



April 23rd, 2025

House Bill 5836– “Our History, Our Schools, Our Future: About Ethnic Studies Bill”

Dear Chair McNamara and Honorable Members of the Committee,

Hello, my name is Sila. I’m a senior and a youth organizer with ARISE and OurSchoolsPVD. I’m speaking in support of House Bill No. 5836. Ethnic Studies delves into the history of different ethnic and racial groups to gain a better understanding on how it affects us today. As a Hmong American student, I’ve never felt represented in my history courses. I’ve taken every required history course in my high school: World History, U.S. History, Western Civ. And yet all of these courses never looked through the lens of people of color despite the fact that people of color are a major part of U.S. History. The enslavement of Black and African Americans is watered down, Southeast Asian history is barely mentioned, Arabian and Latin American history is never discussed in our textbooks. What I’m saying is: a lot of our history is Eurocentric. That’s not to say European history means less, but rather all history should be represented in our schools.

One may ask: “what’s the difference between Ethnic Studies and Multicultural studies”? Multicultural studies is more surface level, learning about different cultures. Ethnic Studies is analyzing this history and how it correlates to our experiences with racial and ethnic biases, as well as intersecting with other identity markers such as gender and sexuality. The reason why many of my peers tonight wish to push Ethnic Studies as a mandated course is because it explores deeper discussion about our history without a whitewashed lens.

For the longest time, I’ve struggled with my Hmong identity. I remember back when I was in elementary school, I was looking for books related to Hmong culture, history, poetry-anything! Yet, there was none. For a school library, there were zero books about Hmong or Southeast Asian people. At the time, I started to wonder if my Hmong identity meant anything. Sure, we make up a small population of the U.S., but that doesn’t mean we don’t exist. It was until I was in highschool that I learned that the Hmong people were subjected to bombings during the Secret War of Laos. And it’s secret because the CIA wanted to avoid controversy with a neutral country during the Vietnam War. It is this reason why I’ve fought alongside the Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE) and OurSchoolsPVD to push Ethnic Studies as a mandated course for not only Providence, but for all of Rhode Island.

Now, many of us in this room know many young people: sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, your own children. Which is why I ask that you look over and pass House Bill 5836. All students from this generation and forward should be represented in their history class! Not only for our education, but also to become open-minded. Thank you for your time.

Sila
12th grade