



March 22, 2021

RE: AMCHA Initiative Opposes AB 101

Honorable Assembly Education Committee Chair Patrick O'Donnell,

As director of AMCHA Initiative, an organization that documents, investigates and combats antisemitism in institutions of higher education in America, I am writing to express my organization's grave concerns and strong opposition to AB 101, the bill making an ethnic studies course based on the AB 2016-mandated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) a graduation requirement for California high school students.

Although the ESMC underwent four revisions over a two-year period, we believe the final draft, approved by the California State Board of Education (SBE) last week, is no less problematic and fundamentally flawed than the original draft, which evoked outrage from tens of thousands of Californians, hundreds of organizations, dozens of state legislators and Governor Newsom himself, who vowed the draft "would never see the light of day." My organization is deeply concerned that classes taught using this curriculum will become vehicles for highly controversial, one-sided and extremely coercive political advocacy and activism that will both subvert the educational mission of our schools and incite bigotry and harm against many students.

AB 2016, the bill mandating the development of the ESMC, clearly calls for a non-political, multicultural approach to ethnic studies that would prepare students in one of the most ethnically diverse states in the nation "to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures" — a worthy goal embraced by the vast majority of Californians. In stark contrast, the recently approved ESMC is firmly rooted in Critical Ethnic Studies, a narrow conceptualization of the field of ethnic studies that limits its primary focus to only four racialized groups, is firmly rooted in neo-Marxist ideologies that divide society into oppressed and oppressor groups based primarily on race, and, as part of its disciplinary mission, uses the classroom to coerce students into adopting a set of narrow political beliefs and political activism.

Unlike other subjects taught in K-12 classrooms, which seek to instruct students in a body of knowledge and provide them with the analytical tools to objectively evaluate that knowledge and arrive at their own conclusions, Critical Ethnic Studies starts with a set of foregone conclusions and ideological commitments that are imposed on students and must be adopted by them without question or debate. In many cases, these commitments stand in direct opposition to liberal democratic and Judeo-Christian values that students learn in their homes and houses of worship. We are concerned that students who, for example, reject the racial characterizations of the discipline or other dogmatic ideological values espoused by the curriculum or their teachers, would be penalized for expressing their views in an ethnic studies classroom, or would self-censor their expression for fear of public humiliation. In addition, requiring students to engage in politically-directed activism to advance ideologies and values

with which they do not agree is nothing short of a coercion of conscience and constitutes educational abuse.

Moreover, the moral valuation inherent in Critical Ethnic Studies that encourages lionizing the "oppressed" and demonizing the "oppressor" directly and substantively harms many students, who, by virtue of their race, socio-economic status, gender, religion, etc., may well find themselves subject to opprobrium and hostility for being members, or perceived members, of an alleged oppressor group. According to Kenneth Monteiro, Dean of the SFSU College of Ethnic Studies and a leading proponent of the teaching of Critical Ethnic Studies in both CSU and K-12 classrooms, "We actually prepare our teachers to know that on the first day of class, or in the first week, you may have students who are sobbing. This is the first time they've had to be this uncomfortable." In addition, an essay in an edited volume promoting the Critical Ethnic Studies approach that is prominently featured in the ESMC, *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*, affirms that while teachers adopting this approach don't actively teach their students "to hate other groups of people...such strong feelings are part of students' sense-making and development." In fact, in acknowledgment of the trauma that Critical Ethnic Studies classes can inflict on some students, the third draft of the ESMC encouraged teachers to become attentive to "trauma-informed" educational practices and recommended that schools have "school site counselors" available when "negative emotions and/or traumas" arise in ethnic studies classrooms. Although the trauma warnings in the third draft were removed in the final SBE-approved ESMC, the trauma-inducing lessons remained unchanged. It is absolutely **unconscionable** that a curriculum known by education officials to cause trauma in students will not only be offered to them, but, if such courses become a state-wide graduation requirement, will be forced upon them.

While the tenets of Critical Ethnic Studies will have a dangerously divisive and harmful impact on all California students, they are particularly threatening to the state's Jewish community. Viewed through the lens of Critical Ethnic Studies, Jews are perceived as "white" and "privileged," squarely on the oppressor side of the race-class divide. At a time when anti-Jewish sentiment, hostility and violence has reached truly alarming levels, a state-sponsored curriculum encouraging students to view Jews as "white" and "racially privileged" is tantamount to putting an even larger target on the back of every Jewish student.

In addition, Jewish families throughout the state are deeply concerned that the well-known anti-Zionist bias of the discipline of Critical Ethnic Studies and the widespread anti-Zionist advocacy and activism — particularly the promotion of the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement — of its scholars and teachers in their classrooms and other professional spaces, will incite further hatred of Jews and harm to Jewish students. Indeed, several empirical studies at the college level have shown strong correlations between faculty who use their classrooms to express support and advocate for anti-Zionist causes, including BDS, and anti-Semitic incidents that target Jewish students for harm, including physical and verbal assault, vandalism, bullying and harassment. That is why after the release of the first draft of the ESMC, 18,000 members of the Jewish and pro-Israel community submitted public comments decrying the draft's overt anti-Israel bias and explicit promotion of BDS. Many also noted that a majority of the ethnic studies experts hired or appointed by the California Department of Education to develop the first draft curriculum had publicly expressed support for BDS or other anti-Zionist sentiments. And although the overt anti-Zionist rhetoric and BDS promotion contained primarily in a lesson included in the first draft were removed from subsequent drafts, a new lesson plan featured in the final draft opens the door to the reinsertion of anti-Zionist content when the

ESMC is implemented in classrooms throughout the state.

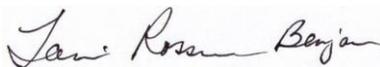
Even more alarming in this regard is that "[Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Institute](#)," an educational consulting firm established by former members of the ESMC advisory committee responsible for the development of the roundly rejected first draft of the curriculum, is offering to school districts throughout the state their own critical ethnic studies model curriculum based largely on the discredited first draft, including its anti-Zionist content and BDS-promotion. The same group of educator-activists has already lobbied school districts throughout the state to support the controversial original first draft of the ESMC, and to date, at least 20 districts have adopted it. Although AB 101 recommends that school districts use the SBE-approved ESMC as the basis for courses required by the bill, it allows school districts to use any curriculum "approved by the governing board of the school district," even the inflammatory first draft of the ESMC being vigorously promoted by educator-activists throughout the state.

Finally, we bring to your attention the fact that a comprehensive analysis of the research cited for the ESMC's bold claims about the academic benefits of ethnic studies classes by more than [100 university scholars and academics](#), found no substantive empirical support for these claims. Considering the catastrophic educational losses and trauma that have already been inflicted on millions of California students due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe it is irresponsible and unethical to pass a bill requiring students to take a course that has not been shown to improve students' academic achievement, and is quite likely to incite strife and hatred.

For the reasons outlined above, we call on you to **vote NO on AB 101**.

Thank you for your leadership in these challenging times, and for ensuring that all California students are provided a non-politicized, non-bigoted quality education that allows them to recover from the enormous educational losses inflicted by the pandemic, helps them thrive in an ethnically diverse state, and sets them on the path to success.

Sincerely,



Tammi Rossman-Benjamin
Director, AMCHA Initiative