

A school district or charter school in this state shall not include in its program of instruction any courses or classes that include any of the following: (1) promote the overthrow of the United States Government, (2) Promote resentment towards a race or class of people, (3) are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group, (4) advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.

— *Arizona House Bill 2281*

SCHOOL AS THE ENGINE OF ASSIMILATION

Since 2007, when he began speaking out for the passage of the bill that has now effectively illegalized ethnic studies in the Grand Canyon State, Arizona superintendent of public instruction Tom Horne has used the phrase “ethnic chauvinism” to describe the risk he sees inherent in culturally-specific education. “Traditionally, the American public school system has brought together students from different backgrounds and taught them to be Americans and to treat each other as individuals, and not on the basis of their ethnic backgrounds,” Fox News quoted Horne as saying.

Arizona governor Jan Brewer signed the bill into law in May. Previously, however, another governor responded very differently to the tides of pluralism in his state. Faced with complaints from members of a minority community that their culture was being denigrated in the public schools, the governor announced that these minority students should be permitted an education in accordance with their own language, culture, and belief systems; the alternative, he feared, was a permanent underclass of the uneducated. This governor reasoned that it was best to pave the road for community-supported, culturally-responsive educational institutions in his state. The governor in question? William Seward, who proposed that Irish Catholic schools be included under the auspices of the state school system—in 1840.

In fact, the tension between ethnocentricity and pluralism in American school policy is as old as American education itself. Ironically, Horne himself neatly summarized the very agenda of the public school system that many multicultural educators find so offensive: the purpose of the school is to inculcate a specific value system. Despite the many ways in which the school has evolved since the nascent days of our democracy, one thread remains consistent: the use of the school system is a means to perpetuate a specific perspective. Obliquely labeled “American” or “mainstream” in contemporary discourse, this point of view in fact represents a very narrow—white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant— slice of the American experience.

Far from being subtle or insidious, this prerogative was transparent in the early days of the republic. For instance, Noah Webster, whose 1783 text *Grammatical Institute of the English Language* had sold 1.5 million copies by 1801—making Webster one of the most influential forces in the history of the American classroom—illustrated the cover of his 1787 reader with this phrase “Begin with the infant in the cradle; let the first word he lisps be Washington.” In 1919, a report issued by the state of California included a statement bemoaning American schools’ failure to adequately assimilate Japanese students: “It seems apparent that the teachings of the American public schools do not offset the Japanese home influence. . . . The Japanese still continue to congregate in racial groups, speak the Japanese language among themselves, and adhere to the customs of the mother country.”

A STORY TOLD IN ONE'S OWN VOICE

Given our country's long history of deliberately, systemically using school as a means to eradicate the heritages of minority groups, it comes as no surprise that members of these groups would seek ways to educate children in accordance with their own beliefs, ideas, and history. One hundred and seventy years after the fierce public controversy ignited by the idea that Irish Catholic students' culture should be foundational to their educational experience, schools nationwide are pursuing culturally-specific education as a route to greater achievement. Brooklyn's Khalil Gibran International Academy prides itself on being "the first school in New York City to focus on the Arabic language and Arab cultures." In St. Paul, the Hmong College Prep Academy was opened in 2006 to provide "curriculum enriched and informed by Hmong culture and language to strengthen student achievement." At Native American Community Academy in Albuquerque, school teachers and administrators strive to "nurture relationships and integrate Native perspectives to connect students and their cultures."

"The history, the culture, the creative genius of all people is central to their education," says Dr. Elaine Mosley, Chief Education Officer of the Betty Shabazz International Charter School in Chicago. "It provides the hook, the connection. At our school, we are teaching children of African descent, and we are teaching them in the way we believe all children should be taught, the way children learn best—and that is to begin with who they are historically, culturally, and creatively. We want to use those aspects to activate young people, to engage that which they already have within them."

In 2003, Nina Buchanan and Robert Fox of the University of Hawai'i at Hilo compiled fascinating case studies of local schools providing culturally-specific education, schools that "translate demography into curriculum," as they put it. "In general," explain Buchanan and Fox, "they emphasize change in one or more of these areas: social environment, content, pedagogy, and/or language.... [They] employ teaching strategies that are congruent with the learning styles and preferred ways of processing and acting on information that reflect the cultural heritage of their target population."

Jihad Kheperu, a rising junior at Morehouse College who attended the Betty Shabazz International Charter School from age two until he was twelve years old, gives a more personal view of the impact of culturally-centered education. "It secured me with myself," he says. "A lot of Black Americans aren't comfortable with themselves, or they have insecurities that make them feel like second-class citizens, like they have something to prove. Even though I had an African-centered education, what it really taught me is that everyone is equal. It gave me an outlook on life that every culture is important. It instilled in me a sense of pride in being Black, but more than that, in being human."

EYES ON THE PRIZE: CLOSING THE GAP

The disparities in academic success that persist between certain minority groups in America and their white counterparts are extraordinarily discouraging to educators and concerned citizens of all philosophical persuasions. The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research reports in a national analysis that in the high school class of 2001, 72% of white students graduated; 54% of American Indian students, 52% of Hispanic students, and 51% of Black students received a diploma. Data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research shows an even wider gap in the nation's third-largest school district. An analysis of Chicago's [would-be] high school class of 2001 shows that only 28% of Black males actually graduated by the time they made it to their eighteenth year; 34% of Latino males graduated by the same measure. In 2009, the New York City Department of Education released a celebratory press release because the performance gap between Black and white students on a standardized math test had dropped from 35 points in 2002 to a still-abysmal gap of 24 percentage points.

These troubling numbers make culturally-specific education—with its promises to improve student self-esteem and set them on the path to achievement—seem like a compelling solution. However, for many people, the concept of the culturally-specific school is a source of negative feelings, ranging from discomfort to moral outrage. “History is one thing,” said Arizona State Senator Russell Pearce, speaking in support of House Bill 2281. “Misinformation, hateful speech, sedition is not appropriate with my tax dollars.” And as Columbia University lecturer John McWhorter wrote recently in *The New Republic*, Americans respond with “visceral recoil” at the suggestion of any social mechanism perceived as serving one ethnic group to the exclusion of another; we think automatically of “shabby one-room schoolhouses in the segregated Deep South.” The Atlantic’s Megan McArdle mused in a June 2010 blog post that even if culturally-specific education seems promising in theory, the legality of a school created under this model would be questionable.

While the argument that culturally-specific education is antithetical to the desegregation mandate of *Brown v. Board of Education* may seem compelling or even obvious, law professor Sonia Jarvis argued in *The Yale Law Journal* that the culturally-specific school actually offers a grand contribution toward realizing the spirit of *Brown*. The decision to desegregate was based heavily on the sociological evidence that separate schools were detrimental to the mental well-being and self-regard of Black children. Thus, the spirit of the law dictates not simply the mandate to integrate schools, but more fundamentally, to create school systems committed to nurturing the intellectual and personal development of all children. A school district that seeks to close the achievement gap by providing culturally-specific schools is therefore acting in favor of the court’s intention. Those not convinced by this argument, who believe that

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the intention of the court was simply to bring together students of different races in one building, face the fact that if that were the task, the court failed miserably: UCLA's Civil Rights Project reported in 2009 that America's schools are more segregated today than they were 50 years ago, and that the economic devastation wrought on the country in the last two years is likely to make matters worse.

Although the specter of culturally-specific education as a reincarnation of Jim Crow doesn't hold much weight, culturally-specific schools do pose another dilemma that could potentially harm children's well-being and self-regard: the threat of essentialism.

The trouble with constructing an educational model intended to reflect a specific culture is the fact that culture is dynamic, and there is no such thing as passively transmitting culture without actively constructing it. The mirror of culture is a slanted one, and the entity that makes decisions about what should be included in a curriculum rooted in African or Mexican or American Indian culture ultimately makes decisions about what constitutes those cultures. For the student, then, who is ostensibly a member of that cultural group but feels excluded or disconnected from the specific cultural norms that are validated in the classroom, there is a risk of sending the message no empathic educator wants to send: You don't belong.

Nevertheless, Superintendent Horne's concept of "ethnic chauvinism" demonstrates a failure to distinguish between affirmative pedagogy that validates a culture and negative pedagogy that devalues a culture. The presumption that to celebrate one is to disparage another is an illogical habit that is unfortunately pernicious in the debate surrounding House Bill 2281 in particular and multicultural education in general. Even more absurd is the idea that ethnic solidarity and personal, individual respect are mutually exclusive. As Jihad Kheperu described, a culturally-specific education establishes the groundwork for students to develop a transcultural worldview, one that recognizes the essential human challenges we all face.

In the end, if the goal of education is to develop and sustain human beings who are successful in realizing their aspirations and adept at addressing global challenges—or even simply, as the Arizona State Board of Education succinctly puts it, to "foster excellence"—we must be wide-eyed in our pursuit of that aim. To narrow our vision of what comprises an excellent school, because of the foolhardy idea that solidarity and individual success cannot coexist, is to narrow our vision of what it means for every child to thrive in school and beyond. ♦