

# Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Ethnic Studies Have Got to Go

*Jonathan Butcher and Mike Gonzalez*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

State lawmakers should replace ethnic studies as a subject in K-12 classes and state universities with history and civics instruction focused on historical facts.

State lawmakers and K-12 and postsecondary officials should prohibit the use of taxpayer spending on DEI offices, staff, and programs at public schools.

State laws should prohibit K-12 teachers and students from being compelled to profess any idea, especially ideas that violate state and federal civil rights laws.

State lawmakers and education officials should replace ethnic studies as a subject in public K-12 classes and state universities with history and civics instruction focused on historical facts, lessons on citizenship, the mechanics of government, and rights under law. Ethnic studies does not include these crucial issue areas, nor is ethnic studies a benign discipline that seeks to bring Americans together. The subject is not intended to make Americans understand each other better nor equip students to be participating members of society when they graduate. Rather, ethnic studies is a radical field based on Marxist ideas that teaches students to prioritize their racial, ethnic, sexual, or “gender” identities (known as identity politics) over a shared national allegiance and national identity. One need only look at the bill mandating that ethnic studies be embedded into academic standards,

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which Minnesota Governor Tim Walz (D), Vice President Kamala Harris’s running mate in the 2024 presidential election, signed into law in 2023, one of the most radical in the nation, discussed below.

Americans need not agree on every policy issue, and elections give Americans the chance to exercise their right to select different candidates for office. Yet Americans should agree that their nation fundamentally respects individual rights and appreciates the sacrifice of those who defended this nation over the years to protect the freedoms that all Americans enjoy today. Ethnic studies does not advance these basic ideas, but, instead, it militates against them. Ethnic studies is a “critical” field, which means that ethnic studies focuses on societal conceptual superstructures and how to undermine them through critique. It analyzes power imbalances and seeks political changes. These are all Marxist notions used to deconstruct American society. Ethnic studies advocates designed their content to “decolonize” social studies and “area studies” (a subfield of study within social studies), in particular.

“Decolonization” is another Marxist concept that calls for revolution, either through violence or by attempting to replace one set of beliefs with another, making ethnic studies an academic discipline rooted in physical or cultural aggression—not the transmission or exploration of historical names, dates, ideas, and places.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnic studies’ most committed proponents do not hide this agenda. Teachers, academics, and activists developed ethnic studies during the turbulent period of the 1960s, amidst the racial, sexual, political, and military changes that reshaped the nation during this decade. One advocate, University of California-Riverside professor Richard F. Lowry, describes the history of ethnic studies saying,

It is in this context of racial, generational, and gender awareness that individuals and groups of activists began to seek the institutionalization of alternative, radical, and nontraditional curricula in the colleges through the struggle for Black studies, Chicano studies, American Indian studies, Asian studies, and women’s studies courses, programs, and departments.<sup>2</sup>

Notice Lowry’s mention of “radical” ideas and the propensity to “struggle,” along with mention of a list of identity groupings based on immutable characteristics. Writing in *The New York Times* in 2021, Bret Stephens put it this way:

What is ethnic studies? Contrary to first impressions, it is not multiculturalism. It is not a way of exploring, much less celebrating, America’s pluralistic society. It is an

assault on it... Ethnic studies is less an academic discipline than it is the recruiting arm of a radical ideological movement masquerading as mainstream pedagogy.<sup>3</sup>

For the past half century, ethnic studies has followed its founding model faithfully, which is why this *Backgrounders* provides case studies from several key states. First is California, not because the Golden State seems open to policy remedies, but precisely because, just as it did in 1969, California continues to show the rest of the country just how divisive ethnic studies is by design. Next is Minnesota, where lawmakers have also adopted ethnic studies standards and requirements for K–12 schools.

Lawmakers in many other states with right-of-center legislative offices, such as Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Utah, have adopted ethnic studies programs or briefly mention ethnic studies in their social studies standards but officials in some of these states provide content and standards focused on liberty, rights, and representative government—in stark contrast to California and Minnesota.

This *Backgrounders* provides a history of ethnic studies in academia, with all its revolutionary roots. It then offers a summary of state policies on ethnic studies and reviews certain states' standards and content. Finally, it provides policy recommendations for state lawmakers and education officials, such as school board leaders, on how to offer students history and civic instruction without the racial discrimination and trappings of identity politics found in ethnic studies. America's continuation as a nation of and for a people—Americans—whose common sense of purpose allows self-governance, depends on ridding schools of the radical, violence-inducing content taught in ethnic studies courses.

## Ethnic Studies: A History

One of the eight demands, from a list of 10, to which Rutgers University conceded after pro-Hamas protestors set up an encampment on campus in early May 2024, was the creation of “a center for Palestine Studies” and the establishment of “a path to departmentalization for Middle East Studies.”<sup>4</sup> This abject capitulation on the part of the leadership of this New Jersey public university will only further fuel the virulent antisemitism rampant on college campuses today.<sup>5</sup> It is also part of a historical pattern. The genesis of ethnic studies starts with craven university administrators giving in to acts of violence and demands from protestors willing to use violence to get their way.

As with many of the theories and disciplines created purposely to corrode the bonds that tie the nation together, ethnic studies' roots go back to

the 1960s, an era when objective, transcendental truth was coming under sustained attack. Too many of the radical students at the time, and the professors and philosophers whose views affected them, interpreted the physical world through a conceptual superstructure that is established by the rich and powerful so that they can remain rich and powerful.<sup>6</sup> These ideas underpinned the cultural application of Marxism in the 1920s and 1930s known as critical theory. The American, and in general Western, interpretation of reality and the natural world was just one of many options, and very much not the best, according to critical theorists.

Out of that ideological sludge came ethnic studies. “Ethnic studies programs, which grew out of student and community grassroots movements, challenge the prevailing academic power structure and the Eurocentric curricula of our colleges and universities. These insurgent programs had a subversive agenda from the outset,” explained Evelyn Hu-DeHart, director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America at Brown University. The new field was created to challenge “Western imperialism and Eurocentrism, along with their claims to objectivity and universalism.”<sup>7</sup>

Academics first designed ethnic studies programs for higher education, and the material was meant to replace “area studies” (regional study programs).<sup>8</sup> Educators developed “regional studies” after World War II in an effort to expand social studies education to maintain humanities’ relevance as a field of academic instruction and better inform American students about the coming challenges from communism.<sup>9</sup>

Area studies programs in the US came into being to serve the globalization of America at mid-century, when the allocation of federal funds sought to increase American knowledge of world areas to improve the global conduct of US policy. National interests propelled area studies and globalization; they all supported one another,

wrote David Ludden of the University of Pennsylvania in 1997. Area studies are interdisciplinary departments or programs that focus on geographical regions, such as Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Area studies mushroomed at universities in the mid-20th century, as Americans saw themselves increasingly thrust into global leadership.

Ludden explains that other national leaders better understood America’s role in the world during and after World War II: “This ‘national’ included government, business, foundations, and universities, which all began to globalize their understanding of America’s world more strenuously after December 6, 1941,” unintentionally reminding us how government,

businesses, foundations and universities in mid-century all pitched in for a joint national effort in the conflict. Ludden says that “[g]lobal America had previously centered on Europe, though it also included East Asia and Latin America, and to a much lesser extent, territories of British and French imperialism in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. After 1945, a new global US view of the world spawned area studies.”<sup>10</sup>

This re-focusing on the world region by region was not entirely new. Global trade and colonialism in the 19th century had impelled businessmen, statesmen, and scholars in France, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, Belgium and the Netherlands, to investigate the histories and local practices of non-European lands. Earlier, Spain’s involvement with Ibero-America had led to a focus on global economics in such academic centers as the ancient University of Salamanca. The 1960s was a pivotal decade, however. The radicalization of students in the U.S. in the 1960s had mostly domestic causes but was also intrinsically tied to the decolonization process taking place outside the United States. By definition, decolonization’s theater or operation was what, in a Cold War context, came to be known as the third world. (A term at first meant to separate certain parts of the world from the capitalist and communist countries, but which then took on a pejorative meaning of its own because it soon became associated with poverty.)

Ethnic studies advocates rejected the intent of area studies, citing “American imperialism” and arguing that area studies were an attempt to “uphold U.S. hegemony in regions in which the U.S. had heavy economic and political investments.”<sup>11</sup> The first College of Ethnic Studies opened its doors in 1969 at San Francisco State University (SFSU), after administrators caved in to violent demonstrators demanding school officials create such a department. From the start, it was clear that this discipline was a revolutionary tool. The coalition that led the marches was itself named the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). Jason Ferreira, today chair of the Department of Race and Resistance Studies at SFSU’s College of Ethnic Studies—itsself a name that leaves nothing to the imagination—explained that the coalition “was formed based on the political principle of Third World solidarity, which is animating Cuba, Algeria, Tanzania and Vietnam. So it’s no coincidence that they called themselves the TWLF—like the National Liberation Front in Vietnam.”<sup>12</sup>

In the classic civil rights history *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, historian C. Vann Woodward explains that Ivy League institutions increasingly added ethnic studies programs in the 1960s as school administrators enrolled more black students over the course of the civil rights movement. Yet the classes were not without a radical bent—revolutionary, even. The new courses’ “avowed purpose in some instances was to revolutionize the

black students and train cadres of revolutionists,” Woodward says.<sup>13</sup> Black Panther leader Stokely Carmichael put it succinctly when he said “the job of the black educator is to train his people how to dismantle America, how to destroy it.”<sup>14</sup> His communist comrade Angela Davis also drove the point home decades later when, addressing a large audience of students at California State University at Los Angeles in 2016, she said that black studies are “the intellectual arm of the revolution.” Earlier in her talk, she reminded the students that “I have always been a communist,”<sup>15</sup> a statement that earned her a rapturous reception.

“The People of Color Power movements that emerged in the 1960s,” reads one description of ethnic studies cited by California’s Department of Education in that agency’s model curriculum, “are key examples of how race has also been embraced and leveraged in the resistance against racism; they are the movements that Ethnic studies rose from.”<sup>16</sup> Yet as the examples provided below will demonstrate, ethnic studies is not an effort to eradicate racism, and instead represents ideas and content that elevate totalitarian political systems over representative systems.

Those activists and students who so vociferously advocated for ethnic studies in the late 1960s were not just unconcerned with America’s national interests or in propelling her global leadership; they actively opposed what America was doing in the world. They wanted to see America defeated, from Latin America to Vietnam. This generation of American intellectuals and students was not the first to wish their nation’s defeat in foreign ventures—this had happened from the Mexican War of 1848 to World War I—but none had ever gained the cultural power that the radical students of the 1960s were able to achieve.

Ethnic studies was the discipline that fit the moment and became an important strategy for this generation of radicals’ grab for power. Not for nothing did the Black Panther Party make the following demand point No. 5 in its 10-point Program: “We Want Education for Our People That Exposes The True Nature Of This Decadent American Society.”<sup>17</sup> In 1968, J. Edgar Hoover, the then head of the FBI, called the Black Panthers “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.... Schooled in the Marxist–Leninist ideology and the teaching of Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-tung, its members have perpetrated numerous assaults on police officers and have engaged in violent confrontations with police throughout the country.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the Black Panthers themselves came directly from one of the early proto-ethnic studies endeavors founded at the University of California’s Berkeley campus in the early 1960s, an informal study group that called itself the Afro-American Association (AAA).<sup>19</sup> The impact of this little-known group on American history cannot be overestimated. It was at one its sessions

that Black Panthers founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale first met, as was the case with another consequential couple, Vice President Kamala Harris's parents, Donald Harris and Shyamala Gopalan, two Berkeley students who also first met at one of the AAA sessions.<sup>20</sup> The rise of the AAA also showed an early push for ethnic-oriented studies among revolutionary circles.

“Founded in 1962, the Afro-American Association taught African Americans history, race pride, and self-reliance, and had a significant influence on the founders of the Black Panther Party,” reads an entry on the group at the Oakland Library website. “Teaching African and African-American history was not a common or popular practice in academic settings in the early 1960s, so AAA members met people where they were: on the streets and on the Grove Street campus of Oakland Junior College.”<sup>21</sup> Both Seale and Newton attended Oakland Junior College.

The discussions at AAA radicalized its members, which was the intention of the study group, as it was to be with the ethnic studies that developed from it. They started reading Marxist black authors, such as W. E. B. Du Bois (who officially joined the Communist Party USA late in his life but was a longtime sympathizer with socialist movements<sup>22</sup>) and Ralph Ellison (who would eventually criticize communism<sup>23</sup>), but then veered into even more radical, revolutionary texts. “As they discussed and debated these books...the study group gradually developed ‘its own antiassimilationist ideology’: ‘a reinvigorated, anticolonial Black nationalism,’ more Malcolm X than Martin Luther King Jr.,” writes Andrew Romano in a Yahoo News 2019 look at the radical early influences on Vice President Harris. Romano quotes an early AAA member, Aubrey Labrie (whom he says Harris calls “Uncle Aubrey”) as saying, “Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were the heroes of some of us. We would talk about Black Muslims, the liberation movements going on in Africa, everything.”<sup>24</sup>

The discipline then exploded in 1968 and 1969. In a dynamic that the country would see repeated again and again in other walks of life, the middle-aged custodians of the learning institutions at first resisted being pushed into creating a discipline devoted to ethnic studies. Then, as the protests grew, they panicked, and, finally, they acceded to the demands of the activists. The revolutionary beginning befits the explicitly revolutionary goal of ethnic studies. It was not and was never meant to be “area studies,” but its opposite. “Area studies programs arose out of American imperialism in the Third World, and bear names such as African studies, Asian studies, and Latin American studies. These programs were designed to focus on U.S./Third World relations and to train specialists to uphold U.S. hegemony in regions in which the U.S. had heavy economic and political investments,” wrote Hu-DeHart.<sup>25</sup>

Hu-DeHart further wrote:

European immigrants have dominated America and defined the national identity as white and Western. Groups of color have a shared history of having been viewed as distinct from the European immigrants and their descendants. They are the “un-meltable ethnics,” or ethnics without options regarding whether to invoke their ethnicity.

Hu-DeHart also quoted an unpublished paper that asserted, “It is both practically and theoretically incorrect to use the experience of white ethnics as a guide to comprehend those of nonwhite, or so-called ‘racial’ minorities.”<sup>26</sup>

The U.S. government was, at the time, in the midst of creating new racial and ethnic Census categories, such as Hispanics and Asian Americans, that would cleave off new immigrants from the rest and hobble their ability to use the experience of past immigrants to join the melting pot. Now academia was doing its bit to keep them apart and was about to instill in them the grievances necessary to use them to transform society from within.

By the 1990s, there were “professional associations” of ethnic studies, including the National Council of Black Studies and the National Association of Chicano Studies, similar to teacher associations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Council for the Social Studies.<sup>27</sup> By 1993, there were at least 700 ethnic studies programs and departments in postsecondary institutions across the country.<sup>28</sup> Today, prospective students would have a difficult time finding a postsecondary institution that does not have an ethnic studies program.<sup>29</sup> In California, community college students must complete a course in ethnic studies before graduating.<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, state policymakers are adding ethnic studies requirements to K–12 schools. (Here again, California will begin requiring high school students to complete an ethnic studies course with the class of 2030.)<sup>31</sup> A description of these policies and curricular materials are described in the next section.

## State Policies

Table 1 indicates the states in which lawmakers have created specific ethnic studies standards or curricula or have legislative requirements that K–12 educators provide ethnic studies courses to K–12 students.



TABLE 1

## Ethnic Studies Across the 50 States and Washington, DC (Page 1 of 2)

State	Standards/ Curriculum	Requirement	Ethnic Studies or Race-Specific K-12 Initiatives
Alabama			
Alaska			
Arizona			
Arkansas			Black History Advisory Committee <sup>a</sup>
California	Yes	Yes <sup>b</sup>	
Colorado	Yes <sup>c</sup>	Yes	
Connecticut	Yes		
Washington, DC	Yes		
Delaware			Minimum Black history curriculum requirements <sup>d</sup>
Florida			Social studies standards required to include contributions from individuals from ethnic minorities <sup>e</sup>
Georgia			
Hawaii			
Idaho			
Illinois	Yes		
Indiana	Yes		
Iowa			
Kansas			
Kentucky			
Louisiana			Black history and the “historical contributions of all nationalities” are topics of required study <sup>f</sup>
Maine			African American history required, and the Maine Department of Education provides resources as part of the agency’s DEI initiative <sup>g</sup>
Maryland			
Massachusetts	Yes		
Michigan	Yes		
Minnesota	Yes	Yes	
Mississippi			
Missouri			
Montana			
Nebraska		Yes <sup>h</sup>	
Nevada	Yes		
New Hampshire			Schools are allowed to offer ethnic studies <sup>i</sup>
New Jersey		Yes	
New Mexico			Black Education Advisory Council makes curricular recommendations
New York			Amistad Commission makes curricular recommendations about how to teach the history of slavery in America
North Carolina			Schools must include instruction on the “contributions to the history and geography...by the racial and ethnic groups” <sup>j</sup>
North Dakota			
Ohio			Requirement to include a “balanced presentation” of the contributions of individuals from different ethnic groups
Oklahoma		Yes	

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## Ethnic Studies Across the 50 States and Washington, DC (Page 2 of 2)

State	Standards/ Curriculum	Requirement	Ethnic Studies or Race-Specific K-12 Initiatives
Oregon		Yes	
Pennsylvania			
Rhode Island			Ethnic studies topics included in state social studies standards <sup>k</sup>
South Carolina			Black history requirement <sup>m</sup>
South Dakota			
Tennessee			“Multicultural diversity” requirement for K-12 curricula <sup>n</sup>
Texas	Yes		
Utah		Yes <sup>o</sup>	
Vermont	Yes		
Virginia			
Washington	Yes <sup>p</sup>		
West Virginia			
Wisconsin	Yes		
Wyoming			Native American history requirement <sup>q</sup>

**SOURCES AND NOTES:**

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## Examples: California, Minnesota, and Beyond

The significance of “identity studies” or “ethnic studies” is that this academic content does not seek to assimilate students with different backgrounds into the American experiment, but the opposite. The content emphasizes the differences between different identity groups, making their status as Americans subordinate to their immutable characteristics. As a result, students are taught that the characteristics that they cannot control—such as skin color and biological sex—help to determine their destiny more than their choices and decisions.

The state standards and model curriculum described here have consequential differences from place to place. Teachers are to use standards and model curricula as guidance and instructional tools, but educators have the latitude to emphasize one idea at the expense of another. Just because California’s standards are steeped in identity politics does not mean that every teacher is instructing students in the same way, though the standards do indicate that state officials’ priorities are for teachers to emphasize Marxist concepts. Likewise, the standards in states such as Indiana and Oklahoma are less specific (and less radical), but individual teachers may still choose to teach students using a critical theory lens. The standards described below are no guarantee that teachers are (or are not) adhering to certain ideas, but this *Backgrounder* does indicate state policymakers’ priorities for classroom instruction around social studies and ethnic studies.

Indeed, prospective teachers can even earn postsecondary degrees in ethnic studies.<sup>32</sup> The University of California at Berkeley has an entire department dedicated to ethnic studies.<sup>33</sup> Stanford, Yale, and Georgetown University are just a few of the selective institutions that offer degrees in ethnic studies.<sup>34</sup>

California policymakers adopted ethnic studies academic standards and even a model curriculum for K–12 schools that contain the radical ideas described above.<sup>35</sup> In 2021, state lawmakers adopted a proposal that requires high school students to complete a course in ethnic studies before graduation, so all K–12 students in the state will be exposed to this content.<sup>36</sup> Even at the beginning of the curriculum, identity politics shapes the ideological slant of the material. The model curriculum tells teachers that they “should engage in activities that allow [students] to unpack their own identities, privilege, marginalization, lived experiences, and understanding and experience of race, culture, and social justice while they are also learning about the experiences of others.”<sup>37</sup>

Critical race theory is an American extension of critical theory that argues that racism explains any real or perceived power imbalances in society. Critical race theory is based on Marxism and rejects America's civil rights laws. Critical race theory's concept of intersectionality, which holds that people can be oppressed in multiple ways based on their race, sex, or "gender," is mentioned 76 times in the model curriculum, with explicit reference to identity politics and radical gender theory: "People have different overlapping identities, for example, a transgender Latina or a Jewish African American. These intersecting identities shape individuals' experiences of racism and bigotry."<sup>38</sup>

The word "power" is mentioned 274 times in the model curriculum, representative of the way in which the ethnic studies material teaches students to view the world through a lens of competing power dynamics, instead of as a representative system in which the government is established to protect individual rights. "Systems of Power," in fact, is one of the model curriculum's four chapters. Ethnic studies "critically grapples with the various power structures and forms of oppression that continue to have social, emotional, cultural, and political impacts," according to the curriculum.<sup>39</sup> Later, the content says, that "the role of power...[perpetuates] dominant narratives and [determines] who benefits from or is harmed by the persistence of these narratives."<sup>40</sup>

"Dominant narratives" are equated with "facts," and what people think they know as "truth" is the hegemonic interpretation of the natural world. It should be no surprise that advocates of identity politics reject the transmission of facts as a crucial teaching tool. The curriculum's description of "dominant narratives" quotes from "an activist from Philadelphia" who explains that, for ethnic studies, identities matter more than facts or individual choices:

[N]arratives around gender roles, body types, power, family, immigration, age, ability are all around us. They repeat to us who is dangerous, who is a hard worker, who is lazy, who is attractive, who deserves power. Even if we become aware of them and resist them, the world around us is still playing them on loop and holding us to those narratives.<sup>41</sup>

All dominant narratives—some of which are, actually, just facts—come with bias, according to the curriculum. Since facts are biased according to critical theory, they cannot be trusted, leading to the conclusion that a student's "lived experience," also emphasized in the curriculum, is more important. Teachers are to "validate" students' lived experiences, and

knowledge is relegated to a position behind experience. Teachers should “understand how the lived experiences of their student population affect the knowledge and attitudes that they bring to the classroom and that students have just as much as educators to bring to the table for mutual learning.”<sup>42</sup>

The authors of the model curriculum insist that ethnic studies is not divisive and “helps students bridge differences,” yet the content repeatedly emphasizes identity politics (“identity” receives 325 mentions), power structures (nine mentions, though “power” is mentioned frequently throughout in contexts such as “power movements,” “systems of power,” and “power relations”), colonization (52 mentions) and decolonization (four mentions).<sup>43</sup> The curriculum provides a clear message that the nation is divided into privileged and marginalized groups and that students must become activists. Furthermore, the model curriculum considers content knowledge to be of *at least equal* value to activism, saying, “Ethnic studies courses address institutionalized systems of advantage and address the causes of racism and bigotry” and contains “suggestions for ways that students can participate in service learning or activism.”<sup>44</sup> The ultimate goal, in fact, is to prepare students to be revolutionaries who view America through a racial perspective. Ethnic studies “should also help students understand the processes of social change and the role they can play individually and collectively in challenging these inequity-producing forces, such as systemic racism.”<sup>45</sup>

Finally, ethnic studies is not so much an academic subject as a philosophy. Teachers in other subjects are encouraged to incorporate ethnic studies into their academic areas: “A geography teacher might develop a unit or lesson around urban geography, where students can delve into key concepts like environmental racism and ecological justice and focus on the experiences of color in those spaces.”<sup>46</sup>

Notably, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) advocates consider ethnic studies as a tool to advance DEI’s objectives—namely, racial favoritism—and vice versa.<sup>47</sup> DEI offices and staff are common across postsecondary institutions and in K–12 schools, making these departments ready-made advocates for racial preferences and ethnic studies’ radical ideas.<sup>48</sup> As researchers have exposed DEI’s racist re-programming by inducing Americans to focus obsessively on racial and sexual identities and through advocating racial preferences in college admissions, race-based hiring strategies, and “bias response teams” that chill speech on campus, state lawmakers have prohibited educators from using taxpayer spending to operate DEI offices and staff.<sup>49</sup> For example, concurrent with California lawmakers’ decision to create an ethnic studies requirement for community college students, officials also required these schools to incorporate a commitment to DEI within

schools' hiring practices.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the National Council for the Social Studies, a national association of social studies teachers that advocates the teaching of ethnic studies, created a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee in 2021.<sup>51</sup> Thus there are overlapping interests around so-called antiracism and racial favoritism in social studies, ethnic studies, and DEI.

Similar to California policymakers, Minnesota officials adopted new social studies standards with ethnic studies incorporated within the social studies content in 2024.<sup>52</sup> This is common: While California policymakers adopted separate ethnic studies curricula and standards, other state lawmakers included ethnic studies content within their social studies standards. For example, in Wisconsin, educators included an area of study within the state's social studies standards that focuses on "personal identity and empathy," and students are to learn "how culture, ethnicity, race, age, religion, gender, and social class can help form self-image and identity."<sup>53</sup>

Minnesota K–12 students must take social studies classes (with ethnic studies embedded in the content) before they graduate high school.<sup>54</sup> Governor Walz signed a new requirement into law in 2023 as part of an education omnibus bill that was one of the most radical in the nation. It mandated embedding ethnic studies in academic standards for all required subjects. The law minces no words about how ethnic studies will be used for political power. It says:

"Ethnic studies" means the interdisciplinary study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity with a focus on the experiences and perspectives of people of color within and beyond the United States. Ethnic studies analyzes the ways in which race and racism have been and continue to be social, cultural, and political forces, and the connection of race to the stratification of other groups, including stratification based on the protected classes.<sup>55</sup>

Consistent with the theoretical descriptions of and sources for ethnic studies provided above, Minnesota's ethnic studies material focuses on "dominant and non-dominant narratives" and descriptions of history as defined by how identity groups "fought...against systemic and coordinated exercises of power."<sup>56</sup>

The St. Paul Public School District already has specific academic content implementing these ideas. The district's materials begin with a land acknowledgement statement, which itself implies that identity groups ("colonizers" and "the colonized") struggled for power. Since district officials make no offer to return the land on which the schools reside today to Native American tribes, students have little choice but to feel guilt over inhabiting

the areas in which they live.<sup>57</sup> The authors of Minnesota standards also use the term “settler-colonialism” 10 times, a term that disparages the founding of America and which has been borrowed by pro-Palestinian advocates to disparage Israel.<sup>58</sup> In fact, the authors use the conflict between Israel and Palestinians as one of their illustrations of so-called settler-colonialism, identifying Israel as “settler-colonists.”

This term is common across social studies standards nationwide. Colorado’s social studies standards, which incorporate ethnic studies, uses terms common to identity politics, such as “privilege” and “settler-colonialism.”<sup>59</sup> Washington, DC, public schools’ standards also include “settler-colonialism” and “decolonization,” and students are to “interpret...global societies through questions of power, privilege and injustice.”<sup>60</sup> These are all terms from the Marxist lexicon of critical race theory.

Minnesota students are instructed to “be aware of your own bias, power, and privilege,” and the “framework” cites the radical Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC’s) education initiative, Learning for Justice, as the source of the standards’ content on “social justice.”<sup>61</sup> Students are to be activists, according to Learning for Justice, and will “plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world” as a part of the curriculum.

The SPLC has significant influence on K–12 ethnic studies. The SPLC has a strong ideological position in favor of critical race theory and New Left causes, such as gender theory.<sup>62</sup> The organization gained its reputation by suing Ku Klux Klan groups into bankruptcy, but it then turned that reputation into a political weapon on behalf of the Left. It releases an annual “hate map” that lists mainstream conservative and Christian groups alongside Klan chapters, suggesting that public interest law firms like the Alliance Defending Freedom and parental rights groups like Moms for Liberty are part of the “infrastructure of white supremacy” and pose a terror threat.<sup>63</sup> The organization has made a living out of smearing conservative organizations as extremist, putting their personnel at risk. In 2012, an LGBTQ activist carried out a terrorist attack on a nonprofit in Washington, DC, using the “hate map” to find his victims. Former employees have called the “hate” accusations a “highly profitable scam,” and the SPLC currently faces a defamation lawsuit that cleared a major legal hurdle.<sup>64</sup> The SPLC has condemned opposition to its ideology by comparing it to the “uptown Klans” that opposed desegregation after *Brown v. Board of Education*.<sup>65</sup> The SPLC even once called former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and noted neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson an extremist (which it later rescinded).<sup>66</sup>

Minnesota's ethnic studies framework also teaches that "identity" has "intersectionalities," similar to California's content. Here again, a student's oppression is multiplied based on the number of groups to which he belongs.<sup>67</sup> In this way, educators inserted identity politics directly into the standards.

Illinois' educators, among others, also include critical race theory's intersectionality in their standards.<sup>68</sup> Notably, in Illinois, education is a form of oppression. Under the state's "Culturally-Responsive Standards," educators should "understand that there are systems in our society especially, but not limited to, our school system, that create and reinforce inequities, thereby creating oppressive conditions."<sup>69</sup> In truth, and contrary to ethnic studies, the most "oppressive" problem with K-12 education in the U.S. is that students are assigned to schools according to Zip code instead of student needs, but that oppression is not what Illinois standards are referring to. Rather, these state standards contain the same identity-related jargon related to "power" and "privilege" used in the other states profiled here.

Other states that have ethnic studies standards provide little information on ethnic studies content in their materials. Oklahoma officials, for example, have only a few references to ethnic studies in the state's social studies standards. The standards mention identities, but the references are largely in the section on world history and geography and discuss instruction about "the world's major cultural landscapes."<sup>70</sup> There is no mention of decolonization or intersectionality or other radical elements of critical theory. Content headings that ask students to read "critically" direct students to carefully analyze different concepts, not to define the world according to racial or economic power struggles.

The text from Georgia's social studies standards also mentions ethnic studies but does not discuss identity politics. When "power" is mentioned, the word is used in reference to the separation of powers in our representative system.<sup>71</sup> The standards do not discuss intersectionality, and while the standards direct teachers to cover "decolonization," the recommended prompts include Tiananmen Square (students are to demonstrate an understanding of the anti-communist movement, for example), the fall of the Berlin Wall, the formation of the state of Israel, revolutionary movements in Asia and Africa, and the nuclear arms race as part of the Cold War (students must show that they understand "efforts to limit the spread of nuclear weapons").<sup>72</sup> This prompt is in stark contrast to Minnesota's standards accusing Israel of "settler colonialism" and direct pro-Palestinian bias. Indeed, "decolonization" in that context refers to



the post–World War II process by which states in Africa and Asia freed themselves from European colonial rule—an actual historical event—and not to the attempted brainwashing that takes place in the West in the 21st century.

Social studies standards in Louisiana and South Dakota also provide a remarkable contrast with the identity politics–laden ethnic studies material described above. The standards include key lessons on historical facts, citizenship, the mechanics of government, and rights. First, content knowledge is respected and emphasized: “The Louisiana Student Standards for Social Studies reflect the understanding that building content knowledge and the acquisition of disciplinary skills and practices are intertwined and inseparable.”<sup>73</sup>

Second, both states’ standards reflect an appreciation for liberty and equality in America’s constitutional system.<sup>74</sup> “The quest for freedom is a hallmark of the American story,” Louisiana Superintendent Cade Brumley says. The standards recognize the Founding Fathers, key holidays, such as Columbus Day, Veterans Day, and Christmas Day, while also covering topics unique to Louisiana, such as the Acadians and Native Americans that are a central part of state history.<sup>75</sup>

Likewise, South Dakota’s standards include discussion of Native American history while also discussing lessons on citizenship. “We believe parents desire that their children learn to be wise and virtuous. The state, echoing the American founders, requires a citizenry that is wise and virtuous in order to sustain free self-government,” read the standards.<sup>76</sup> The standards aim to provide “honest, balanced, and complete accounts of historical events and debates that foster a love of country that, like any love, is not blind to faults.”<sup>77</sup>

When discussing power, South Dakota’s standards refer to the way in which representative government derives its powers from the consent of the governed and the separation of powers in the system of government. Here again, there is no mention of intersectionality and any reference to identity refers to “American identity.”<sup>78</sup> In high school, students are to be able to explain the meaning of rights, including “‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,’ in particular the founders’ argument that each human being has the right by nature to their [sic] own life, to their [sic] liberty and the general freedom of thought and action, and to seek the happiness appropriate to human liberty as long as it does not violate the rights of others.”<sup>79</sup> South Dakota’s focus on liberty and rights is the opposite of the Marxist philosophy centered on identity politics and power imbalances.

## Designing Policies Governing Ethnic Studies: Lessons from Arizona and HB 2281

In 2010, Arizona lawmakers adopted HB 2281, which prohibited the teaching of ethnic studies in K–12 public schools.<sup>80</sup> The law contained commonsense provisions rejecting the application of critical race theory and accurately outlined the basic ideas in ethnic studies and identity politics. The law said “public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people,” educators should not “promote the overthrow of the United States government” nor “promote resentment toward a race or class of people,” and it prohibited teaching that advocates “ethnic solidarity instead of treatment of pupils as individuals.”<sup>81</sup> The examples of ethnic studies curricula across the U.S. finds that resentment, revolution, and “ethnic solidarity” are all features of this academic field.

Lawmakers drafted and adopted the bill in direct response to the application of critical theory on a K–12 school campus. In 2006, long-time labor organizer and far-left activist Dolores Huerta told an audience of Tucson high school students that “Republicans hate Latinos,” and after learning of the speech, state lawmakers began inspecting the academic program teachers were using that initiated Huerta’s invitation to the school (a program called “Raza Studies”).<sup>82</sup> State legislators drafted legislation opposing identity politics, with one state representative saying, “We ought to be celebrating unity as Americans and not allowing, with taxpayer dollars, these organizations.”<sup>83</sup>

The bill temporarily upended a Mexican American studies program that Tucson Unified School District educators had offered since the 1990s.<sup>84</sup> Teachers and students filed a lawsuit to overturn the law, arguing the provisions discriminated against ethnic minorities, and a federal judge appointed by President Bill Clinton agreed in 2017.<sup>85</sup> Ethnic studies programs are still in operation today, though the district enrollment is shrinking. The court victory for ethnic studies adherents did not resolve this traditionally low-performing district’s declining student membership by attracting more students to district public schools. In the 2010–2011 school year, Tucson Unified School District enrolled 53,261 students, a figure that declined to 40,534 last fall.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, K–12 enrollment statewide has increased by more than 40,000 students over this period.

The ruling indicates that rather than “banning” ethnic studies through state legislation, state education officials should adopt standards and model curricula for history and civics (rather than the more ambiguously defined “social studies”) that “enable a rising generation[to] understand the history and principles of the founding of the United States...and strive to form a

more perfect union.”<sup>87</sup> The standards should stress the teaching of facts—names, dates, ideas and places—while also requiring that students explain the significance of this information in the creation and evolution of this constitutional republic. Policymakers should include instruction on the institution of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the failure of Reconstruction to heal all the nation’s problems after the Civil War, along with teaching about the Native American tribes and traditions that are unique to different areas of the country. Stated simply, instead of banning ethnic studies and critical theory, policymakers should adopt standards that replace this content with teaching about liberty, personal responsibility, representative government, and local history. Any “ethnic studies” that covers those areas would differ significantly from the premeditated attempt at using the classroom for societal change, which is what today’s “ethnic studies” is.

## Policy Recommendations for State Lawmakers

State lawmakers should consider the following policies to promote rigorous civics and history content that acknowledges America’s imperfections while also teaching students about the nation’s unique history of liberty and the rule of law. State lawmakers should:

- **Adopt challenging civics and history standards and curricula.** State lawmakers should adopt academic standards that teach students historical facts, lessons on citizenship, the mechanics of American government, and rights under law. Standards should consider local, national, and world history, as well as the importance of becoming participating members of society through civic organizations and by voting. State officials should not adopt ethnic studies requirements.
- **Eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion programs that foster ethnic studies.** State lawmakers and K–12 and postsecondary officials should prohibit the use of taxpayer spending on DEI offices, staff, and programs. DEI programs promote the race essentialism and Marxist ideas found in ethnic studies.
- **Protect freedom of speech on campus.** State lawmakers should consider proposals that protect the right of anyone lawfully present on a public college campus to listen and be heard in public areas of campus. Similar to the language contained in the Chicago Statement on Free Expression, postsecondary educators should state that it is

not an institution's responsibility to protect students from ideas with which students disagree. Likewise, school officials should prohibit shout downs, dis-invitations, free speech zones, and other examples of censorship. State policymakers in Alabama, Arizona, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and elsewhere have adopted such proposals.<sup>88</sup>

- **Prohibit compelled speech.** State lawmakers should consider proposals that prohibit K–12 teachers and students from being compelled to profess or believe any idea, especially ideas that violate state and federal civil rights laws.<sup>89</sup> These provisions will prevent educators from requiring students to advocate or defend critical race theory or the use of racial preferences as analytical tools in education or administrative policies.

## Conclusion

Despite claims that ethnic studies “helps bring students and communities together,” examples from state standards and some states’ model curricula find that the material, in fact, teaches students that their “identities” are more important than their choices and decisions or their allegiance to their nation and their compatriots.<sup>90</sup> Students are taught to consider social, cultural, and political events as the results of racial or economic power imbalances, and ethnic studies curricula train students to be political activists, regardless of students’ knowledge of history, civics, politics, or policy.

Only slightly more than one in five eighth graders are proficient in civics, and average history scores on a national comparison are at the lowest level since the score measurement began in 1994. Parents and policymakers have little assurance that students can differentiate between civic knowledge and political bias.<sup>91</sup> Ethnic studies is not preparing students to be engaged citizens but is goading them to be revolutionaries. The subject ill prepares students for the future, and educators should replace it with challenging subject matter on history and civics. Educators can and should acknowledge the ways in which Americans in history failed to live up to national ideals while also emphasizing the unique contribution that America’s founding documents and Founding Fathers made to the cherished ideas of liberty and representative government in world history.

**Jonathan Butcher** is Will Skillman Senior Research Fellow in Education Policy in the Center for Education Policy and Mike Gonzalez is Angeles T. Arredondo E Pluribus Unum Senior Fellow in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation.

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