



CALIFORNIA SCHOLARS FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM
<https://cascholars4academicfreedom.wordpress.com>

January 21, 2021

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

Re: California Scholars for Academic Freedom OPPOSITION to Current Revisions of CA ESMC

Dear Superintendent Thurmond,

On behalf of **California Scholars for Academic Freedom**, we write to protest 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. The current version eliminates, misstates, or marginalizes essential Ethnic Studies terminology, including the definition of race. It buries the decolonial, anti-racist, and liberatory focus of Ethnic Studies under an avalanche of vague and often contradictory language. The current version moves Arab American Studies from its rightful place in Asian American/Pacific Islander Studies to an “interethnic bridge-building appendix.” It fails to engage Palestine within a critical Ethnic Studies framework, relegating Arab history to an appendix.

A group of some 200 academics who teach in 20 California institutions, California Scholars for Academic Freedom responds to violations of academic freedom, including the post-9/11/2001 attacks on civil rights and those mounted against progressive educators by neo-conservatives. Scholars of Arab, Muslim or Middle Eastern descent and scholars researching and teaching about the Middle East, Arab and Muslim communities have suffered the most. Our goal of protecting California Scholars has grown in scope to include threats to academic freedom in the United States, and where relevant, across the globe. We believe that violations of academic freedom anywhere are threats to academic freedom everywhere.

We have become sorely aware of the campaign to repress and even silence meaningful expression of Palestinian experiences and aspirations for freedom in the classroom. Tactics include threats to the physical and emotional health of scholars, students, and community members who teach, study and write about Palestine.

Public education should remain a site for free intellectual exchange, addressing ideological and structural forms of oppression. As avid defenders of academic freedom, we focus on defending the rights of scholars, students and critical pedagogical approaches that come under attack.

The exclusion of Arab American Studies from the Asian American Studies Unit represents a deliberate attempt to silence communities struggling against systemic violence, exclusion, and oppression. Slashing the Palestine curriculum from the original draft of the Arab American Studies curriculum and then relegating Arab American Studies to an appendix insults the affected communities and constitutes a gross violation of academic freedom.

California Scholars for Academic Freedom is a group of scholars committed to academic freedom and rights to education of faculty and students not only in California and the United States but internationally as well. We recognize that violations of academic freedom anywhere are threats to academic freedom everywhere. California Scholars for Academic Freedom investigates legislative and administrative infringements on freedom of speech and assembly, and it raises the consciousness of politicians, university regents and administrators, faculty, students and the public at large through open letters, press releases, petitions, statements, and articles.

We urge the ESMC team to return to the original proposal of the Arab American Studies curriculum, housed under Asian American studies, and, more broadly, to defend the political integrity of Ethnic Studies.

It appears that the Ethnic Studies educators who wrote the original ESMC have been sidelined, while politicians and lobbyists have wielded the most influence on the revisions in the current version. The process repeats an all-too-familiar experience for people of color, one of having our expertise denied.

Taking the lead from Ethnic Studies educators, we support the demands of the Save Arab American Studies Coalition:

- 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 California Department of Education to take immediate action to protect the integrity of Ethnic Studies. We want and deserve 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. We urge you 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 consideration.

Signed on Behalf of California Scholars for Academic Freedom,

Lisa Rofel,
Professor Emerita, Department of Anthropology
University of California, Santa Cruz
LROFEL@ucsc.edu

Sondra Hale, Professor Emerita, Anthropology and Gender Studies,
University of California, Los Angeles
sonhale@ucla.edu

Rush Rehm
Professor, Theater and Performance Studies, and Classics
Stanford University
mrehm@stanford.edu

Stephen Roddy,
Professor, Department of Modern and Classical Languages
University of San Francisco
roddys@usfca.edu

