

Over 100 University Scholars and Academics Remain Concerned with ESMC's Unsubstantiated Claims

The Honorable Tony Thurmond
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
1430 N Street, Suite 5602
Sacramento, CA 95814-5901

SENT VIA EMAIL

March 4, 2021

Dear Superintendent Tony Thurmond and the CA State Board of Education,

We are 114 university scholars and academics with decades of research experience, who are deeply concerned that empirically unsubstantiated claims of the educational benefits of ethnic studies curricula are being used to advance the political goals of some activist-educators rather than what is best for California students.

Many of us were signatories on [a letter](#) submitted to you on January 21 that included a comprehensive analysis of the research cited in the section of the Third Field Review of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum entitled "The Benefits of Ethnic Studies," which begins with the bold overarching claim taken directly from a 2011 review of the literature by CSUMB Professor Emerita Christine Sleeter that there is "considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students." The comprehensive analysis included in the January 21st letter, which involved a careful examination of all of the research provided in the four articles cited in the draft ESMC as evidence for the overarching and specific claims about the educational benefits of ethnic studies, found that ***none of the articles provides sufficient evidence for the claims that were attributed to it.***

We are writing to you now because it has been brought to our attention that a [petition](#) directly challenging our letter, signed by "a statewide alliance of educational scholars across California," was recently sent to you. In a section titled "THE RESEARCH BASIS FOR ETHNIC STUDIES," the petition offers three reasons why you should reject our letter's conclusion and instead accept the validity of the ESMC's claims. We believe it is important to explain why the petition's challenges to our letter are not only wholly baseless, they unwittingly provide further evidence in support of our letter's conclusion that the ESMC's bold claims are not at all substantiated by empirical research and should be omitted from the curriculum.

The petitioners' first argument is that we have used excessively "narrow criteria" in determining which studies can offer evidence for broad claims about the educational benefits of ethnic studies. In point of fact, the criteria we used are universally-accepted norms and standards for evaluating research in academia. Moreover, these are the very same criteria used by Thomas Dee and Emily Penner (2017), when, after surveying the ethnic studies research that had preceded their widely-cited empirical study — including the dozens of studies reviewed by Sleeter in 2011 — they wrote that previous

research “relies on research designs that cannot necessarily support credible causal inference,” and concluded that “the theoretical arguments and public enthusiasm for ES curricula have not been matched by convincing quantity evidence on their efficacy.” Dee and Penner even applied the same stringent criteria to their own research, cautioning against “scaling up and replicating” the ethnic studies course they studied and noting that “the effects of such smaller-scale interventions are often very different when the same policies are implemented at scale.” This last point is especially important in light of the fact that these claims about the educational benefits of ethnic studies curricula are being used to justify the ESMC itself -- a curriculum that will affect millions of students and whose implementation throughout the state could cost California taxpayers tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars in the coming years. The petitioners’ willingness to offer qualitative, small-scale, non-experimental studies as “evidence” for these bold claims defies standards of scholarship and is highly irresponsible, given the sweeping public policy decisions that are being made on the basis of such unscholarly evidence.

Secondly, the petitioners object to the conclusion we came to after a thorough analysis of Sleeter’s 2011 monograph, that not a single study of the dozens she reviewed substantiated her claim — which is also the central claim of the ESMC — that “well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students.” Once again the petitioners are asking the SBE to accept Sleeter’s foundational claim on the basis of studies and evaluative processes that simply do not meet rigorous scholarly standards. In this regard, it’s crucial to highlight the fact that Sleeter’s 2011 claim not only serves as justification for the development and implementation of the ESMC, it is also cited as an important rationale for almost every piece of public policy related to the teaching of ethnic studies in California schools, including the bill (AB 2016) mandating the development of the ESMC; the bill (AB 1460) making ethnic studies a graduation requirement for all CSU students; and the bill (AB 331) that would have made an ethnic studies class a graduation requirement for all public and charter high school students in the state, which was vetoed by Governor Newsom last September. ***With so much at stake for California students and taxpayers, the standards for determining what research should constitute evidence of the educational benefits of ethnic studies should be even more stringent, not less, as the petitioners argue.***

Furthermore, it is telling that one of the “steps” the petitioners ask the SBE to take is to “provide sufficient financial and other resources and support to examine and document the impact of Ethnic Studies on K-12 students in California.” This brazen request for money to carry out research that was already presumed by lawmakers and education officials to have been carried out -- research whose alleged results justified the state’s development of a model curriculum and mandates for its implementation in the first place — is *itself* an admission that the educational benefits of ethnic studies have not been sufficiently substantiated by empirical research.

Even more telling is that such an admission is in a petition that was organized and presumably written by Christine Sleeter, the author of the ESMC’s central and demonstrably false claim that “there is considerable research evidence” for the academic and social benefits of ethnic studies.

What is true, however, is that there is considerable evidence that the petitioners are driven by an ideological agenda to promote Critical Ethnic Studies - a narrow and highly controversial conceptualization of ethnic studies that is firmly rooted in ideologies that divide society into oppressed and oppressor groups based primarily on race, and, as part of its disciplinary mission, coerces students into engaging in political activism to challenge systems of “hierarchy and oppression” as defined by the discipline’s practitioners. Sleeter herself is a leading proponent of Critical Ethnic Studies, and not

surprisingly, she and many of the petition's signatories have signed onto letters and petitions in support of the highly controversial and politicized first draft of the ESMC, whose Critical Ethnic Studies framework still forms the basis of the ESMC's third draft.

We believe that we have demonstrated in both our January 21st letter and in this one that there is no credible empirical support for the ESMC's claims that ethnic studies curricula and courses provide educational benefits for California students, and we reiterate our call for the complete removal of the "Benefits of Ethnic Studies" section from the ESMC. In addition, as you deliberate over whether or not to approve the third draft of the model curriculum, we urge you to resist political pressure from educator-activists who continue to tout wholly unsubstantiated claims about the benefits of ethnic studies, but appear to be more concerned with promoting their ideological agendas than educating our students.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned University Scholars and Academics:

Alexander Figotin, PhD, Professor, UC Irvine
Alvin Rosenfeld, PhD, Professor, Indiana University
Alvin Sokolow, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC Davis
Amy Elman, PhD, Professor, Kalamazoo College
Andrew Pessin, PhD, Professor, Connecticut College
Anna Krylov, PhD, Professor, University of Southern California
Anne Pym McDonald, PhD, Professor Emerita, CSU East Bay
Anton Gorodetski, PhD, Professor, UC Irvine
Anton Kapustin, PhD, Professor, California Institute of Technology
Arnold Felsenfeld, MD, Professor Emeritus, UCLA
Arnold Jacobson, MD, Professor Emeritus, UC San Francisco
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Bard Cosman, MD, MPH, Professor, UC San Diego School of Medicine
Barry Chiswick, PhD, Professor, George Washington University
Barry Demchak, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC San Diego
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Daniel Klein, PhD, Professor, George Mason University
Daniel Neuhauser, PhD, Professor, UCLA
Daniel Palanker, PhD, Professor, Stanford University
David Bensimon, PhD, Professor, UCLA
David Feifel, MD, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC San Diego
David Potts, PhD, Professor, City College of San Francisco
David Siegel, MD, MPH, Professor Emeritus, UC Davis
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Gerald Gillespie, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Stanford University
Gina Strumwasser, PhD, Professor Emerita, Fresno State University
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Jay Bergman, PhD, Professor, Central Connecticut State University
Jeffrey Carmel, MD, Adjunct Professor Emeritus, Stanford University School of Medicine
Jeffrey Ullman, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Stanford University
Jessica Emami, PhD, Adjunct Professor, Marymount University
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Joseph Manson, PhD, Professor, UCLA
Joshua Muravchik, PhD, Adjunct Professor, Institute of World Politics
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