

American Indian Library Association Statement on Ethnic Studies Programs in Arizona

The American Indian Library Association (AILA) wishes to publicly express its strong disapproval of the elimination of the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) Mexican American Studies classes and removal of books associated with the program due to the State of Arizona Revised Statutes Sections 15-111 and 15-112. We write this statement in support of all students, educators, and families who have been negatively affected by this action.

All students have the right to develop critical thinking skills through a challenging curriculum. All students, regardless of their background, have the right to learn about the history of their own people, as well as the history of the land and peoples where they are currently living. In Tucson, this should include the history and literature of Mexican American people as well as the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui peoples. The targeting of one ethnic group is an attack on all ethnic groups, and the elimination of a curriculum and books that encourage students to consider the perspectives of those who are often silenced should be a concern to all humanity.

The teaching of Mexican American studies cannot be separated from the teaching of the history of the Indigenous peoples who inhabited this land long before the arrival of Europeans. Indigenous communities have been artificially bisected by the US-Mexico border. People from these communities may speak Spanish, English, as well as their Indigenous languages. Their histories, their stories, and discussion of their contemporary issues have a place in our classrooms and libraries. The curriculum that has been banned in Tucson includes works written by highly acclaimed authors and Tucson residents Ofelia Zepeda (Tohono O'odham) and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), in addition to a number of other Native American authors. The censorship of Native voices due to the prohibition of the Mexican American Studies curriculum is part of what prompts the American Indian Library Association to take a stand on this issue.

The systematic banning of ethnic studies and the discouragement of students learning about their own histories is reminiscent of the US federal government's educational philosophy towards American Indians. As Native Americans, we have witnessed the destructive policies of the federal government in which Indian children were denied knowledge of their own cultures, histories, and languages through the abhorrent practices of the boarding schools and, later, through western educational systems. Because of this history, many Native Americans continue to struggle to maintain the knowledge of our elders and ancestors.

We have rights under the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and we assert that Arizona state law is in violation of these rights. Under Article 8, the UN Declaration says, "States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for:

- (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities; . . .
- (d) Any form of forced assimilation or integration;
- (e) Any form of propaganda designed to promote or incite racial or ethnic discrimination directed against them."

The banning of the Mexican American ethnic studies curriculum is in effect denying the students the opportunity to learn about their cultural values and identities as Indigenous peoples.

The American Indian Library Association supports the January 2012 American Library Association Resolution that

- 1) Condemns the suppression of open inquiry and free expression caused by closure of ethnic and cultural studies programs on the basis of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
- 2) Condemns the restriction of access to educational materials associated with ethnic and cultural

studies programs.

3) Urges the Arizona legislature to pass HB 2654, "An Act Repealing Sections 15-111 and 15-112, Arizona Revised Statutes; Relating to School Curriculum."

The American Indian Library Association worked alongside a number of ALA committees, offices, and affiliates to draft the above mentioned resolution, including the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, ALA Committee on Diversity, ALA Committee on Legislation, American Association of School Librarians, Asian Pacific American Librarians Association, Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Chinese American Library Association, Intellectual Freedom Round Table, REFORMA: The National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking, Social Responsibilities Round Table, and the Young Adult Library Services Association. **We urge other national associations to also take a stand on this issue, particularly other national and international groups with a focus on Indigenous, tribal, Native American, and American Indian communities.**

While the issue in Tucson, Arizona may seem to be limited to the Mexican-American population, we recognize that Tucson, and the surrounding area, is home to several Indigenous groups, including the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui, and many students in this school district identify as Native American. According to TUSD enrollment statistics, 4% of students in the district are Native American, with most students identified as Tohono O'odham, Yaqui, and Navajo. Additionally, according to the independent audit of the disbanded Mexican American Studies program, conducted by Cambium Learning, Inc., 2% of the students who were enrolled in the program are Native American.

As a membership action group, AILA's focus is on the library-related needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives, including the improvement of library, cultural, and information services in schools and public and research libraries. As librarians and educators, and members of the American Indian Library Association, we write this statement in support of culturally based curriculum that includes libraries as institutions that can freely disseminate information about cultures, languages, and values to the community.

American Indian Library Association, January 31, 2012
Edited February 2, 2012

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