

The Campaign for Ethnic Studies  
by Kathy Emery  
for the Western Edition  
January, 2010

I have recently become involved in a campaign to expand a small beach head established last year in SFUSD's 9<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum by a few brave and passionate educators. I have done so because I think this campaign to institutionalize ethnic studies at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level has the potential to be an issue around which a movement for social justice in SFUSD schools can be built.

In the spring of 2007, several school board members encouraged central office staff (in the Office of Learning Support and Equity) to develop an ethnic studies course for high school students. In the fall of 2008, three teachers, one each at Balboa, Lincoln and Mission High Schools, taught ethnic studies to a total of 120 9<sup>th</sup> grade students (see <http://campaignforethnicstudies.pbworks.com/> for the curriculum and more). The reason ethnic studies is being taught in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, is that the state government has mandated that world history be taught in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, U.S. History in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and "Principles of American Democracy and Economics" must be taught in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Grade 9 is the only grade without a mandated course in social science. This year, there are only five classes of Ethnic Studies—two at Mission, two at Thurgood Marshall, and one at Washington high schools. In the district, there are 19 high schools and 5260 9<sup>th</sup> grade students of which only 7.3 percent are white.

The reason those involved in developing and teaching ethnic studies have launched a "campaign" during the last several months is because this fledgling curriculum is in danger of being nipped in the bud. Its existence, never mind expansion, depends on the decision of each school's principal to hire a teacher to teach this course and pay for his or her professional development. In the context of severe budget cuts and pressure from the business community to impose a "career and college preparation" curriculum on all 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, the principals of every high school will be forced to abandon ethnic studies, *unless* the current campaign is successful.

To be successful, the campaign for ethnic studies must be able to create a coalition of parents, teachers and students that can demonstrate their sustained cohesion over time. This will give the campaign's leadership the leverage it needs to successfully negotiate with the superintendent for the funds and structures that will institutionalize the program throughout the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The introduction of a school board resolution on January 26<sup>th</sup> is the vehicle around which a coalition can be created. The presence of parents, teachers, students and others at subsequent school board meetings (full board and committee hearings...the long process by which the system normally erodes public participation in the creation of policy) can demonstrate to the superintendent that there can be a price to pay for rejecting the campaign's requests.

But the campaign's organizers must look beyond the possibility of successfully negotiating for funds and administrative support. They must be able to sustain the coalition of grassroots groups over time so as to be able to hold the district accountable for promises it makes. Too often, such as in the recent A-G (California college entrance) requirements battle, the policy is established but the administration fails to implement it since there is little pressure from its proponents to do so. The campaign for ethnic studies has ignited a grassroots passion and excitement among teachers and students that could allow organizers to develop a powerful coalition that could be sustained over time, if they are savvy enough to understand the how and why to do so. And if they are, then the campaign for ethnic studies could be the first of many social justice policies that the people of San Francisco can implement for their schools and then perhaps for their city.