

**EDUCATION** JUNE 13, 2015

# Ethnic studies gaining traction in Sacramento-area public schools

**HIGHLIGHTS**

Woodland is first in region to join growing ethnic studies trend

Sacramento City Unified launches pilot course in fall 2016

Advocates say courses will bring greater cultural insight



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Asami Saito will be done with high school well before 2020, when Sacramento City Unified School District students will have to take ethnic studies to graduate.

Even so, the West Campus High School junior, who serves as the student trustee on the city school board, said she's hoping future students will benefit from the greater cultural insight that she believes comes with ethnic studies.

For years, she said, history has been taught largely through a European-American lens. "You rarely get to hear about an African American, Latino or Asian American perspective," said Saito, 16. "I've never heard of any textbook focused on the Japanese American perspective."

Sacramento City Unified this month became the fifth – and largest – school district in the state to add ethnic studies as a future graduation requirement, joining a handful of districts across California that will ask students to study U.S. minority cultures, including Woodland Joint Unified.

The Sacramento district is one of the most diverse in the region, with no one ethnic group forming a majority. According to state data, 37 percent are Latino, 19 percent white, 18 percent African American, 17 percent Asian American and more than 5 percent identifying themselves as multiracial.

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Sacramento City Unified high schools will be on board in 2019

The district will phase in ethnic studies as an elective at a pilot group of high schools starting in fall 2016. The course would expand to all 13 district high schools by fall 2019 and become a graduation requirement a year later, starting with the freshman class entering high school.

Districts in San Diego and the Bay Area are creating or expanding existing ethnic studies courses, said Jose Lara, coordinator of the statewide advocacy group Ethnic Studies Now. Locally, trustees for San Juan Unified in Carmichael recently added a course for one high school, although they have not made it a graduation requirement.

San Juan Unified trustees approved that course in April. The outlined course, which freshmen will take this fall at San Juan High School, calls for a “comparative and historical perspective to examine languages, values and voices of diverse groups in the United States” with emphasis on African Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Latinos, Native Americans and other groups relevant to students.

The suburban district in northeast Sacramento County has grown increasingly diverse over the past two decades, according to state data. In 1995-96, 78 percent of the district’s students were white. This school year, 58 percent were.

Gloria Ervin, principal at San Juan High School in Citrus Heights, said teachers and administrators began to see the possibilities for their students when they attended an ethnic studies training session in San Francisco in January. Administrators and teachers from San Francisco, Santa Monica and Los Angeles explained how the courses enhanced students’ perceptions of their own place in the world, she said.

“We thought, ‘What an opportunity to engage students as they transition into high school,’” Ervin said.

In California, Assembly Bill 101 by Assemblyman Luis Alejo, D-Watsonville, would require school districts serving students in grades seven to 12 to offer ethnic studies as an elective. The Assembly passed the bill earlier this month and moved it to the Senate.

In Arizona, a 2010 law banned ethnic studies in public schools, a move championed by critics who said such courses were divisive, specifically those that promoted ethnic solidarity or were tailored to individual ethnic groups. Teachers and students mounted a legal challenge that has reached the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Lara said he listened to Arizona teachers opposed to the law discuss the issue in Los Angeles and took up the cause when he ran successfully for the El Rancho Unified school board two years ago. He also formed Ethnic Studies Now, a coalition of educators, civil rights groups and educators that has worked with school districts throughout the state.

This year, he said, increased state education funding is helping the effort along. His school district this fall will become the first in California to implement an ethnic studies graduation requirement, starting with the incoming freshman class.

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Jose Lara, coordinator of Ethnic Studies Now

“This is a long time coming,” Lara said. “It’s an issue of civil rights. All students are robbed when the voices of students of color are not in our curriculum. When you see across the country people shouting out, ‘Black lives matter,’ the question is, what are our schools doing to address those issues? An answer is ethnic studies.”

In Sacramento City Unified, the Student Advisory Council pushed for an ethnic studies requirement, citing the district’s diverse student body and the fact that 44 languages are spoken by students at home.

“It’s really important to recognize how historic this vote is,” said Trustee Jessie Ryan, who represents Oak Park, Lemon Hill and Hollywood Park and was instrumental in coaching students on their successful board measure. “To institute ethnic studies across the school district has the potential to transform the lives of our young people.”

A task force of teachers, parents and administrators reviewing all graduation requirements will explore an ethnic studies curriculum and propose changes that ensure courses meet expectations for college readiness, said Olivine Roberts, the district’s chief academic officer. Ethnic studies will become part of the social studies lineup, but it’s not yet known if the course will run for one semester or for one year.

In March, Woodland Joint Unified School District trustees launched a committee to decide how to phase in an ethnic studies requirement starting in 2017. Latino students represent two-thirds of the district’s 10,000 students, according to state data.

“In a diverse community and state, as we are, there is value in learning about each other’s culture and background and contributions,” said Trustee Cirenio Rodriguez, an adjunct professor who teaches Chicano studies at Woodland Community College.