

EDUCATION

How One Law Banning Ethnic Studies Led to Its Rise

Legislators in Arizona decided to prohibit a culturally relevant course, so teachers pushed back and started a nationwide movement.



Arne Duncan visits a high school in San Francisco, a city where all high schools now offer ethnic studies courses.

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The irony is that if Arizona lawmakers had never squashed one Mexican American studies class—in a single district in one city—Curtis Acosta would have no interest in duplicating that same class across the country. Certainly, California and Texas public schools would not be considering to offer the

course in all its high schools. And Tony Diaz would never have become the book smuggler.

In fact, today Mexican American studies has spread to high schools at a rate that no one could have imagined before Arizona banned the class in 2010.

“It sped up the evolution by about 25 years,” says Diaz, the self-dubbed “librotraficante,” or book smuggler. “It’s clear to me that our intellectual advancement is a threat to some people, because they tried to make it illegal.”

The story of how Mexican American studies flourished begins in 2010, with Arizona House Bill 2281. A group of Republican legislators in the state designed the legislation specifically to ban the course—or more specifically, to ban the Mexican American studies class taught in the Tucson Unified School District, which attracted mostly Latino students. The legislators sought to implement the ban while leaving similar classes geared around Asian, black, and Native American cultures untouched.

The housing crisis had crippled Arizona's economy. Legislators had just passed the most controversial anti-immigration law in the country, Senate Bill 1070, which allowed local officers to question people's citizenship. And the governor, Jan Brewer, had declared (incorrectly) that cartel members were beheading people in the desert. There seemed to be a lot more to worry about than a high-school course.

The focus (or some might say vendetta) on Mexican Americans started when Dolores Huerta, an influential activist with United Farm Workers (of Cesar Chavez fame), told students at a Tucson High Magnet School assembly that “Republicans **hate Latinos**.” The then-state superintendent of public instruction, Tom Horne, dispatched an aide to tell students at the majority-Latino school otherwise. As the aide spoke, students raised their fists and

turned their backs.

From there on, Horne and his replacement, John Huppenthal, tried with puzzling ferocity to squelch Mexican American studies. The bill designed to eradicate the course said the program taught Latino students to hate other races and that they'd been historically subjugated and mistreated by the government, and that it even encouraged sedition. "When I came into a classroom, they were portraying Ben Franklin as a racist," said [Huppenthal](#). "They got a poster of Che Guevara."

In the spring of 2010, the majority-Republican legislature signed HB 2281 into law.

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Acosta had taught Mexican American studies for several years, and led the development for its design and curriculum. Each day at Tucson High Magnet School, Acosta started his class with a poem by Luis Valdez: "If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself." Next, students might read passages from a Chicano author, analyze rap lyrics to tie in pop culture, write an essay about poverty or disenfranchisement among young men and women of color, or ponder current issues of feminism and heterosexism. Acosta taught students to view history not just through the lens of Manifest Destiny and the nation's conquering heroes, but also through the eyes of the displaced and conquered. "All that scary revolutionary crap," Acosta recently said, jokingly.

In a district of some 55,000 students, only 3 percent took the course each year, according to school data. Tucson High Magnet School is mostly Latino, and nearly half of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. Mexican American studies, Acosta says, was a way to engage those students who found school rote and unexciting, or those who might otherwise drop out. In fact, a year later, the University of Arizona would publish a report that

found offering Mexican American studies increased graduation rates, grades, and college enrollment.

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Almost immediately after legislators passed the bill on Mexican American studies, activists and lawyers fought back and resisted the directive; they would eventually take the ban to court. But in 2011, in his last days in office, Horne announced that if the school district didn't drop the course, it would lose significant funding. So many schools dropped or significantly watered down Mexican American studies. Some even banned books for the course.

During the following months, Acosta—slogging to school, forced to teach a censored class—learned a new type of dehumanization, he says. “More so than someone saying racist stuff to your face.”

Then one day in April, around 5:45 p.m., the fight for Mexican American studies shifted gears.

As the Tucson Unified School District's governing board prepared to discuss removing Mexican American studies from a list of classes that would count toward core requirements (seen by many as another move to demean it), nine students rushed the boardroom. They pulled chains from around their waists. Behind a curved wood desk with microphones, they sat in the board's rolling chairs and locked themselves in place. They **pounded the table and chanted**, “When education is under attack, what do we do?”

“Fight back!”

When education is under attack, what do we do? Fight back.

National media had covered the story before. But the issue seemed to take on new vigor. At the next board meeting, so many people arrived that large speakers were placed outside the boardroom so they could hear the discussion. Officers arrested several people, most of them students.

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Seeing the protests in the news, Jose Lara, a Los Angeles social-studies teacher at Santee Education Complex High School, wondered why his district didn't have its own Mexican American Studies course. "What are we doing in our classrooms [to help]?" Lara thought. "What type of awareness are we bringing?"

In Houston, Texas, a group of Chicano writers, poets, artists, and activists hatched an idea: They would bus all those banned books into Tucson. "Librotraficantes," they'd call themselves—book smugglers.

Soon, a tiny program that leaders hoped to silently squash quickly became the focal point of a Southwestern Chicano movement.

The Texas author and professor **Tony Diaz**, together with his band of book smugglers, raised money for their trip. Donations poured in from across the country, he says, as well as books sent directly from banned authors. The book smugglers rented a tour bus and made their first stop in San Antonio, where they delivered a package of contraband books ("wet-books") to the Southwest Workers Union. "A mobile underground library," Diaz called it. He marched the streets in a suit and tie, fist raised.

They made several stops, including El Paso,

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Albuquerque, and finally Tucson, where Diaz handed books out to former Mexican American studies students and created a library at a local youth center. “[Arizona has] been oppressing Mexican-Americans for years,” Diaz says. “And they were used to bullying and controlling immigrants, and they wanted to control our thoughts. They were wrong. I’m a Mexican American citizen with a master’s. I know my rights.”

Meanwhile, Acosta had started Sunday gatherings to replace the banned Mexican American studies classes.

With all the attention, he was able to partner with Prescott College, a local liberal-arts school, to offer students free college credit. But where once he had 150 students, he now had just 10. Still, they met for two hours each week.

The next year, Acosta quit teaching at the high school. He handed his Sunday class over to a group of teachers. “I couldn't live with the idea of what I thought was political opportunism and fear-mongering,” Acosta says.

Around the same time, Lara, the Los Angeles teacher, had begun implementing an ethnic-studies course in his district. Then the district made it mandatory to graduate.

“It was an idea whose time had come,” Lara says. “The ban in Arizona lit a fire for everyone here to think, ‘Hey, we should be doing something about this.’”

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Within a year, Lara had spoken with leaders in San Diego, San Bernardino, San Francisco, and Ventura counties who wanted ethnic studies in their

schools. The reaction in California couldn't have been more different from Arizona's. When the school board held a meeting to discuss implementation and Lara had no money to bus students to it, "teachers started reaching into their pockets and soliciting online donations. We heard from people all across the country—teachers, parents, professors saying, 'Here's \$25. And I wish I could be there.'" Lara told *The Los Angeles Times*, "It's been pretty amazing."

Acosta, forced to teach a censored class, learned a new type of dehumanization.

Lara says five California school districts now require an ethnic-studies class, and 11 others offer it as an elective. There's even a law proposed that would compel all California high schools to offer some form of ethnic studies.

This year, the National Education Association awarded Lara the 2015 Social Justice Activist Award, largely for his work in spreading ethnic studies in California.

After the success of the book-smuggling tour, Diaz and his group of traficantes went before the Texas legislature and petitioned for Mexican American studies to be offered statewide. "The ban of Mexican American studies in Arizona opened our eyes to the discrimination," Diaz says, "and how important it is to embrace our history and culture. We realized there was nothing to ban in Texas, so we needed to start one."

In response, the Texas State Board of Education allowed interested schools to begin including ethnic-studies courses. It also put out a call for course books.

This year, Mission High School, in Mission, Texas, became one of the first

public schools in the state to offer a Mexican American studies course. Soon, Diaz says, they plan to spread it to more than 100 school districts.

As for Arizona, the Tucson Unified School District eventually rescinded the book ban. The law that banned the course is still being fought in court. A federal appeals court recently rejected arguments from opponents that the ban was overly broad and vague. But it upheld complaints that the ban was motivated by “[discriminatory intent](#).”

It was a partial win for Acosta and other activists.

Acosta no longer teaches in public schools. Instead, he opened his own education consulting company called the Acosta Latino Learning Partnership, and with a group of educators he also founded in 2013 the Xicano Institute for Teaching and Organizing. There, they instruct and consult with teachers and school staff on how to develop a curriculum for their own Mexican American or ethnic-studies programs. They get calls from across the country.

Last week, Acosta flew to an educational conference in San Francisco. Every school in the city now offers ethnic studies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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