and teaching race-based oppressions (Molina, 2014; Clark, 2015), it would be more politically palatable for organizers to frame ethnic studies implementation as preparation for college coursework or improving reading.

Beyond the state, we would need to secure the participation of the schools that have already implemented these programs, to ensure that they are able to effectively communicate their strategies and coursework. In both these "model" schools and in the participating schools, there must be teachers and administrators who are willing to step up as champion of ethnic studies.

Ultimately, a main priority of this proposal is creating infrastructure in a way that is politically palatable to be convincing to a wider audience. By framing this proposal carefully, we are able to create spaces for local actors invested in ethnic studies to move forward without having to wait for the state to catch up with these local movements. This flexibility is important in

ensuring that we take the best of what both the state and grassroots actors provide. The benefits of the former is in providing funding to facilitate convenings of what is the strength of local movements: dedicated players in the field of K–12 ethnic studies.

A recent convening in April 2016 at the American Education Research Association’s annual conference brought together a few of these key grass-root players in the fight for ethnic studies in both Arizona and California to discuss the state of ethnic studies today. What the speakers emphasized was that ethnic studies curricula has something that others don’t have: a social justice and activist agenda, one that it is ultimately about disrupting systems. In thinking about the future of ethnic studies, the speakers identified their central question as “How do we collectively organize?,” a question that guides this paper as well. In this paper, I began with the data that illustrates the effectiveness of ethnic studies coursework in promoting student attachment and engagement. Ultimately I aimed to bridge together grass-root organizers’ commitment to implementing curricula that promotes the disruption of systems with the state’s capacity for helping implement curricula that is politically divisive to many. In finding a commonality between the two: the commitment and desire to work with a range of stakeholders, I sought in this proposal to find a realistic way to define the role of the state in a way that is politically feasible and useful to support a movement that has been carried out since the 60’s and has no end in sight.

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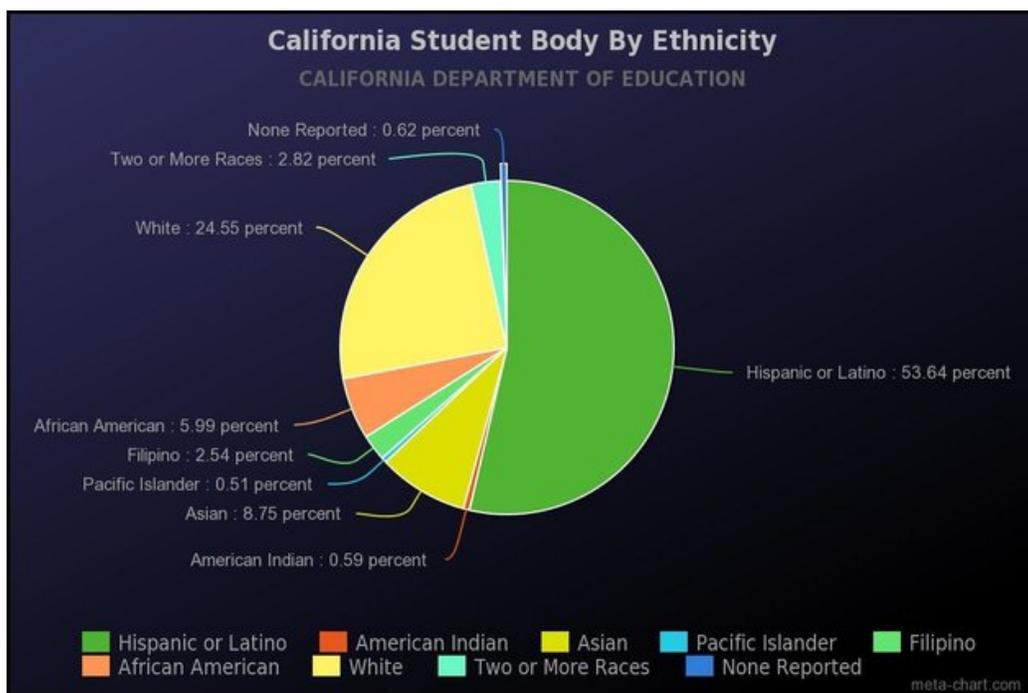
## Appendix A

Source: <http://home.lausd.net/apps/news/article/434255>

<b>Ethnic Studies Course</b>
Afro American History
Afro-American Literature
American Indian Studies
Asian Studies
H Mexican American Literature
History of the Middle East
Latin American Studies
Literature of Minorities in America
Mexican American Literature
Mexican American Studies
AP European History
AP Chinese Language and Culture
AP French Language and Culture
AP German Language and Culture
AP Italian Language and Culture
AP Japanese Language and Culture
AP Spanish Language and Culture
AP Spanish Literature and Culture

Current list of ethnic studies courses offered by the Los Angeles Unified School District that count towards its new ethnic studies graduation requirement

Appendix B



California's public student body



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### Author

Tania Uruchima '16 is a recent graduate with a Sociology/Anthropology & Educational Studies special major. She has an interest in studying how race and class intersect in issues of educational inequity for traditionally marginalized populations. She can be reached at [tania.uru@gmail.com](mailto:tania.uru@gmail.com).