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Date: September 27, 2014

To: Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education  
Office of the Board  
333 S. Beaudry Avenue, 24th Floor  
Los Angeles, CA 90017

From: National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME)

Re: Statement of Support for Ethnic Studies in the Los Angeles Unified School District

The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) supports the campaign (<http://www.EthnicStudiesNow.com>) to make Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

Since its founding almost a quarter century ago NAME has advocated for equity and justice, particularly for groups most underserved in our public school systems. We believe that education can rise to the highest levels of quality and equity when it is centered on multicultural curriculum and instruction. That is, education can offer a strong foundation for building communities that reflect core American values of democracy and ideals of educational success for all children when it (a) reflects and values the many ways that we are similar to and different from one another, (b) prepares all children to flourish in their personal and professional lives amidst this diversity, and (c) refuses to ignore the inequities that often accompany differences along lines of race, ethnicity, nation, social class, gender, sexuality, language, religion, disability, and other dimensions. Such ideals manifest in the core goals and principles of Ethnic Studies, and as such, we support the proposal for LAUSD to make Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement.

Ethnic Studies programs contribute to the educational enterprise significantly in a number of ways. For ethnic groups that have historically been marginalized in schools and society, Ethnic Studies fosters a more positive sense of self, which in turn affects engagement and improves academic performance and social engagement. For all ethnic groups, Ethnic Studies fills deep gaps in traditional curriculum, offering to all students, regardless of ethnic identity, an opportunity to learn about more diverse experiences and perspectives, ask different kinds of questions, and grapple with more contradictions and complexities. Ethnic Studies is essential for any student to flourish as well as to develop critical thinking skills that can address the increasingly complex problems in our diverse society.

Unfortunately, many so-called “reforms” and initiatives are underway across the United States that move curriculum and instruction in the exact opposite direction from what research tells us to be most effective. High-stakes testing is increasing the amount of time that students spend preparing for standardized tests that assess narrowly what students know and can do, often with curriculum that includes a narrow range of subject areas, a lower level of cognitive skills, and an inability to make connections to the lives and communities of our students, despite the research that shows the importance of offering curriculum that is engaged, interdisciplinary, and challenging. Overlapping with calls for curriculum standards is a deep and widespread belief that education can and should be racially neutral or “color-blind,” despite compelling research that reveals how curriculum cannot help but to include only some perspectives and experiences and not others. Such color-blind ideology helps us to understand why some critics of Ethnic Studies argue that such curriculum is “biased” or “un-American.” The controversy in Tucson is illustrative. The critics of the Mexican American Studies program in the Tucson Unified School District argued that Mexican American Studies is biased but failed to see the reverse, namely, that a curriculum with deep gaps in the history and literature of Mexican Americans is necessarily one that centers and normalizes White Americans, but which is insidiously framed as un-biased. In 2010, NAME issued a statement (available on our website, <http://nameorg.org>) that assails the state of Arizona’s banning of Ethnic Studies in schools. Over the past year, as the struggles moved to the courts, we have continued to support Tucson’s students, educators, and community members in their fight for the right to democratic education in their schools.

The School Board of the Los Angeles Unified School District stands at a key historical juncture, where your decision to make Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement in the third largest school district in the United States can serve as a model for districts everywhere. We urge the School Board to adopt this requirement, and we urge our membership and allies to support this struggle to make the goals of Ethnic Studies central to public education in Los Angeles and beyond.