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Embedding Equity Into the Student Experience in Culver City Public Schools, CA



THE POLICY

The Culver City Unified School District (CCUSD) is one of many districts across the country pushing to center equity in all facets of their work, including governance, curriculum, and opportunities for all students to thrive. To advance equity in governance, the district spent the last year developing an Equity Strategic Plan, which commits them to equity auditing and reform at four institutional levels, including that of the organization, staff experience, parent experience and student experience over the next three years. The [Equity Strategic Plan](#) addresses discipline, grading, curriculum, attendance permitting, funding, professional development, parent education, student voice and so much more.

One of the most important goals outlined in the Equity Plan is to make ethnic studies a central focus of their curriculum. Ethnic Studies as a course comes directly from the rich history of activism that emphasized the importance of intersectionality and Critical Race Theory throughout the state of California. In the 1970s, students at San Francisco State and Berkeley staged a walkout over demands to include ethnic studies as part of their curriculum. Around the same time, a robust resistance movement, known as the Chicano Moratorium, was taking shape among the Mexican diaspora in Southern California in opposition to the Vietnam War. These advocacy stories, among many others, are critical components of many ethnic studies curricula.

Culver City and the surrounding Los Angeles area are incredibly diverse, with a large Chicano population. Labor unions representing educators have made it very clear that they support and endorse policymakers that believe in curricula which overtly teaches stories of resistance, including the Chicano Moratorium and others covered in ethnic studies courses. These unions have been instrumental in leading the state and California State Universities (CSU) to mandate one ethnic studies course as a graduation requirement for all students beginning with fall 2020 freshman classes. Governor Newsom vetoed a bill mandating the course as a graduation requirement for K-12 students in September of 2020, but some K-12 districts, including LAUSD, have implemented it as a requirement.

Ethnic studies courses are designed to meet California's A-G requirements, the minimum criteria to be met by all high school graduates in order for them to be eligible for any University of California (UC) or CSU institution. While A-G course completion is required for entry into California four-year colleges and universities, it is not yet a high school graduation requirement in most California districts. This discrepancy has significant equity implications and prevents many students from attending four-year universities after they graduate. Students without A-G can still attend two-year higher education institutions.

CCUSD Board members had been discussing mandating ethnic studies as a graduation requirement prior to the murder of George Floyd. After his death, however, CCUSD students became increasingly vocal in their insistence that ethnic and gender studies, both previously separate electives, be made mandatory. In response to their organizing, at the end of August, alongside LAUSD, the Culver City School Board directed district staff to come back with a report on phasing in Ethnic Studies and A-G completion as graduation requirements by 2023.

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

The district formed an equity committee in 2016 in the wake of the national election. In 2019, a working group composed of community members, teachers, staff, parents, and administrators participated in a year-long consultant-facilitated strategic planning process that resulted in the adoption of the equity plan in August of 2020. The committee is now designing a “heat map” of priorities and action steps, upon which the community is invited to comment. One of the most compelling aspects of the current committee work is the integral role played by students. Students are actively participating in setting priorities and determining action steps, and are diligently holding the district accountable for the plan’s promise to include students in decision making at all levels, from the board to the curriculum committees.

Including ethnic studies as part of the A-G graduation requirements is one example of the direct result of amplified student voice. Self-identifying BIPOC students were instrumental in maintaining this work. Students organized their own virtual town hall, advocated at multiple public board meetings and ultimately created pressure on the board to direct staff as they finally did in August of 2020. It was these student-led presentations and discussions that highlighted the potential for Ethnic Studies to serve as a hyper-localized microcosm of a culturally responsive curriculum.

Districts can and should curate these curricula according to local social and cultural environments as well as the unique histories of resistance in the region. This is an excellent way to activate and engage with the local community as sources of historical and political knowledge, and even as potential guest lecturers and speakers. This format allowed Culver City students to see their needs reflected in both their academic content as well as the instructors delivering the material and facilitating their education.

EQUITY

The Equity Strategic Plan will begin to transform culture by explicitly directing a review of current practices from the standpoint of equity. Gender, disability, and race equity are training and professional development directives for parents and educators, specifically the use of Critical Race Theory. The plan also directs the district to rewrite policies that disproportionately exclude or target students of color and low income students.

The Equity Strategic Plan is not yet funded, and CCSD has yet to hire a coordinator to execute it, so these are both immediate imperatives. However, Culver City’s BIPOC students are advocating to reallocate funding from the municipal police department budget to fund both a coordinator and plan implementation.

Ethnic studies centers BIPOC voices so that all students will be exposed to diverse views and experiences. Ethnic studies can also focus attention on histories of resistance and struggle. This is one of the most evidence-supported methods of **teaching critical thinking and producing engaged citizens** of authentic democracies—defined as those in which diverse and dissenting voices are celebrated and encouraged. Pedagogies of resistance aim to link education (the what, how, and why of teaching) to struggles for social and ecological justice. In this sense, they help make students aware of the various inequalities that structure their everyday lives and which are present in their communities, nations, and globally.

Ethnic studies, by definition, take power away from Eurocentric and white supremacist narratives. The Trump administration **demonstrated its preference** for the 1776 curriculum, garnering it national attention, as part of its hateful rhetoric towards the *New York Times’* The 1619 Project. This had an immediate impact on the Culver City School District as conservative parents began insisting that the district implement the former and prohibit the instructional use of the latter, more progressive curriculum.

The district is working to codify its commitments to center BIPOC voices, so they do not get muted by reactionary voices that seek to maintain the status quo by demanding a “neutral” approach to history. Our education system was originally designed to uphold white supremacy, and the district is committed to addressing that reality and to reversing the historical role of schools in upholding systems of oppression.

ANALYSIS

- In California, efforts to implement ethnic studies **began** with El Rancho in 2014 and spread across the state although districts continue to **face** significant pushback. Districts in Arizona have also **faced** significant opposition. It took a seven year court **battle** for a judge to ultimately rule that the 2010 state law banning ethnic studies violated students’ constitutional rights.
- Local government dynamics: The Culver City School Board is fully in support of efforts to focus on equity in the district.
- Policy “strength” – Research on ethnic studies supports it as a way to increase student engagement and support student learning. Strategic plans centered on equity offer useful a framework and key commitments, while the level of success depends on implementation

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