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
Sacramento, CA 95814

Governor Gavin Newsom
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173
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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
Andrew Pessin, PhD, Professor, Connecticut College
Andrew Viterbi, Professor Emeritus, UC San Diego
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
Arieh Warshel, PhD, Nobel Laureate and Distinguished Professor, University of Southern California
Arnold Felsenfeld, MD, Professor Emeritus, UCLA
Arnold Jacobson, MD, Professor Emeritus, UCLA
B. Nelson Ong, PhD, Professor Emeritus, College of New Rochelle
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
Barry Simon, PhD, Professor Emeritus, California Institute of Technology
Barry Weissman, OD, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UCLA School of Medicine
Boris Mityagin, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Ohio State University
Carmel Chiswick, PhD, Professor Emerita, University of Illinois at Chicago
Carol Edelman, PhD, Professor Emeritus, CSU Chico
Charles Geshekter, PhD, Professor Emeritus, California State University Chico
Chris Wonnell, Professor, JD, University of San Diego
Corinne Blackmer, PhD, Professor, Southern Connecticut State University
Dan Fendel, PhD, Professor Emeritus, San Francisco State University
Daniel Klein, PhD, Professor, George Mason University
Daniel Neuhauser, PhD, Professor, UCLA
Daniel Palanker, PhD, Professor, Stanford University
Darrell Long, PhD, Distinguished Professor, UC Santa Cruz
David Bensimon, PhD, Professor, UCLA
David Feifel, MD, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC San Diego
David Klieger, PhD, Distinguished Professor and Executive Vice Chancellor Emeritus, UC Santa Cruz
David Potts, PhD, Professor, City College of San Francisco
David Siegel, MD, MPH, Professor Emeritus, UC Davis
David Stronck, PhD, Professor Emeritus, CSU East Bay
Deanne Meyer, PhD, Cooperative Extension Specialist, UC Davis
Debby Rosenthal, PhD, Professor, John Carroll University
Dennis Carson, MD, Professor Emeritus, UC San Diego
Doreen De Leon, PhD, Professor, CSU Fresno
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Eli Yablonovitch, PhD, Professor, UC Berkeley
Ezra Maguen, MD, FACS, FICS, Clinical Professor, UCLA
Frederick Milstein, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC Santa Barbara
Gabe Vorobiof, MD, Professor, UCLA School of Medicine
George M. Lewis, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Cal Poly, SLO
George Roussas, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC Davis
George Seaver, PhD, Independent Researcher
Gerald Gillespie, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Stanford University
Gina Strumwasser, PhD, Professor Emerita, Fresno State University
Helene Levens Lipton, PhD, Professor Emerita, UC San Francisco
Ilan Benjamin, PhD, Distinguished Professor, UC Santa Cruz
Irving Biederman, PhD, Professor, University of Southern California
Itzhak Bars, PhD, Professor, University of Southern California
Ivan Schuller, PhD, Distinguished Professor, UC San Diego
Jack Berger, MD, PhD, Professor Emeritus, University of Southern California
James Enstrom, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UCLA
James Fay, PhD, Professor Emeritus, CSU East Bay
Jay Bergman, PhD, Professor, Central Connecticut State University
Jay Rosenheim, PhD, Distinguished Professor, UC Davis
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
Jim Moore, PhD, Professor, University of Southern California
Joanne Donsky, MSW, LCSW, Professor Emerita, UC San Francisco
John H. Riskind, PhD, Professor, George Mason University
John M. Ellis, PhD, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, UC Santa Cruz
Jonathan Roth, PhD, Professor, San Jose State University
Joseph Manson, PhD, Professor, UCLA
Joshua Muravchik, PhD, Adjunct Professor, Institute of World Politics
Judea Pearl, PhD, Chancellor’s Professor, UCLA
Judith Frydman, PhD, Stanford University
Kaare Strom, PhD, Distinguished Professor, UC San Diego
Keith Whitaker, PhD, Chairman, National Association of Scholars
Larry Alexander, LLB, Distinguished Professor, University of San Diego
Larry Clayton, PhD, Professor Emeritus, University of Alabama
Lee Jussim, PhD, Distinguished Professor, Rutgers University
Lee Ohanian, PhD, Professor, UCLA
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Mark Barash, PhD, Professor, San Jose State University
Mark Lee, PhD, Professor, University of San Diego
Marvin Goldman, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC Davis
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Mitchell Langbert, PhD, Professor, Brooklyn College
Naomi Wagner, PhD, Professor, San Jose State University
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Nora Laiken, PhD, Lecturer, UC Davis
Norma Landau, PhD, Professor Emerita, UC Davis
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Sara Reguer, PhD, Professor, Brooklyn College
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Sarkis Joe Khoury, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC Riverside
Sheldon Rothblatt, PhD, Professor Emeritus, UC Berkeley
Shimon Weiss, PhD, Distinguished Professor, UCLA
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Simone Monier Clay, PhD, Professor, UC Davis
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Stanley Dubinsky, PhD, Professor, University of South Carolina
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