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COMMENTARY

Ethnic Studies in High Schools

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On February 14, 2014, Assemblyman Luis Alejo introduced AB 1750 which would require California's Instructional Quality Commission to "identify model programs, standards, and curricula relating to ethnic studies at the high school level" in order to pave the way for ethnic studies coursework in California's high schools. For policymakers, this bill raises several questions, including what is ethnic studies, and what kind of impact it makes on students. Three years ago, the National Education Association asked me to review the research on the academic and social impact of ethnic studies on students. Policy makers who are considering implications of this bill may find my report helpful.

Ethnic studies centers the knowledge and perspectives of a marginalized ethnic or racial group, reflecting viewpoints rooted in that group's experiences and intellectual scholarship. Ethnic studies arose as a counter to the traditional mainstream curriculum, which numerous content analyses of textbooks find continues to marginalize scholarship by and about African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. In fact, because of the continued dominance of Euro-American perspectives, mainstream curricula can be viewed as "Euro-American ethnic studies." As students of color go through the school system, the curriculum's overwhelming whiteness disengages many from academic learning.

In this study, my review divided the research into two types based on the kind of impact that was studied. Ethnic studies curriculum designed primarily for students who are members of the group under study (such as African American studies mainly for African American students, although normally any student is welcome) are usually part of a broader effort to improve the quality of education the students receive, often in conjunction with other efforts such as culturally responsive pedagogy. Ethnic studies is supported by social psychology research documenting a positive relationship between racial/ethnic identity of students of color and academic achievement. My analysis examined research on sixteen curricula (some very small classroom-based, others larger school-district based); the curricula were mainly for K–12 level, in various subject areas (principally social studies, literature, and math). The kinds of impact investigated included academic engagement, academic achievement, and empowerment (most studies focused on only one of these). Studies of fifteen of the sixteen curricula reported a positive impact on students, two of these using state standardized tests as a measure of achievement. In other words, well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies benefits students of color academically.

Ethnic studies curricula designed for diverse student groups that include White students, while sometimes aiming to improve achievement, usually focus more on influencing students' understanding of and attitudes about race and/or people who differ from themselves. Studies with young children find that simply infusing representation of racially and ethnically diverse people into curriculum only marginally affects students' attitudes. Curricula that teach directly about racism have a stronger positive impact. A large body of research in higher education that examines the impact of various diversity experiences, particularly course-taking and interracial interaction, quite consistently finds a positive impact on students, particularly when courses include cross-group interaction. The impact is strongest on White students, since exposure to a systematic analysis of power and cross-racial

interaction generally is newer to them than to students of color.

In short, research evidence consistently shows that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students. AB 1750 seems like a promising approach to improving the education of California's increasingly diverse students.

The full study (ungated) can be found in Christine E. Sleeter (2011), "The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies: A Research Review," National Education Association Research.

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