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Ethnic Studies

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Hours: Monday – Friday | 8:00 AM – 4:00 PM | 510-644-8727

The Legacy of Ethnic Studies in Berkeley Unified School District:

There would be no Ethnic Studies without the fight for Black Studies, led by SF State and UC Berkeley's Black students in 1968-1969. We honor this rich local history and how Black students sparked a successful cross-racial solidarity movement called the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). The TWLF included Black, Indigenous, Asian American & Pacific Islander, and Latinx/e student groups that worked together in a five-month student strike to successfully bring Ethnic Studies Departments to SF State and UC Berkeley so that students of color could take classes and learn history that centered their experiences of racism, and settler colonialism.

That same year in 1968, Black students, families, and educators at Berkeley High School advocated for and established an African American Studies Department under the direction of Richard Navies. In 1990, a group of students at Berkeley High School advocated for a required Ethnic Studies class, which was shortly followed by Latinx/e Studies and Asian American Studies classes. Currently, Berkeley High School continues to have a thriving African American Studies Department, a Universal 9th grade Ethnic Studies class, and several other elective Ethnic Studies classes such as Latinx/e History, Latinx/e Literature, and AAPI Literature.

The spirit of student voice and agency is at the heart of our work in Berkeley Unified School District and we are proud of this legacy.

What Ethnic Studies is:

Ethnic studies is the study of what it means to have a race as one important part of our intersectional* identities and it centers the people most impacted by racism and settler colonialism. Ethnic Studies also has three main parts: what is taught, how it is taught, why it is taught.

- **What is taught:** Ethnic Studies teaches BUSD students about the true histories and lived experiences of the people most impacted by racism and other intersecting* forms of oppression. Ethnic Studies is community responsive, which means the curriculum reflects our Berkeley community.
- **How it is taught:** Ethnic Studies is taught in a humanizing way, which uplifts love for self, love for community, and solidarity across races and groups that have been historically oppressed.
- **Why it is taught:** Ethnic studies is taught with the goal of transforming the world to be a better place for all, so that we may all live in a world that is free from racism, white supremacy, and all forms of oppression.

**Intersectional means the different aspects of a person's identity such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and more. These intersecting pieces of an individual's identity can often impact how an individual or entire group has advantages or disadvantages within institutional systems such as schools, the court system, and more. It is a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, an American Civil Rights Advocate, critical race theory scholar, and lawyer.*

The Purpose of Ethnic Studies:

The purpose of Ethnic Studies is to inspire BUSD learners to take action from a place of knowledge about our true connected histories and care for our diverse communities and their lived experiences in order to transform our world so that we may all be liberated from racism and oppression. Additionally, Ethnic Studies teaches students how to critically analyze power, notice and name injustices, respect their peers, and honor their own and one another's identities. This includes things such as race, ethnicity, ability/disability, class, sexuality, body size, gender identity, religion/spirituality, belief systems, and more.

The Impact of Ethnic Studies:

Ethnic Studies has universal benefits for all students of all identities; it connects and strengthens all communities because it is rooted in love and transformation so that the world can be a better place for all. Ethnic Studies has been proven to have many positive benefits for all students of all races and ethnicities, by increasing their sense of belonging and self knowledge, connection to their school community, empathy for others, attendance rates, GPA, and much more (as [researched in 2017](#) at Stanford by Emily Penner and Thomas S. Dee). For students of color, Ethnic Studies provides a much needed academic space where they can take classes and learn history that centers their experiences of race, racism, and settler colonialism. These classes support students of color in developing a sense of connection and pride in their ancestral and familial legacies, the impact of which manifests in many of the positive outcomes described in the Stanford study.

Elementary

[Translate »](#)

Through our work with the Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee, students, classroom teachers, district staff, and community members, Berkeley Unified School District has written six pilot units, which complement our pre-existing BUSD educator-created curriculums for second and third grade. All units are standards based and tailored to our unique Berkeley community.

2nd Grade

- Integrated Ethnic Studies Read-aloud Lesson Set about Diverse Families

3rd Grade

- *Our Stories Connect Us! Celebrating Our Community* Unit focuses on personal identity, building stronger relationships in our school community, Ohlone history and current day activism, as well as inspiring Berkeley role models (Ruth Acty, Corrina Gould, Mayor Jesse Arreguin, Yoshiko Uchida, with fall additions of Anthony Brown and Beatriz Levya-Cutler).
- *Who Came to Berkeley? A Spotlight on Black and Asian Stories* Unit is a celebration of migration and immigration, community interviews, and solidarity. This unit features community interviews with Berkeley leaders.

4th Grade:

- *The Decolonizing California's History: The Mission System* Unit centers the experiences of the Indigenous peoples of California and their resilience and resistance in the face of colonization and oppression.

5th Grade:

- *The From Jamestown to Revolution* Unit uplifts the often overlooked perspectives of racialized minorities during this key time period in our nation's history. Connections to modern day Reparations efforts, including right here in BUSD will be highlighted and the unit will feature community interview with some of our community leaders.

Middle School

6th Grade (pilot unit for the 2026-2027 school year):

- *Imagining a Better Civilization* Unit supports students to critically analyze the 'symptoms' and hidden environmental and social costs of ancient and modern civilizations. By connecting ancient stewardship practices—such as those of the local Bay Area Ohlone peoples—with modern community challenges (like climate change, housing, and food access), students learn to apply the core Ethnic Studies pillars of Solidarity, Love and Respect, Hope and Critical Consciousness. Ultimately, the unit challenges students to move from critique to action, collaboratively conceptualizing and designing a future civilization rooted in care and reciprocity rather than resource extraction and control.

7th Grade (will be implemented in the spring of the 2026-2027 school year):

- *Shattered Pillars: Decolonizing Histories, Reclaiming Futures* Unit grounds students in the 7 Pillars of Colonization framework. The unit centers ancestral knowledge and narratives, focusing on pre-colonial systems such as Pasifika matriarchal societies and case studies from regions around the world. Through engaging projects and engaging with community change makers, students learn about how to counter the negative impacts of colonization through community resilience, creative joy, and collective care.

8th Grade:

- *The Abolitionism and the Fight for a Multi-Racial Democracy* Unit supports our students to engage with questions around freedom and human rights, focused on the experiences and histories of people of color. Additionally, this unit prepares students for the transition into the Universal Ninth Grade Ethnic Studies class at Berkeley High School.

High School

All incoming ninth grade students are assigned to one of seven houses, or hives. These hives are composed of approximately 120 students who share 4 teachers in their core subject areas: Math 1 (or Advanced Math 1), Physics 1, English, and Ethnic Studies/Social Living. Students choose their remaining two classes out of several elective options. At the end of ninth grade, students have the opportunity to rank one of the five learning communities at Berkeley High School for their 10th-12th grade education.

- [Universal 9th Grade Overview](#)
- [Universal 9th Grade Ethnic Studies Scope and Sequence Document](#)

Additionally, through our work with the Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee, students, classroom teachers, district staff, and community members, Berkeley Unified School District has written six pilot units, which complement our pre-existing BUSD educator-created curriculums for the 9th grade. All units are standards based and tailored to our unique Berkeley community.

9th Grade:

- *The Racial Solidarity Unit* explores different significant historical moments when communities of color came together in solidarity with one another; case studies include the Third World Liberation Front strike for Ethnic Studies right here in Berkeley, the struggle to prevent the demolition of San Francisco Hotel, which housed many Filipino American seniors, and other significant moments of unity.

- *The Arab American Studies* Unit celebrates the richness of Arab American contributions and experiences in the United States, with a particular focus on Yemeni American stories.

Berkeley High School remains the only high school in the nation with a dedicated African American Studies Department. Students can take classes within the African American Studies Department, as well as other Ethnic Studies classes such as Latinx History, Latinx Literature, and Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature.

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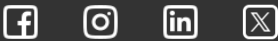
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