

March 10, 2021

Representative Ruth Richardson
Education Policy Committee, Chair
463 State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Richardson and members of the Committee,

I am a Minnesota teacher urging you to include Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement in the Education Policy Omnibus Bill. Making Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement is the first of many steps needed in order to ensure that education in our state meets the needs of all our students. Minnesota's K-12 student population is rapidly becoming more diverse. In 2005 there were 22% Indigenous students and students of color and today it's 35%. Meanwhile, Minnesota has one of the largest achievement gaps in the country. The classroom learning experience – including the teacher workforce which is 95% white, materials, and content – remains predominantly white. This is harmful to our Indigenous students and students of color because lack of representation in curriculum contributes to a sense of disenfranchisement. Indigenous students and students of color receive the message that school is not for them because history is not about them. Schools talk of increasing student engagement, but it is impossible to engage in school when school does not reflect your lived experience. In order to increase engagement, we must first increase enfranchisement. I will also note that lack of representation and perspectives of communities of color is harmful for white students because it deprives them of the knowledge, skills and empathy they need to be effective community members.

Ethnic Studies enables students to better understand the rich heritage, culture, and history of the land upon which we live, told from multiple and diverse perspectives. This builds empathy, the ability to know and feel what another person experiences even if that experience is different from your own. Empathy is the antidote to fear, and it is fear of each other that so often divides us. Replacing fear with empathy empowers students to critique racism and its personal and social impact, as well as to challenge oppressive conditions. Understanding that different worldviews exist and investigating the lived experiences of other groups helps prepare students for discourse rather than division. Our children need us to make this possible.

Each student's world view is uniquely their own. Yet our school curriculum leaves many students with the impression that there is a single world view, a single narrative that claims to be colorblind but actually centers whiteness. This leaves Indigenous students and students of color left out and leaves white students with a false sense that white history is all history.

We cannot raise our students to be colorblind as many of us were. Colorblindness is harmful to all students because it ignores what makes our students amazing, talented, fierce and fantastic. We cannot raise our Indigenous students and students of color to believe their history is an alternative narrative. We cannot raise our white students to ignore-or worse pity

and devalue-the experiences of communities of color. The genuine stories and truths of all Minnesotans must be celebrated and woven together into the fabric of our students' school experiences.

Again, I appreciate the Ethnic Studies language in the legislation, and I strongly urge the committee to strengthen the ethnic studies instruction within the bill moving forward, so all students have the benefit of ethnic studies education. Thank you for the work you are doing to support our students.

Sincerely,

Liesa Klyn
Middle School Teacher, Minnesota