

Op-Ed Why ethnic studies programs are good for California, and America

By **NOAH REMNICK**

JULY 2, 2014, 6:06 PM

On Nov. 6, 1968, the Black Student Union and a coalition of student groups at San Francisco State University known as the Third World Liberation Front began what would become the longest student strike in U.S. history. They wanted the university to institute an ethnic studies program.

Beyond simply teaching students names like Frederick Douglass and Sacagawea, the program they envisioned would explore race and ethnicity across all disciplines in order to address issues of Eurocentrism, oppression and identity.

Such a field had been proposed since the late 19th century by thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and José Martí, but obstinate elites had never formalized it in mainstream academia. At one rally, San Francisco State President S.I. Hayakawa silenced student activists by yanking the wires out of the loudspeakers. But after nearly five months, he capitulated, instituting the first College of Ethnic Studies in the nation.

The movement that started at San Francisco State spread across the state and country. Today, some form of ethnic studies is taught at most American universities. Nine of the 10 University of California campuses (UC San Francisco, the system's health science campus, is the exception) have various ethnic studies departments and programs, offering courses on Native American literature (UC San Diego), “Gandhi and the Civil Rights Movement in America” (UC Berkeley) and farmworker history (UCLA). Yale offers a major in ethnicity, race and migration. Columbia is home to the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race.

But ethnic studies remains virtually absent in K-12 public education nationally, and it is rare even in California, where about three-quarters of students are nonwhite.

That could change with Assemblyman Luis Alejo's (D-Watsonville) recent introduction of AB 1750, a bill requiring California to form a task force that would study how to best implement a standardized ethnic studies program for high school students throughout the state. Such a program would shore up important gaps in students' knowledge and, coming from one of the most diverse states in the nation,

serve as a powerful model for the rest of the country.

There is plenty of evidence of the need for ethnic studies. On the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress U.S. history exam, only 2% of 12,000 high school seniors could successfully answer even a simple question about the 1954 landmark Supreme Court school integration case *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The blame should fall not on “lazy” students but on deficient curricula.

A report this year by the Southern Poverty Law Center revealed a disturbing abundance of states offering little or no study of the civil rights movement. In a comprehensive analysis of state standards and instructional resources, the center handed out Fs to nearly half of the country based on what teachers were expected to teach about civil rights history. (California, which received an F on the 2011 iteration of the same report, saw its grade jump to a B this year, suggesting the possibility for meaningful improvement.)

Not surprisingly, high school textbooks also give scant attention to ethnic studies. And that may mean students have little chance of encountering the stories of, say, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez and Maxine Hong Kingston.

In 2011, the National Education Assn. published a review of research on ethnic studies that summarized K-12 textbooks this way: “Whites continue to receive the most attention and appear in the widest variety of roles, dominating story lines and lists of accomplishments. African Americans, the next most represented racial group, appear in a more limited range of roles and usually receive only a sketchy account historically, being featured mainly in relationship to slavery. Asian Americans and Latinos appear mainly as figures on the landscape with virtually no history or contemporary ethnic experience. Native Americans appear mainly in the past.”

The problem can't be solved by lightly interspersing ethnic diversity into the existing curricula — tokenism goes only so far. This is about offering students an education that is not just enriching but empowering.

Indeed, there is a strong body of social science evidence showing that a serious ethnic studies program can pay off in improved student achievement and higher graduation rates.

For example, the NEA review of research cites multiple university studies showing that, for students of color, the more they know about race, racism and cultural identity, the higher their grades and graduation rates, and the more likely they are to go on to college.

Interestingly, the positive impact of such studies is even higher on white students, who gain a much

more sophisticated ethnic consciousness as they confront issues of race already familiar to minority students.

In some states, high school ethnic studies programs have met resistance from conservative legislatures. The rationale was that such classes foster racial resentment and division. Four years ago, the Arizona Legislature outlawed such courses, including a popular Mexican American studies program in Tucson, **despite data that showed improved achievement** and a state-commissioned **independent audit** praising the classes.

“No evidence as seen by the auditors exists to indicate that instruction within Mexican American Studies Department program classes advocates ethnic solidarity,” the report read. “Rather, it has been proven to treat student as individuals.”

Ethnic studies is no panacea for California's deep education disparities. Not when overwhelmingly minority schools in the state **spend** thousands less per pupil (including teacher salaries) than overwhelmingly white schools. Not when students of color face **harsher discipline** than their white classmates. And not when schools are still **largely segregated** along racial and economic lines.

In a state where minorities are the majority, a dynamic understanding of ethnicity isn't a luxury or a diversion but a necessity. Such courses would help high school students to grapple with the complex history of oppression and achievement in a truthful — and even liberating — fashion.

Noah Remnick, a Los Angeles Times intern, will be a senior at Yale University in the fall.

Copyright © 2014, Los Angeles Times