

The Honorable Tony Thurmond  
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Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond  
President  
State Board of Education  
1430 N Street, Room 5111  
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January 21, 2021

**RE: Scholarly Review of Research Articles Cited in the Third Field Review of the ESMC Finds Insufficient Evidence for Claims Cited, Request Removal of Claims**

Dear Superintendent Tony Thurmond and SBE President Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond,

We are university scholars and academics, many of us with decades of experience designing and carrying out empirical research and qualified to analyze scholarly publications. We are deeply concerned with the misrepresentation of social science research that is used to support claims of the benefits of ethnic studies courses in the Introduction and Overview to the Third Field Review of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC).

In particular, we are referring to several claims made in the section entitled “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies” (pgs. 9 - 11) that are attributed to one review article (Sleeter, 2011) and three research articles (Steele and Aronson, 1998; Cammarota, 2007; and Dee and Penner, 2017). The section begins with two overarching claims:

- "There is considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students." (Sleeter, 2011)
- “[B]oth students of color and white students have been found to benefit from ethnic studies.” (Sleeter, 2011)

And it continues with these specific claims about the benefits of ethnic studies courses “that ethnic studies scholars and classroom teachers established through research”:

- Contributed to students’ sense of agency and academic motivation (Sleeter, 2011)
- Increased youth civic engagement and community responsiveness (Sleeter, 2011)
- Reduced stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1998)
- Led to an increase in attendance (Cammarota, 2017)
- Led to an increase in standardized test scores (Cammarota, 2017)
- Led to an increase in GPA, especially in math and science (Dee and Penner, 2017)
- Led to an increase in graduation and college enrollment rates (Dee and Penner, 2017)

In addition to the above, seven specific claims about the benefits of ethnic studies “that ethnic studies scholars and classroom teachers established through research” are included in the list but are not footnoted and have no attribution to peer-reviewed research:

- Helped students discover their historical and ancestral origins
- Aided in the social-emotional wellness of students
- Provided students with skills and language to critically analyze, respond, and speak out on social issues
- Increased critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and interpersonal communication skill
- Introduced students to college level academic frameworks, theories, terms, and research methods
- Helped foster a classroom environment of trust between students and teachers, enabling them to discuss contentious issues and topics, as well as current events
- Strengthened social and cultural awareness

After careful analysis of the four articles cited in support of the overarching and specific claims, ***we have found that none of these papers provides sufficient evidence for the claims that are attributed to it.*** We hope that after reviewing the following analysis, as well as considering the seven claims included in the section that are not attributed to any published research, you will remove all of these claims, and perhaps even the entire section entitled “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies” from the final version of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, since its claims are insufficiently supported by empirical research.

### **Analysis of Research Articles Cited in the Third Field Review of the ESMC in Support of Claims about the Benefits of Ethnic Studies Courses**

#### **1) Christine Sleeter, *The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies: A Research Review.* Washington, DC: National Education Association, 2011**

Two overarching claims in the Benefits of Ethnic Studies section of the ESMC come directly from Sleeter’s review:

- "There is considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students."
- “[B]oth students of color and white students have been found to benefit from ethnic studies."

Specific claims in the ESMC also attributed to Sleeter are that ethnic studies courses have:

- Contributed to students’ sense of agency and academic motivation
- Increased youth civic engagement and community responsiveness

Sleeter's review article examined numerous published studies that investigated the impact of ethnic studies and related curricula on the academic and social achievement of students in both K-12 and higher education. While a few of the studies Sleeter reported on included the randomized assignment of students to control and experimental groups and the administration of pre and post-program assessments using standardized achievement tests, a large majority were small-scale

qualitative studies that did not include these experimental conditions, making it impossible to generalize their results in a reliable way.

### ***Analysis of studies in the Sleeter review article presumed to support the ESMC's specific claims***

An analysis of the studies in Sleeter's review that we believe were presumed to support the ESMC's specific claims that are attributed to her article indicate that ***none of the studies provides sufficient evidence for those claims.***

With regard to the model curriculum's first specific claim about ethnic studies courses contributing to students' sense of agency and academic motivation, while Sleeter's article includes several studies that we believe address these issues, none of them can provide sufficient support to justify the claim's inclusion in the ESMC:

- Citing an article by O'Connor (1997) that analyzed in-depth interviews with six high-achieving African American adolescent students, Sleeter noted that "the students' familiarity with individual and collective struggle...contributed to their sense of agency and facilitated their academic motivation," closely echoing the words of the ESMC's claim. However, the O'Connor paper does not mention that any of the six students participated in an ethnic studies class and so cannot be used to support the ESMC's claim that ethnic studies courses have been shown to contribute to "students' sense of agency and academic motivation."
- According to Sleeter, research on five curricula (three in social studies, one in literature, and one in 'life skills') found that they had "a positive impact on students' empowerment (i.e. students sense of agency and ability to take positive action on problems in their communities)." Four of the studies cited by Sleeter — Tyson (2002), Vasquez (2005), Halagao (2004) and Halagao (2010) — were small and descriptive, making them unreliable sources of support for a generalized claim about the benefits of ethnics studies courses. In the fifth study by Lewis, Sullivan, and Bybee (2006), 65 students in a predominantly Black middle school were randomly assigned to one of two participating classes, where one class received the experimental intervention — an African American "emancipatory curriculum" — and the other received a regular Life Skills course (the control condition). The authors found that those students in the "emancipatory curriculum" class scored significantly higher than those in the control class on "overall social change involvement," a measurement similar to "sense of agency". However, according to a review of the Lewis, Sullivan and Bybee study by Dee and Penner (2017), "The availability of only two assignment units within the same school (and the lack of evidence on balance at baseline) makes it difficult to differentiate the true effects of the course from the effects of other unobserved traits that may have differed across these two classrooms or spillovers of content and pedagogy between the two classrooms." Thus, even the experimental Lewis, Sullivan and Bybee study does not provide adequate evidence of the ESMC's claim that ethnic studies courses contribute to "a sense of agency."
- Four small and descriptive studies included in Sleeter's review — Brozo and Valerio (1996); Bean, Valerio, Senio, and White (1999); Rickford (2001); and Matthews and Smith (1994) -- directly address the issue of "academic motivation" by showing that the use of culturally relevant instructional materials (literature and science materials) with groups of ethnically homogenous students of color produced more positive attitudes towards and engagement

with the materials and the subject matter. Once again, the non-experimental nature of these studies imposes limitations on the ability to generalize their results or to provide adequate support for the ESMC's claim. Another problem with basing the claim on these studies is that while culturally relevant instructional material will most likely be used as part of an ethnic studies course, the use of such materials in a course does not make it an ethnic studies course. So even if these four studies were to have been conducted with experimental rigor (i.e. with experimental and control groups, pre and post assessments, etc.), their results would still not support the claim that ethnic studies courses contribute to academic motivation, only that culturally relevant materials do. (Cammarota (2007), a fifth study included in the Sleeter review that addresses the issue of academic motivation and claims that participation in an ethnic studies program contributes to academic motivation, is analyzed in detail below.

Regarding the ESMC's second specific claim attributed to the Sleeter review, that ethnic studies courses "increased youth civic engagement and community responsiveness," we believe two studies in the review article address these issues, but neither one provides sufficient evidence to support the ESMC's claim:

- Analyzing a study by Halagao (2010) that reported on a follow-up survey of 35 Filipinos who, 10 years earlier as college students, had participated in a class using Pinoy Teach (a curriculum focusing on Philippine and Filipino American history and culture), Sleeter reported that the author claimed that the curriculum had helped the former students to develop "ongoing activism...through civic engagement." However, a careful analysis of the study itself showed that Halagao's finding was based on the responses of a few of the former students to a set of open-ended questions about how the Pinoy Teach curriculum had influenced their lives 10 years later — far too subjective and insubstantial to form the basis of a generalized claim about the long-term benefits of ethnic studies courses.
- Another article included in the Sleeter review, Gurin and Nagda (2006), found that participation in structured intergroup dialogs "enhances interest in political issues and develops a sense of citizenship through college and community activities," though no data were presented to support this finding. In addition, while an ethnic studies curriculum might include structured intergroup dialogs, these are independent treatments. Even if there were strong empirical evidence for Gurin and Nagda's finding, it does not mean that ethnic studies courses will have a similar effect.

### ***Analysis of the two overarching claims about the benefits of ethnic studies in Sleeter's review article***

Neither of the overarching claims about the benefits of ethnic studies made by Sleeter and quoted in the ESMC are substantiated by the studies reported in Sleeter's review.

Sleeter's first claim, that there is "considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students" is insufficiently supported even in 2021, and was wholly unsupported by the research Sleeter reviewed in 2011. In fact in Dee and Penner's 2017 study (analyzed below), the authors note:

While the expansion of ES courses illustrates both their appeal and concerns, the

quantitative evidence on their effects is relatively limited. Furthermore, the evidence that is available relies on research designs that cannot necessarily support credible causal inference... In sum, the theoretical arguments and public enthusiasm for ES curricula have not been matched by convincing quantity evidence on their efficacy.

In addition, as we mentioned above, relatively few of the studies that Sleeter counts as part of the “considerable research evidence” of the benefits of ethnic studies had an experimental design involving treatment and control groups and pre and post testing with standardized tests, which would have allowed their results to be generalized beyond the very specific context in which the studies were carried out. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, *none* of the dozens of studies Sleeter cites — either descriptive or experimental — provided objective evidence that the ethnic studies curriculum whose impact the researchers examined was either “well-designed” or “well-taught.” ***This effectively means that not a single study in Sleeter’s review article can be used to support her claim -- which is also a central claim of the ESMC -- that “well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for studies.”***

***Sleeter’s second claim***, that “both students of color and white students have been found to benefit from ethnic studies,” ***is insufficiently supported by the studies she cites as evidence.***

While most of the studies cited in Sleeter’s review article looked at the impact of ethnic studies or related curricula designed primarily for students of color on the targeted racial or ethnic group, about a dozen studies looked at the impact of curricula designed for diverse student groups. Of those, two experimental studies specifically claimed to show a positive impact of an ethnic studies or related curriculum on White students, but both had methodological limitations that do not justify their use in supporting Sleeter’s broad claim that “white students have been found to benefit from ethnic studies”:

- Hughes, Bigler, and Levy (2007) documented the impact on 48 White elementary children of short lessons that included information about Black and White historical figures, where the lesson given to half of the students included information about some of the discriminatory experiences endured by the historical figures (treatment group) and the lesson taught to the other half of the students made no reference to racial discrimination (control group). Although the researchers reported that “European American children who learned about historical racism had more positive and less negative views of African Americans than did children who received similar lessons that did not include information about racism,” because students’ views of African Americans were only assessed after the lessons and not before, it is impossible to say that it was the content of the lessons that was responsible for the difference between groups, rather than group differences that pre-existed the lessons. The authors themselves acknowledged, “[W]e decided to forgo pretest attitude assessment ...and thus, we cannot be certain that children in the two treatment groups showed equivalent racial attitudes prior to receiving lessons.”
- While Lopez (2004) found that European American university students who attended classes or academic programs that dealt with issues of race and ethnicity had a heightened awareness of inequality in society as compared to those European American students who did not have these curricular experiences, because the classes or academic programs were voluntary and not required and the researcher did not control for self-selection among students who chose to take classes dealing with issues of race and ethnicity, it is impossible to attribute the difference between these two groups of students to the classes or academic

programs rather than to students' pre-existing views about racial inequality.

Interestingly, in contradiction to her own claim, Sleeter's review included three studies showing that diversity courses, including ethnic studies courses, not only do not benefit White students, but may even cause them emotional harm:

- Henderson-King and Kaleta (2000) reported that the students (majority White) who completed a one-semester race and ethnicity course did not shift their attitudes about various groups (such as African Americans and Latinos).
- Hogan and Mallot (2005) found that for many students — particularly White students — the first diversity course is emotionally challenging.
- Bowman (2010) reported that many students — both White students and students of color - who take a single diversity course experienced a reduced sense of well-being.

**2) Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Test Performance of Academically Successful African Americans," in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, ed. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips (Washington, DC, US: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).**

The ESMC attributes to Steele and Aronson the specific claim that ethnic studies courses have:

- Reduced stereotype threat

Steele and Aronson reported on a series of experiments investigating how "stereotype threat" - i.e. anxiety that one's behavior confirms a negative stereotype about one's identity group - affects the performance of talented, strongly school-identified African Americans on standardized tests. While the authors found that stereotype threat does lower the performance of high-scoring black college students on a difficult verbal test, they stated, "It is not yet clear to what extent one can generalize from these findings to other kinds of students and tests."

More importantly, since the sole focus of their research was to ascertain whether a stereotype threat negatively affects African American students when taking standardized tests, the authors did not experimentally investigate the question of what treatments could remedy the problem. In addition, ***the authors never stated or implied that their research supported the claim that courses in ethnic studies could reduce stereotype threat.*** In fact, one of their most robust results suggests just the opposite: when black students were asked to report their racial identity before taking a difficult verbal test, it significantly depressed their performance on the test compared with black students who were not asked to report their racial identity. If anything, these results suggest that ethnic studies courses that foreground race and racial identity may actually *exacerbate* the stereotype threat and its negative impact on the academic achievement of black students, rather than reduce it.

**3) Julio Cammarota, "A Social Justice Approach to Achievement: Guiding Latina/o Students Toward Educational Attainment With a Challenging, Socially Relevant Curriculum," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 40, no. 1, 2007. [Please note: the draft curriculum cites this reference as being published in 2017, but that is incorrect]**

The ESMC attributes to Cammarota the specific claims that ethnic studies courses have:

- Led to an increase in attendance - **[Please note: This claim was mis-attributed to Cammarota and is not mentioned in this article, but rather in Dee and Penner (2017)]**
- Led to an increase in standardized test scores - **[Please note: This claim was mis-attributed to Cammarota and is not mentioned in this article]**
- [Led to an increase in college and graduation rates - **Please note: This claim was mis-attributed to Dee and Penner (2017) but was actually addressed in Cammarota's article]**

Cammarota's article discusses how a two-year experimental social science curriculum, "Social Justice Education Project" (SJEP), influenced the attitudes of a cohort of 17 Latina/o students in a remedial program at a high school in Arizona regarding their potential to graduate high school and attend college. Student attitudes were assessed through one opinion survey administered after the first year of the program, the author's field notes and interviews with each of the participants after the program's completion. Cammarota concluded that the SJEP had a significant positive influence on students' attitudes towards high school graduation and college enrollment. In addition, the author reported that the actual high school completion and college enrollment rates of the 17 students were significantly higher than the national average for Latina/o students, and he concluded that the curriculum of the SJEP played a significant role in students' attainment levels.

While the ESMC attributes to Cammarota's paper claims that ethnic studies courses have led to increases in both attendance and standardized test scores, the author himself never claims that the SJEP program led to such increases, and in fact nowhere in the paper are these issues even addressed. These two claims have apparently been mis-attributed to the Cammarota article, although another article cited in the model curriculum, Dee and Penner (2017), does address the issue of increased attendance. (See our analysis of the Dee and Penner article below).

On the other hand, while the ESMC attributes the claim of ethnic studies courses leading to increases in graduation and college enrollment rates to the Dee and Penner article, such a claim does not appear there but is rather addressed in Cammarota's article. Regarding this claim, however, it must be pointed out that even though Cammarota found that the high school graduation and college enrollment rates of the students in the SJEP program were significantly higher than the national average for Latina/o students, because of the descriptive, non-empirical nature of the reported study, it is impossible to say that the curricular content of the SJEP program was responsible for this disparity. It could well be that simply providing "at risk" students with increased, individualized teacher attention and a more interesting curriculum on any topic would have had the same effect. In addition, the fact that the author looked at only 17 students makes these results impossible to generalize. Cammarota himself recognizes the limitations of his research, stating: "Definitive conclusions cannot be drawn from the early findings presented in this article. More research is needed to assess the educator's influence on academic performance within a socially relevant curriculum." Thus, ***Cammarota's paper does not provide sufficient evidence for the ESMC's bold claim that ethnic studies courses lead to increases in graduation and college enrollment rates.***

**4) Thomas S. Dee and Emily K. Penner, "The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance" Evidence From an Ethnic Studies Curriculum," *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127-166.**

The ESMC attributes to Dee and Penner the specific claims that ethnic studies courses have:

- Led to an increase in GPA, especially in math and science
- Led to an increase in graduation and college enrollment rates [**Please note: Although this claim was attributed to Dee and Penner it is not addressed in their article, but it is addressed in Cammarota (2007)**]
- [Led to an increase in attendance - **Please note: This claim was mis-attributed to Cammarota (2007), but was actually addressed in Dee and Penner's article**]

The Dee and Penner study asserts that it is the first to measure the causal influence of Ethnic Studies on 9th grade students' academic achievements, i.e. Grade Point Average (GPA), math and science scores, school attendance and courses completed. They claim that "C" students in 8th grade became "B+" students in 9th grade, increased their attendance to 100%, and increased the course credits they gained from about the bottom 10%, in 8th grade to the most possible in 9th grade. The conclusions come from data examined in three high schools in San Francisco that offered a year-long Ethnic Studies course in 9th grade. Those schools specifically assigned students whose 8th grade GPA was 2.0 or below ("C" or below) to the course. Participation, however, was voluntary and some students, despite assignment, opted out. Although two other high schools also offered the course, the authors excluded them from the main analyses specifically because they did not make assignments to the course. Therefore, no examination or information is given as to their students' achievements associated with participation in an Ethnic Studies course. Rather, the study compares at 9th grade, those 8th grade students who were eligible for assignment to the Ethnic Studies course, i.e. those with GPA 2.0 or just below, to those who were just ineligible to assignment because their GPA was just above 2.0. Both groups of students took the Ethnic Studies course.

The gold standard of evaluating a treatment intervention is an experimental study comparing those who take the treatment and those who do not. Although it was completely feasible and ethical to conduct such a study, the authors did not. They did not observe nor compare the academic achievement of students who were intended to or actually took an Ethnic Studies course to those who did not. Rather, they used regression discontinuity statistics - instead of experimental group comparison - of students enrolled in an Ethnic Studies Course, comparing students just above to those just below a 2.0 GPA. Statisticians have long recognized that regression discontinuity is vulnerable to unreliability and inaccuracy.

The educational treatment analyzed was whether the high school administration advised a student to take an Ethnic Studies class. Students with GPA averages less than 2.0 were so advised, while those with higher GPA averages were not. By the authors' own research design and analyses, the effective educational factor, and the one the authors examined, was the advice and encouragement by the school administration. Although the authors do secondary analyses to try to detach the impact of participation in the course from the impact of the schools' assignment, the separation is not possible. Rather, contrary evidence is found that increases the possibility that the effective mediator for "C" students was the attention from the school administration rather than participation in the course. That is, the study itself shows that ***those students who chose not to take the Ethnic Studies Course after being advised to do so improved their academic scores similarly to those who were advised and did take the course.*** Moreover, and very significantly, ***those who took the Ethnic Studies Course but had not been advised to do so did not gain academically.***

The authors also considered whether the skill and motivation of the Ethnic Studies' teachers was the effective intervention rather than the course curriculum. Analyses of student scores in other classes

besides Ethnic Studies taught by the only four teachers involved did not highlight any extraordinary skills, but the possibility exists that the teachers' enthusiasm for Ethnic Studies was the significant motivating factor.

The study does not inform about the majority of students who took the Ethnic Studies course. The focus is only on students whose GPA was just below or just above 2.0, or a "C." Those with higher GPA or those with lower GPA scores were not shown to improve. The authors, using the statistical tool of regression discontinuity, conclude that the students with GPA just below 2.0 did gain in GPA, math and science scores, school attendance, and courses taken. Whereas the authors do show evidence for an improvement for those selected students, the gains appear modest, much less than claimed. For example, whereas the data may support a movement from a C to a C+ GPA, the authors' claim that those C students (the bottom 10%) became B+ students (top 25%) is not supported.

The question of the impact of Ethnic Studies on school attendance was analyzed similarly to that of GPA. Students with a "C" GPA or below did appear to improve their attendance from 8th to 9th grade, but no comparison was made between these students' attendance performance and that of students who had been advised to take Ethnic Studies but chose not to take the course. Without such a comparison of these two groups, it is impossible to claim that the increase in attendance for the students with a "C" GPA or below was due to their participation in the Ethnic Studies course rather than some other factor.

***In sum, this study does not support a claim that participation in an Ethnic Studies course will improve academic performance or school attendance.*** Such generalizations are limited by the nature of the selected students, only those hovering around a "C" average. The authors themselves state that it is "an open question...whether effects of this or any other Ethnic Studies curriculum would generalize to higher performing students." The generalizations are also limited by whether the schools' encouragement or the teachers' heightened motivation were influential in fostering academic gains or attendance. As the authors recognize, "The benefits of the course are larger among those who complied with the encouragement to take the course...as relative to those who would take it when available." Finally, the authors themselves are "cautious about the likely impact of scaling up and replicating the Ethnic Studies course," pointing out that scholars from a number of disciplines "have noted that the effects of such smaller-scale interventions are often very different when the same policies are implemented at scale."

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the articles referenced in the Third Field Review of the draft ESMC do not provide sufficient empirical support for the specific claims regarding the benefits of ethnic studies courses that are attributed to them, nor do they provide sufficient empirical support for the curriculum's two overarching claims that "well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students" and that "both students of color and white students have been found to benefit from ethnic studies."

Moreover, in addition to noting that half of the specific claims made about research showing the benefits of ethnic studies did not cite any research at all, we found several mis-attributed claims —

claims attributed to one paper that were not at all addressed by the research reported in the paper or that were addressed by research reported in another paper cited in the curriculum.

Our goal in this letter has been to point out that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support either the overarching or the specific claims about the benefits of ethnic studies courses that are made in the current draft of the model curriculum. However, given that the model curriculum was presumably drafted by expert educators in the field of ethnic studies, the embarrassing carelessness with which this section was written — inaccurate and mistaken attribution to empirical research, or no attribution at all -- offers a very poor impression of the academic rigor of this ethnic studies model curriculum, and of the field of ethnic studies more generally.

As mandated by AB 2016, this model curriculum is intended for use by millions of students in the state, and, if legislation currently being considered by the state legislature is passed, the ESMC may serve as the basis for courses that high school students in all public and charter schools must take. It is unconscionable that with so much at stake, the State Board of Education would mislead California citizens into believing that bold claims about the benefits of ethnic studies courses for K-12 students are supported by considerable and robust empirical evidence, when this is simply untrue.

Therefore, in the name of honesty and academic integrity, we urge you to remove from the ESMC the entire section entitled “The Benefits of Ethnic Studies,” or at least all of the overarching and specific claims that are made in it.

Thank you for your consideration,

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