



Cultural and Ethnic Studies Courses Are Worth Promoting and Protecting in Georgia

Submitted to Democratic Members of the Georgia State House and Senate Education Committees

Dear Honorable Members of the Georgia House and Senate Education Committees:

My name is Terrence Wilson, J.D., and I am the Regional Policy and Community Engagement Director at IDRA, an independent, non-partisan non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. Since our founding, we have promoted the creation and implementation of diverse, culturally-sustaining curricula, particularly cultural and ethnic studies courses.

I am here to express strong support for the inclusion and expansion of ethnic studies courses in Georgia's public schools. Our extensive research and experience promoting these courses in Georgia and Texas demonstrate that these courses are crucial in fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and high-achieving educational environment.

The recent approval of Advanced Placement (AP) African American Studies in Georgia is a significant and promising step forward. This development underscores the growing recognition of the importance of diverse perspectives in our educational system. Like other ethnic studies courses, the newly-approved AP African American Studies provides students with a deep understanding of the cultural, social and historical contributions of African Americans. The course promotes academic excellence by connecting students to the curriculum in a more meaningful and relevant way. Evidence from other states indicates that students participating in ethnic studies programs demonstrate increased academic engagement, higher graduation rates, and improved performance in standardized tests (Bishop, 2022).

Moreover, these courses contribute to a more inclusive educational environment by addressing and correcting historical omissions and biases in our current educational system. They foster a deeper appreciation for the diverse fabric of our society and encourage critical thinking about social justice issues. By incorporating ethnic studies into the curriculum, Georgia has the opportunity to lead by example, promoting educational equity and cultural competence across the state.

It is important to note that there is growing student interest in ethnic studies courses, and there are several options available to students. In addition to AP African American Studies, Georgia still offers an elective course called "Ethnic Studies" (created in 2008) as well as several other introductory courses (created in 2020), such as Introduction to African American/Black Studies, Introduction to Latinx Studies, Introduction to Asian American Studies, Introduction to American Indian Studies and Introduction to U.S. Women's Studies. From 2020 to 2022, the number of schools offering an ethnic studies course **increased by nearly 60%** and enrollment nearly doubled. However, factors including the passage of HB 1084 may negatively impact students' ability to take these courses. In fact, **between 2022 and 2023**, there was nearly a **20% drop** in

total enrollment for ethnic studies, and close to **40% drop** in the number of schools offering the course. While there may be several factors that contribute to this decline, undoubtedly districts and educators across the state may follow a similar rationale to the State Superintendent Woods and fail to offer the class out of fear of violating the Divisive Concepts Law. Notably, these courses are not covered by the current exception for AP, IB and dual enrollment courses that was cited in the approval of AP African American Studies.

As the initial actions of our education leaders with regard to AP African American Studies show, it is necessary for our leaders in the legislature to enact steps to protect access to all of the cultural and ethnic studies courses that are currently available. To support and sustain the expansion of ethnic studies, IDRA recommends the following:

- Provide dedicated funding to support student leadership initiatives similar to those outlined in our recent report on Mexican American Studies (Hernández et al, 2024). Empowering students to advocate for ethnic studies programs can be a powerful catalyst for change. By involving students in the research, advocacy, and implementation processes, we not only amplify their voices but also build a more engaged and informed student body. These student-led efforts can drive momentum and support for ethnic studies courses, ensuring that they are not only introduced but also successfully integrated into school curricula.
- Support local districts that want to teach the cultural and ethnic studies course by ensuring that adequate resources are allocated for curriculum development, teacher training, and implementation for all cultural and ethnic studies classes.
- Introduce legislation to repeal O.C.G.A. § 20-1-11 (House Bill 1084), Georgia’s Classroom Censorship Law, which has led to self-censorship, book bans, and other efforts aimed at limiting what students can learn about race, class, and the diverse world around them. Until that law is repealed, ensure that cultural and ethnic studies courses receive the same exemption as AP, IB, and dual enrollment courses.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Terrence Wilson, J.D., IDRA Regional Policy and Community Engagement Director at terrence.wilson@idra.org.

Citations

- Bishop, S. (2022). Literature Review – Ethnic Studies Best Practices. IDRA. <https://www.idra.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Literature-Review-%E2%80%93-Ethnic-Studies-Best-Practices-IDRA-2022.pdf>
- Hernández, M., Lokensgard, J., & Rosales, H. (2024). MAS for Our Schools – A Youth Participatory Action Research Project on the Status of Mexican American Studies in San Antonio. IDRA. <https://idra.news/MASforOurSchoolsReport>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.