

# Texas mulls adding Mexican-American studies course (Update)

April 8 2014, by Will Weissert

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The Texas Board of Education is considering adding a Mexican-American studies course as a statewide high school elective, a move that proponents say would give students a deeper understanding of the state where Hispanics make up a majority of public school students and which was once part of Mexico.

Critics, though, dismiss the effort as an attempt to inject progressive politics into the classroom.

The board's 10 Republicans and five Democrats will hold a public hearing Tuesday, then vote on possible new courses later in the week. It's the first time Texas has considered such a course, and specifics on exactly what it would teach haven't yet been devised—especially since Mexican-American culture is already taught in existing history and other classes at the high school level.

Even with approval, developing a Mexican-American curriculum and appropriate textbooks means it won't actually be ready for classrooms for two to three years. But the debate will likely re-ignite past ideological battles about what goes into the history curriculums taught in America's second most-populous state.

"I might pull a Cesar Chavez and call for a boycott," David Bradley, a Republican board member from Beaumont who opposes the proposal, said of Tuesday's hearing. He was referring to the Hispanic labor leader who led a massive grape boycott to win better pay and working

conditions for farmworkers.

The discussions also likely will preview some of the coming clashes over the content of new social studies textbooks the board is set to approve for use in classrooms across Texas this fall. In 2010, then Democratic board member Mary Helen Berlanga even stormed out of a meeting on social studies curriculum after failing in her efforts to include more lessons on Hispanic leaders, declaring: "We can just pretend this is a white America and Hispanics don't exist."

The issue has already flared up in other border states. In California, a recently introduced bill would mandate creating a model for a standardized, statewide ethnic studies course there, while in 2010, Arizona approved a law targeting a Tucson school district's ethnic studies program—after state education officials complained that its Mexican-American studies component taught Latino students that they were oppressed by whites.

Several Texas school boards, including its largest in Houston, have passed resolutions supporting a statewide Mexican-American studies course. Aside from Ruben Cortez of Brownsville, who proposed the course, it isn't clear how much support there was among board members for the change. Some have said they'd be more amenable to a multicultural studies class encompassing the accomplishments of Mexican-Americans but also Texans of other races and ethnicities.

Still, board members like Bradley aren't willing to go that far.

"We're all Americans. To suggest otherwise is to further segregate and divide the community," he said. "I'm sorry if I disappoint some folks, but it's almost reverse racism."

Debbie Ratcliffe, a spokeswoman for the Texas Education Agency, said

school districts are already free to offer their own Mexican-American studies courses locally—and that some schools have worked with nearby community colleges to devise such classes for high school students.

She also noted that youngsters are required to study Texas history in the fourth and seventh grades, and are already taught about subjects like the life of Mexican-American civil rights giant Hector P. Garcia and the efforts of trailblazing Tejanos dating back to 1500s.

"A separate course is one way to go," Ratcliffe said. "But I don't want people to think it's not being taught without a separate course, because it is."

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