

REED COLLEGE

A Letter in Support of Greater Geographical/Racial Representation on the Advisory Group Implementing the Ethnic Studies Standards in the Oregon Public School System (HB2845)

March 14th, 2018

Office of the Governor
900 Court Street NE, Suite 254
Salem, OR 97301-4047

Dear Governor Kate Brown,

We write to you as four students of color concerned with the implementation of ethnic studies in schools in the city of Gresham. The implementation of House Bill 2845 is contingent on the plan and curriculum set by the Advisory Group created by the bill, which will be convening for the next two years to introduce ethnic studies everywhere in Oregon by 2020. There is a key issue with the terms of the advisory group as they currently stand: there is no representative from Gresham, the city containing the most diverse school district in Oregon.¹ The advisory group consists of a representative from the Commission on Indian Services, Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs, Commission on Hispanic Affairs, the Oregon Disabilities Commission, the Oregon Commission for Women, the Oregon Education Association, and the Education Equity Unit in the Oregon Department of Education. All of these organizations are based in Salem or Portland, however, while the bill is applicable to all of Oregon.

Ethnic studies makes a difference in the lives of all students, but impacts students of color most of all. We highlight the oversight of Gresham in particular due to its increased diversity. The ethnic studies courses offered by House Bill 2845 could best serve students in Gresham, as over one in four Gresham residents is a person of color,² making it more diverse than Portland.³ Additionally, one 2015 study by Data USA showed that while there are 3.5 more White than Hispanic residents in Gresham,⁴ there were 7.15 times more Caucasian graduates than Hispanic or Latino graduates.⁵ Indeed, only 168 Hispanic students graduated.⁶ The integration of ethnic studies will be widely beneficial, but only if it is a collaborative effort on every front. The students of Gresham

¹ “Centennial School District,” *Niche*, Accessed February 23, 2018, <https://www.niche.com/k12/d/centennial-school-district-or/>

² “Gresham, OR | Data USA,” *Data USA*, Accessed February 23, 2018, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/gresham-or/#education>

³ “Portland, OR | Data USA,” *Data USA*, Accessed February 23, 2018, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/portland-or/>

⁴ “Gresham, OR | Data USA”

⁵ “Search for Public School Districts,” *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES IPEDS)*, Accessed February 23, 2018, https://api.datausa.io/api/?sort=desc&show=geo&required=grads_asian%2Cgrads_black%2Cgrads_white%2Cgrads_hispanic%2Cgrads_hawaiian%2Cgrads_multi%2Cgrads_unknown%2Cgrads_native&sumlevel=all&year=all&geo=16000US4131250

⁶ Ibid.

deserve equal opportunity to take a more active role in the implementation ethnic studies.

Research reveals an all around improvement in the performance of students of color with the implementation an ethnic studies program. For example, a study funded by the National Education Association, and conducted by Christine E. Sleeter at California State University, found students to engage more when they shared a background with the authors they read in class.⁷ Not only did middle school students' literacy skills improve when they shared a background with authors they were reading, but they also grew significantly in science and mathematics. Additionally, the introduction of authors representing the backgrounds of the students strengthened their "sense of agency."⁸ Another study conducted by Stanford University found that attendance and academic performance improved in high school students that took classes which explored "the roles of race, nationality and culture on identity and experience."⁹ The research literature also suggests that students' experiences in ethnic studies programs have been overwhelmingly positive. In a high school in Tucson, Arizona, 48% of Latino students dropped out, but all Latino students enrolled in Mexican-American studies graduated with 85% of them going on to college.¹⁰ Ethnic studies programs are also being developed in Kansas, Montana, Alaska, and Indiana to reflect their incredibly diverse communities.¹¹ Studies and facts propel this growth across the country, but another contributing factor is a desire to make students of color proud of their heritage.¹²

Passing House Bill 2845 is a great step towards the kind of sustainable change we are looking for, but the fight for ethnic studies can not stop there. It is up to leaders, on the level of individual school districts, to enforce the legislation in their communities. Inviting leaders from Gresham to participate in the formation of the curriculum would forge a more meaningful connection between the legislation and the people who will actually carry it out. Portland Public Schools has been discussing ethnic studies at Board meetings since May 3rd, 2016.¹³ The school districts in Gresham (Centennial and Gresham-Barlow) have had to focus on other key issues in their districts. If they are not

⁷ Christine E. Sleeter. "The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies: a Research Review," *National Education Association Research Department* (2011), Accessed February 20, 2018, <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NBI-2010-3-value-of-ethnic-studies.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Julie Depenbrock. "Ethnic Studies: A Movement Born Of A Ban," *NPR*, Accessed March 1, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/08/13/541814668/ethnic-studies-a-movement-born-of-a-ban> ¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Stephen Ceasar. "El Rancho Schools Don't Wait on State, Adopt Ethnic-Studies Curriculum." *Los Angeles Times*, Accessed March 1, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-ethnic-studies-20140708-story.html>

¹³ Portland (Oregon) Portland Public Schools, Minutes of Meetings of the Board of Education, Meeting of 3 May 2016.

directly involved in the formation of the curriculum, it is possible that ethnic studies may never fully take off in these schools. The growth of this program in Portland has been inspiring, and we want to encourage equal progress in Gresham.

This implementation of this legislation has special meaning to us as Reed students because we have firsthand experience with administrative pushback in implementing ethnic studies programs. Planning for “Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies” (CRES) at Reed College began in 2011, and will only finally be implemented in 2018.¹⁴ We do not want to see the same kind of delay play out in the city of Gresham.

Students of color deserve better. We write to you because of your influence in the Oregon Department of Education, who ultimately oversees the meetings of the Advisory Group. We ask you to recommend that the committee open the meetings to representatives from the Centennial and Gresham-Barlow school districts. We met with Angela Hubb, the Director of Curriculum at Centennial School District and discussed how we can support Centennial in the implementation of ethnic studies in the coming years. Representatives from Centennial are clearly as eager to get a jumpstart on developing the program, and would benefit from an invitation to meetings of the advisory group.

We hope you consider our recommendation carefully, and we would be happy to meet with you or a board member from the Oregon Department of Education to discuss it further.

Respectfully,

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¹⁴Lydgate, Chris. “Race & Ethnicity Major Clears Hurdle.” *Reed Magazine*, December 2017, 8.