



1/21/2021

Tony Thurmond
State Superintendent, CA Department of Education
1430 N Street
Sacramento, California 95814

Re: Palestinian Youth Movement's OPPOSITION to Current Revisions of CA ESMC

Dear Superintendent Thurmond,

On behalf of the Palestinian Youth Movement, I am writing in **opposition** to the **current version of the CA Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC)**, which does not live up to the values, principles and pedagogy of Ethnic Studies. Essential Ethnic Studies terminology, including the definition of race, has been eliminated, incorrectly defined, or moved to the footnotes. The decolonial, anti-racist, and liberatory focus of Ethnic Studies has been buried in an avalanche of vague and contradictory language. And Arab American Studies has been moved from its rightful place in Asian American/Pacific Islander Studies to an “interethnic bridge-building appendix.” It is unacceptable that our history and community has been relegated to an appendix.

As a youth organization with multiple chapters across California and North America, we work to empower new generations of Palestinian and Arab youth to take pride in and learn about their heritages. Ethnic Studies is foundational to the empowerment and education of our youth. It is abundantly clear that there is a glaring gap in educational programming which uplifts Arab American stories alongside other community narratives of the fight against historical and ongoing forms of oppression and racism. For too long, Arab youth have only learned about offensive and racist stereotypes about Arab communities, and have experienced a severe lack of education regarding their history.

Removing Arab American Studies from the core curriculum of Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies throughout the ESMC to tokenistic references in Appendices A & C communicates the deeply misinformed message that Arab American Studies is “optional” to a meaningful engagement with Ethnic Studies. Historically, Arab American Studies played an important role in expanding Ethnic Studies to include a greater transnational focus that has been central in the development of Ethnic Studies. SFSU has developed an Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas Studies program within the College of Ethnic Studies, as well as a Critical Pacific Islands and Oceania Studies minor, and has renamed Chicano Studies to Latina/Latino Studies. Rather than moving away from such momentous and significant developments by sidelining Arab American Studies to an afterthought in the appendix, **we urge the IQC to restore Arab-American Studies to its rightful place within Asian American Studies in the ESMC.**

Furthermore, the equating of all criticisms of Israel with anti-semitism by lobbyist groups is appallingly unnuanced and sweepingly reductive, and represents a grave threat to academic freedom. It is a tactic that has been repeatedly used to silence educators and students across the nation, and it sets an unacceptable precedent for other states' legislatures. Pro-Israel interest groups should not be able to override the work of Ethnic Studies Scholars in determining what should be incorporated



into the Ethnic Studies curriculum. **We urge the IQC to reject outdated definitions of anti-semitism that reductively equate criticism of Israel with anti-semitism.**

We further note that education in this country has frequently served as an arm of racist oppression and dispossession. From universities that directly profited from slavery, advanced medical knowledge through unethical experimentation on enslaved peoples, and established their territorial integrity through the ethnic cleansing of Indigenous peoples, to boarding schools furthering the cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples, schools and universities have long been sites of power and discipline posturing as isolated spheres safely removed from the political realities of this country. Ethnic Studies emerged as an important attempt to counteract this, showing that education itself is political, and thus redirecting the project of education to scrutinizing the workings of power and counteracting erasures and exclusions of all that have been its victims. For these reasons, **we urge the IQC to align all lesson plans to the guiding principles of ethnic studies, which are anti-racist, decolonial, and liberatory.** Doing anything otherwise, including relegating Arab American Studies to the appendix of the model ethnic studies curriculum, would be to deeply undermine the legacy of Ethnic Studies. It would be a searing betrayal of everything that activists, educators, and intellectuals of various backgrounds fought for for so long. Having our communities' histories and stories told will not right every wrong that has been done, but it would be a powerful first step towards challenging the erasure of our voices and the state-sanctioned repression that we have long faced due to belligerent US foreign policy.

We are also concerned that the Ethnic Studies educators who wrote the original ESMC have been sidelined, while politicians and lobbyists have wielded the most influence in what revisions get made. The sidelining of the original committee echoes an all-too-familiar experience amongst people of color of having our expertise denied.

We are echoing and uplifting the demands of the Save Arab American Studies Coalition, and taking the lead from Ethnic Studies educators:

- Re-empower experts in the field of Ethnic Studies to decide on revisions to the ESMC that align with the principles, values, and pedagogy of Ethnic Studies.
- Put Arab American Studies—including Palestine—back where it belongs, within the Asian American Studies section of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum.
- Approve an ESMC that is anti-racist, decolonial and liberatory—that centers the voices and experiences of communities of color and their struggles for liberation.

We call on the CA Department of Education to take immediate action to protect the integrity of Ethnic Studies. We want a curriculum that meets the needs of our youth and carries on the spirit of the original 1968 Third World Liberation Front and Black Student Union strikes that led to Ethnic Studies as a discipline. It is not too late to stand with us on the right side of history and support an ESMC that will educate, protect, and inspire all our children.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Celine Qussiny, Palestinian Youth Movement