

145 University Scholars and Academics Ask to Withhold Approval of ESMC Unless Unsubstantiated Claims Removed

Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond
President
State Board of Education
1430 N Street, Room 5111
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Governor Gavin Newsom
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SENT VIA EMAIL

March 12, 2021

Dear Dr. Darling-Hammond, SBE Members and Governor Newsom,

We are 145 university scholars and academics, who are deeply concerned about the implementation of a state-mandated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum whose education benefits are not supported by empirical research. Most of us were signatories on letters to the California Department of Education exposing the unsubstantiated and misleading claims that provide the rationale for why school districts should implement the curriculum. We are writing to express our deep dismay over the CDE's unwillingness to carefully review and remove these baseless claims from the final draft of the ESMC, and **we urge you to withhold approval of the curriculum until the claims are removed.**

Our [first letter](#), sent on January 21, 2021, contained an eight-page analysis of the research cited in the Benefits of Ethnic Studies section of the Introduction to the Third Field Review of the ESMC. Focusing on the overarching claim of the section taken verbatim from a 2011 review article by Christine Sleeter — “There is considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students” — as well as several other specific claims about the educational benefits of ethnic studies attributed to various research articles, the comprehensive analysis found that ***none of the articles cited in the ESMC provided sufficient evidence for the claims attributed to it.***

Furthermore, we pointed out that our conclusions were corroborated by none other than Thomas Dee and Emily Penner, authors of the most recent study cited in the curriculum, in which they wrote that previous ethnic studies (ES) 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.” The researchers even cautioned against attempts at “scaling up and replicating” the ethnic studies course they themselves had investigated, noting that “the effects of such smaller-scale interventions are often very different when the same policies are implemented at scale.” Nevertheless, the ESMC ignored Dee and

Penner's plea for caution, exaggerating the researchers' very modest and somewhat confounding results - that students hovering slightly below a 2.0 GPA who were encouraged to take an ethnic studies course improved their GPAs compared to students slightly above a 2.0 GPA who were *not* encouraged to take the course (while students who were encouraged to take the course but did not do so similarly improved their academic scores, and students who took the course but were not encouraged to do so did not gain academically) - to support the ESMC's sweeping claim that ethnic studies courses increase student GPAs, especially in math and science.

Our [second letter](#), sent on March 4, was a response to a petition addressed to Superintendent Thurmond that was organized by Christine Sleeter, author of the ESMC's central claim that ethnic studies courses result in "positive academic and social outcomes for students." The petition itself acknowledges the lack of robust empirical research on the academic benefits of ethnic studies, but astonishingly argues that these empirically unsubstantiated claims should continue to serve as justification for not only teaching "critical" ethnic studies courses, but for requiring students to take such courses. In our letter we noted that besides providing a major rationale for the ESMC itself, Sleeter's unsubstantiated 2011 claim has served as the rationale for the promotion of almost every piece of public policy regarding the teaching of ethnic studies in California schools, including AB 2016, AB 1460 and AB 331, and we stated, "***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.***"

We also stressed the bad faith of the activist-educators who knowingly promulgate false claims about the academic benefits of ethnic studies in order to ensure that the highly politicized and controversial version of the discipline known as Critical Ethnic Studies — a version that many Californians believe is extremely divisive, will promote hatred and bigotry in CA classrooms, and is wholly inappropriate for K-12 students — will be widely taught throughout the state. The fact that the CDE is willing to continue this charade by refusing to remove these empirically unsubstantiated claims from the final draft of the curriculum is extremely troubling.

As you well know, the pandemic has been responsible for a catastrophic loss of instruction for millions of K-12 students in the state. One [study](#) by researchers at Stanford University found that during the early stages of the pandemic, children lost an average of 116 days of reading time and 215 days of math work, and that recovery from these losses could take years. **In light of the pandemic's drastic reversal of students' academic achievement, it is irresponsible and unethical to use false claims about the academic benefits of the ESMC to convince already overwhelmed school districts and teachers to implement a curriculum that has not been shown to improve students' academic achievement and may in fact add to their trauma. We therefore urge you to withhold approval of the ESMC unless and until the Benefit of Ethnic Studies section is removed from the curriculum.**

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned 145 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
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Andrew Viterbi, Professor Emeritus, UC San Diego
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Anton Kapustin, PhD, Professor, California Institute of Technology
Arieh Warshel, PhD, Nobel Laureate and Distinguished Professor, University of Southern California
Arnold Felsenfeld, MD, Professor Emeritus, UCLA
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Barry Chiswick, PhD, Professor, George Washington University
Barry Demchak, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC San Diego
Barry Simon, PhD, Professor Emeritus, California Institute of Technology
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