

# **A Strategy Guide to Build Public Support for Ethnic Studies Programs**

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National Education Association  
Human and Civil Rights

## ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAMS STRATEGY GUIDE

**“NEA will work with all local and state affiliates to develop a strategy to defend ethnic studies programs that the state legislatures are trying to limit or ban. The NEA will also publicize a story about this issue through any available communications channels in order to bring awareness to what is happening in states such as Arizona. Additionally, the NEA will provide legal and organizational support to any state and local affiliates that are defending and/or expanding ethnic studies programs.”**

—*New Business Item #44*

### BACKGROUND

NEA’s department of Human and Civil Rights (HCR) was assigned responsibility for New Business Item #44, submitted by ethnic minority members concerned that conservative Arizona politicians would create a law to prohibit the teaching of specific ethnic studies courses in Arizona’s public schools.

On April 30, 2010, Arizona Republican lawmakers, using their House and Senate majorities, voted to approve House Bill 2281, which bans classes from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade that “promote the overthrow of the U.S. government, promote resentment toward a race or class of people, are designed primarily for pupils of one ethnic group, or that advocate ethnic solidarity” in the state’s public and charter schools.

The primary target of HB 2281 is the Mexican-American Studies program taught in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). TUSD administrators, teachers, students and a majority of the Tucson community—including some elected officials—defend teaching Mexican-American Studies classes. Supporters say the classes promote cultural pride in Hispanic/Latino students, not hatred of any other ethnic group, and that research data proves students enrolled in ethnic studies classes make better grades, generally, than their peers who do not take these classes.

Mexican-American Studies (previously “La Raza” studies) classes have been taught in TUSD from 1997 to present day. Under HB 2281, any school district considered to be in violation of the law can lose 10 percent of its monthly allocation of state funding. On January 3, 2011, a few hours before he left office as the state Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne (now State Attorney General) announced he had determined that TUSD’s ethnic studies program violates the new law. TUSD had 60 days to come into compliance with the statute or risk losing 10 percent of its state funding, about \$15 million. To date, no punitive action has been taken against the district, even though the ethnic studies program is still operating.

Human and Civil Rights has provided information to *NEA Today* that was used in two nationally published articles on HB 2281. The Arizona Education Association monitors all political, legal and social activities related to HB 2281 and provides regular updates to NEA’s General Counsel and Human and Civil Rights. HCR acknowledges the Tucson Education Association and Arizona Education Association for all of their help and support in completing the strategies document.

*Note: On October 18, 2010, 11 TUSD employees filed a class action lawsuit against HB 2281 claiming it is unconstitutional. TUSD, the Arizona Education Association and NEA are not parties in this lawsuit.*

## INTRODUCTION

**“Our first wish is that all men should be educated fully to full humanity; not only one individual, nor a few, nor even many, but all men together and single, young and old, rich and poor, of high and lowly birth, men and women—in a word, all whose fate it is to be born human beings; so that at last the whole of the human race may become educated, men of all ages, all conditions, both sexes and all nations.”**

—*John Amos Comenius*  
*The Great Didactic, 1649*

The National Education Association firmly believes that the promise of public education is to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world. To fulfill this promise, public education must be a gateway to opportunity by making it possible for all students to develop their potential, independence and character regardless of family income, place of residence, ethnicity or any other distinguishing group variable. Further, public education in a diverse and interdependent world must provide opportunities for cross-cultural understanding, a sense of mutuality and an appreciation for one’s own cultural identity.

Myriad schools and school systems attempt to fulfill this promise by offering ethnic studies programs aimed at providing a rich dialogue in which students can expand their cultural knowledge, a self-affirming learning experience that promotes student achievement. Executing these programs can be quite daunting in a national climate plagued by polarization, adversarial political posturing, misinformation, ethnic hostilities and a hemorrhaging economy. The intense debates about illegal immigration, exportation of American jobs, homosexual marriages and the military’s “don’t ask don’t tell” policy create a volatile environment for programs that may challenge deeply held beliefs, prejudices and biases.

Although these ethnic studies programs are purposeful and well intentioned, careful planning and execution are essential to community acceptance. Serving the greater public good, and operating within the parameters of the schools or districts shouldn’t be

the sole litmus test in the decision-making process. Rather, decision makers must address the political nuances, stakeholder interests and resource constraints that will undoubtedly attract attention. Accordingly, schools and school systems must devise and implement thoughtful strategies that account for the challenges and pockets of resistance that could impact the programs' acceptance and success.

The best practices that follow are based on research of applicable theory and sound principles and lessons learned from a district that was thrust into the national debate over its ethnic studies program. A cross-section of targeted community stakeholders—including teachers, legislators, activists, school board members and members of local and state NEA affiliates—identified nine core strategies for creating and defending a viable and vibrant ethnic studies program:

### **Summary of Strategies**

1. **Understand the positions taken by all stakeholders.** (Acknowledging and exploring resistance can pave the way toward fostering a partnership between the school district and various stakeholders).
2. When establishing an ethnic studies program, **use a logical decision-making process that can be explained and defended.** (Use the documentation generated by the decision-making process to help build coalitions and overcome present and future objections.)
3. **Align program content with other courses, and focus on the social and political forces that shape human interaction rather than a “victims versus oppressors” dynamic.** (Student explorations should lead to propositions for strengthening individuals, groups, communities, and the nation.)
4. **Identify likely objections and interests of stakeholders to increase the probability of moving them beyond the position they've staked out.** (Invite

- stakeholders to be your partner in selling the program, and ask stakeholders with different points of view to list considerations they want reflected in the program.)
5. **Build coalitions with stakeholders who have the ability to sway public opinion.** (Be upfront in discussing controversial aspects of the programs and any potential or actual claims made against the program.)
  6. **Take the time you need to implement your program successfully.** (A well-developed program delivered at the wrong time has no more value than a poorly developed program.)
  7. **Provide transparency through open and ongoing dialogue with community stakeholders.** (The provocative topic of ethnic studies requires transparency that exceeds other programs.)
  8. **Manage the news spin by taking an early lead in scripting the messages about your program.** (Remain focused on the program's intended purpose—enhancing student achievement.)
  9. **Choose instructional staff very carefully—not only for content mastery but for open-mindedness, objectivity and ability to understand boundaries.** (Instructors must have well-developed skills in managing conflict, recognizing hot-button triggers, and facilitating tense conversations.)

## **STRATEGIES FOR A STRONG ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAM**

### **Strategy One: Understanding the Complexity**

Ethnic studies programs that teach cultural pluralism and healthy co-existence are by no means radical concepts, but history has shown that these programs sometimes become recipes for maintaining the status quo, cross-cultural rifts and alienation, and disparate education or treatment. As a result, ethnic studies programs must be guided by the reasonable expectations of progressive school systems geared toward preparing students for success in a multicultural, interdependent world. But instituting these programs is not a simple matter. The very nature of ethnic studies promulgates conversations about historical injustices, disparate treatment, biases, prejudice, and entitlement. Because these conversations touch at the core of unconscious beliefs about self, others and the world, they can be complicated, emotionally charged, difficult to manage and adversarial.

The notion that students learn best when they have a strong self-concept and accept their cultural underpinnings is a widely accepted proposition. Ethnic studies programs designed to bolster the acceptance of self and one's culture can have a positive impact on the self-confidence students need for high achievement. The connections between self-esteem and achievement, as well as the connection between healthy appreciation of one's culture and self-esteem, are well documented and widely accepted.

The complexity of instituting ethnic studies programs transcends the boundaries of accepted theory or logic and can pierce directly into the unconscious constructs that are dear to many stakeholders. When these constructs are threatened, the challenge can appear as an attack on the very fabric of individual and community existence. As an example, reasonable ethnic studies programs might seek to enrich the perspectives of people, events, and situations from a historical context because history has generally been reported from a myopic perspective. Despite the motive to enrich, many could see these programs as teaching revisionist history aimed more at placing blame and confronting shame than broadening perspectives. There are no simple solutions to the ensuing stalemate.

In *Visions and Strategies for Change*, Allan G. Johnson opines that “the problem of privilege and oppression is deep and wide, and to work with it we have to be able to see it clearly so that we can talk about it in useful ways.” Consequently, schools and districts must recognize and accept that there is no single-mindedness when issues of race, ethnicity and/or culture are presented. Though they are not monolithic entities, ethnic communities could have starkly different reactions and unbridled resistance could erupt. The program leaders must recognize the complexity of this resistance and move to understand the positions taken by stakeholders so as to determine their underlying interests. Acknowledging and exploring the resistance in this way can pave the way for a partnership between the school districts and the stakeholders as they seek to find ways to satisfy each one’s interest in the program’s goals and design. In so doing, the district will find that it has adopted the new goal of transforming relationships with stakeholders into effective, cooperative and trusting partnerships. This transformation provides a greater chance of success.

### **Strategy Two: Making Smart Decisions**

Given the complexity of the action and the potential consequences, the decision to launch an ethnic studies program should not be taken lightly. As with any other instructional initiative, the establishment of an ethnic studies program must result from an orderly process that leads to smart choices. Therefore, the process for deciding whether to establish the program can be an important factor in determining the success of the program. The decision-making process must fulfill six specific criteria: 1. It focuses on what’s important about ethnic studies; 2. It is logical and consistent so that it can be explained later; 3. It acknowledges both subjective and objective factors and blends analytical with intuitive thinking; 4. It considers as much information and analysis as necessary to resolve present and anticipated dilemmas; 5. It encourages and guides the gathering of relevant information and informed opinion; and 6. It is straightforward, reliable, easy to use and flexible. These criteria and the following approach to decision making can be found in *Smart Choices*, by John Hammond, Ralph Keeney and Howard Raiffa. The authors provide eight keys to effective decision making that school and

district officials should use to guide their own decision making. At some later date, the documentation generated by the decision making process could prove useful in building coalitions or overcoming objections.

- **Work on the right problem:** The way the problem is framed initially makes all of the difference in determining later interactions and outcomes. The problem needs to be stated carefully, acknowledging the complexity and avoiding unwarranted assumptions or opinion-limiting prejudices. In deciding on the problem statement, care should be given to fully explaining the current state of affairs, who is affected, the impact of doing nothing, and the benefits of solving or rectifying the current situation.
- **Specify your objectives:** An ethnic studies program is a means to an end. Decision makers should be able to state what they most want to accomplish through the program—their interests, values, concerns, fears, and aspirations. Thinking through these concepts will help provide a clear direction.
- **Create imaginative alternatives:** There are many ways to solve a problem and, as such, implementing an ethnic studies program is *not* the only viable solution. It is wise to generate a number of alternative solutions that could also address the concerns that are driving plans to introduce the ethnic studies program. This list might also be helpful later to justify that the ethnic studies program was a means, not the end that was being sought.
- **Understand the consequences:** Alternatives should satisfy the objectives but could have sobering or exciting consequences. If the ethnic studies program proves to be the favored alternative, the consequence of implementation should be evaluated. Understanding the potential consequences of the program is necessary in order to devise strategies that mitigate the impact.
- **Grapple with your tradeoffs:** Because some of the objectives might be in conflict with one another, or have too many negative consequences, it could be necessary to make some tradeoffs or concessions so the program is more acceptable to the stakeholders. For example, it might be deemed necessary to

pare down some of the original objectives in order to sustain more critical objectives. Other tradeoffs deserving consideration might impact approach and methodology, phase-in or staffing as a strategy for gaining acceptance. Make sure the program is worth the investment of time, people and money.

- **Clarify your uncertainties:** Consider future circumstances and how likely they are to occur. This part of the process equips stakeholders with scenario-planning considerations that can be used to influence judgment and decisions about moving forward in a specified direction.
- **Consider linked decisions:** It is highly possible that a decision to implement an ethnic studies program could be linked to other decisions, either made within the school or within the affected community. Understanding these relationships is critical to ensure a successful rollout of the program.

### **Strategy Three: Developing Inclusive Curriculum and Instruction**

The curriculum must be designed with rigor to satisfy the instructional intent while staying within the boundaries set by state standards and law. Content should be aligned with other courses and based on sound defensible research. Content also should be rich in a portrayal of actual events and equally rich in unpacking the circumstances, attitudes, beliefs, values and options available to all parties. Classroom activities should be presented to allow students to think deeply and understand the courses of actions that were chosen and why those courses of action were consistent with the prevailing thinking of the time. With this knowledge, they could trace the evolution to current thinking and attitudes and identify contradictions in the law, the public mind and ethnic group experiences. Instruction should guard against win-lose or zero-sum thinking. Rather than focusing on right versus wrong, or victims versus oppressors, instruction should help the students examine the confluence of social and political forces and the collusion of the ethnic groups that produced the chapters in history. All of these explorations should lead to propositions for strengthening individuals, groups, communities, and the nation. Instructional modalities should foster active participation and engagement. University

partners, utilizing research-based materials both in scope and sequence, should be considered critical in the development of the ethnic subject-matter materials.

### **Strategy Four: Analyzing Stakeholders**

Understanding the positions and interests of stakeholders and the centers of power they represent is paramount to a successful rollout. Stakeholders should be rated in terms of their prospects for supporting or opposing the program and then ranked in order of their importance. Using this analysis, decision makers can decide how much energy is required to win their favor. When there are large numbers of antagonistic stakeholders, expect resistance but use logical analysis that can provide clues for winning them over. Further, this analysis can support an effective strategy to manage the social and political forces that could be stirred up by the program. Interests or positions could be staked out based on turf, self-esteem, recognition, security, social relationships and valued practices. Responsible decision makers who identify the likely objections and interests of the stakeholders will have a stronger probability of moving them beyond the position they have staked out.

### **Strategy Five: Building Coalitions**

Beyond identifying the objections and interests of the stakeholders, decision makers should be proactive in building coalitions with stakeholders who have the ability to sway public opinion. The adage that there is strength in numbers holds especially true when deciding to launch a program that has the potential of raising public angst. Beyond mere numbers, efforts must be made to create partnerships with the most powerful and influential stakeholders.

This means holding private meetings to discuss the program's objectives, value to the community and benefit to the students. Use stories, anecdotes and live testimonials to persuade stakeholders to your point of view. Invite these stakeholders to meetings held at either side's respective "turf" or at neutral locations. Be upfront in discussing controversial aspects of the programs and the potential or real claims made against the program. Ask the stakeholders with different points of view to list their claims and the

concerns or considerations they want reflected in the program. Reconcile the contradictions in their claims by exploring the concerns and considerations supporting each. Find common themes in conflicting claims that social and political forces stir up. Look for ways to head off these forces with appropriate implementation tactics. Invite the stakeholders to be your partner in selling the program to other stakeholders. Such invitations should be given so as to represent the diversity among the stakeholders.

### **Strategy Six: Avoiding an Artificial Sense of Urgency**

Decision makers must guard against the seductive power of a plan that appears ready to be implemented. When there is no compelling need to rush to implementation, avoid creating an artificial sense of urgency. While quick implementation will get the plan off and running and avoid the appearance of doing nothing, decision makers don't need to create unnecessary time pressures. Rather, when the long view is taken, programs become timeless and have an enduring effect. A well thought out program delivered at the wrong time has no more value than a poorly thought out program.

### **Strategy Seven: Maintaining Transparency**

The very provocative topic of ethnic studies requires transparency that exceeds the requirements of other programs. To achieve the necessary transparency, there needs to be open dialogue throughout the developmental and implementation processes. Transparency requires that the school or district establish and maintain a climate of openness with the immediate community and beyond.

This openness is accomplished mainly through communications not simply aimed at the giving of information, but also designed to allow for discussion, compromise, mediation and mid-course corrections. Understanding that ethnic studies programs could carry with them some degree of resistance, the intent of all communications must always be to build alliances with the community while decreasing any alienation and disconnectedness.

Once the program is launched, schools inviting stakeholders in for first-hand experiences of the program could alleviate lingering uncertainties. These visits will also motivate staff to stay within the boundaries of the program objectives.

### **Strategy Eight: Managing the Spin**

Because ethnic studies programs can be translated or spun to meet the needs of any particular audience, it is important that schools and districts proactively manage the messages that swirl through communities about the programs. Taking an early lead on scripting the messages provides the greatest potential for winning the minds and hearts of the community. The message must always be spoken in terms of the vision the course promotes and the results the program achieves. Additionally, the communications must remain focused on the intended overall reason for the course, i.e., that all student achievement is enhanced when students have a healthy sense of themselves and their ethnic group. The messaging must emphasize that strengthening the self-concept for one does not come at the expense of the self-concept or appreciation for others, and cultural differences should be presented as an enhancement for the larger community. Expert use of various forms of media is essential in widening the message.

### **Strategy Nine: Choosing Skilled Instructional Staff**

Instructional staff cannot be chosen solely on the basis of their academic degrees or passion for ethnic studies. In addition to mastery of program content, instructors must understand the broader social and political context for the program, have a clear understanding of boundaries, demonstrate open-mindedness and objectivity and have no apparent hidden agenda for being involved in the program.

Instructors should be skillful in provoking deep thinking, rigorous analysis and spirited dialogue without pushing a personal agenda that transcends the course objectives. They must also have well-developed skills in managing conflict, recognizing triggers and hot buttons and controlling tense conversations. Because the instructor is a major force in shaping the conversation within the classroom, she/he is in the default position of shaping much of the outside conversation about the program.

## CONCLUSION

Implementing an ethnic studies program where previously there has been limited attention to such studies can be a tenuous proposition in the best of circumstances. Given the divisive nature of discourse that has permeated our national, state and local conversations, ethnic studies programs can easily morph into a tinderbox of heated controversy that undermines the goals of the programs. Although there have been solid advances in the 50 years since the start of the civil rights movement, many individuals and communities are too rigidly entrenched in their biases, prejudices and occasional hatred to open their minds to data that forces them to confront their values and beliefs. Further, the economic downturn has increased fears about scarcity of resources and diminished quality-of-life that breeds insular thinking and alienation.

Despite the intensity of the potential challenges that could accompany the introduction of ethnic studies programs, school administrators shouldn't waver in their resolve to accomplish the credible goals of the programs. Rather, they should apply the tools of critical and strategic thinking, such as conflict resolution, mediation, community building and empowerment. The strategies outlined in this report are designed to help you implement those tools in a simple and practical way.

Those charged with planning the program should move cautiously and deliberately in the early stages to ensure building an adequate framework for success. Once the intentionality is clear, a process can be designed with checkpoints along the way. These checkpoints allow the framers to identify and resolve potential resistance early in the process and build alliances that could support the program moving forward. Further, the due diligence contained in these strategies helps administrators create a groundswell of empowered supporters who are highly motivated to achieve the goals articulated in a well-planned ethnic studies program.

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