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# Governance Brief

## Ethnic Studies: School Board Member Attitudes and Recommendations for Implementation

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### Introduction

The United States is an exceptionally rich and diverse nation, and its prosperity is strongly connected to its diversity. For generations, people from all over the world have contributed their ingenuity, hard work, and capital to build new enterprises and expand existing ones. Essential to this diversity are the native people who were here before Europeans came, the Africans and their descendants who did not come here willingly, and immigrants from countless nations.

California epitomizes this culturally rich mix and this diversity is foundational to the state's economy, which is the nation's most prosperous and the fifth-largest in the world. Yet, when we look at curricula in classrooms across the state, a broad perspective including the history, languages, and accomplishments of people from all heritages has long been missing. This means that students of color do not see themselves fully represented in their school curriculum—and their peers do not learn the rich histories and contributions of these communities either. Ethnic Studies is a critical way to change that dynamic and make sure that all students see themselves and their stories reflected in the school curriculum.

### The Case for Ethnic Studies

Research has shown that students who do not see themselves and their families reflected in the curriculum may have a weaker connection to school or disengage from learning—factors associated with poor achievement and leaving school before graduation.<sup>1,2</sup> The good news is that this can be mitigated when students see themselves, their families, and their histories represented in a positive light in school curricula. The inclusion of the histories and contributions of people

#### In this brief you will find:

- » Background research on positive effects of Ethnic Studies on student outcomes
- » Results of a study on school board member attitudes about Ethnic Studies
- » Recommendations for school districts considering implementing Ethnic Studies
- » A link to resources for school districts considering implementing Ethnic Studies
- » Questions for board members to consider

from all backgrounds—including those who have traditionally been left out of school curricula—is the central goal of Ethnic Studies. Research has shown positive effects for students of color who take Ethnic Studies courses. These include:

- » Increased levels of academic success, civic participation, and academic engagement in school districts that have included Ethnic Studies as either an elective or graduation requirement;<sup>3,4</sup>
- » A consistent, significant, positive relationship between participation in an Ethnic Studies program and improved academic success and graduation rates;<sup>5</sup>
- » An increase in ninth-grade student attendance, grade point average, and number of credits earned for students who take Ethnic Studies courses;<sup>6</sup>

- » Higher graduation rates and increased likelihood of attending college for students who learned about race, racism, and cultural identity—features of Ethnic Studies curricula;<sup>7</sup> and
- » Higher scores for students of color on state reading, writing, and math exams for those enrolled in a social justice and Ethnic Studies project than their unenrolled peers.<sup>8</sup>

School boards can play a role in mitigating the negative consequences that may occur when students do not see themselves reflected in school curricula—and in promoting the potential for positive outcomes when they do. Board members are responsible for approving curricula for school districts and county offices of education. These choices reflect the vision and goals that boards have for the students they serve. By the curricular choices they make, boards can widen the perspectives and information reflected in the textbooks and materials their students use in the classroom.

Recent state legislation provides for the development of guidance which can be used by school districts and county offices of education that wish to offer Ethnic Studies. This legislation—passed and signed into law in 2016—requires that the state create a model Ethnic Studies curriculum for school districts that choose to offer these courses. The work to develop this curriculum, along with the public review and editing process, is underway. When complete, these guidelines will assist school districts and county offices of education (local educational agencies or LEAs) that choose to include Ethnic Studies in their course offerings.

## A Study of School Board Member Attitudes and Beliefs about Ethnic Studies

In the spring of 2017, a study was conducted to explore high school district board members’ perspectives on Ethnic Studies curricula and the extent to which these perspectives inform policy in their school districts. The study focused exclusively on high school district board members in California, given its unique status as a bellwether state and the birthplace of Ethnic Studies. These trustees were CSBA members drawn from the Association’s database.

The study, conducted by the author of this brief as part of his doctoral dissertation research, was conducted in two phases: a survey, which gathered quantitative information about attitudes toward Ethnic Studies and a set of semi-standardized interviews that generated qualitative data from a sample of participants. Almost 100 board members completed the survey (26.5 percent response rate).

Of the board members who indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview, 11 were chosen. These 11 were selected with a range of perspectives toward Ethnic Studies, as well as varied geographic location, gender, ethnicity, and length of school board service.

## Most School Board Members Support Ethnic Studies as an Elective

The findings revealed that most of the surveyed school board members were supportive of Ethnic Studies as an elective, but less supportive of it as a graduation requirement. Most of those who were supportive had taken Ethnic Studies themselves at some point. The survey scale placed board member perspectives on a continuum from complete opposition to complete support. Board members identified as change agents (those in complete support, based on the survey results) had already taken steps to establish Ethnic Studies in their districts and were working to alter school district culture to further advance the program.

During follow-up interviews, participants were asked to identify why they supported or opposed Ethnic Studies. The majority of supporters cited five distinct yet interrelated reasons for support, including that they promote:

- » Inclusivity of other cultures;
- » Global citizenship;
- » Enhanced self-awareness;
- » Understanding of societal power dynamics; and
- » Improved academic performance.

The interviewed board members who were less supportive of Ethnic Studies expressed concern that adoption could be seen as:

- » Limiting the course schedule;
- » Being divisive/exclusive;
- » Eroding local control if mandated;
- » Contrary to American culture; and
- » Not defined well.

These potential negatives can be mitigated through sensitive and inclusive planning. When an LEA develops a strategy for Ethnic Studies, it should reflect local demographics and conditions, and craft a customized implementation which reinforces the idea that adoption is a byproduct of local choice rather than a state mandate. LEAs should also be sure to highlight the contributions of multiple cultures and their relationship and contributions to the overall American fabric, while emphasizing that all

students and all Americans benefit from a richer understanding of the nation's diverse history and peoples.

Concerns about racism or race-related dynamics was another issue that surfaced in comments of board members who were opposed to Ethnic Studies. These concerns were also expressed by board members who had advocated for Ethnic Studies and had encountered opposition. Comments about experiences with this issue from the latter group focused on colleagues' reluctance and fear of honest dialogue on race; an attitude that racism is no longer a concern in the U.S.; and encounters with blatant or subtle racism in their districts or in their communities.

In an analysis of the characteristics of surveyed board members, their support or opposition to Ethnic Studies did not seem to be affected by their gender, educational attainment, number of languages spoken, or school district demographic description.

## How to Encourage Consideration of Ethnic Studies at the Local Level

When asked what might encourage a positive attitude toward Ethnic Studies and openness to the possible inclusion of these courses in the local curriculum, survey participants cited several strategies that were the most and least likely to be effective in advocating for Ethnic Studies.

The top five strategies that board members recommended to encourage support for Ethnic Studies were:

- » Citing studies that show how Ethnic Studies helps students develop skills that contribute to academic success;
- » Fostering inclusivity through building awareness of broad, balanced alternative histories and different cultures;
- » Demonstrating how A through G requirements (those required for admission to University of California and California State University schools) can be addressed by Ethnic Studies courses;
- » Sharing templates of existing courses with other high school districts; and
- » Starting with Ethnic Studies as an elective before moving toward implementation as a graduation requirement.

Board members also addressed reasons why Ethnic Studies might be seen as less appealing. They noted that when considering Ethnic Studies as a possible promising practice

for encouraging student engagement and achievement, the following approaches should be avoided:

- » Overemphasizing differences across race and ethnicity;
- » Mandating Ethnic Studies, which erodes local control;
- » Exclusion or separation of groups;
- » Making false assumptions about individuals or groups; and
- » Blaming certain groups or individuals.

Some of the concerns expressed by board members related to Ethnic Studies are precisely why these courses have potential for students and the school systems that serve them. Geneva Gay, an expert in culturally responsive teaching, noted: "Unfamiliar groups can produce anxieties, prejudices, and racist behaviors among those who do not understand the newcomers or who perceive them as threats to their safety and security." This is why it is essential to "develop[ing] institutional programs and practices [that can] respond positively and constructively to diversity."<sup>9</sup>

## Recommendations Based on Board Member Survey and Interview Responses

In these surveys and interviews, board members expressed their ideas about how to learn from students and local communities about their views of Ethnic Studies, how to build support for the program, and how to ensure the quality and effectiveness of these courses and curricula. Their suggestions included:

### Listen to students

Inviting students to provide testimony on the benefits of Ethnic Studies can increase the comfort level for those who may not be as familiar with it. There is additional intrinsic value in placing students at the center of an advocacy strategy, since the process of taking an Ethnic Studies course, reflecting on growth, preparing remarks, presenting in front of others, and answering questions can be empowering for students.

### Embrace collaboration

For Ethnic Studies programs to persist longer than the terms of individual board members, board members need to work with their superintendents to engage with a variety of local entities and individuals. One board member described this process as meeting with the superintendent, creating a taskforce charged with exploring Ethnic Studies,

and soliciting feedback from the community. These steps are supported by the research of Paolo Freire, a world-renowned leader in community involvement and action, on what he called the co-participation process in which educators work closely with communities. The dialogue that results from this co-participation helps elevate the community's awareness of Ethnic Studies.<sup>10</sup>

### **Foster community dialogue**

Robust dialogue can identify common ground and contribute to a well-informed policy. Since dialogue is central to overcoming the fear that can be associated with opposition to Ethnic Studies, it is important that board members urge superintendents to host community dialogues with teachers, students, parents, and other interested stakeholders. California school districts and county offices of education have structured opportunities to host such dialogues as part of regular community input sessions that are part of the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) development process.

### **Disseminate literature regarding Ethnic Studies curricula**

Given that the strategies identified as most effective include citing research, highlighting academic benefits, and publicizing best practices, it would be helpful for statewide educational organizations to solicit, publish, and distribute Ethnic Studies materials to school districts, county offices of education, educational nonprofits, and elected officials. This widespread distribution, particularly to school board members, increases awareness of Ethnic Studies, understanding of its benefits, and appreciation for models of existing Ethnic Studies electives or graduation requirements that have contributed to student success.

### **Create an Ethnic Studies clearinghouse**

A statewide clearinghouse that could be accessed by school districts with Ethnic Studies programs would enable districts to research current practices, learn about the benefits to students, and make resources available for school board members, superintendents, administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students.

### **Employ appropriate policy drivers**

As policymakers, board members can use proven strategies for positive educational change, such as capacity building, collaboration, and research-based pedagogy.<sup>11</sup> Understanding local district culture and identifying situations that could lend themselves to advancing Ethnic Studies can foster the identification and use of appropriate policies.

Board members can promote the inclusion of the stories of all peoples in classroom curricula by working together to promote Ethnic Studies policies that work for their LEAs.

## **Future Steps**

The findings of this study highlight the importance of Ethnic Studies as a way to support the increased academic achievement of all students. Board members committed to implementing Ethnic Studies curricula can discuss the benefits with colleagues and advocate for its implementation. This dialogue is especially important given that a lack of understanding of Ethnic Studies and concerns of what it might be and do was a common factor among those who were opposed to the concept. Involving a wide variety of community members in a collective effort to build Ethnic Studies programs can encourage high school districts to keep an open mind, and if necessary, slowly roll out classes. Another effective strategy is to introduce an Ethnic Studies pilot program at one high school site and track results to help supporters make the case for replication elsewhere.

School board members who are interested in learning how to best implement Ethnic Studies curricula should consider several factors. Regardless of whether board members decide to approve a single elective or a graduation requirement, the common ingredient needed is an instructor with the interest in developing curricula and the experience or skills to teach that curricula. Board members can read Geneva Gay's research to learn how to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy across various disciplines.

Furthermore, school board members can consult school districts in California that have already adopted Ethnic Studies electives or graduation requirements. These districts can offer guidance on professional development, instructional strategies, course curricula, and other resources crucial to Ethnic Studies. One district doing this work is the El Rancho Unified School District (ERUSD) in the city of Pico Rivera. In 2014, ERUSD became the first school district in the nation to mandate Ethnic Studies as a high school graduation requirement. Each year, ERUSD hosts open houses for school districts interested in learning more about the impact of Ethnic Studies on students and about how district officials designed and implemented the requirement. For a list of school districts that have passed Ethnic Studies graduation requirements, board members can visit the Ethnic Studies Now Coalition website at [www.ethnicstudiesnow.com](http://www.ethnicstudiesnow.com).

## Conclusion

Ethnic Studies promotes a history that includes all peoples and can open doors to new possibilities and awaken minds to histories and accomplishments of those from their own backgrounds—as well as others—they did not know existed. The enduring influence of Ethnic Studies was documented in the responses of board members who participated in the 2017 study, who described how Ethnic Studies inspired them to run for office, pursue higher education, and share what they had learned with their children and grandchildren.

### Questions for Board Members

1. How can Ethnic Studies be part of a strategy to increase the engagement of students of color in your LEA?
2. What are the views of your fellow board members, staff, and other stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, community members) about Ethnic Studies?
3. Which teachers in your LEA, if any, have the capability and desire to teach Ethnic Studies?
4. What steps can your board take to explore adopting (or expanding) Ethnic Studies in your LEA?

- 3 Dee, T., & Penner, E. (2016). *The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Working paper 21865. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21865>.
- 4 See Endnote 2.
- 5 Cabrera, N. L., Milem, J. F., & Marx, R. W. (2012). *An empirical analysis of the effects of Mexican American studies participation on student achievement within Tucson Unified School District*. Tucson, AZ: Report submitted to the College of Education, University of Arizona.
- 6 See Endnote 3.
- 7 See Endnote 2.
- 8 Cammarota, J., & Romero, A. (2014). *Raza studies: The public option for educational revolution*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- 9 Gay, G. (2004). The importance of multicultural education. *Educational Leadership*, 61(4), 30–35.
- 10 Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- 11 Fullan, M. (2016). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Columbia, NY: Teachers College Press.

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## Resources

For a list of school districts that have passed Ethnic Studies graduation requirements, board members can visit the Ethnic Studies Now Coalition website at [www.ethnicstudiesnow.com](http://www.ethnicstudiesnow.com).

For CSBA Gamut subscribers, the following sample policies and administrative regulations can be accessed through [gamutonline.net](http://gamutonline.net):

- » BP 6142.94 - Social Sciences Instruction
- » AR 6143 - Courses of Study

## Endnotes

- 1 Leonardo Z. & Grubb, W. N. (2013). *Education and racism: A primer on issues and dilemmas*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- 2 Sleeter, C. E. (2011). *The academic and social value of ethnic studies: A research review*. Washington, DC: National Education Association Research Department. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED521869>.