

Practitioner's Essay

Teaching Toward Justice and Liberation: Asian American Educators on the Implementation of Ethnic Studies in California K–12 Public Schools

William Gow, Tracy L. Buenavista, Jasmine Nguyen,
Virginia Nguyen, Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales,
and Karen Umemoto

ABSTRACT

The passage of Assembly Bill 1460 and Assembly Bill 101 is set to radically transform the relationship that California students have with the field of Ethnic Studies. When fully implemented, these bills will require that all students graduating from either a public high school or the California State University (CSU) system take a course in Ethnic Studies. However, the passage of these bills has not ensured that all students will be provided a critical grounding in the field of Ethnic Studies. Indeed, the implementation process has raised a series of unanswered questions.

This article brings together a diverse group of Asian American Studies stakeholders to discuss the future of high school Ethnic Studies in California. We ask: How will the mandate to teach high school Ethnic Studies shape the implementation of the CSU Ethnic Studies Area F requirement? Given that more than sixty percent of teachers in California self-identify as white and many have never taken an Ethnic Studies class, who will teach this new Ethnic Studies curriculum? How should California teachers navigate the conservative backlash attempting to ban the teaching of Ethnic Studies, Critical Race Theory, and

Young Adult books with themes focused on race and sexuality? Who will create the textbooks and lesson plans that will be used in these courses, and how do we ensure they remain rooted in foundational Ethnic Studies principals? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, will CSU and California state bureaucrats dictate the answers to these questions, or will high school students themselves, more than nearly eighty percent of whom are students of color, have a voice in their own Ethnic Studies education?

For this article, we have recorded and transcribed a roundtable discussion focused on these and related questions. Roundtable participants have had the opportunity to lightly edit their responses for clarity before publication.

INTRODUCTION

In September 2020, a month after signing Assembly Bill 1460 (AB 1460) into law requiring all students in the California State University (CSU) system to take an Ethnic Studies class for graduation, Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed a similar bill for California public high schools. In vetoing that particular bill, the governor sided with right-wing critics of the original Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, going against the twenty longtime high school educators and Ethnic Studies professors who wrote and developed it. The California Department of Education's failure to support the original Model Curriculum in the face of public pressure from non-experts and conservative critics led all twenty original authors to ask to have their names removed from it. They protested that "Ethnic Studies guiding principles, knowledge, frameworks, pedagogies, and community histories have been compromised due to political and media pressure."¹ While portions of the original framework developed by the original authors remained within the final version of the Model Curriculum, large sections were deleted or revised in the version finally adopted by the California State Board of Education in 2021. Changes in the final version included the deletion or revision of sections on Arab Americans and Palestinians and the removal of Ethnic Studies principles and values. The original authors later renamed themselves the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium (LESMCC) and have been joined by hundreds of Ethnic Studies educators. The LESMCC continues to develop curriculum that they share through their website and teacher development institutes steeped in the principles and cannon of the field of Ethnic Studies.

Following the state adoption of the revised Model Curriculum and the negation of the original version developed by the LESMCC, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 101 (AB 101), which mandates a one-semester course in Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement for all public high school students beginning with the graduating class of 2029-30. In signing the bill, the state left individual school districts to adopt their own curricula for the new course. Similar to its college-level counterpart AB 1460, AB 101 ensures that students at the high school level take an Ethnic Studies course to graduate. Yet unlike faculty in the CSU system who teach courses that fulfill AB 1460 and who are often specialists trained in Ethnic Studies, AB 101 has no stated requirements or training for teachers who will go on to teach high school Ethnic Studies. Indeed, without some type of intervention, large numbers of those assigned to teach these first high school Ethnic Studies classes will be teachers with Social Science credentials who may have never taken an Ethnic Studies course.

At the annual 2023 Teaching for Justice Conference at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) Teacher Academy, we gathered six Asian American Studies stakeholders to discuss the future of K-12 Ethnic Studies in California and to offer critical commentaries on this topic.²

Dr. Allyson Tintiango-Cubales, Professor of Asian American Studies in the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University, has worked with many school districts—including the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD)—to co-develop Ethnic Studies, Social Justice, and Filipino Language curriculum and is also the co-founder and co-director of Community Responsive Education (CRE), a national firm that supports the development of responsive, equitable, and justice-driven educators and Ethnic Studies frameworks, pedagogy, and curriculum. In this discussion, Dr. Tintiango-Cubales provides an overview of the history and development of K-12 Ethnic Studies going back to the 1960s and highlights the ways that Ethnic Studies has reached beyond higher education spaces and into our communities, including our K-12 schools.

Dr. Tracy Lachica Buenavista is a Professor of Asian American Studies and a core faculty member of the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at California State University, Northridge. She reminds us that we must think of Ethnic Studies as much more than content, as the goal has always been liberation.

Dr. Karen Umemoto is a Professor of Urban Planning and Asian American Studies and the Director of the Asian American Studies

Center at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She discusses her work as the Co-Director and Co-Editor of *Foundations and Futures*, UCLA's multimedia textbook on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Virginia Nguyen is a high school history teacher in Orange County and cofounder of Educate to Empower. She lends her insights as a high school teacher and author in this textbook.

Finally, Stanford student Jasmine Nguyen is the co-founder of Diversify Our Narrative (DON), a student-led coalition of approximately over one thousand students fighting for a diverse and inclusive K-12 curricula. She draws on her insights as the co-founder of DON, representing high school and college youth, to remind us that conversations about the development and implementation of K-12 Ethnic Studies must always center teacher and student voices.

The moderator, Dr. William Gow, served for eight years as a middle and high school public school teacher in California prior to his current position as an Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies in the Ethnic Studies Department at Sacramento State University. Names of those speaking, as well as questions asked by Gow as the moderator, have been bolded for clarity in the body of this work.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

William Gow: The passage of Assembly Bill 101 and Assembly Bill 1460 are set to radically transform the relationship that California students have with Ethnic Studies. **Allyson, can you provide us with an overview of how the high school Ethnic Studies graduation requirement came about and what the requirement entails for all public high school students in California?**

Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales: When understanding the roots of California's Ethnic Studies high school graduation requirement, let's deeply consider its origin. Sometimes, people jump to current policy campaigns versus thinking about the history of what it took to get an Ethnic Studies graduation requirement. On our panel, we have the legend, activist, and scholar I greatly admire, Karen Umemoto. In her piece, "On Strike!," she narrates the history of Ethnic Studies long before the recent requirement. Karen's beautiful ethnography embodies Black, Asian American, Chicana/o/Latinx, and Native American solidarity. Activists of that time called for an Ethnic Studies curriculum, but they also called for other rights that should be considered, like open admissions. The overarching goal was that of self-determination.

Talking about their goals is important because many assume that Ethnic Studies is just about curriculum, but it's much more than that. It's always been about Access, Retention, and Community (ARC).

The current graduation requirements both at the high school and college levels result from what the Black Student Union (BSU), the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), and their allies went on strike for at San Francisco State University (SF State), then College. The ARC that they fought for was to ensure marginalized communities had access to college, that the university be connected to the community, and, of course, the centerpiece was relevancy. Relevancy is beyond posters that look like students on the walls or textbooks with people of color in them. Relevancy in Ethnic Studies is not about surface representation. TWLF described relevancy as "confronting racism, poverty, and misrepresentation imposed on 'minority' peoples (people of color) by formally recognized institutions and organizations operating in the State of California" (Umemoto, 1989, 39). Ethnic Studies was not just a subject matter or content area, but a pedagogy. Its goal was to shift the purpose of education; as Umemoto describes, it was a new consciousness.

The movement for Ethnic Studies was and is not just at SF State. University of California, Berkeley established their Ethnic Studies Department in 1969. El Plan at Santa Barbara, a document written in 1969 at the University of California, Santa Barbara, set the foundation of Chicano/x/a Studies. Community colleges like the City College of San Francisco also established Ethnic Studies courses, programs, and departments. We must also include programs like UCLA's High Potential program, established in 1968, which fought to give access to nontraditional students like gang leaders, those previously incarcerated, and activists. The institutionalization of Educational Opportunity Programs to support first-generation and historically disadvantaged groups was also part of the history during the late 1960s.

In 1968, the activists who fought for Ethnic Studies were not just fighting for Ethnic Studies in higher education; they were fighting for Ethnic Studies in our communities, including schools. Berkeley High students went on a successful strike to demand the creation of the first African American Studies department at a high school. The students also successfully got the district to hire more Black teachers.

The movement and efforts in the late '60s and '70s inspired the establishment of current Ethnic Studies offerings. In 2001, I helped establish Pin@y (Pinay/Pinoy) Educational Partnerships (PEP), a

Filipina/x/o American Studies program where college students learn to teach Ethnic Studies to K-12 students in San Francisco. Also, Logan High School in Union City, California, just celebrated the twentieth anniversary of its Ethnic Studies courses.

In 2008, San Francisco school board member Eric Mar championed a resolution to establish a committee where I was brought on as the academic advisor to work alongside teacher-on-special-assignment Pete Hammer and a group of teachers to create an Ethnic Studies curriculum that would be taught at the ninth grade level. This led to a course pilot, resulting in the positive academic outcomes researched by Thomas Dee and Emily Penner.

Christine Sleeter in 2011 wrote a briefing for the National Education Association detailing the academic and social benefits of Ethnic Studies, which established that the field not only supports students of color—it benefits white students, too. Dee and Penner's (2017) piece solidified the academic benefits. This led to the realization that Ethnic Studies could positively impact student outcomes. Although that is a selling point for educational leaders, our real goal in Ethnic Studies centers the stories and voices of communities of color and ultimately to eradicate racism. And Ethnic Studies was supposed to be about impacting the wellness and wholeness of our communities. It's okay that it positively impacts student outcomes, but that shouldn't be the only reason why it should be required.

Some of you might have been there when we pushed for Ethnic Studies in schools and requirements long before the passing of AB 101. But our efforts failed over and over. There was an argument criticizing the passing of a requirement without an established curriculum.

This pushed California to create a model curriculum to support the implementation of Ethnic Studies before the requirement. Unfortunately, there was a heated battle over the model curriculum, which led to the villainization of the original writers and experts (me being one of them), which pushed us to revoke our names from the document. The disrespectful and dehumanizing process that we experienced in the model curriculum process led to the creation of the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium, which I am proudly a part of.

California is the first state to require all students to complete a semester-long course in Ethnic Studies to earn a high school diploma. Although the graduation requirement is seen as a win for Ethnic Studies, we face a heavy dilemma to answer questions like: Who will teach it? How will they teach it? How should we prepare teachers to teach it?

William Gow: You talked about the conflict between the Liberated Ethnic Studies model curriculum, and the model curriculum that the state developed later. Could you walk us through the differences between those two model curricula?

Allyson Tintiango-Cubales: The approved model curriculum is not a requirement. That should be very clear. It is a model because it offers suggestions on how to teach Ethnic Studies. A model curriculum is very different from a framework. History-Social Studies has a framework that impacts standards and requirements. A model curriculum does not. It is a set of examples and suggestions on how to implement it. The document has A-G approved course examples, some of which I helped author. But they are examples, not required.

It is important to note that there was controversy over the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum where Zionist pressure pushed to remove critical Palestinian voices. The original lessons written about Arab and Muslim experiences were removed from the Asian American chapter and replaced with a multicultural lesson on Arabs that can be found in the appendix of the curriculum. Additionally, important Arab American figures and the 1948 Nakba were removed, even though “Al-Nakba is one of the biggest historical influences on Palestinians worldwide, including those living in California and throughout the US” (Kiswani, Naber, and Shoman, 226). Additionally, key Ethnic Studies elements were removed and watered down in the curriculum that we—the advisory committee of Ethnic Studies scholars and teachers—didn’t agree with. For example, certain core ideas were taken out of the guiding principles I helped write, including concepts like intersectionality, struggle, resistance, diaspora, and family. Although the model curriculum was altered, you will see remnants of the voices of the original writers and advisory board of California’s model curriculum, and citations of our publications are still in the document.

William Gow: Thank you for that clarification. I want to turn to Tracy Lachica Buenavista and Karen Umemoto. Building on what Allyson said, can you talk about what you see as some of the key impediments to effectively implementing this Ethnic Studies curriculum across the state?

Tracy Lachica Buenavista: For context, the widespread implementation of Ethnic Studies in K-12 education is occurring while we are still in a pandemic. We have a national shortage of teachers, and teachers of color in particular. Now we’re going to layer this onto the reality that

very few teacher education programs have faculty and curriculum for adequate Ethnic Studies teacher preparation. There are recruitment and admissions policies that prevent BIPOC students from entering the profession, and a lack of Ethnic Studies teacher mentors who could equip newer teachers to develop and implement the curriculum. Most districts have no infrastructure to support the implementation. This includes a lack of key staffing to conduct Ethnic Studies professional development for existing teachers, as well as a clear direction on the qualifications teachers need to be eligible to teach Ethnic Studies.

All of these challenges are bred from the reality that Allyson illuminated—there are organized attacks on Ethnic Studies, including attempts at school district and state levels to define and control what constitutes Ethnic Studies. The model curriculum that she and our friends developed required a team of experts to create and is hundreds of pages long. Conservative attacks against such efforts thwarted an Ethnic Studies-led effort to implement an Ethnic Studies curriculum statewide.

I've seen education practitioners also thwart this curriculum from being responsibly implemented. Education folks need to let Ethnic Studies-trained individuals lead the effort. We need to intervene and clarify that this is not only about subject matter expertise, but also Ethnic Studies pedagogy. And beyond subject matter expertise and pedagogy, is the political imperative of liberation. Part of the reason Ethnic Studies pedagogy works is because those employing it are foundationally committed to the idea that education can be used for liberation.

Our discussion is important so that everybody is on board in terms of what we deem necessary in the teaching of Ethnic Studies.

William Gow: Tracy, you mentioned recruitment of future teachers of color, a lack of mentors for those teachers, a lack of district infrastructure, and ongoing conservative attacks on Ethnic Studies. Karen, what else do you think might be impediments to implementing this new curriculum?

Karen Umemoto: I just want to underscore the fact that this is a political battle. The right to teach Ethnic Studies is a political battle, and I think the Right has weaponized Ethnic Studies in the form of the attacks on Critical Race Theory (CRT). And we're going to have to develop strategies right down to the school board level—because that's where they're mobilizing, at the school board level—to figure

out how to make sure that our teachers who teach Ethnic Studies are protected and our librarians are protected, and that people are not intimidated from teaching the curriculum that many of us in the field are trying to develop.

William Gow: Virginia Nguyen, you're a high school teacher. As we implement this requirement across the state, how do you think California teachers, students, and their supporters should navigate the conservative backlash that Tracy and Karen are alluding to?

Virginia Nguyen: Let me start by sharing that I live and teach in Southern California. I teach in a district that is privileged and has a lot of access, so some of the things that I'll be sharing with you are unique to my circumstance. I've taught at other places, and I want to share with you this reality of teaching Ethnic Studies. I don't have an Ethnic Studies background myself, but what I do have is a commitment to learn, and a commitment to use my lived experiences as a place of power and liberation for myself, my students, and my community. Ethnic Studies comes in as a place of cultural preservation. That's where I really see the power of Ethnic Studies.

When I think about this potential for conservative backlash, the first thing I think of is, "Wow, I have so much power that people are freaking out." That's the first thing I think of because these are people who traditionally think Asian Americans are invisible, who do not value my story, who are so afraid of my voice that they're going to use their time, their energy, to try to silence it.

The very first thing I encourage my fellow educators to do is: find your power. The power that comes from the fact that we want to be visible and remember that the reason people are mad is because they're scared.

Then the next thing is: find your community. We cannot be alone, especially as educators of color, especially as Asian American and Pacific Islander educators. We must find others to build community with and find strength and learn from one another. Most of my strength, though, comes from my students. It's their voices. So when I think about how to navigate this backlash, I'm always going to turn to the voices of my students to tell the rest of the community what is needed. I'm going to find ways to center and amplify the ways in which Ethnic Studies is bringing rich experiences to them.

William Gow: Tracy, we've just heard Virginia's thoughts from a teacher perspective. What kind of insight can you give us about

navigating this conservative backlash from the perspective of an Ethnic Studies professor in the field of education?

Tracy Lachica Buenavista: I want to echo Virginia, because I think as Ethnic Studies faculty in higher education, we experience the same thing. And the one thing that I think helps to sustain our work is the community that drives us and holds us when we're hurting. We need to find community, build community.

I want to acknowledge some educator-driven, grassroots efforts like the Coalition for Liberated Ethnic Studies and The People's Education Movement. These are two really important grassroots spaces where you can see people fighting for Ethnic Studies and gain confidence that we're going to win when we organize.

But I also want to add to this question an observation. We're seeing a backlash against Ethnic Studies and CRT, but I want to emphasize that they are not the same. In many ways, Ethnic Studies is collateral damage in the state-sanctioned attacks on CRT. For example, the rejection by politicians of the Advanced Placement African American Studies course in Florida was enabled because politicians mischaracterized the content of the course as being filled with CRT.

Subsequently, I saw a lot of Ethnic Studies practitioners deny CRT as a strategic way to protect their own ability to teach Ethnic Studies. I also saw Ethnic Studies folks downplay CRT's utility in a K-12 classroom—downplay our students' ability to comprehend its major tenets. They inadvertently depoliticized the Ethnic Studies classroom by saying, "My class is not about politics. It's just about culture and learning." But, no. Ethnic Studies is political. We have a political agenda. And that agenda is to dismantle white supremacy. We need to argue and hold true to that.

My own work in Ethnic Studies is very much grounded in CRT. I think Ethnic Studies-trained folks who went into teaching gravitated to CRT because it's among a few areas in education that spoke to our political sensibilities. I want to warn us against the conflation of Ethnic Studies and CRT, while also emphasizing that there's a nuanced relationship there. Teachers, students, and other Ethnic Studies advocates can be attentive to this particular issue and this nuance.

William Gow: *Jasmine Nguyen, I know you are the head of Diversify Our Narrative (DON), a group of high school and college students who have been advocating for Ethnic Studies across the country. What are some of the foundational Ethnic Studies concepts that can*

help students understand the world in which they live, and how to go about making this positive change, which so many of our speakers have alluded to?

Jasmine Nguyen: Speaking from my own background, I'm from Orange County, and the school district right next to me just passed a ban on CRT in their high schools. My co-founder Katelin Zhou and I both grew up in very conservative districts, so we formulated our theory of change based on what we thought would be adaptable in our own school districts. A lot of this is starting with the rhetoric of "Do you know your history?" Rather than beginning with larger concepts, we try to begin with personal reflection based on lived experience.

I'm Vietnamese. My parents were refugees from the Vietnam War. When I entered college, I realized I never learned about the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese perspective. I never learned about Critical Race Theory until I took courses with Dr. Gow, my old professor. DON's foundation is: Do you know your history? Do you see yourself represented in the books that you are told to read? If a K-12 education is supposed to be the foundation of society, and the basis for you to understand what you want to do, moving forward, shouldn't your history and your ethnic identity, your racial identity, be a core part of that? And so, when we speak to other students about wanting to get involved in Ethnic Studies or learn about it, it is the question we ask. One of my favorite quotes is: "No history, no self; know history, know self."

William Gow: Jasmine, you talked about students grounding Ethnic Studies in their own lived experiences and their own histories. Given this, does the strategy of DON change based on location— given that this backlash is much more pronounced in some places than others?

Jasmine Nguyen: The words we use vary depending on where we're working. In Los Angeles, we had a group of students who would fight to learn about CRT, or about colonialism, but in Orange County, you cannot easily bring up those terminologies. Instead, we begin the conversation by asking: "Can we see people who look like ourselves in the textbooks?" Where we work shapes the kinds of language we can use. That's not to say that the concepts are different. In both Los Angeles and Orange County, we're saying we deserve to know our history, but we're going to say it in a different way.

William Gow: Karen, I know that you and UCLA are in the process of putting together a free multimedia textbook. As we think ahead

to the need for an Ethnic Studies curriculum, who is going to create the textbooks and lesson plans that become the foundation of Ethnic Studies education for K- 12 students?

Karen Umemoto: Yes, we have over fifty years of scholarship in Asian American Studies hidden behind paywalls of libraries and publishers. I think it's incumbent upon all of us to try to translate that into K-12 materials for students, and there are a lot of great people and organizations doing that who can hopefully centralize it into a list. Noreen Rodriguez did a great job compiling one for the Association of Asian American Studies—a list of great curricula that are out there. For us at UCLA, we're developing a multimedia textbook: free, online, open access with curricular materials. And we're figuring out how to do this in a way that meets the needs of different grade levels, different reading levels, different locations and geographies, and different demographics in a way that there's something useful for everybody knowing that there are many different entry points to learning Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies.

Building upon what Jasmine said about the foundational concepts, we're trying to figure out how to really teach students about these concepts—colonialism, capitalism, and other axes of power and difference, including class, race, gender and sexuality. If we want people to dismantle white supremacy, we need to be able to define what that is, how it's supported, and also have students understand the concepts of justice, social justice, histories of fighting for justice, and how to build solidarity and collective action for positive change. These types of concepts run through many of the chapters, but I think that the challenge is to write it and present it in a way that's accessible and relevant to ninth graders, which is really difficult. That's a challenge we're facing and trying to address. We're at this point where a lot of scholars hold knowledge. People in the community hold knowledge. We're figuring out how to combine that in a way so we could present exciting, engaging prose to a generation who grew up in a multimedia-packed atmosphere.

Chapters are under development and will be rolled out over the next few years. We are developing partnerships with organizations that can reach and train teachers in Ethnic Studies pedagogy and use the multimedia textbook and its lesson plans. We can't do it alone. We need to build a movement among teachers and administrators who can appreciate how the stories of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are central to American history and how we can learn from our history to create a more just, democratic, and inclusive society. We are working

with organizations like the National Educators Association, the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, and others to develop teacher training programs using chapters and curriculum from *Foundations and Futures*. The textbook will be launched in 2025.

William Gow: I know your textbook has a multimedia component. Can you talk about the differences in form between a traditional textbook and the textbook the UCLA Asian American Studies Center is developing?

Karen Umemoto: The textbook is punctuated by various multimedia. We have videos, timelines, oral histories, excerpts from novels, poetry, podcast excerpts, photographs, archival documents, artwork, and any other type of multimedia that you could think of. Thuy Vo Dang is doing the Vietnamese Americans chapter and is integrating wonderful materials like oral histories with the help of Virginia Nguyen, who's the curriculum developer for that chapter. So, the sky's the limit. . .but I think the main thing is to make it engaging, interactive, and fun for students to read.

William Gow: Virginia, you've been a classroom teacher for many years. You said you don't teach Ethnic Studies per se, but that you do incorporate Ethnic Studies concepts into your teaching. What are some of the aims of Ethnic Studies pedagogy that are often overlooked in mainstream approaches to teaching?

Virginia Nguyen: I am going to bring my own personal experience as a classroom teacher to this question. I've been in the classroom for twenty years, specifically teaching History in high school and middle school. I would like to believe that I have been implementing the core Ethnic Studies pedagogies in my classes. But over the course of the last three to four years, I've been in deep reflection about my own stance on Ethnic Studies. I used to be afraid that Ethnic Studies would be declared the course that would check all the boxes for race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, and that in other courses we would then be excused from addressing such issues.

But I now understand Ethnic Studies from a completely different lens—that Ethnic Studies is the place for liberation, and that is what is missing in our classes. As a history teacher, a lot of these core beliefs of Ethnic Studies pedagogy should naturally fall there. But what I found is that I'm still so limited, because no matter what I try to do in my history classes, it is still too Eurocentric.

It is important that all educators acknowledge that teaching is a political act, but sadly, not all do. I love that Ethnic Studies pedagogy does not move away from the political nature of education. It puts it right in your face. This is about liberation. This is where the power and voice lie for all of our communities. The parts that I think I need to grow in as a non-Ethnic Studies teacher are encouraging critical thinking and analysis of power structures and social hierarchies, specifically through the lens of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class—the intersectionality of all of those identities together, along with the idea of promoting cultural preservation. I mentioned that earlier, but I move back to it because as a Vietnamese American, my identity, culture, and history is very different from being Vietnamese. So a lot happening in K-12 classrooms today is the celebration of Vietnamese culture: for instance, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year (Tết). That’s a wonderful opportunity for celebration of Vietnamese culture. But where is my Vietnamese American identity? What I see in Ethnic Studies is cultural preservation. I now get to very clearly and intentionally bring into my classroom and center the stories that I’m not capable of centering in my other courses.

William Gow: When I was a teacher, I was always frustrated by state mandates. We have a set of California standards that are very prescriptive, and that often list sets of factual information that the state expects students to learn. Even if we replace these more Eurocentric facts with facts about people of color, you still have a top-down form of education. **How do you negotiate these state standards that require you to teach particular facts while still creating lessons that center the lived experiences of your students?**

Virginia Nguyen: You know, I’m going to turn to my experience working with Karen on the Vietnamese Americans chapter of *Foundations and Futures*. What we did there was start with a really compelling question that connects us all. I will teach this once I get back into teaching U.S. history and get to the Vietnam War. “What has to happen for someone to leave their home?” So that’s where you start. For me, what education should be about is that big, compelling question, so that we understand ourselves, and we understand those around us from a place of empathy.

So that’s where I see Ethnic Studies, and I’m very proud to be part of the Asian American component of Ethnic Studies as a person who is in education—bringing my lived experiences and commitment to use

my voice and privilege as an Asian American, to uplift all communities; to use it to teach from my point of view, but also to connect and bridge to other communities, so that we together can really have that final place of belonging, right. That's where I see Ethnic Studies power is.

William Gow: Given that more than sixty percent of teachers in California self-identify as white, and many teachers have never taken an Ethnic Studies class, how do we ensure that Ethnic Studies teachers, regardless of their positionality or training, are prepared to teach Ethnic studies in the K-12 arena? What does this proper training look like if we want to incorporate the types of pedagogies to which Virginia's been alluding?

Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales: I wish I had hundreds and thousands of Virginias in all these districts. She's amazing! Virginia mentioned that she didn't have that much Asian American or Ethnic Studies background, but she had that desire to learn. This is key. It's not about training. It's about development and growth; people reflecting on who they are as people and in relation to power and race. We need to establish strong relationships with long-time Ethnic Studies practitioners, scholars, and organizations that have been successful in teaching Ethnic Studies and partner with them to create long-term development for K-12 teachers.

The second piece is that we need to treat Ethnic Studies as a discipline that requires teachers to have the background by taking courses—majoring or minoring in Ethnic Studies, similarly to history teachers, social studies teachers, English teachers, and math teachers. All of them take the content courses to teach those subject matters or take the CSET (California Subject Examinations for Teachers). Sometimes people think anyone can teach Ethnic Studies. This is a problematic framework. I think most people can learn to teach a couple of lessons in their classes, but to become an Ethnic Studies teacher—that's a process that takes time, and I believe we need to honor that.

I believe that white teachers, specifically those aligned to the original purpose and committed to developing their Ethnic Studies background and pedagogy, can teach it. But I also think that we need to spend more time recruiting, retaining, and building the growth of teachers of color. So although, yes, we want to be able to support white teachers to teach Ethnic Studies, this should not take away from creating intentional pathways and communities of practice focused on growing Ethnic Studies teachers of color.

William Gow: One of the frustrations that we've had in our department at Sacramento State University is that we have Ethnic Studies majors who want to become K-12 teachers, but their Ethnic Studies degree is not counted by California as subject matter competency for a social science credential. Those students are not allowed to obtain their social science credential without going back and taking a number of history and political science classes, so I appreciate the model you've developed.

Moving on to Jasmine, what are some of the ways that students and youth are involved in advocating for Ethnic Studies, and how can we support, center, and amplify the efforts of young people like yourself?

Jasmine Nguyen: When I was in high school, I didn't know anything about Ethnic Studies. I think there was just not even exposure to begin with, and again I think it ranges depending on where you're from. I'm from a conservative city in Orange County, so it was not something that was spoken about at all. Bringing up Ethnic Studies in your classroom is already a start. DON is a student group where we basically have a bunch of college students and older high school students—like juniors and seniors—mentor younger high school students on how to push for anti-racist and diverse texts in their classrooms, with some of our districts having gone and pushed for Ethnic Studies. Our more conservative areas are pushing literally just to have a book by and about a person of color in it, because it's just so difficult. And so, we have a lot of variance.

Something that we've seen a lot of times: these students will go and try to talk to their teachers, try to talk to their school boards, but do not have adult support in doing so, and they will contact us. A really good example of this is—we had a group in Oklahoma, I believe. They went and presented to their school board and said, we want more diverse books, period, and they actually got a bunch of anonymous death threats over their email from parents. And so they were *so* terrified. But in their high school, they didn't have any teachers who were willing to come with them to that school board meeting. They didn't have any teachers who were willing to stand by them. And I think that just showing up when you see that these youth are doing something can make all of the difference, because they're not going to know how to handle these situations. I didn't know how to handle this situation when they approached us. But just being a figure and letting them know that you have their back, that you're going to stand with them, makes a difference. Even though that sounds very simple, it's actually not very common. Just devoting your time and your presence can make a really big difference.

William Gow: We have one last question. Tracy, can you discuss efforts you've been involved with in K-12 Ethnic Studies in terms of preparing Ethnic Studies students, teachers, and educational leaders?

Tracy Lachica Buenavista: I think there is a heightened level of urgency around the rollout of K-12 Ethnic Studies. Where I've been involved is to think of ways we can systematically grow our own. Ethnic Studies students make the best Ethnic Studies educators, but many of our students are first-generation college students and working class and might be pushed to pursue career pathways perceived as more financially secure. Or, they might be so focused on surviving undergrad that they're missing opportunities to become competitive for credentialing or other graduate programs.

At California State University, Northridge we started the Ethnic Studies Education Pathways Project, which was an effort to guide our Ethnic Studies students to think about K-12 teaching, counseling, and social work careers—focused not only on teaching, but also other practitioner roles at school sites. We partnered students with Ethnic Studies practitioners who could mentor and expose our students to what it means to embody this work, affirming the idea that teaching Ethnic Studies is not just about subject matter content.

We organized professional development opportunities for both the mentors and mentees to go through together because we realized that although the practitioners have a wealth of experience, many haven't had the time nor the opportunity to continue their learning of all the new ways that Ethnic Studies has evolved as a field. We did this in partnership with faculty in the College of Education. We tried to reimagine an "Ethnic Studies Education" that normalized trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches, and transformative justice concepts.

And everyone in the program was compensated, which is an important piece we often don't think about. The folks who are doing this work are the people who are already the most culturally taxed. We only did this program because we were able to secure \$150,000 for two years, with the vast majority into the pockets of the students, mentors, and community-based facilitators who conducted the professional developments. A lot of critical Ethnic Studies training is done on the ground, and oftentimes those doing the work are passion-exploited, so we wanted to materially honor the work they would do with us.

We hosted two cohorts of students who strengthened their commitment to pursuing Ethnic Studies careers. They're more confident in

seeing how Ethnic Studies is actually applicable to career opportunities, which is something that they could talk to their families about, and they've begun to develop this really important community network so that they can actually be supported once they leave us. We try to empower these students to do amazing things, but we also realize that such spaces aren't necessarily with them once they leave; we introduce them to the network of folks that we're in community with.

CONCLUSION

In so many ways, the fate of Ethnic Studies in the CSU system is intertwined with the progress of Ethnic Studies at the K-12 level. If AB 1460 is to be considered an unqualified success, there are steps we must take to integrate Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies content and pedagogy in California across grade levels from kindergarten to college. These include:

1. Expand upon both AB 1460 and AB 101 to establish and properly fund Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies courses and programs at all levels of education.
2. Support and amplify the Ethnic Studies work already being done in K-12 public school classrooms.
3. Ensure that the scholarly fields of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies retain their integrity as bona fide areas of research and teaching.
4. Create a pipeline from the CSU system to the state's K-12 classrooms of teachers trained in Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies.
5. Build an infrastructure of teacher training programs in communities, professional organizations, teachers unions, colleges, and universities with professional development classes and certification programs.
6. Defend the field of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies from attacks that threaten academic freedom and freedom of speech.
7. Build a movement like that which gave birth to the field among BIPOC and progressive teachers, students, and community supporters to implement Ethnic Studies requirements with fidelity to the field rooted in a commitment to community wellbeing and equal access to educational opportunities.

We know the road to a full and successful implementation of requirements in California and elsewhere will be challenging, but it is a test of democracy. Organized movements to ban books, prohibit courses, and intimidate teachers and librarians who educate students about subject matters related to race, gender, sexuality, or structures of white supremacy continue to threaten our basic freedoms. Opponents claim that Ethnic Studies divides students when the opposite is true; divisions already exist and Ethnic Studies is a powerful tool to bring people together in a shared understanding of that which has historically divided us. Current conservative movements take extreme measures, including the use of intimidating threats, lawsuits, and physical confrontations. Some even oppose state-sponsored education itself, claiming that institutions such as public universities are “too liberal.” The anti-intellectualism of these movements threatens to undermine the role and importance of education itself. There is no greater threat to democracy than the suppression of academic freedom and freedom of speech, and an uneducated, misinformed public.

NOTES

1. Letter to the State Board of Education from CDE Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Advisory Committee Members of 2019, February 3, 2021.
2. The following article “Teaching Toward Justice & Liberation” is an edited transcript from that panel, originally titled: “California’s High School Ethnic Studies Requirement: Addressing Unanswered Questions and Challenges.” We are mindful that the term “liberation” has many meanings. Historically, Ethnic Studies was born from a vision of society where our communities can thrive on equal grounds with others in society, where we have the freedom to retain our ancestral languages and cultural identities, where we enjoy the full rights of citizenship and that citizenship be defined by one’s contributions to society, and where we support the rights of indigenous peoples of the land for self-determination. Within this context, we seek liberation from the structures of power that perpetuate exploitative and unjust relations based on race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and other demarcations of difference.

REFERENCES

- Dee, Thomas S., and Emily K. Penner. 2017. “The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence From an Ethnic Studies Curriculum.” *American Educational Research Journal* 54(1): 127–166. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216677002>

- Kiswani, Lara, Naber, Nadine, and Samia Shoman. 2023. "Palestine is Ethnic Studies: The Struggle for Arab American Studies in K–12 Ethnic Studies Curriculum." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 26 (2): 221-231.
- Sleeter, Christine E. 2011. *The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies: A Research Review*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Sleeter, Christine E., and Miguel Zavala. 2020. *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Umemoto, Karen. 1989. "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–69: The Role of Asian American Students." *Amerasia Journal* 15(1): 3–41. <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.15.1.7213030j5644rx25>.

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

TRACY LACHICA BUENAVISTA (SHE/HER/ISUNA) is Professor of Asian American Studies and a core faculty member of the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). She is the co-principal investigator and co-founder of the CSUN DREAM Center, Asian American Studies Pathways Project, Ethnic Studies Education Pathways Project, and the Faculty of Color Wellness Collective; and serves as a member of the Project Rebound Community Advisory Committee. In her research she utilizes critical race theory to examine how race, (im)migration, militarism, and carcerality shape the educational access, retention, and experiences of People of Color. She is co-editor of *Education at War: The Fight for Students of Color in America's Public Schools*, *"White" Washing American Education: The New Culture Wars in Ethnic Studies*, *Navigating the Great Recession: Immigrant Families' Stories of Resilience*, and the forthcoming *First-Generation Faculty of Color Narratives: Reflections on Research, Teaching, and Service*.

WILLIAM GOW is a Sacramento-based community historian, educator, and documentary filmmaker. A fourth-generation Chinese American and proud graduate of the San Francisco Unified School District, he holds an M.A. in Asian American Studies from UCLA and a Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies from UC Berkeley. Before receiving his doctorate, he taught history for nearly a decade in California public schools, including Nightingale Middle School, Santa Monica High School, and Berkeley High School. As a doctoral student, he led trainings for public school educators on Ethnic Studies topics through the UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project.

He currently serves as co-chair of the Outreach and Advocacy subcommittee of the Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander Curriculum Project at OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates. He has taught Asian American Studies courses at UC Berkeley, UCLA, and Stanford University. He is an assistant professor of Asian American Studies in the Ethnic Studies Department at CSU Sacramento.

JASMINE NGUYEN is the cofounder and co-CEO of Diversify Our Narrative, a student-led coalition of over one thousand students internationally fighting for a diverse and inclusive K-12 curricula through local policy advocacy and curriculum development. She is a junior at Stanford University double majoring in Political Science and Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, both with a Justice and Policy specialization.

She has prior experience in speaking as a panelist, leading workshops, and delivering speeches with organizations such as the EmpowHERment Conference and the Women of Color Conference. Her work pushing for the passing of California's AB101 through Diversify Our Narrative has been mentioned in *TIME Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, Vox News, ABC News, Mashable, PBS, NextShark, and more.

VIRGINIA NGUYEN is a high school history teacher and cofounder of Educate to Empower. She is committed to fostering school communities that center student voice, belonging, and empowerment. In addition to being a teacher and district leader, Virginia impacts teachers across the nation by facilitating workshops, publishing articles, and speaking at events advocating for equity and justice in education. Recently, she spearheaded the inaugural Teaching for Justice Conference at UCI. Virginia is a wife, mom, and proud daughter of Vietnamese refugees. These identities continue to shape her dreams and aspirations. As a teacher of nearly twenty years, she believes educators have the power to change the world.

ALLYSON TINTIANGCO-CUBALES was born and raised on Ohlone land with immigrant parents from Batangas and Tarlac in the Philippines. She is an award-winning professor in the College of Ethnic Studies at SF State. Since 2000, she has been teaching in the department of Asian American Studies and is an affiliated faculty member in Educational Leadership. She has mentored hundreds of critical undergraduates, master's, and doctoral students who are teaching and working in schools, colleges, and community organizations across the nation. In 2001, she founded Pin@y Educational Partnerships, a "barangay" that provides Ethnic Studies courses and curriculum, develops radical

educators, and creates resources for Filipina/x/o communities and similarly marginalized peoples. She has worked with many school districts, including the SFUSD, to co-develop Ethnic Studies, Social Justice, and Filipino Language curriculum. She is also the co-founder and co-director of Community Responsive Education, a national firm that supports the development of responsive, equitable, and justice-driven educators and Ethnic Studies curriculum.

KAREN UMEMOTO is Professor of Urban Planning and Asian American Studies and serves as the Helen and Morgan Chu Chair and Director of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA. She received her M.A. from UCLA in Asian American Studies and Ph.D. from MIT in Urban Studies. Born and raised in Los Angeles, a major concern has been racial conflict and youth violence. Her research on racialized gang violence led to *The Truce: Lessons from an LA Gang War*. While a professor at the University of Hawaii for twenty-two years, she worked on community development and efforts to end youth incarceration. Her work with the University of Hawaii Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Violence Prevention Center informed her co-authored publication, *Jacked Up and Unjust: Pacific Islander Teens Confront Violent Legacies*. She is currently Co-Director and Co-Editor of the AAPI Multimedia Textbook Project.