

Dear RI House Education Committee,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to the H5836 ethnic studies bill for several reasons, some of which are outlined below. To begin, I believe that I am qualified to provide written opinion on this matter as I have been and am an educator, albeit at the post-graduate level with Professor Emeritus appointments at the Weill Cornell Medical College of Cornell University and the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University. I have taught undergraduate, graduate school and medical school courses as well as mentored high school students during externships and visiting student experiences. I have served on numerous curriculum committees and have interviewed applicants for colleges, graduate schools, medical schools, and post-graduate training programs. Therefore, I believe that I am knowledgeable in this area as an educator. Moreover, I am a member of a minority ethnic group that has historically been subjected to negative bias and prejudice which is currently experiencing an unfortunate increase in prevalence here in Rhode Island, the United States, and worldwide. I also have a grandson in the Rhode Island public school system. Hence, the issue is of personal importance to me and my family. To follow is a brief overview of my objections to the bill as currently written based on the version available through the legislative portal.

As you are all undoubtedly aware as members of this committee, the issue of ethnic studies is hotly debated in the educational community. Initial reports of benefits to students' attendance and academic performance have largely been refuted (see Stanford University study and subsequent critiques, for example) based on flawed study designs and analyses that do not meet rigorous statistical methods. Hence, there is no proven benefit to establishing an ethnic studies program per se. Furthermore, the bill as written demands that the program is a "yearlong" course of study to begin in the 2026-27 school year and that beginning with the graduating class of 2030 this course of study will become a graduation requirement (i.e., for high school freshmen in year 2026-27, the very first year the course will be offered). Therefore, the bill mandates an immediate requirement with mandatory completion for graduation for students entering high school beginning in its very first year. This mandate is being proposed without a rigorous and detailed curriculum. The literature on ethnic studies courses does seem to be in wide agreement on one very important point. That such programs must be guided by an expertly designed and widely vetted curriculum that meets the highest standards of inclusiveness and that avoids politically motivated tropes and prejudices so as to avoid causing harm, potentially irreparable harm. The proposed timeline without any preceding community-based input and without expert course design violates the one area in which academics seem to agree.

Furthermore, given that the current RICAS scores demonstrate only a 14% English Language Proficiency and a 15% Mathematics Proficiency for Providence students (by way of only one example), it seems that the limited time in the school day might be better invested in improving performance in core competencies prior to adding an additional requirement with no proven academic benefit. Therefore, this may not be the time for considering and implementing the proposed course.

Ethnic studies courses generally fall into two broad categories, 1) inclusive and 2) "liberated." The former, inclusive ethnic studies, is based on 1) imparting an understanding of

the travails, hardships, and prejudices to which various ethnic groups have been subjected in the United States and elsewhere, and 2) imparting an understanding of the contributions made by various ethnic groups to society and humankind. The latter, “liberated” ethnic studies, is based on the divisive and polarizing philosophy promulgated by the Frankfurt School and its acolytes emphasizing the supposed struggle between those groups in power and the ethnic groups that have been and that are subjugated by the power structure, the so-called battle between the victimizers and the victims or the oppressors and the oppressed. The inclusive type of ethnic studies can, should, and must be incorporated within existing American History and World History courses that are already part of the curriculum in multiple years of study based on the RIDE school curriculum as published. Doing so adds nuance and context that is very difficult to achieve during a dedicated ethnic studies course. However, I do concede that a well-constructed inclusive ethnic studies course could serve the same purpose if time and budget so allow. However, the language of the existing bill strongly suggests that the intent of the bill’s sponsors is to mandate a “liberated” ethnic studies curriculum as per line 12, “Fostering critical thinking skills, and a deeper analysis of structures of power and race.” I’m certainly in favor of fostering critical thinking skills. But the meaning of “deeper analysis of structures of power and race” is very clear - the sponsors are calling for a prejudicial, biased, and divisive course focused on the “liberated” ethnic studies concept.

Several states have gone down this road already. Rhode Island should learn from their experiences. In the current highly polarized and divisive state of our society, ethnic studies (ideally taught in the context of American History and World History) should be honest and open, but with the goal of educating the students that there is more that unites us than divides us; not that society is an endless battle between the oppressed and their oppressors. Stoking the fires of prejudice is neither useful nor justifiable. Furthermore, in states that have participated in such failed experiments, there have been costly legal actions by numerous citizen groups and the Federal government. Even in the State of California, the original intent of an inclusive ethnic studies format was subverted by University of California faculty of Africana and Ethnic Studies departments that implemented the “liberated ethnic studies” model. The State then revised the highly controversial and divisive curriculum. Now, the battle is being fought on a district-by-district basis with resultant cost, confusion, and quite a bit of animus. Is this a path we would willing desire?

In 2016, then Governor Gina Raimondo signed into law a bill requiring Holocaust and Genocide education in Rhode Island’s secondary schools starting with the 2017-18 academic year. The RIDE website outlines the material to be included and the resources made available to the state’s school districts in order to be in compliance with this law. Among the topics to be included in this required educational experience is the Armenian Genocide. Why is this topic also included in this proposed bill requiring an ethnic studies course? Native American Genocide is also included within the material to be covered as is genocide within the African Nations. There seems to be at the very least a great deal of overlap between the material that this bill would mandate and an already existing mandatory educational experience. Are the Rhode Island school districts failing to meet or exceed the existing legal mandate? If so, shouldn’t this failure to meet current expectations be remedies prior to establishing yet

another year-long requirement? If not, then it would seem that the bill's authors need to reconcile the language of this bill with the current curricular requirements.

Furthermore, I note with grave concern that this bill is quite prescriptive as to exactly which ethnicities are worthy of inclusion within the mandated ethnic studies course. I am an ethnic Jew. My minority has been subjected to millennia of prejudice, has been subjected to multiple ethnic cleansings both within our ancestral homeland to which we are indigenous (an area encompassing, but somewhat larger than, present day Israel), and within multiple geographies throughout our centuries-long diaspora (including, but not limited to, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East) and even now is subject to genocide in our recently reclaimed ancestral homeland of Israel. Here in Rhode Island, I and my people are subjected to ongoing antisemitism - even on the steps of the Rhode Island Statehouse with the active participation of elected officials, academics, and my fellow Rhode Island citizens (see May 17, 2025 demonstration at the State House with a banner in Arabic stating "From Gaza to Beirut, the Intifada will never die." Calling for Intifada is calling for lethal violence that targets on-combatant Jews, both in Israel and worldwide). Antisemitism, including anti-Zionism, is the fastest growing category of hate crime in the United States and here in Rhode Island. Antisemitism is the largest percentage of all single-bias religious hate crimes. When corrected for population size, antisemitism is the most predominant form of hate crime in the country. And yet, my ethnicity is not to be included within the curriculum proposed for ethnic studies. Why? And what other ethnicities have been ignored and why? Perhaps the bill's authors have an agenda. If so, the agenda should be made clear and public.

As stated earlier, the one point regarding ethnic studies upon which proponents and opponents agree is that to achieve any benefit and to avoid irreparable harm, the curriculum must be constructed by experts that include a wide base from the community representative of the ethnicities that should be studied as part of the course. These experts should be representative of ethnic perspectives and with a background in education. The experts should not be proponents of a prejudicial, biased, hateful, (or antisemitic) agenda. And it is also mandatory that the resources made available for the course are also widely agreed upon for their accurate and uncolored historical content and to ensure that such resources are free from biases, prejudices, and political agendas. There are examples of curricula that are quite controversial and harmful that have been employed resulting in unintended downstream consequences (see State of California and the Coalition for Liberated Ethnic Studies by way of two examples). There are also examples of constructive curricula that have broad-based approval (see Stand With Us Ethnic Studies by way of one example). Constructive curricula have universally benefited from expert input and endorsement from the ethnic communities themselves. None have been derived from a "to be appointed" student-led ethnic studies leadership council as overseers attended by teachers (again to be appointed) without any previous history of curriculum creation, knowledge of subject matter, and understanding of the context and nuance of ethnic studies within the greater rubric of higher education. The State has a Department of Education. The State has community-based groups with rich histories of representing ethnicities and of engaging with one another constructively. The infrastructure

proposed to support an already highly questionable course of study is simply inappropriate and dangerous.

In conclusion, I strongly request that this committee does not advance this bill for further consideration. It does not advance the academic excellence of the State's students. It is not so subtle as to its intent to foster an illiberal agenda. It does not adequately consider existing educational requirements in unrelated areas of study that are failing to meet goals (English Language Proficiency and Mathematics) nor in related areas of study (Genocide and Holocaust Studies). The proposed foci of attention do not adequately address ethnicities that are deserving of study and focuses instead on selected groups, likely consistent with its illiberal agenda. And the infrastructure to support the proposed course of study is lacking based on the work of numerous experts in the field. Should the committee decide to instead move this bill forward, which would be regrettable, at the very least the committee should require that the bill is reworked with the input of all (not merely some small subset) of concerned constituencies including, but not limited to, the Rhode Island Jewish community.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this bill.

Gary S. Dorfman, MD