

## **Policy Brief One Pager: Ethnic studies as a graduation requirement**

**Source:** Voice4Equity Policy Leadership Platform

**Audience:** School District Superintendents

**Purpose:** To ignite early conversations around an important re-emerging equity policy matter

Recent state-level actions have put a spotlight on high school graduation requirements, particularly the growing movement to include Ethnic Studies courses.

In October 2021, California became the first state to require all students to complete a semester-long course in Ethnic Studies to earn a high school diploma, starting with the class of 2030. This landmark decision reflects a shift toward embracing curricula that explores the histories, struggles, and contributions of historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

California's action builds on the experience of districts like Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) in Arizona. In the late 1990s, TUSD launched a Mexican American Studies (MAS) program to address high Latino dropout rates. The program incorporated Mexican American history and literature, encouraged critical thinking about race, and strengthened students' cultural identities. MAS students had a 90% graduation rate in the years before a state-imposed ban.

In 2010, Arizona passed HB 2281 which effectively outlawed TUSD's MAS program. The law prohibited courses that promoted ethnic solidarity, resentment toward other races, or were designed primarily for one ethnic group. Despite evidence of MAS's success in closing the achievement gap,, conservative state officials attacked it as divisive and un-American. When TUSD resisted eliminating the program, the state withheld funding, forcing MAS to shut down in 2012. Books by Latino authors were even removed from classrooms.

After a lengthy legal battle, a federal court ruled in 2017 that Arizona's ban was motivated by racial animus and violated students' constitutional rights. The judge cited officials' use of "derogatory code words" about Mexican-Americans. This landmark case affirmed the value of culturally-relevant curricula.

Other States and Districts:

- **Washington State:** The Washington State Board of Education recently voted to establish an ethnic studies graduation requirement. The details and implementation timeline are still being worked out. ([OSP](#))
- **Los Angeles Unified School District:** LAUSD implemented a district-wide ethnic studies requirement ahead of the state mandate. All incoming high school freshmen must take an ethnic studies course to graduate. ([EdSource](#))
- **Minnesota State:** A bill, referred to as HF1502, is being sponsored with the intent to mandate all district and charter high schools in Minnesota to offer an ethnic studies course by the 2026-27 academic year. This course would count towards the social

studies graduation requirements. ([MPR News](#))

- **St. Paul School District:** St. Paul has already made ethnic studies a graduation requirement, highlighting the significance and growing acknowledgment of understanding the political and social struggles of people of color, Indigenous communities, and immigrants. ([MPR News](#))

As more states consider adding Ethnic Studies requirements, the Tucson story and California's decision provide important context:

- 1) Research shows well-designed Ethnic Studies courses boost achievement and engagement for students of color without promoting resentment. Fears of divisiveness are not supported by evidence.
- 2) Efforts to ban or restrict Ethnic Studies often stem from politically-motivated racial bias more than legitimate educational concerns. Officials' rhetoric and reasoning merit close examination.
- 3) Students have mobilized to defend curricula that affirm their identities and experiences. Expect activism if these courses are threatened or marginalized.
- 4) Ethnic Studies requirements can be an effective strategy for closing opportunity gaps when implemented thoughtfully and with strong community input. California's phased 8-year rollout allows time to build capacity and address challenges.

In summary, the movement toward Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement appears to be gaining momentum, with California leading the way. While people can debate the specifics of implementation, the evidence suggests Ethnic Studies can benefit students and better align curricula with our diverse society. The Tucson case provides a cautionary tale about misguided efforts to suppress this approach. We must engage stakeholders to chart a path forward that serves all students well.

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