

My Reflection on Today's April 11, 2018 Texas SBOE Vote on Ethnic Studies: No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

By Angela Valenzuela—*Reprinted by permission of the author*

Today was an interesting day. Many of us gathered at the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) and testified, calling for a course on Mexican American Studies. I am happy to share my testimony to the SBOE below.

The short of it is that we won—together with other under-represented groups that fall under the “Ethnic Studies” umbrella, namely, African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Native American Studies, and Latino Studies. This opening of the curriculum to the historically under-served members of our communities who are not reflected in our state curriculum was the absolute best part of today.

In all honesty, however, when it came to “Mexican American Studies”—which is what all of us present were unanimously calling for—it’s hard to shirk the sense of a loss of dignity with the SBOE’s decision to paternalistically name us in their own image.

In an amendment that followed the testimony of more than 50 students, teachers and advocates from throughout the state of Texas, the SBOE chose to name the course, “Ethnic Studies: An Overview of Americans of Mexican Descent.”

You can’t make this stuff up. This terminology is a throwback to the 1950s.

I have a faint, yet crystal-clear memory in the early 1960s when my Mother told me that I was an “American of Mexican descent.” Then the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement occurred when as a middle schooler, I became a Chicana, brown and proud! And my mother never used this terminology again. Thanks to the Movement, this expression evaporated into the atmosphere.

To grasp the gravity of this naming, it would be akin to naming African American Studies, “Negro Studies.” And we know just how much anger and outrage this would incite.

The testimonios, everybody’s testimonios, with their sense of urgency, were impactful. What is so ironic is that so much of what was said today was about values, rights, and responsibilities. All were so off-the-charts, eloquent and brilliant, adults included! :-)

The children and youth present who spoke—and all spoke—were powerful! This exemplifies the very voice that all of our children need to have.

And my husband and partner, Emilio Zamora, spoke correctly and eloquently about Reverend Martin Luther King’s dream of the beloved community that we, ourselves, through our work in the classroom and in the community, attempt to live. We have so much, as Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Chicanas, Xicanxs in all our complexity, smarts, and beauty to offer this country. Why do they revile us so? I get it. And then I don’t get it.

Some among us commented afterwards today that, “Gee, we should have gone for “Chicana

[Studies]” or “Chicano [Studies].” After all, most of us are members of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Tejas Foco. “Mexican American” sounded a tad conservative, but sensible in this context. Sour grapes, I guess.

The truth of the matter is that “Mexican American Studies” is a totality. Here, I am borrowing from my colleague, Dr. Anthony Brown at the University of Texas at Austin who spoke recently on how African American Studies is a totality. He is right. Asian American Studies, Native American Studies, and Women and Gender Studies, too.

Mexican American Studies is a substantive, frequently cutting-edge field of study that is at least 40 years old [see Orozco article in this issue of *La Voz*] with its own associations, journals, theoretical frameworks, epistemologies, departments, centers, initiatives, local and state networks, and so on.

To my ears, the name the board gave us doesn’t sound so stilted or anachronistic in Spanish, “Soy de descendencia Mexicana.” In English, however, it sounds plain backwards—with echoes of the oppressive 1950s and early 1960s. It reminds me of my elementary years of schooling when I felt ashamed to be “Mexican” or “Mexican American” because “Mexican” was a dirty word.

Sadly, a high school student from San Antonio today advocated for a standards-aligned course on Mexican American Studies, saying that it’s time for the word, “Mexican,” to no longer be a negative, dirty word, on the one hand, and expressed, on the other, how her MAS course was the antidote to that. It is tragic to think of how far we have yet to go when one hears testimonies like these from our youth.

To a person, what should have been an amazing, happy day after the decision “for Ethnic Studies in the state of Texas” was rendered, became a procession of bodies exiting the chamber in a somber manner.

Not only did their naming us robs us of any true sense of accomplishment, it also spoke volumes about what the SBOE thinks of Texas’ Mexican American community, including the children and college students assembled there.

Such is the stuff of majority-minority relations.

We’ll get over it. After all, no good deed goes unpunished.

This is not a closed chapter. We’ll remain involved and continue to advocate for a name of our choosing, for “Mexican American Studies.” In time, we will celebrate the true victory that

the culmination of our many years of service, scholarship, research, and advocacy that today gloriously represents. *Sí se puede!* Yes we can!

Bio: Angela Valenzuela, professor in the Educational Policy & Planning Program in the Dept. of Educational Administration at UT Austin is also director of the Texas Center for Education Policy.



Mexican American Studies advocates outside of the William B. Travis Building, Austin, Tx. 04.11.18.

From: Professor Angela Valenzuela, Ph.D., Director
Texas Center for Education Policy
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Re: Significance of the Arizona Court Case on Mexican American Studies
Date: April 11, 2018



This policy memorandum builds the case that a decision for the development of state standards for Mexican American Studies (MAS) rests on solid conceptual ground. I was an expert witness in the precedent-setting, court case in Arizona brought forward on October 18, 2010, by Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) students and teachers against the State of Arizona whose program—under the leadership of then-State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne—had been dismantled. The plaintiffs alleged a violation of their First and Fourteenth Amendment rights under the U. S. Constitution.

Close to seven years later, on August 22, 2017, Judge Wallace A. Tashima ruled against the State of Arizona, saying that the state had violated the students' First and Fourteenth Amendment rights, which was particularly egregious in light of the fact that students who participated in the program often performed better than their counterparts who were not in the MAS program. Research on these students also showed that instead of making students resentful toward America, as the State of Arizona had alleged, the students benefitted enormously from the experience of finally seeing themselves, their community, their history, and stories mirrored in the school curriculum.

While this decision marked a major victory for students, educators, and activists, of most significance in the outcome of the trial was the ample evidence provided by an array of resources, including that which I myself provided as an expert witness in the trial on the legitimacy of the curriculum that had been taught to the students. This matched up with data and analyses provided by University of Arizona Tucson Assistant Professor Dr. Nolan Cabrera that clearly demonstrated the positive effects of the MAS curriculum on TUSD students. Positive outcomes included higher academic achievement, attendance, and students' decision to pursue higher education than their non-MAS counterparts. Moreover, these findings applied to students of all races.

Other research by University of Arizona Tucson Professor Dr. Francesca Lopez took a close look at the impact of the MAS curriculum on elementary-level, TUSD students. Specifically, she observed positive effects of the program primarily with respect to not only higher academic achievement, but also the children's greater openness to diversity as a result of having been exposed to MAS at the elementary school level.

These data and findings built on earlier evidence provided by an independent auditor of the TUSD MAS Curriculum that furnished what came to be known as, "The Cambium Report." Released on May 2, 2011, the auditors found no evidence of any violations. Although this audit involved an independent contractor paid for by Arizona taxpayers, John Huppenthal—who by then had replaced Tom Horne as State Superintendent of Public Instruction—rejected the positive findings of the MAS program to which Judge Tashima, in his final judgement, forcefully disavowed.

All of this is to say is that in the history of U.S. public education, there has never been such a high-profile, high-stakes vetting of any school curriculum as Mexican American Studies. Stated differently, the MAS curriculum and pedagogy taught in the Tucson Unified School district is not only a legitimate, research-based, college-preparatory curriculum, but it passed the high bar of intense legal scrutiny. The Texas SBOE should therefore feel confident that their approval of TEKS Standards for a course in Mexican American Studies could never equate to either a capricious or ill-conceived, decision, when the exact opposite is true. If carried forward by the Texas SBOE on the basis of state standards developed by experts like ourselves that have dedicated our professional careers to Mexican American Studies, *all* Texas students—like their counterparts in Arizona—will get poised to reap the positive benefits that helps all children not just to achieve but to become part and parcel to the great American narrative.

Thank you for allowing me to weigh in on the board's present deliberations on Ethnic Studies. Please let me know if I may be of any further assistance in the matter.



Texas SBOE member Marisa Perez-Diaz speaks at a rally for MAS outside the TEA on April 11, 2018. Photo: Laura Skelding

**APPROVE MAS
MEXICAN AMERICAN
STUDIES FOR TEXAS
SCHOOLS**

