

Texas board considers Mexican-American studies course, after two failed attempts at a textbook



The State Board of Education is considering creating standards for an official Mexican-American studies course after two failed attempts to approve a textbook for the subject.

by Aliyya Swaby, The Texas Tribune. *Reprinted with permission.*

Advocates, including many professors and teachers, urged the board Tuesday to set coherent curriculum and graduation requirements for a course they said is already being taught to hundreds of students across the state and that is important for the state's majority-Hispanic student body. The hearing comes almost two months after the board voted not to approve a Mexican-American studies textbook submission from a local publisher, leaving teachers with no state-approved resources to offer the course.

Currently, schools can offer Mexican-American studies as a social studies elective, but teachers and districts must put in additional effort to build a specific course structure and choose materials and they are offering drastically varied versions of the class. With no state-approved standards or textbooks for an official course, smaller districts with fewer resources are facing an uphill battle to get a class started.

The board is not scheduled to vote on the matter this week. The board's staff would not be able to start working to create the course until the end of 2018 at the earliest, said Monica Martinez, the Texas Education Agency's associate commissioner of standards and support services.

"The only thing we're asking for is to have [state curriculum standards] aligned so everyone can have [information] from the State Board of Education that this is a state-approved course and we have standards to teach them," said Christopher Carmona, a Mexican-American studies professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

He leads a coalition of Mexican-American studies experts and teachers who are offering to serve as a working group for the board, at no cost, to help decide what knowledge and skills students should be required to learn in the class. The official course could be modeled on a local full-year, full-credit innovative class Houston ISD already offers, he said.

Doug Torres-Edwards, the educator who developed that course for Houston ISD, vouched for the rigor of the standards he



Dr. Emilio Zamora, a history professor at UT Austin, with Juan Tejeda and Marta Cotera in the background at a press conference on July 18, 2016. Photo by Marjorie Kamys Cotera for *The Texas Tribune*.

created and said they could serve as the foundation for a "bona fide" Mexican-American studies course approved by the state.

Some board members pushed back on whether creating a Mexican-American studies course was the right move as opposed to a broader Latino or Hispanic studies course. Board member Marty Rowley, R-Amarillo, said he wondered if creating a Mexican-American studies course would be "ideological" and exclusionary in not focusing on the contributions of "other Latinos to Texas history

or American history."

Board member Marisa Perez-Diaz, D-San Antonio, retorted that the decision is not a "zero-sum game" and asked why the board could not work to develop both courses.

Torres-Edwards said his innovative course's standards could also be used to build a more inclusive Latino studies course, as long as it was structured as a chronological history class.

"What I like about Mexican-American studies it that it offers a depth, rigor and complexity that is not truly possible in traditional survey courses," he said.

In 2014, the board rejected a proposal to create an official Mexican-American studies course, with some arguing that creating a separate class would be divisive. Instead, it compromised and decided to put ethnic studies, including Mexican-American, African-American, Asian-American and Native American studies, on a list of social studies textbooks it would ask publishers to develop for Texas schools, giving schools a list of state-approved resources if they chose to offer ethnic studies courses.

But that route failed. Democrats on the board have argued they received so few submissions because publishers were required to align their books to a set of broad standards for a general social studies elective, giving them little guidance. Approving curriculum standards for a Mexican-American studies course first would allow for stronger textbook submissions, they said.

bit.ly/texas_board