

June 11, 2021

The Honorable Connie Leyva  
Chair, Senate Education Committee  
State Capitol, Room 4061  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Support for AB 101**

Dear Senator Leyva:

UnidosUS, formerly the National Council of La Raza, is the nation's largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization and has built a stronger country by creating opportunities for Latinos for more than 50 years. Through our unique combination of research, advocacy, programs, and a national network of nearly 300 community-based Affiliate organizations, we challenge the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos in the United States. UnidosUS's California-based Affiliates include 58 community-based organizations that provide direct services to approximately 1.8 million Californians annually. Through partnerships, community investments, and state research and advocacy on housing, health, and education, UnidosUS advances opportunities for the more than 15 million Latinos who call California home.

UnidosUS is proud to support AB 101, which will require high schools to provide ethnic studies starting in academic year 2025–2026 and require students to take one semester of ethnic studies to graduate beginning in 2029–2030. In California's K–12 education system, 78% of the students are non-White, with Latinos making up 55% of the student population.<sup>1</sup> This legislation aims to create curricula that are culturally competent and reflective of California's diverse student population. There is substantial data showing that student achievement, attendance, and college-going rates improve when students see themselves reflected in the classroom; therefore, having students take an ethnic studies course will contribute to closing the opportunity gap for students of color. Furthermore, research on ethnic studies curricula has found that both students of color and Whites benefit academically and socially from taking well-designed ethnic studies courses.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on students of color, and it is suspected that Black and Latino students have fallen further behind. As decision-makers think

about policy changes and systems of support necessary for addressing the needs of our most vulnerable students, changes to California’s curricula must be included in that conversation.

This past year, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted long-standing inequities in the country’s education system, and a national movement advocating against anti-Blackness and discrimination in American society has revealed how deeply ingrained racism is in the nation’s fabric. Both events demonstrate the need for culturally competent ethnic studies curricula, which provides all students—not just students of color—with opportunities to learn about the histories and accomplishments of various cultures and communities.

Ethnic study curricula contain courses focused on the history and literature of the struggles of people whose voices have often been omitted from traditional texts and classrooms: the four core racial and ethnic groups—Blacks, Latinos, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. The history of ethnic studies courses is unique as it is rooted in the struggle against racism.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, access to an ethnic studies course gives students the opportunity to engage with a more nuanced and complex history about their communities.

Taking a well-designed and well-taught course supports students—regardless of racial or ethnic identity—in valuing their own cultural identity while appreciating the differences of those around them. Studies have found that both students of color and Whites who participate in these courses develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy and personal empowerment, perform better academically, and graduate at higher rates.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, implementing AB 101 is critical to addressing the opportunity gap that students of color experience; research indicates that giving students access to ethnic studies courses can improve their engagement and academic performance. A study on the effects of an ethnic studies curriculum piloted in several San Francisco high schools showed that when students with GPAs below a certain threshold take an ethnic studies course, it positively impacted their attendance by 21%, GPA by 1.4 grade points, and credits earned by 23%.<sup>4</sup> Other studies tracking Latino students indicate that ethnic studies courses (including Mexican American studies) instill ethnic pride and give students a stronger sense of belonging within their communities and academic spaces. Additionally, ethnic studies courses have shown to boost Latino students’ performance on standardized tests and make it more likely that they graduate high school.<sup>5</sup> Thus, current research indicates that Latino students, alongside other students of color, greatly benefit from taking ethnic studies courses and that it is a key tool necessary to closing the opportunity gap.

UnidosUS is pleased to support AB 101 to ensure that high school students have access to an ethnic studies course before they graduate, thus improving the academic outcomes for Latinos

and all students of color throughout the state. If you have any questions regarding our support, please contact Viviana Martin, Policy Analyst, Policy and Advocacy at [vmartin@unidosus.org](mailto:vmartin@unidosus.org).

Sincerely,



Amalia Chamorro  
Director of Education Policy  
UnidosUS

cc: Assemblymember Jose Medina

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<sup>1</sup> California Department of Education, “Fingertip Facts on Education in California,” Sacramento, CA, 2021, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp> (accessed May 18).

<sup>2</sup> Tina Vasquez, “The Fight for Ethnic Studies,” *Teaching Tolerance Magazine* 66 (Spring 2021): 19–23.

<sup>3</sup> Christine E. Sleeter and Miguel Zavala, “What the Research Says about Ethnic Studies,” *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Research* 3 (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Dee and Emily Penner, “The Casual Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum” *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (2017): 127–166.

<sup>5</sup> Christine E. Sleeter and Miguel Zavala, “What the Research Says about Ethnic Studies.”