



The Washington State
BOARD OF EDUCATION

An Ethnic Studies Concept Paper

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Acknowledgments

This paper was prepared through engagement with educators, students, families, and Washington residents. We are incredibly grateful to the Washington State community for their contributions and perspectives on implementing a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement.

Letter from the Chair coming in next draft

Executive Summary

In March 2021, the State Board of Education (SBE) in Washington adopted a [resolution](#) to establish a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement. The resolution responds to various stakeholders who have expressed a desire for courses devoted to exploring ethnic studies. Broadly, ethnic studies refer to an interdisciplinary study of “the social, cultural, political, and economic experiences of ethno-racial groups” (Washington State Ethnic Studies Framework, 2021, p. 6). In October 2021, the SBE held listening sessions with Washington residents, including students, educators, families, and community members. The purpose of these sessions was to learn more about their perceptions of and hopes for a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement. The SBE particularly focused on three topics:

- The purpose of ethnic studies
- Goals of ethnic studies
- Considerations for implementation

In November 2021, SBE policy analyst Jasmin Patrón-Vargas, prepared a summary report of preliminary findings from the listening sessions. This paper builds on the preliminary findings identified in November and the commentary we received via email.

We hope this paper generates fruitful conversations and ideas around a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement in Washington. It is important to note that while this paper outlines significant themes for an ethnic studies graduation requirement, it is only the first step in developing a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement. In alignment with ethnic studies principles and advocates, we believe that for meaningful ethnic studies to exist, it must be developed with the members it seeks to serve. As such, we look forward to continuing to build partnerships and trust with students, families, educators, and community partners.

Paper Organization

The first section of the paper reviews the current context of the K-12 ethnic studies movement. We then turn to an overview of the field of ethnic studies, including its history and what the research says about the benefits it offers students. Next, we highlight themes from the listening sessions, and commentary received. We conclude with a discussion of recommendations for the work ahead.

Summary of Findings

Through our engagement with community members, we gathered information about

what Washington State residents would like to see in a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement.

- Purpose – ethnic studies offer an opportunity to destabilize the status quo in education, allowing for more diverse perspectives to be centered in the curriculum.
- Goals – ethnic studies aim to:
 - Foster a sense of community
 - Develop well-rounded citizens
 - Prepare students to be agents for social change
 - Promote self-empowerment
- Implementation – ethnic studies should be implemented as a graduation requirement and across all subjects, rather than as a stand-alone course, elective or relegated to a single subject.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on the feedback we received from Washington State residents, we provide the following recommendations. Our recommendations borrow from and align with several ethnic studies initiatives across the nation, including the [Washington State Ethnic Studies Framework](#), the [California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum](#) and the [Rethinking Ethnic Studies](#) resource book:

1. **Graduation Requirement** – Continue to support the creation of an ethnic studies graduation requirement, including the development of an ethnic studies model that outlines the mission, goals, and principles of ethnic studies in Washington State.
2. **Community Engagement** – Strengthen and expand initiatives on community engagement and partnerships to ensure communities are engaged in the process, sharing knowledge and expertise, and contributing to local decision-making efforts.
3. **Student Partnerships** – Establish and maintain a formal relationship with student-led organizations to ensure ethnic studies aligns with the needs of the students it seeks to serve.
4. **Educational Collaboration** – Continue collaboration efforts between OSPI and educational partners to advance ethnic studies and realize its mission of providing a quality humanizing education.
5. **Tribal Consultation** – Conduct Tribal consultation with Washington Native American Tribes and Tribal organizations in developing and before the implementation of ethnic studies programs.

6. **Strategic Plan** – Develop a comprehensive strategic plan for implementation, including an initial pilot that will enable the state to gather data about what works and doesn't work about the new requirement.
7. **Funding** – Develop a funding model that includes how funding will be allocated for a statewide ethnic studies mandate in order to ensure its vital sustainment and strategic growth.
8. **Professional Development** – Increase investments in high-quality, sustained professional development opportunities for all educators.
9. **Research** – Invest in ongoing research and inquiry around implementation challenges and successes in districts across Washington State, led by researchers that are knowledgeable in Ethnic Studies frameworks.

Summary of Ongoing Challenges

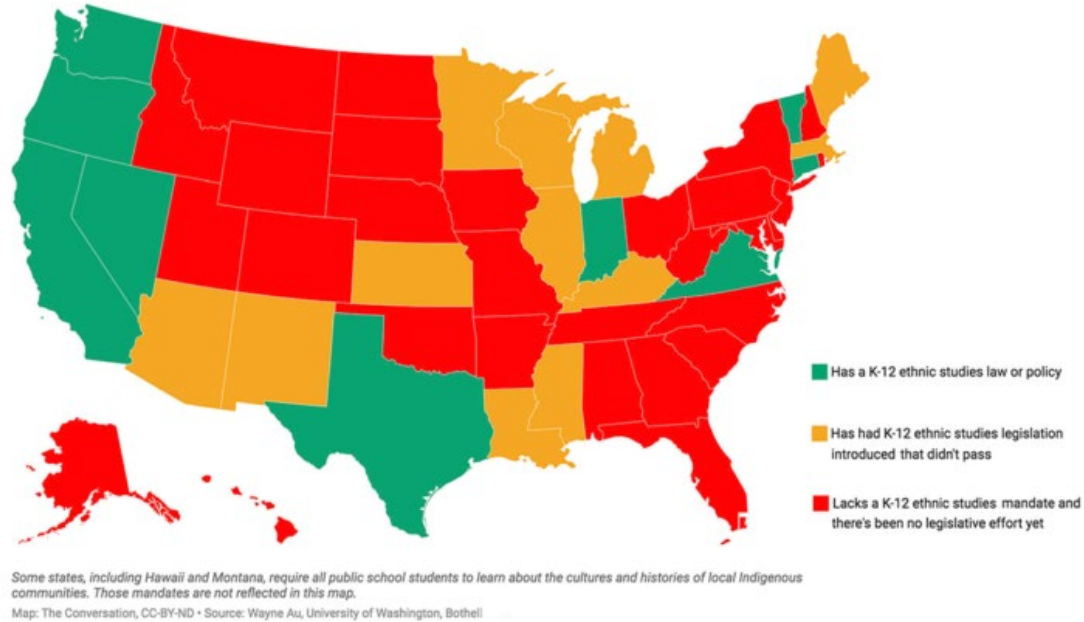
1. **Inclusion of all Perspectives** – Some participants expressed concerns about whose perspectives will be included in ethnic studies. For example, a student commented that it will be important for ethnic studies to recognize Jewish narratives, who often face anti-Semitism.
2. **Teacher Support** – Many educators shared that they are worried about resistance from stakeholders that oppose ethnic studies. Others expressed concerns about the limited training that teachers have around ethnic studies.
3. **Added Student Pressure** – Parents are concerned that an ethnic studies requirement will add more stress on students.
4. **Compromising Ethnic Studies Mission and Values** – Some ethnic studies proponents are worried that in the process of implementation, the integrity of ethnic studies will be compromised.
5. **Intentional Engagement with Tribal Nations** – Some Tribal nations have expressed concerns about their involvement with ethnic studies initiatives. The reason is that Indigenous peoples are more than ethnicities, they are Tribal nations with sovereign rights.

The Landscape of K-12 Ethnic Studies in the U.S.

In 2010, Arizona's Republican Governor Jan Brewer signed [House Bill 2281](#) (HB 2281), banning Mexican American/Raza Studies (MARS) in Tucson. According to state officials, the program "promoted the overthrow of the U.S. government" (Muñoz, 2018). What state officials did not anticipate is that the banning of MARS would incite a nationwide movement for humanizing and anti-racist learning (see map below). Over the last decade, more than nine states in the U.S. have introduced statewide initiatives that establish some form of K-12 ethnic studies (Kwon, 2021). These states include [California](#), [Connecticut](#), [Indiana](#), [Nevada](#), [Oregon](#), [Texas](#), [Vermont](#), [Virginia](#), and [Washington](#). According to ethnic studies proponents, ethnic studies teaches

More than just history and racial justice. It's a framework that allows participants from multiple cultures to share their perspectives, achievements, traditions and experiences. It is designed to help eradicate fear, structural racism, and social inequities by promoting knowledge and understanding (Smith, 2021, para. 2).

Before statewide legislation, however, many school districts adopted ethnic studies courses or graduation requirements. In 2014, [El Rancho Unified School District](#) became the first school district in California to pass an ethnic studies high school graduation requirement. Shortly after, two large districts—[Los Angeles Unified School District](#) and [San Francisco Unified School District](#)—also adopted a resolution to make ethnic studies a graduation requirement. A year later, in 2015, [Chicago Public Schools](#) introduced districtwide Latinx and Latin American Studies curricula. Other districts that have implemented [graduation requirements or courses] include [Austin Public Schools](#), [Bridgeport Public Schools](#), [Portland Public Schools](#), [Providence Public Schools](#), [Oakland Unified School District](#), [Sacramento City Unified School District](#), [San Diego Unified School District](#), the [School District of Philadelphia](#), and [Seattle Public Schools](#).



Map: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND
Bothell

Source: Wayne Au, University of Washington,

The Latest on Ethnic Studies in Washington State

In 2018, the Washington State Legislature passed [Senate Bill 5023](#) (SB 5023), requiring the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to establish an Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee (ESAC) and identify resources and materials for teaching ethnic studies in grades 7–12. In 2019, the Legislature passed [Senate Bill 6066](#) (SB 6066), expanding the scope of work to include all grades K–12. Following the legislation, OSPI created the ESAC in 2019, composed of 45 members. Their responsibilities included identifying and making available ethnic studies materials and resources and creating a framework to support the teaching of ethnic studies in grades K–12. The Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee published the [Washington State Ethnic Studies Framework](#) in October 2021. The framework seeks to support educators and administrators implementing Ethnic Studies. In addition, ESAC developed the [Ethnic Studies Open Educational Resources \(OER\)](#), an online portal for districts choosing to implement ethnic studies in K–12.

In line with these goals, in March 2021 the State Board of Education in Washington State adopted a [resolution](#) of intent to establish a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement. The resolution responds to various stakeholders who have expressed a desire for courses devoted to exploring ethnic studies. In 2020, for instance, Washington

State students at the [Modern Day Racism in Education](#) panel spoke on the necessity of ethnic studies. According to student testimonies, ethnic studies will provide students with a more well-rounded view of the world, enabling students to contribute to a growing multidimensional society. In pursuit of this goal, the SBE held listening sessions in October 2021 with various stakeholders to learn more about their perceptions of a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement. This paper focuses on the feedback the SBE received in the listening sessions.

At the grassroots level, organizations and collectives have also been established to support ethnic studies statewide implementation. In 2019, for instance, [Washington Ethnic Studies Now](#) (WAESN), a non-profit organization, was created. The organization aims to advance anti-racist education and ethnic studies in Washington State. In 2021, WAESN held its third annual assembly, a one-day event that brought together various stakeholders from Washington State “to build collective capacity, and let people know where they can plug into existing efforts, or how they can start their own efforts” (McKenna, 2021). WAESN has also provided staff and board members from the State Board of Education with training on the foundations of ethnic studies and partnered with OSPI to develop the ethnic studies framework.

Summary

In the past decade, efforts to implement ethnic studies in K-12 schools have gained momentum. Across the country, at least nine states have passed legislation to implement some form of ethnic studies in K-12 public schools. In other states, school districts have taken action to implement ethnic studies at the district level. In Washington, several efforts have also come to the forefront to implement ethnic studies in K-12 schools. According to Washington students, ethnic studies is necessary as it will allow students to feel seen in the curriculum, empowering their sense of self and belonging in schools. Furthermore, Washington students argue that ethnic studies will enable them to learn about the different perspectives of their peers, further increasing their understanding of the multiethnic society we live in.

Ethnic studies is especially pertinent as the demographic makeup of Washington continues to shift. According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), Washington State had more than 7 million residents in 2020. The racial composition in Washington was 61.6% White, 18.7% Hispanic, 12.4% Black, 6% Asian, 1.1% Native American, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 8.4% some other race alone, and 10.2% Multiracial. The demographic shift is also evident in school enrollments. Since 2007, public schools have seen significant changes in their enrollments by race/ethnicity (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2012). In the 2020–2021 academic year, the student racial composition in Washington public schools was 51.1% White, 24.7% Hispanic, 4.6% Black,

8.3% Asian, 1.3% Native American, 1.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 8.8% Multiracial (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). According to [population projections](#), these percentages are likely to continue to change. By 2040, it is estimated that Washington's population will reach 8.9 million, with migration being a critical factor in this estimation. As Washington's demographics continue to shift toward a multilingual and multicultural society, it will be essential to consider how to meet the needs of a pluralistic population. Ethnic studies provide an excellent opportunity to support Black, Indigenous, and students of Color (BIPOC) while preparing the growing diverse population in Washington.

Ethnic Studies: An Overview

Ethnic studies is an interdisciplinary study of "the social, cultural, political, and economic experiences of ethno-racial groups" (Washington State Ethnic Studies Framework, 2021, p. 6). Although ethnic studies emerged from a demand by Asian/Asian American, Black, Latinx, and Native American students for relevant education, it is more than the inclusion of communities of color who "too had heroes and great civilizations" (Okiihiro, 2016, p. 150). Ethnic studies consider the ways systems of power are interconnected and ultimately shape the world we live in. In this way, ethnic studies are not only for Black, Indigenous, and students of color, but for all students.

History of Ethnic Studies

The ideological origins of ethnic studies can be traced as early as the 1900s. Several scholars of color argued that the histories, perspectives, and contributions of marginalized peoples—African Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Chicanx/Latinx, and Native Americans—be included in traditional disciplines (Okiihiro, 2011; Sleeter, 2011). These scholars included W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Mary McLeod Bethune, Grace Lee Boggs, Rodolfo Acuña, Carter G. Woodson, Carlos Bulosan, Vine Deloria Jr., Gloria Anzaldúa among others.

Although the ideological roots of ethnic studies can be linked to the works of scholars of color in the 1900s, the fight for ethnic studies as an official academic field began in 1968. Inspired by the works of these scholars, along with the sociopolitical climate of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. and abroad, a coalition went on a five-month strike in 1968 at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University). Led by the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF)—a coalition of students from the campus' Black Student Union, Latin American Student Organization (LASO), the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA), the Mexican American Student Confederation, the Philippine American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE), La Raza, the Native American Students Organization, and Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA)—created a list of 15 demands

(Diaz, n.d.). One of the key demands by students rested on the idea of relevant education. Students called for “a new curriculum that would embrace the history of all people, including ethnic minorities” (Umemoto, 1989). After a hard-fought battle, the first College of Ethnic Studies was established at SFSU on March 20, 1969.

Soon after, several other colleges and K-12 schools across the country followed in the same direction. In the spring of 1968, the Afro-American Student Union (AASU) at the University of California at Berkeley proposed a Black Studies program (California Ethnic Model Curriculum, 2021). The AASU was soon joined by other organizations on campus, such as the Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC), the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), and the Native American Student Union (NASU). Together, they formed the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). As part of their collaborative partnership, they proposed the Third World College, comprised of four autonomous units: Asian American Studies, Black Studies, Chicano Studies, and Native American Studies. Between January to March of 1969, the TWLF at UC Berkeley engaged in a strike. On March 7, 1969, the first ethnic studies entity at UC Berkeley was created. By 1993, over 700 ethnic studies programs existed in the U.S. (UCLA Center X, n.d.).

In 1998, the Mexican American Studies (MAS) in Tucson was created, with the premise that the experiences, history, literature, and art of Chicanos were a necessary and valid area for rigorous academic exploration (Camarota & Romero, 2006). In return, students, who were primarily of Mexican descent, reacted positively. In a study that investigated the influence of MARS, Cabrera and colleagues (2014) found that Chicano students graduated at higher rates and performed significantly better in state exams than in previous years. Despite positive findings, in 2010, Arizona Governor, Jan Brewer, [banned Mexican American Raza Studies](#) in Tucson. According to challengers Tom Horne and John Huppenthal, the program promoted ethnic division and hatred towards the U.S. government. In 2017, Judge A. Wallace Tashima ruled [the ban on MARS unconstitutional](#). According to the judge’s ruling, the ban was racially motivated, violating the constitutional rights of Mexican American students. To date, the MARS program is considered one of the few programs to have a full-fledge ethnic studies program.

Today, 50 years after its inception, ethnic studies continue to be met with opposition. Some critics claim that ethnic studies promote “cultural separatism” and “indoctrinates” students with anti-American beliefs (Schlesinger, 1990, 1998). Other common misconceptions include the following:

1. “We already do ethnic studies; we have culturally responsive teaching.”
2. “Ethnic studies is simply a version of social studies/history.”
3. “Ethnic studies only focus on race.”

4. "Ethnic studies is only for students of color."
5. "Ethnic studies is a remediation program for at-risk youth."
6. "If adopted as a graduation requirement, students may not want ethnic studies."
7. "Ethnic studies courses are successful because of teacher efficacy rather than the curriculum."
8. "Ethnic studies is most effective at the high school and college level."
9. "College professors of ethnic studies are most qualified to teach ethnic studies courses."
10. "Ethnic studies classes might engage students, but I don't see how they address real learning."

As the State Board of Education continues to work toward a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement, we wish to dispel myths about ethnic studies by engaging community partners in dialogue that provide a more profound understanding of what ethnic studies is and what it offers. For more information on what ethnic studies *is*, read Zavala and colleagues' (2018) text, [10 Common Misconceptions of Ethnic Studies](#).

Research on the Effects of Ethnic Studies

In this section, I review the social and academic impact of ethnic studies for students in pre-K through higher education. The section is organized into three main sections. The first subsection highlights the impact of ethnic studies on Black, Indigenous, and students of Color social development. The second subsection reviews research on the impact of ethnic studies on BIPOC students' academic performance. The third subsection reviews research on the effects of ethnic studies for White students.

The Social Impact of Ethnic Studies Programs for Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color

One of the main strands of research on the impact of ethnic studies has focused on the students' sense of self (Belgrave et al., 2000; Gaxiola Serrano et al., 2019; Halagao, 2010; Lewis et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2008; Vasquez, 2005). Sense of self describes an awareness of the self, often influenced by the extent to which an individual feels accepted and supported by members of a racial/ethnic group (Hunter et al., 2019). In particular, research has investigated the effects of ethnic studies on BIPOC students' racial identity. Racial identity refers to "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1995, p. 3).

One of the ways ethnic studies impact the racial identity of BIPOC students' is by immersing students in learning that reflects their cultural practices, traditions, and

history. For example, Belgrave et al. (2000) studied the impact of a four-month-long Afrocentric extracurricular program for middle school Black girls. Students learned about African and African American culture, such as the Rites of Separation Ceremony, a traditional ritual in African culture. The researchers found positive outcomes in racial identity and self-concept measures for students in the experimental groups compared to the control group.

Similarly, Thomas et al. (2008) found a positive link between ethnic studies and Black students' racial identity development. Based on a 10-week school-based program for Black high school girls, the authors tested the program's effectiveness using a control group and a non-control group. The students learned about African American history and contemporary culture, weaving in African cultural values, Freire's critical consciousness, and holistic learning. As with the previous study, the findings demonstrate that participants in the program scored higher in measures of racial identity than participants from the control group. Altogether, the studies emphasize the importance of a curriculum that supports students' ethnic and racial identity.

Other research has focused on the impact of ethnic studies and students' sense of belonging in academic spaces and beyond (De los Ríos, 2013; Gonzalez, 2002; Halagao, 2004; Marrun, 2018; Vasquez, 2005). Halagao (2004), for instance, examined the impact of the Pinoy Teach curriculum on six Filipinx American college students. The curriculum, which Halagao co-developed, focused on Philippine and Filipino American history and culture. The author reports that students gained a more profound sense of community, confidence, and empowerment. With this in mind, not only do students gain an individual awareness of their racial identity when the curriculum affirms their culture, but so does it influence their collective sense of belonging in a racial/ethnic group.

Other research indicates that when students share a sense of belonging in school settings and their communities, they feel more motivated to engage in community social change (Lewis et al., 2012; Tyson, 2002). In an experimental study of a one-semester African American curriculum for Black eighth-graders, Lewis et al. (2012) reported that youth in the experimental curriculum scored higher than those in the control groups in metrics of school connectedness, motivation to achieve, and social change involvement. The authors credit the sustained curricular focus on African American history and culture. In other words, when culturally relevant ethnic studies teaching is sustained in the classroom, students are more likely to feel affirmed and validated in the classroom, leading to greater levels of belonging and motivation for social change. Overall, these studies show that BIPOC students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging in school settings and their community when they participate in an ethnic studies course.

Additionally, several research studies have focused on the benefits of ethnic studies on students' academic engagement (Bean et al., 1999; Copenhaver, 2001; Duncan, 2012; Matthews & Smith, 1994; Rickford, 2001). Although there are variations in how these terms are defined, academic engagement refers to meaningful student involvement in academic activities (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017). In particular, studies have explored the effects of ethnic studies on student attitudes towards academic learning. Matthews and Smith (1994) conducted an experimental study investigating the impact of Native American science materials on fourth through eighth graders in nine schools. The 10-week intervention included biographies of Native Americans using science and other activities related to Native nations. The results show that the experimental group expressed a more positive attitude toward science in the posttest. In this sense, ethnic studies support students' positive perceptions towards subjects that have historically excluded BIPOC students.

Similarly, other studies point to an increase in student engagement when students' prior knowledge is valued. In an analysis of Black students' response to reading *Malcolm X: A Fire*, Copenhaver (2001) found that students showed high levels of engagement. The researchers attribute their findings to the relevance of the curriculum in which students were able to share knowledge about African American media, civil rights leaders, and everyday racial issues to follow the plot, make connections, and interpret the story. The results suggest that students not only engage through a shared sense of cultural texts but also by making connections to their experiences. To that end, for ethnic studies to effectively influence student engagement, it must include culturally relevant curricula and educators that honor student knowledge.

In brief, ethnic studies research on the social development of BIPOC students reveals positive outcomes. These outcomes include a greater sense of racial identity, belonging in academic spaces and beyond, and positive perceptions towards learning through academic engagement. Noteworthy attributes to these findings include culturally relevant texts and pedagogy, and honoring students' funds of knowledge.

The Academic Impact of Ethnic Studies Programs for Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color

In addition to the social impact of ethnic studies, research supporting the value of ethnic studies demonstrates that BIPOC youth benefit academically from ethnic studies courses and programs. Student performance involves information about the academic progress of a student, including the grade point average (GPA), high school graduation rate, and standardized test scores (Department of Education, n.d.). Collectively, researchers

emphasize the positive educational outcomes that these courses can have on state standardized test scores (Cabrera et al., 2014; Lipka et al., 2005; McCarty, 1993; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Romero et al., 2009), school completion (Cammarota, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2017; Green-Gibson & Collett, 2014) and comprehension skills (Kisker et al., 2012; Rickford, 2001; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015; Tyson, 2002).

Research investigating the academic impact of ethnic studies curricula shows an increase in students' state standardized test scores (Cabrera et al., 2014; Lipka et al., 2005; Cammarota & Romero, 2009; McCarty, 1993; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Primarily, research on Mexican-origin students has shown that ethnic studies courses impact students' test scores. Perhaps the most well-known research involving an ethnic studies program is Cabrera et al. (2014) study of the Mexican American Raza Studies (MARS) program in Tucson, Arizona. Guided by a Critically Compassionate Intellectualism (CCI) model, which positions students as holders of knowledge, the authors found that Mexican-origin high school students enrolled in the program outperformed students who were not enrolled in reading, math, and writing state exams.

Other research expands the conversation by indicating that Native students are more likely to excel academically when the curriculum addresses culture, language, and tribal sovereignty. McCarty and Lee (2014) report a case study of the Native American Community Academy's (NACA) impact on middle and high school students in Albuquerque, New Mexico. They report that eighth graders' math, reading, and writing test scores improved significantly from the previous year. Overall, findings provide compelling evidence about the benefits of ethnic studies courses concerning students of color and their resulting improved test scores. It can be argued that a persistent feature across results includes culturally relevant curricula.

Another small body of studies points to the positive impact of an ethnic studies curriculum on students' school completion, specifically attendance (Dee & Penner, 2016), yearly progress (Green-Gibson & Collett, 2014), and graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cammarota, 2007; Dee & Penner, 2016). An increase in student attendance has been particularly prevalent in high school studies. Dee and Penner (2016) examined the effects of an ethnic studies high school course on 1405 students in San Francisco, California. They reported that the ethnic studies course had "large positive effects on each of [the] student outcomes" (p. 3). Specifically, the course increased student attendance by 21 percentage points. Other investigations of ethnic studies have used the Adequate Yearly Progress report to explore the impact of an African-centered curriculum on middle schoolers. The AYP is a measure used to determine if schools are successfully educating their students and if students are showing growth in their learning. In a study of Black middle school students in Chicago, Green-Gibson and

Collett (2014) found that students enrolled in an African-centered curriculum performed better than students in a school that does not infuse African culture.

Moreover, research on the impact of ethnic studies indicates that when students take ethnic studies courses, they are more likely to graduate from high school. Using student-level administrative data from Tucson Unified School District, Cabrera and colleagues (2014) report findings from three cohorts enrolled in the MAS program (N=26, 022). The results show that taking more than one MAS course "significantly increased the probability of graduation" (p. 23). This trend was particularly evident for students considered "low performing" (p. 16). This is significant as research shows that students of color are disproportionately pushed out of schools (Morris, 2016; Rios, 2011). Ethnic studies courses, in this way, provide many benefits for BIPOC students, one of them being school completion.

A small number of qualitative studies have explored the impact of ethnic studies on BIPOC students' comprehension skills (Kisker et al., 2012; Rickford, 2001; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015; Tyson, 2002). Specifically, when BIPOC youth engage in literature that connects to their lived experiences, they develop higher-order thinking skills. For example, Rickford (2001) explored the impact of culturally relevant texts on 25 African American middle school students. In assessing their comprehension, Rickford found that the students excelled in higher-order thinking. The author suggests that students' ability to comprehend texts is related to students' familiarity with themes like African American vernacular.

Furthermore, when students are pushed to think complexly about social, political, and economic issues, which is a central learning goal of ethnic studies, they develop better critical thinking skills (Tyson, 2002). In a middle school study, Tyson (2002) examined how students respond to adolescent novels about social issues. Using multiethnic novels as part of an integrated social studies and English Language Arts block, students developed an understanding of the complexities of social action and an ability to use text to derive meaning. Ethnic studies courses provide students with the academic skillset to navigate academic assignments.

In contrast to the literature reviewed above, one study did not find a positive link between academic performance and ethnic studies courses. Ginwright (2000) examined the effects of an urban high school initiative for Black low-income youth. Based on several academic indicators, including enrollment, GPA, dropout rate, suspension rate, number of graduates, and higher education enrollment numbers, Ginwright found that these stayed the same or worsened over the five years of the initiative. The author argues that students likely rejected the reform due to conflicting worldviews between

the students in the program and the curriculum specialist. On the one hand, the middle-class Black educators who created the curriculum drew on Egypt's African and African American knowledge systems. On the other hand, the central concerns of the low-income Black youth in the program dealt with housing, employment, health care, and poverty. The author concluded that while cultural identity is essential, relevancy is crucial. To that end, while this study did not find any significant improvement in students of color, it confirms the importance of considering students' experiences and their local communities when designing an ethnic studies initiative.

Overall, all but one study reviewed found that ethnic studies curriculum tremendously impacts the academic and social achievements of Black, Indigenous and students of Color. A significant factor that contributes to the success of students is culturally relevant texts and pedagogy. In other words, the more students see themselves and their experiences reflected in the curriculum, the more likely they are to be engaged in school, leading to tremendous educational success. Moreover, an equally important component in the success of ethnic studies involves teachers' critical pedagogical practices. Through exploring and analyzing social issues, students develop strong comprehension skills and a positive sense of belonging.

The Benefits of Ethnic Studies for White Students

Thus far, most studies on the effectiveness of ethnic studies have positively impacted Black, Indigenous, and students of Color. However, a question that remains is what impact do ethnic studies programs have on White students? This section reviews the research on the impact of ethnic studies on White students. Although research is still developing that examines the effects of ethnic studies on White students, a sizable amount of related research in higher education and multicultural education have documented significant gains regarding White students' racial attitudes. Recent studies at the high school level have also begun documenting exciting findings related to White students cultural and self perceptions.

A considerable amount of research in higher education has documented the impact of diversity courses, which include ethnic studies, on students' racial bias (Bowman, 2010; Denson, 2009; Gurin et al., 2003; Lopez, 2004). Engberg (2004), for example, reviewed 73 studies that investigated the impact of diversity courses, workshops, and peer-facilitated intervention. The results demonstrated that at least 52 studies reported positive gains, primarily when a combination of diverse content and intergroup contact occur.

In a similar study, Okoye-Johnson (2011) explored the effects of a multicultural curriculum versus a traditional curriculum on the racial attitudes of pre-K–12 students.

Using a statistical meta-analysis of 30 studies, the results show that at least 21 of the studies reported more positive changes in students' racial attitude than did exposure to traditional instruction" (p.1263). Although ethnic studies and multiculturalism are not synonymous, they share similar attributes related to the study of race and ethnicity. Therefore, the findings from this study showcase the benefits of a curriculum that focuses on race and ethnicity.

In a more recent study, Keppler (2014) examined the impact of his social studies course on the attitudes of 64 female students in a Catholic high school in the Midwest. Drawing on survey data, he found that students expressed more tolerance towards Muslims and the role of women in Islamic societies by the end of the semester. More recent work has also begun to document the effects of ethnic studies on White students' self-perceptions. In a three-year longitudinal ethnographic study, San Pedro (2018) examined a White student's experience in a high school ethnic studies course that focused on Native American literature. The author found that the course helped the White student reconceptualize her racial identity and knowledge about other groups. Ultimately, San Pedro argues that ethnic studies do not only support BIPOC students, but they also aid in "the deconstruction of invisibility, socialization and privileging of whiteness that works to maintain social and cultural order" (p.1206).

Summary

In summary, literature shows that ethnic studies have a positive impact on students from varied backgrounds. Based on the research, ethnic studies benefits students in the following ways:

- Positive racial/ethnic identity
- Greater sense of belonging in and out of school settings
- More likely to contribute to positive social change
- Higher levels of awareness about race and racism
- Increased rates of graduation, attendance, standardized test scores, and comprehension skills

Key Themes from Listening Sessions

During October 2021, the State Board of Education in Washington held four listening sessions with various stakeholders. The purpose of the listening sessions was to learn from students, families, educators, and Washington residents about what they would like to see in an ethnic studies requirement. Some of the questions attendees were asked were:

- In your opinion, what should be the purpose of ethnic studies?
- What would you like to see students walk away with?
- How should Washington State incorporate ethnic studies as part of high school graduation requirements?

This section outlines significant themes from these sessions. The themes from these sessions were organized into three main categories: 1) defining ethnic studies, 2) goals of ethnic studies, and 3) implementation.



Purpose of Ethnic Studies

“Tearing Down the Default”

For many attendees, ethnic studies present an opportunity to challenge the dominant narrative passed down. One student, for example, said, “I think ethnic studies, it’s very much decolonization of academia, is focusing more on that community aspect rather than individual competitors... that we usually see, especially in a high school setting.” This student highlights a historical trend.

Historically, U.S. curricula has been dominated by Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge. Eurocentrism is a cultural phenomenon in which European or Western perspectives are viewed and accepted as a universal truth (Quijano, 2000). In K-12 textbooks, for instance, White figures appear more than any other racial/ethnic group and are given reputable roles (Sleeter, 2016). When analyzing the depictions of Mexican Americans and Hispanos (European “conquistadors”) in 20 social studies and language arts texts, Sleeter (2016) found that Hispanos held roles like senators, soldiers, and artists while

darker-skinned Latinxs appeared in “less respectable” roles like field worker, labor union supporter, and food server.

In addition, although the visibility of people of color has increased in the last decades, the perspectives embedded in these narratives are surface level. For example, in analyzing three high school history texts, Noboa (2005) found that Latinxs were described as a monolith with an overwhelming concentration on Mexican descended people. Other groups of color are depicted as non-American, foreigners and stereotypical figures. Two studies of high school social studies and literature texts for example, found that Latinx literature is framed as “multicultural” rather than American and that Arab Americans were likely depicted as foreigners and terrorists. For Indigenous peoples, uncritical views are also standard. As Reese (2007) shows in a study of children’s books, Indigenous people are isolated from their respective tribal nations, as if Indigenous nations are homogenous.

At its core, ethnic studies offer a chance to interrogate and destabilize systems of power that have historically omitted certain groups of people. By “tearing down the default,” as one attendee said, we can create the conditions for historically marginalized people to live authentic lives. Furthermore, it allows *all* students to learn about systems of power and develop the tools to make our society more inclusive and understanding.

What does this look like?

One of the ways ethnic studies challenge dominant discourses and paradigms is by challenging monolithic representations of communities of color. To present multidimensional representations of communities of color, educators draw on anti-essentialist approaches. Essentialism refers to the belief that all members in a single group think, act, and believe the same things in the same ways. Rather than essentializing the experiences of racialized communities, ethnic studies teachers seek to present nuanced narratives of Black, Indigenous, and people of Color that shed light on the complexities of these communities and tribal nations. A Kindergarten teacher in Oakland, California, for example, created a year-long interdisciplinary curriculum that explored immigration and nativism through a multifaceted lens. Using the ethnic studies framework, students learned the difference between terms like Indigenous and immigrant (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Within an anti-essentialist approach, ethnic studies disrupt settler-colonial frames by recognizing the original stewards of the land (Calderon, 2014; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013).

Goals of Ethnic Studies

Across the listening sessions and commentary received, various responses were received regarding what the role of ethnic studies should be. The following significant themes are not in a particular order. We hope that the goals outlined here garner ongoing conversations about the purpose and goals of ethnic studies for students in Washington State.

1. Promote Self-empowerment

One of the goals of ethnic studies should be to affirm, validate, and honor students' experiences. In other words, students should be able to see themselves represented in the curriculum. One of the ways attendees suggested achieving this is by allowing students to learn about the history of their ancestors, "ethnic studies should allow students to learn the history of who they are, where they come from, the strengths that brought them to be." Another way that student experiences can be validated is by honoring their present-day experiences. One educator, for example, said, "I want them to understand that, yes, windows and mirrors; We can access perspective through stories and hearing those stories. But also, what if we reversed that equation and said, we believe that your story is true, you don't have to prove it because you're a human being, right?" Altogether, affirming students' experiences is crucial if we wish for students to feel empowered, cared for, and as research shows, be able to excel in academic settings.

What does this look like?

Ethnic studies teachers use culturally relevant pedagogies to leverage students' ways of knowing. Coined by education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy advocates situating student culture and funds of knowledge at the center of the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995). A Filipino high school teacher in the South Bay of California, for example, drew on *Kuwento*, a Filipinx oral tradition that involves sharing stories (Jocson, 2008). Through the practice of storytelling, students were able to share their experiences as Filipinx Americans. In doing so, students' membership in the class felt validated.

2. Create a Sense of Community

According to some attendees, ethnic studies should foster a space where everyone feels like they belong. One student, for instance, said, "in an ethnic studies-oriented class,

students should feel safe to explore issues.” One of the ways students can gain a sense of community in the classroom (that aligns with the last goal) is by providing opportunities for students to feel “seen” in the curriculum. As one student mentioned, “I think that having the opportunity to see oneself in a curriculum is paramount in order to feel like you are a part of the community.” Research supports this statement. When students’ identity is validated, they are more likely to feel like they are part of a community. Another way that ethnic studies can create a sense of community is through classroom collaboration. For the students we received feedback from, collaborating with their peers is important because it creates a sense of connection with their classmates. Overall, it will be necessary for ethnic studies to foster a sense of community, as it allows students to gain a greater sense of belonging in academic settings and prepares them for the multicultural world they will join after they leave the K-12 system.

What does this look like?

Many ethnic studies teachers draw on community-grounded approaches to foster a sense of community in their classrooms. However, to make this possible, many teachers emphasize the importance of restructuring power relations in school settings. For example, De los Rios's (2013) sheds light on how she cultivated a sense of community in her Chicana/o-Latina/o studies high school course in Pomona, CA. After teaching a unit on immigration, students in de los Rios class were tasked with a community project. As part of this, students collaborated with their peers to plan an event that raised awareness about anti-immigrant sentiments in California. The results of her study suggest that when teachers provide students with opportunities to collaborate with their peers and entrust students to make decisions of their own, they develop a stronger sense of membership within their schools and communities. One student, for instance, expressed how “walking into Chicana/o-Latina/o studies felt like home” (De los Ríos, 2013, p. 69).

3. Develop Well-informed Citizens

For many attendees, one of the main goals of ethnic studies should be to prepare global citizens to engage and contribute to a multiethnic society. One parent, for example, stated, “we are hoping that our children are going to be growing up as [a] well-rounded person. Know not only about the basics but get tools that they need to be a good citizen, a good person growing up, being productive [sic] that, but also be able to connect with each other and work with each other.” With this in mind, if ethnic studies were integrated across subjects, it would provide a more robust understanding of the world.

One way that ethnic studies can prepare well-rounded global citizens is by exposing students to multiple perspectives. According to an attendee, exposing students to multiple perspectives will allow them to be “able to draw their own conclusions about the world.” In addition, if we wish to prepare students to have a well-rounded understanding of the world, we need to go beyond surface level understandings of racial and ethnic groups and present multidimensional representations, as one parent claimed, “what I hope ethnic studies can do for my kids right now is to offer a very complex and nuanced understanding of history and the world.” This means allowing students to delve into the nuance of a multiethnic society: “I think we need representations that are deep and not shallow... for Asian American communities, we have a lot of diversity in terms of ethnicity. And I think also we have student who shared that [sic] ethnic identity as Asian Americans. And then also there is in our kind of the difference between Asian-American identities and Asian identities. And I think we need a curriculum that would allow students to think about all these different layers of identities and an intersection of identities.” Finally, attendees suggested going beyond oppression frames that portray communities between the confines of oppression. Instead, Washington State residents call on educators to honor minoritized groups' contributions, particularly those whose narratives have been historically misrepresented. In this way, ethnic studies could provide an avenue for students to widen their lens about the present-day, enhancing students' cultural competency, critical thinking skills, and empathy for other members of society.

What does this look like?

Many ethnic studies teachers provide opportunities for students to learn about the complexity of ethnic groups. In a high school unit of Afro-Latinx resistance, Coffey and Espiritu (2016) challenge the perception that Latinxs are non-black. Drawing on the history of people's liberation in Latin America and the Caribbean, students learn about the role that Afro-descended people in Latin America played in resistance movements. Through this exploration, students are able to widen their lens about racial and ethnic categories. Furthermore, they are better equipped to engage in nuanced present-day conversations about social issues and honor the complexities of diverse communities.

4. Prepare Agents for Change

By raising students' awareness of diverse perspectives and social structures, many hope that ethnic studies will encourage students to create change. As one parent said, “students should be able to leave our educational system [and be] able to be responsive.” To make this possible, students must be given the tools to work across differences.

What does this look like?

To equip students with the skills and abilities to enact change in their respective communities, ethnic studies teachers engage students in project-based activities that consider how systems of power affect students' communities. A high school teacher, for example, used a mobile app to analyze social issues in California (L. Kwon & de los Ríos, 2019). Using the mobile app, students collected evidence of the infrastructural problems in their communities and presented their findings to the city council. By researching their physical surroundings, students could critique systems of power and conceptualize new possibilities for change. Thus, ethnic studies is an educational project that builds students' capacities and abilities to help elicit social change. Teachers can achieve this across all subjects by incorporating project-based activities and assignments rooted in a community-grounded praxis.

Implementation

An Interdisciplinary Approach

Rather than adding ethnic studies as a stand-alone course that students must take in order to graduate, many attendees suggested an interdisciplinary approach. One attendee, for instance, stated, "this is an important subject that everyone should learn, and ethnic studies can and should be embedded in every single subject matter." Through an interdisciplinary approach, ethnic studies is embedded across the curriculum.

What does this look like?

By design, ethnic studies is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that draws from multiple disciplines such as Anthropology, Economics, English, History, Linguistics, Philosophy, Political Science, Public Health, and Sociology. For instance, in a seventh-grade math class, Gutstein,(2007) paired math and economics to understand systemic racism. Specifically, the students in the class, who were predominantly first-generation, working-class Latinxs, investigated the rejection rates for African Americans, Latinxs, and Whites in Chicago. Using proportional reasoning (decimals, fractions, ratios, and percentages), students understood the disproportionate rates of mortgage rejections. In the final task, students were asked, "does racism play a factor in mortgage rejection rates?" Despite a range of responses, students were able to use mathematical and economic skills and apply what they knew to complex social issues. To that end, ethnic studies go beyond

teaching students to read, write, or solve math problems. Ethnic studies bridge disciplines to expose students to complex issues.

Ongoing Challenges

1. **Inclusion of all Perspectives** – Some participants expressed concerns about whose perspectives will be included in ethnic studies. For example, a student commented that it will be important for ethnic studies to recognize Jewish narratives, who often face anti-Semitism.
2. **Teacher Support** – Many educators shared that they are worried about facing resistance from stakeholders that oppose ethnic studies. Others expressed concerns about the limited training that teachers have around ethnic studies.
3. **Added Student Pressure** – Parents are concerned that an ethnic studies requirement will add more stress on students.
4. **Compromising Ethnic Studies Mission and Values** – Some ethnic studies proponents are worried that in the process of implementation, the integrity of ethnic studies will be compromised.
5. **Intentional Engagement with Tribal Nations** – Some Tribal nations have expressed concerns about their involvement with ethnic studies initiatives. The reason is that Indigenous peoples are more than ethnicities, they are Tribal nations with sovereign rights.

With these concerns in mind, it will be important for stakeholders to consider the following questions? These questions have been inspired by the [California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum](#).

1. What is the ethnic breakdown of the student population? Does the district have large numbers of linguistically diverse students? What countries and regions of the world are they from? What is the history of race relations in Washington State and its local communities? How have demographic or economic changes impacted the community?
2. Will an ethnic studies professional learning community be formed to include teachers from multiple disciplines and academic backgrounds? Will ethnic studies be incorporated across all subject areas? If so, how? How will teachers be protected from facing resistance?
3. How will ethnic studies be implemented? Will ethnic studies be a semester or year-long course or set of courses? Will the course be a standalone ethnic studies course,

or will an existing course be modified to incorporate ethnic studies content, skills, and principles?

4. How can we ensure that the integrity of ethnic studies remains intact as it becomes institutionalized? How can we ensure that Washington residents and state and local organizations are well-versed in the purpose and impact of ethnic studies?
5. How can we respectfully engage with Tribal Nations? In what ways will Tribal Nations be included?

Conclusion and Recommendations

We believe it is our collective responsibility to create educational opportunities that respond to all students' diverse views, experiences, and traditions, especially those whose narratives have been historically omitted or misrepresented. Moreover, we believe it is essential to foster an awareness of social justice to prepare leaders that can contribute to an increasingly growing multiethnic society. The State Board of Education in Washington State is committed to these goals. However, the successful implementation of ethnic studies hinges on a collective approach that invites overlapping authorities, including state and local governance organizations, to participate in ethnic studies discourse. With that in mind, we offer the recommendations below. Our recommendations borrow from and align with several ethnic studies initiatives across the nation, including the [Washington State Ethnic Studies Framework](#), the [California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum](#) and the [Rethinking Ethnic Studies](#) resource book.

1. **Graduation Requirement** – Continue to support the development of an ethnic studies policy graduation requirement, including a clear ethnic studies model that outlines the mission, goals, and principles of ethnic studies in Washington State.
2. **Community Engagement** – Strengthen and expand initiatives on community engagement and partnerships to ensure communities are engaged in the process, sharing knowledge and expertise, and contributing to local decision-making efforts.
3. **Student Partnerships** – Establish and maintain a formal relationship with student-led organizations to ensure ethnic studies aligns with the needs of the students it seeks to serve.
4. **Educational Collaboration** – Continue collaboration efforts between OSPI and educational partners to advance ethnic studies and realize its mission of providing a quality humanizing education.

5. **Tribal Consultation** – Conduct Tribal consultation with Washington Native American Tribes and Tribal organizations in the development of and before the implementation of ethnic studies programs.
6. **Strategic Plan** – Develop a comprehensive strategic plan for implementation, including an initial pilot that will enable the state to gather data about what works and doesn't work about the new program.
7. **Funding** – Develop a funding model that includes how funding will be allocated for a statewide ethnic studies mandate in order to ensure its vital sustainment and strategic growth.
8. **Professional Development** – Increase investments in high-quality, sustained professional development opportunities for all educators.
9. **Research** – Invest in ongoing research and inquiry around implementation challenges and successes in districts across Washington state, led by researchers that are knowledgeable in Ethnic Studies frameworks.

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Resources

For a video recording of each listening session, please visit [SBE's web page](#)

For more information related to ethnic studies in Washington State, please visit the following links:

- [Watch Alicia Ing](#), former Renton High School senior share her view about ethnic studies and her experience during last year's [Modern Day Racism in Education student panel](#).
- [Watch Jasmin Patrón-Vargas address](#) the State Board at the September 2021 meeting. Topic: ethnic studies implementation in other states, recommendations for Washington.
- [Download a copy](#) of Jasmin's draft summary of themes from the four listening sessions (submitted for the November 2021 meeting. Her report with additional context will be available in December.
- Find the new [Ethnic Studies Framework and Implementation Tools \(ESAC\)](#) developed and recently submitted to the Legislature by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.
- Interested in learning more about ethnic studies teaching? Find resources for educators on the [Washington Ethnic Studies Now](#) web page.