

LOCAL / Education

# El Rancho schools don't wait on state, adopt ethnic-studies curriculum

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As lawmakers debate statewide requirement, El Rancho schools adopt ethnic-studies course

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**W**hile some California legislators hope to implement a statewide ethnic-studies curriculum in coming years, one school district has decided not to wait.

For students at El Rancho High School in Pico Rivera, ethnic studies are now required.

The El Rancho Board of Education recently agreed that all students, beginning with the class of 2016, must take and pass an ethnic-studies course before graduating.

El Rancho is thought to be the first school system in the state with such a requirement, one that officials said they hope will help create bridges between students and teach them about not just their own heritage but that of others.

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"When students learn about themselves, their history, it gives them self-worth and self-esteem and they do better in school," said Jose Lara, vice president of the El Rancho Board of Education who co-sponsored the proposal.

The 9,380-student district will spend the next year creating a curriculum and deciding the best way to implement classes, Lara said. He envisions a variety of courses, such as an art class that focuses on Chicano work, or an English class that includes African American literature, among others.

The move does not increase the number of credits needed to graduate but replaces a geography

requirement with ethnic studies, Lara said.

The idea was conceived after district officials learned of efforts by Assemblyman Luis Alejo (D-Watsonville), who sponsored a bill that would require the Education Department to form a task force to study the best approach for implementing a standardized ethnic studies curriculum in high schools statewide. The legislation is pending in the Senate.

The academic success of students in a popular Mexican American studies program in Tucson, which has since been dismantled, also proved that a well-run program can spur students to do better in school, Lara said.

Latino students make up 98% of El Rancho's enrollment.

"We want to make sure that we're producing students who go to college and are entering fields that Latino students typically don't go into," Lara said.

The effort, so far, has avoided clashes over ethnic studies classes that have occurred elsewhere.

The Tucson program ended in 2011 when Arizona outlawed the Mexican American studies program. Officials banned classes primarily designed for a particular ethnic group or those that "promote resentment toward a race or class of people."

A movement to require Mexican American courses in Texas recently failed.

Opponents of ethnic studies classes say they are divisive and foster anger among students.

El Rancho board President Aurora Villon contends the classes push students to excel and teach long-neglected slices of America's cultural heritage.

"It's extremely important for students to have an understanding and pride in their ethnic background — not only Latino students, but all students," she said. "What a beautiful way to unite people and for them to contribute what their culture can to the mainstream — it's what America is all about."

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