

Literature Review – Ethnic Studies Best Practices

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Serving 11 states and D.C., the IDRA EAC-*South* is one of four federally-funded centers that provide technical assistance and training to build capacity to confront educational problems occasioned by discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, sex and gender, and religion.

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Overview

A growing interest in more equitable education, particularly regarding historical contributions of racial and ethnic communities, has heightened advocacy for adopting ethnic studies (Bonilla, Dee & Penner, 2021). A common definition of ethnic studies is the “critical and interdisciplinary study of race, ethnicity and indigeneity with a focus on the experiences and perspectives of people of color in the United States” (Vásquez, 2021). Ethnic studies goes beyond teaching history. It is a truly interdisciplinary subject that also encourages the inclusion of text, film, music, literature, oral histories, research and scholarship created by communities of color (Nguyen, 2021).

The focus of ethnic studies courses can vary across the nation. Some courses prioritize the accomplishments and contributions of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, while others seek to build critical consciousness by analyzing not only these individuals but understanding systemic barriers racial and ethnic minorities overcame or continue to face (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Additionally, some courses focus on the history of a wide range of racial and ethnic groups in the United States, while others cover a single community’s history, perspectives and contributions (de Novias & Spencer, 2018).

Since its introduction, many advocates of these courses have had difficulty getting districts and state policymakers to adopt curricula that includes the perspectives of traditionally underserved groups. As a result, many students first encounter ethnic studies courses in college (Vásquez, 2021).

The landscape of ethnic studies varies widely across the country, ranging from states that offer no ethnic studies courses to those that make them a key part of the curriculum (Bonilla, Dee & Penner, 2021; Green et al, 2020). The following highlights the status of ethnic studies as of 2022.

- **California:** In 2021, the state approved an ethnic studies curriculum for all K-12 schools (Nguyen 2021). California is a trailblazer for K-12 ethnic studies courses: it was the first state to require all students to complete a course in ethnic studies to earn their diploma (Fensterwald, 2021).
- **Connecticut:** Starting in 2022, high schools were to offer Black and Latino studies (Nguyen, 2021).
- **District of Columbia:** In 2020, the district’s board of education established an advisory committee to oversee revision of the district’s social studies standards. By the end of 2021, the committee was expected to update the 2006 standards to be culturally responsive, to be

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antiracist and to promote civic engagement (Kwon, 2021).

- **Illinois:** In 2019, Illinois passed a law requiring that social science learning standards include the role and contributions of ethnic groups in the United States (Kwon, 2021).
- **Indiana:** In 2017, the governor mandated all districts offer ethnic studies as a semester-long course in high school curricula. Standards and a framework for these courses were developed in 2018 (Kwon, 2021).
- **Kansas:** After legislation to include ethnic studies failed in 2015 and 2016, the community-based Tonantzin Society, in partnership with the state board of education and the Kansas Department of Education, began to offer professional development in culturally-relevant pedagogy in 2018 (Kwon, 2021).
- **Massachusetts:** In 2018, the board of education approved a new history and social studies framework that incorporates diverse perspectives and acknowledges that events are impacted by race, ethnicity, culture, religion, education, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability and individual experience (Kwon, 2021).
- **Nevada:** The state passed a law in 2017 authorizing ethnic and diversity studies in public schools. The bill requires the state to develop standards of content and performance for ethnic and diversity studies. In 2018, the state's council developed the Nevada Academic Content Standards for Social Studies that includes multicultural education (Kwon, 2021).
- **New Jersey:** Legislators passed a law requiring public schools to offer a course on diversity and inclusion (Nguyen, 2021).
- **New Mexico:** Legislators introduced a bill in 2021 to create a council to assist in the development of an ethnic studies curriculum (Kwon, 2021).
- **Oregon:** The state Department of Education convened an advisory group to develop ethnic studies standards in 2017. By September 2021, the board was expected to adopt the new standards (Kwon, 2021).
- **Texas:** In 2020, Texas' State Board of Education approved a Mexican American Studies course built on the efforts of advocates in local school districts. The course covers a wide range of historical achievements that developed in Mayan and Aztec civilizations in addition to select works of Mexican American literature (Nguyen, 2021). In 2020, the State Board of Education also approved a course in African American Studies to be offered in the fall of that same year (Ferguson, 2020). In 2022, the board voted to delay consideration of standards for new ethnic studies courses on American Indian/Native Studies and Asian American Studies (Latham Sikes, 2022).
- **Vermont:** In 2019, the Ethnic and Social Studies Equity Standards Advisory Working Group was created to review K-12 standards for ethnic and social equity studies and to provide recommendations for training and support for changes to the curriculum (Kwon, 2021).

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- **Virginia:** A 2020 law required the Virginia Department of Education to establish and appoint members to the culturally relevant and inclusive education practices advisory committee. They were tasked with strengthening culturally relevant education practices and encouraging anti-biased education in the state (Kwon, 2021).
- **Washington:** In 2019, the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction created an advisory committee for ethnic studies to identify and include ethnic studies materials and resources for grades 7 to 12. Public schools were encouraged to offer ethnic studies courses to incorporate these materials (Kwon, 2021).

Though these components are not specifically ethnic studies, some states, including Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York and Rhode Island, passed laws requiring that African American history be included in public schools, while Hawaii, Maine, Minnesota, Montana and Wisconsin require public schools to teach the histories and cultures of indigenous communities (Kwon, 2021).

History of Ethnic Studies as Coursework

Ethnic studies as an academic discipline has been traced to California in November 1968. Students of color at San Francisco State College, now San Francisco State University, and the University of California, Berkeley led the longest student strike in U.S. history. They were on strike for four and a half months, demanding that their institutions include people of color in the university curriculum and for the establishment of ethnic studies courses on their campuses. Less than a year later, they reached a settlement with their schools (Nguyen, 2021).

The development and expansion of ethnic studies contributed to the advancement of multicultural education and culturally affirming pedagogy practices. Though the efforts of California's college students helped officially establish the practice, some historians point to a longer history of Freedom Schools, Black independent schools and tribal schools as the real root of ethnic studies in the United States (Dee & Penner, 2017).

Community efforts are key to the inclusion of ethnic studies (Falcón, 2020). In recent years, conversations have centered on the importance of providing a more equitable and inclusive education. In California, the racial justice protests in the summer of 2020 brought racial equity to the forefront and helped make ethnic studies reforms possible (Cavallaro, 2022).

Judicial decisions also have upheld the importance of ethnic studies. Notably, after Arizona's legislature banned classes that promoted *ethnic solidarity* in 2010, a 2017 decision by a U.S. circuit court declared that Arizona's elimination of the Mexican American Studies program with its 2010 law was a violation of Mexican American students' constitutional rights (Curammeng, 2020; Flannery, 2020).

Importance of Ethnic Studies

The call for ethnic studies courses is part of long-standing advocacy for inclusion and equity in public history and social studies courses. The aim is to provide a more equitable form of education for all students and improve outcomes for historically underserved children (Bonilla, Dee & Penner, 2021).

Advocates emphasize that K-12 curriculum has largely been Eurocentric, outdated and often disconnected from the growing population of students of color in the nation (Nguyen, 2021). Further, the exclusion of contributions and histories of students of color sends a message that the histories of non-white citizens are unimportant or not sufficiently academic, increasing the chances of student disengagement (Cavallaro, 2022).

Ethnic studies course content can help provide educators with concrete and practical language they can use to advocate for more culturally responsive teaching practices. One intended goal of these courses is to increase a sense of ethnic identity and racial awareness in students and improve their overall mental health and achievement.

Psychologists have pointed to a link between racial awareness in students of color and improved graduation rates (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Additionally, ethnic studies courses can bring important historical events and contributions of people of color to light and increase cross-racial empathy (de Novias & Spencer, 2018; Falcón, 2020). Research shows the benefits of ethnic studies courses, both academically and socially, to include improved attendance rates, a higher-grade point average and credit completion (Dreilinger, 2021; Vásquez, 2021; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Sacramento, 2019; Curammeng, 2020; de Novias & Spencer, 2018).

Students also learn more deeply and better when they see themselves in the curriculum (Wells & Cordova-Cobo, 2021). A 2011 study from the National Education Association found that when students of different ages experience ethnic studies courses, they consistently show higher academic achievement, increased awareness of race and racism, and more positive identification with their own racial group (Vásquez, 2021).

Beyond improved academic outcomes, educators have noted that high school students who take ethnic studies courses become more passionate about learning and feel they have a better understanding of the conditions in which they live (Vásquez, 2021). Students also show increased engagement and a feeling of greater belonging in school (Bonilla, Dee & Penner, 2021).

Challenges to Offering Ethnic Studies

Challenges to Offering Ethnic Studies

Statewide debates over the importance of ethnic studies courses contribute to ongoing public discussions on the framing of history and who is included and excluded in ethnic studies courses (Vazquez, 2021). Critics commonly wrongly accuse ethnic studies advocates as politically biased, attempting to indoctrinate students, and making white students feel guilty or ashamed of their country (Bonilla, Dee & Penner, 2021; Star Tribune Editorial Board, 2022; Falcón, 2020). Additionally, the inclusion of ethnic studies courses may run counter to traditional notions of schooling with the misperception that ethnic studies do not benefit all students. (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020).

There have been robust efforts in some states to exclude ethnic studies elements in the curriculum. Across the nation, lawmakers have made efforts to suppress antiracism training of what they consider to be “divisive concepts.” These concepts tend to revolve on the histories and cultural contributions of people of color or the LGBTQ+ communities.

By 2022, over 36 states adopted or introduced 137 bills to restrict teaching about race and racism (Stout & Wilburn, 2022; Gross, 2022). These bills can be intentionally vague and forbid teachers from discussing or introducing “divisive concepts” or materials that could cause “anguish, discomfort or guilt” in their students. Additionally, the language included in these bills will sometimes contain a provision requiring teachers to present “both sides” of an issue without any sort of favoritism if they do discuss a topic relating to race, politics, history, sexual orientation or gender identity (Gross, 2022).

Texas, for example, passed a classroom censorship bill to ban training and elements that legislators defined as “critical race theory” in public schools (Nguyen, 2021). Critical race theory itself is an academic discipline taught at the university level, but Texas lawmakers who crafted the censorship bill used the phrase to refer to anything about race taught or discussed in public schools. Senate Bill 3 targets “controversial issues” that cannot be discussed in class, but does not define this term (Castillo et al., 2022; López, 2021). The confusion surrounding the bill and the chilling effect on classroom discussion could irreparably harm efforts to provide ethnic studies courses or add elements into the regular curriculum (Latham Sikes, 2021). Educators or administrators, confused and fearful of legal repercussions, may choose to self-censor and avoid these topics altogether (Gross, 2022).

When it comes to preparing for ethnic studies courses, some educators have difficulty determining what groups should be included under the umbrella of the discipline. For example, it is a misnomer to identify Native American Studies as part of ethnic studies because Native

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Americans all uniquely form 574 nations. They are not a single ethnic group or identity in the United States (Nguyen, 2021). This speaks to the difficulty in making one-size-fits-all ethnic studies courses because different schools engage with unique communities with their own histories, needs and perspectives (Dreilinger, 2021).

Programmatic Best Practices

Promoting ethnic studies requires the continued efforts of activists and community coalitions (Vásquez, 2021). General recommendations for these courses include the following.

Ensure Clarity of Purpose: Ensure school-level and district level decision makers, including school board members understand the purpose of ethnic studies. Even in the state of California, where programs are most popular, almost 30% of school board members had “limited to no understanding of ethnic studies” (Calleros, 2018). Buy-in from key decision-makers is critical.

Make Courses Accessible: For ethnic studies courses offered in high school, do not establish barriers by limiting the grade-level of students allowed to participate. And the course needs to be available at a time that works with students’ schedules without conflicting with courses that have built-in less scheduling flexibility, such as dual credit courses and courses like music and athletics.

Establish Course Credit: Again, at the high school level, ethnic studies courses need to be credit bearing, such as satisfying a social studies requirement.

Ensure Accuracy: Texts and materials should be based on current and confirmed research (California Department of Education, 2021). Educators can approach community experts and historians for relevant, local contributions (Conklin, 2021; Falcón, 2020).

Use Common Terminology: Educators across the nation need to have a common definition of ethnic studies, particularly one that emphasizes the struggle against racism and focus on the groups that racist policies have impacted (Vásquez, 2021).

Use Inclusive Language: Materials and teacher-generated content should use language that is supportive of multiple users in terms of culture and accessibility for different learners (California Department of Education, 2021).

Integrate Supportive Materials: There is no single way to ensure education provides equity and anti-racist language, but one important change is ensuring that curriculum, textbooks and other classroom materials are inclusive and include contributions and history of people of color (Cavallaro, 2022). Educators can benefit from culturally-relevant materials from the community, such as including the works of local artists in their lesson plans (Falcón, 2020).

Maintain Quality Professional Development: Professional development support for educators should consider both teacher and student needs in implementing a rigorous ethnic studies

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course. Educators should be supported in effectively designing courses that center the experiences of historically marginalized communities while exploring how power works systemically. More specifically, teachers need tools and support to figure out how to translate necessary content into lessons (Sacramento, 2019; Wells & Cordova-Cobo, 2021). Diverse and culturally-sustaining pedagogy should include secondary schools partnering with university-level teacher education programs so that university educators, alumni and colleagues can participate in ongoing dialogue and professional development (King, Barnes & Salas, 2020).

Even in states where ethnic studies courses are not part of the curriculum, educators can opt to weave diverse perspectives and stories into existing lessons that are relevant to their students (Nguyen, 2021).

Include Expert Voices: Teachers should seek out accounts from people of color with firsthand experience and who know the legacy of their group instead of only referencing token or “safe” historical figures who might be commonly mentioned in relation to a particular race or ethnicity (Nguyen, 2021). Programs can reach out to local historians for resources regarding both the community and state (Conklin, 2021).

Reach out to the Community: Community voices can provide guidance and context to ethnic studies to help troubleshoot and pinpoint what works (Conklin, 2021).

Ensure Understanding of the Field: As part of ethnic studies, educators should help students trace the movement and its history as part of work to increase diversity and inclusion (California Department of Education, 2021).

Acknowledge Complexity Early: Improving racial attitudes and self-esteem in younger children involves directly confronting their questions and assumptions about race, racism and the differences they experience while interacting with children of different races or ethnicities than themselves. It is helpful to draw younger students’ attention to the complexities of individuals (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Educators should develop knowledge of institutionalized bias, oppression, white supremacy and how these impact students (Green et al., 2020). Educators should receive guidance on how to have difficult conversations about race and history (Conklin, 2021).

Seek out University Partnerships: Colleges and universities have historically provided more opportunities for ethnic studies. These community partners can help educators and students craft quality courses (Sacramento, 2019).

Best Practices for Instruction

Best Practices for Instruction

Promote Empowerment: Cultivate leadership skills in students and be committed to equity and social justice for all students (Sacramento, 2019; California Department of Education, 2021). Educators should be prepared to interrogate and confront color-evasiveness, racism and power to disrupt the status quo (Curammeng, 2020).

Use Asset-Based Pedagogies: Academically rigorous and successful ethnic studies curriculum uses asset-based pedagogies and culturally responsive strategies. Specifically, educators can take familiar or culturally relevant knowledge from their communities and combine these assets with new and unfamiliar academic concepts. Essentially, students can learn critical, rigorous academic concepts via texts and histories familiar or of interest to their lives. Learning is meaningful and optimal when teaching strategies draw from and enrich the sociocultural context of the classroom (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Additionally, educators should consider the particular cultural contexts of their students – the belief systems, funds of knowledge, experiences, and social and familial networks that shape their lives (King, Barnes & Salas, 2020).

Encourage Reflection: Critical thinking is central to understanding and implementing a successful ethnic studies course. Educators should ideally be aware of their role in the process and engage in weekly reflections on how identity informs what and how they teach. Generally, the skills that educators build in promoting equity and elements of social justice extend to other areas of academia such as assessments and discipline (Sacramento, 2019).

Additionally, culturally-proactive reflection requires that teachers consider themselves and their students to be vulnerable learners, be proactive in acknowledging the diverse lives of their students and engage in ongoing analysis of their position as they make pedagogical decisions. Culturally-sustaining pedagogy is an ongoing process and educators should be prepared for tension and reevaluation (King, Barnes & Salas, 2020).

Provide Robust Professional Support: Educators should have opportunities to collaborate and support each other in equitable pedagogy. Pre- and in-service teachers should regularly discuss their experiences and ideas with each other (King, Barnes & Salas, 2020).

Incorporate Project Based Learning: Many ethnic studies curricula include a youth participatory action research project rooted in the community's local context (Gómez, 2021; Cuauhtin, et al., 2019; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020).

Recruitment Strategies

Research shows that students of color best connect to role models and educators who reflect their communities (Heubeck, 2020). The types of critical consciousness and self-reflection recommended for rigorous and effective ethnic studies courses necessitates hiring more teachers of color who can approach their courses and students with relevant lived experiences. Equally important is ensuring students are aware of the existence of ethnic studies courses in their schools and recruiting them to take these classes to broaden their cultural and critical knowledge.

Educators

Strategies for recruiting and retaining educators prepared to teach ethnic studies include the following.

Ensure a Robust Pipeline for Teachers of Color: There are numerous benefits to ensuring that the racial and ethnic makeup of educators reflects the school communities where they work. They can build unique bonds with students of color and are likely to have higher expectations of these students (Gist, Bianco & Lynn, 2019; Wells & Cordova-Cobo, 2021).

Recruitment of educators in general should begin in high school, especially if students are encouraged to chart their path in education and have exposure to role models and information on colleges. Teachers of color can be recruited from paraprofessionals already working in school districts (Heubeck, 2020). Additionally, teacher preparation programs themselves should aim at raising critical consciousness in educators and provide the necessary skills to center the needs of students of color (Curammeng, 2020).

Expand Grow-Your-Own Teacher Programs: Recruitment for teachers tends to come from adult members of the local school community, such as paraprofessionals, cafeteria workers, security guards, custodial staff, parents, community activists and religious leaders. Educators recruited from these pipelines are usually nontraditional in age, race, socioeconomics and college status (Gist, Bianco & Lynn, 2019).

Retain Teachers of Color Already in Schools: Increasing the diversity of the K-12 workforce does not only involve recruiting new teachers but also ensuring that teachers from underserved communities receive the support necessary to stay in the field. Properly supporting educators requires professional enrichment, mentoring, scholarship and fellowship activities to ensure ongoing education and tangible support among educators (Heubeck, 2020). Further, if these

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educators are already active members of the school's community, they may be more likely to stay (Gist, Bianco & Lynn, 2019).

Include Ethnic Studies for Preservice Teachers: Educators being trained in pedagogy should have experiences rooted in ethnic studies to provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach all students. Ethnic studies in teacher education can prepare teachers to interrogate existing power structures, potentially allowing them to be agents of change in providing equitable education (Curammeng, 2020). Teacher education programs using a racial literacy approach, with a particular emphasis on the socio-political realities of schools, can also help prepare and retain people of color in the profession (Kohli, 2018).

Collaborate with Ethnic Studies Advocacy Groups and Organizations: One way to improve teacher education and enhance understanding and proliferation of ethnic studies is for university teacher education programs to partner with community-based organizations and national networks doing similar work. This could potentially increase the pipeline and ensure that there are more conferences and organizations that center principles of ethnic studies that reach a wider range of people that may have not considered going into teaching (Curammeng, 2020).

Students

Strategies to draw students to ethnic studies can mirror efforts to recruit students to clubs, extracurricular and AP activities.

Provide Information to Clubs and Extracurricular Activities: Schools can encourage students of color to form clubs that not only help peers support one another, but they also can be vehicles to learning about ethnic studies courses offered at their schools (Ojetunde, 2019).

Share Projects: Students taking ethnic studies should be encouraged to actively engage in the material, and their efforts can be showcased in a campus-wide display or gallery to spread awareness of the course and share their contributions (Meehan, 2020).

Identify Students: Educators can directly approach students who could benefit from taking ethnic studies courses for recruitment (UIL, 2022). Additionally, educators wanting to implement an ethnic studies course can approach potentially interested students to gather enough names to establish a class (Falcón, 2020).

Use School Fairs and Parent Nights: When promoting clubs and organizations during events or assemblies, educators can build awareness about the availability of courses like ethnic studies (UIL, 2022).

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Share Information with Parents and Family: As part of the school strategy to disseminate useful information to families via mail or electronic communication, school personnel can build awareness about the importance and availability of ethnic studies at their school (UIL, 2022; Judson, Bowers & Glassmeyer, 2019).

Encourage Counselor Outreach: When discussing schedules with their students, counselors can provide guidance and information on the availability of ethnic studies courses early in their high school careers and emphasize how these courses might align with college-level work (Judson, Bowers & Glassmeyer, 2019).

Educator and Advocate Resources

For Educators

- UCLA's Center X provides [guidance on teacher education](#) and teacher development for ethnic studies. This includes a submission by Sean Arce on [Ethnic Studies Approaches and Curriculum](#).
- California's Department of Education provides an [ethnic studies model curriculum](#).
- [Our Lives](#) is a resource on ethnic studies that includes African American, Asian American, and Latinx studies.
- [What We Now Know About Race and Ethnicity](#), by Michael Banton, is an open-access textbook that address race and racism in relation to academic disciplines, to include social sciences.
- [Oasis](#) is a tool that can help educators find relevant open-access resources.
- [Smithsonian Open Access](#) includes a large collection of free resources.
- Ingrid E. Fey provides guidance in [A Thematic Approach to Ethnic Studies](#), which includes both a model outline and resources for ethnic studies.
- Oregon's Department of Education provides [recommendations for ethnic studies materials](#) by topic and contains a list of potentially useful websites.
- EVERFI provides free digital lessons and curriculum for [African American History](#).
- The Library of Congress has numerous digital collections for [African American History](#).
- MAS for Texas Schools provides resources for [Mexican American Studies](#), to include lesson plans and digital resources.
- The University of Arizona's Latin American Studies department includes a long list of curriculum resources for [Latinx history and social studies content](#).
- The Library of Congress provides research guides for [Hispanic American Studies](#).
- The Ethnic Studies Library at UC Berkeley has a [Native American Studies collection](#), to include source guides and links to numerous resources.
- Cal Poly Humboldt's library has a collection of open educational resources for [Native American Studies](#).
- The Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) has a robust [collection of resources](#), to

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include articles and syllabi, for Asian American studies.

- The Berkeley Library has a digital and open resource collection on [Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies](#).
- [Is Your U.S History Text Racist? Five Topics Often Whitewashed](#), is a one-page checklist by the Center for Anti-Racist Education.
- [Rethinking Ethnic Studies](#) offers examples of ethnic studies frameworks, classroom practices, and organizing at the school, district, and statewide levels.



See IDRA's We All Belong – School Resource Hub for more strategies, resources and lesson plans: <https://www.idraseen/hub>.

For Advocates

- Chalkbeat has a detailed [map on restrictions and expansion of classroom teaching on race, racism and ethnicity](#).
- UCLA's Center X provides a [timeline](#) illustrating the history of ethnic studies.
- [The Latina/o Studies Association](#) provides a gathering place for ethnic studies advocates.
- [The National Association for African American Studies & Affiliates](#) can unite advocates for numerous ethnic studies courses.
- [The Native American and Indigenous Studies Association](#) (NAISA) comprises scholars working the field.
- United Chinese Americans has a page of resources dedicated to advocacy for [Asian American Studies](#).
- [The Association for Ethnic Studies](#) is a non-profit organization that provides a forum for scholars and activists who promote ethnic studies.



See IDRA's Southern Education Equity Network for more advocacy news and partners: <https://www.idraseen>.

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