

ETHNIC STUDIES POLICY BRIEF

Overview

This Board Special Full Report will briefly define Ethnic Studies and outline its history in the United States. It will also specify the ongoing efforts in Oakland to provide students with greater access to Ethnic Studies in alignment with the Oakland Unified School District's strategic plan.

Definition of Ethnic Studies

At its core, Ethnic Studies speaks to both pedagogy and content. Ethnic Studies is a human-centered pedagogy that engenders teachers to develop trusting relationships with their students grounded in a deep appreciation and understanding of their lives, experiences, and cultures. Ethnic Studies provides engaging content that supports the identity development of students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds by drawing from their experiences, exposing them to new horizons, and fostering their ability to reflect critically and take action in the community. Christine Sleeter, one leading scholar, defines Ethnic Studies by saying, it "includes units of study, courses or programs that are centered on the knowledge and perspectives of an ethnic or racial group, reflecting narratives and

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points of view rooted in that group's lived experiences and intellectual scholarship" (vii).

While her definition primarily addresses the approach that Ethnic Studies scholars take to the content, we, in Oakland Unified School District, are also equally concerned with the pedagogical approaches that shape the relationships between adults and students in school.

History of Ethnic Studies

A defining characteristic of life in the United States is that it has been structured to provide political, social, economic, and other advantages to white people based on socially constructed notions of race-based superiority and inferiority. It is important to note that people of color have always resisted these structures and their effect on their lives and communities. The decade of the 1960's were particularly marked by a growing consciousness and activism among people of color to demand that the oppressive institutions change. Schools and their Eurocentric curriculum and practices were one key site of contestation.

San Francisco State University was on the leading edge of the movement to address racist practices in schools. The Black Student Union issued demands to increase the recruitment of students of color, increase the hiring of faculty of color, and address the need for students of color to learn about their history on their terms. Students from the Asian American Political Alliance, Mexican American Students Confederation, Pilipino

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American Collegiate Endeavor, and Native American Students Union joined their Black peers to demand the creation of a School of Ethnic Studies.

After 5 months of confrontations on campus, including the nation's longest student strike, the students and administration settled with the administration agreeing to the students' demands to open a School of Ethnic Studies including the establishment of four departments - American Indian Studies, Asian American Studies, Black Studies, and La Raza Studies. The students also won changes in enrollment policies to bring more students of color on campus and the hiring of more faculty of color. While SFSU still has the only College of Ethnic Studies in the country, the Ethnic Studies movement has impacted nearly every field of study by pushing other disciplines to consider the role of race and power in that field. Most students attending any college or university in this country will have the opportunity to take an Ethnic Studies course or one that explicitly examines the discipline with a lens of race (Hu-DeHart, 51).

Ethnic Studies in Oakland

Educators in Oakland have made numerous efforts to address the Eurocentric nature of the K-12 curriculum. Some recent examples include trying to incorporate an Afrocentric curriculum at McClymonds High School in the 1990s (Ginwright) and developing a 9th Grade Multicultural Studies curriculum in the early 2000's. In 2010, there was a resurgence of student activism led by community organizations like Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL). This was around the time that the state of

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Arizona passed legislation that led to the closure of the Raza Studies program in Tucson.

Teachers in Oakland were inspired by the youth to form a taskforce with the goal of supporting the growth and institutionalization of Ethnic Studies in OUSD. One major focus of that group's efforts was to develop a draft framework for Ethnic Studies. The group also supported the implementation of the first required Ethnic Studies class at Castlemont High School that all incoming 9th graders continue to take. This class then became an example for other educators, providing curriculum materials and inspiration for Ethnic Studies classes to start at Coliseum College Preparatory Academy and Life Academy.

In 2015-16, a team of K-12 teachers from various disciplines will convene to revise the 2011 framework for Ethnic Studies in OUSD and to develop their capacity as key leaders in this work with their colleagues. Over the year, these teachers will engage with academics, scholars, and practitioners in shaping this framework, which teachers will then be able to use to modify and develop Ethnic Studies curricula and to support the measurement and assessment of the effectiveness of these courses. In 2016-17, a group of high school teachers will participate in a two-year pilot study where they implement curricula that have been developed in alignment to this framework. Throughout this process, the district will continue to support teachers through professional learning opportunities that focus on reflection and collaboration. By 2018-19, OUSD will have put in the necessary supports and conditions so that all high schools can offer an Ethnic Studies class aligned to the district framework.

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Pathway to Excellence

The Pathway to Excellence, the strategic plan for Oakland Unified School District, outlines the district's foundational principles and key priorities. Priority 3 is Quality Community Schools, and one of the key strategies for achieving quality community schools is equity-based education. Ethnic Studies is at the heart of an equity-based education because it has been shown to have positive social and academic impacts on all students. The research has shown that these impacts are true both in settings that target a particular constituency of students and in diverse settings that include White students (Sleeter, 19). Ethnic Studies then is a critical and vital practice to achieve any equity-based goals in the K-12 system in Oakland.

Ethnic Studies educators possess a deep belief in the humanity of each and every student. It follows that an Ethnic Studies classroom hones in on the students' lives and experiences, empowers students to research the needs of their communities, and develops students' ability to effect positive change in the world. In this sense, Ethnic Studies has the potential to transform the pedagogy and the content of all classes in OUSD so that all of our students thrive.

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References

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Sleeter, C. E. "The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies: A Research Review." *National Education Association*: 2011: 1-27. Print.

OUSD documents

[2011 Ethnic Studies Framework](#)