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POLICY BRIEF

Beyond the Budget: Implementing Ethnic Studies in a Divided Educational Landscape and Polarized Nation

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Executive Summary

In October 2021, California became the first state to require Ethnic Studies as a high school graduation requirement with the passage of Assembly Bill 101 (AB 101).¹ Beginning with the graduating class of 2029-30, all California high school students must complete a one-semester Ethnic Studies course. However, statewide support for AB 101's courses are contingent on fiscal allocations provided through the annual Budget Act or through other legislation statutes.² Since the bill's passage, no dedicated state funding has been allocated for this program. This has left many Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) on a tight timeline to independently develop curriculum, train teachers, and manage resources to meet the graduation requirement for the class of 2029-30. Districts are at risk of either (1) failing to meet the new graduation requirement on time—potentially delaying student graduations—or (2) implementing unstandardized versions of Ethnic Studies that lack appropriate pedagogy. Poorly implemented programs risk missing key opportunities to improve graduation and attendance rates, strengthen critical thinking and literacy skills, and meaningful community-building in the classroom.

According to a study done by the National Academy of Sciences students who enrolled in an Ethnic Studies course found significant improvements in graduation rates, attendance, and college enrollment for at-risk students.³ Similarly, a 2016 Stanford study reported increased student engagement, GPA, and attendance linked to Ethnic Studies participation.⁴ While substantial research and literature has been recorded on the possible benefits of Ethnic Studies, far less attention has been paid to the challenges of implementation at the district and school levels.

To better understand these challenges, this policy brief analyzes qualitative data from teachers, administrators, and professors involved in the rollout of Ethnic Studies in two Southern California school districts. A total of 13 individuals were interviewed: four from the San Diego Unified

Scale of the problem

- San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) is on ahead on schedule and will meet the state's Ethnic Studies graduation requirement for the Class of 2025. <https://www.sdusdetethnicstudies.org/>
- San Dieguito Union High School District (SDUHSD) reports low student enrollment in its English 9/9H with Ethnic Studies course for the 2025–2026 school year. <https://d16k74nzx9emoe.cloudfront.net/7f1bfaae-2be9-4e7c-8ca4-cd15b04c0593.pdf>
- The flexibility in the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum has led to varied interpretations of course content. For instance, the Independent Institute's SMCP has created a unit focused on White Americans. <https://www.independent.org/article/2024/09/05/unit-7-white-americans/>

¹ AB 101, Medina. *Pupil instruction: high school graduation requirements: ethnic studies*. CA Assembly Bill No. 101, October 8, 2021 https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB101

² The Budget Act is the predominant method by which appropriations are made. It must be introduced by January 10 and there is a constitutional requirement for the Legislature to pass the Budget Bill to the Governor by June 15. The Budget Bill becomes the Budget Act upon the Governor's signature. Legislation (bills passed by the California State Legislature and signed into law) can request or establish fiscal funding in California.

³ S. Bonilla, T.S. Dee, & E.K. Penner, *Ethnic studies increases longer-run academic engagement and attainment*, Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A. 118 (37) e2026386118, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2026386118> (2021).

⁴ Thomas S. Dee & Emily K. Penner, 2017. "The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance," American Educational Research Journal, vol 54(1), pages 127-166.

School District (SDUSD), five from the San Dieguito Unified High School District (SDUHSD), and two from the San Diego County Office of Education, and two professors involved in Ethnic Studies work in California.

Original research hypothesized that disparities in the implementation of Ethnic Studies may stem from differences in school funding structures, particularly the contrast between Title I allocations and property tax-based revenues (see Section: Understanding the Problem), compounded by the absence of dedicated state funding. However, findings illustrate how each district has navigated the mandate within its distinct sociopolitical and institutional contexts. Across interviews, respondents consistently identified four key themes involved in Ethnic Studies implementation and its challenges:

- 1. Significance of Ethnic Studies Centered on Students**
- 2. The Disconnect Between Theory and Practice**
- 3. Nationwide Polarization and the Need for Community-Responsive Strategies**
- 4. Teaching with Fidelity and The Lack of Proper Teaching Training.**

See section: Summary of Key Implementation Challenges for more information

While several respondents acknowledged that funding is important for technical implementation, “lack of funding” is often used as a rationale to delay or avoid Ethnic Studies curriculum rollout. The San Diego Unified School District was frequently cited as a district that successfully implemented Ethnic Studies without relying on state appropriations or grants. Concerns were also raised about the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) adopted by the California Department of Education.⁵ Many educators expressed that the Model does not have state-adopted content standards, making it harder to defend in contested districts and leaving content open to interpretation.

The brief concludes with three key recommendations, including: (1) Establish an Active Research, Support, and Monitoring Team within the California Department of Education (CDE), (2) Develop a State-Supported Ethnic Studies Teacher Accreditation Program and/or support legislation that provides similar incentives, and (3) Encourage Districts to Learn from Local Models and Adopt Research-Based Implementation Themes (re. Transparency, Belonging without Othering, and Community Responsive etc.) These recommendations were presented to the Superintendent of Public Instruction at the California Department of Education in July 2025.

Understanding the Problem

The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) and the San Dieguito Unified High School District (SDUHSD) serve different student populations and have different operating structures. According to 2023–24 data from the California Department of Education, SDUSD enrolls approximately 114,330 students, with a racially diverse student body: 47% Hispanic or Latino, 7.4% African American, and 22.9% White. A majority—58.1%—are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 21.4% are identified as chronically absent. SDUSD qualifies for federal Title I funding and receives substantial state support through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which allocates additional resources to districts serving high-need student populations.⁶ In contrast, SDUHSD enrolls 12,364: 54.1% White, 18.8% Asian, and 16.7% Hispanic or Latino. 18% of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and the chronic

⁵ California Department of Education, *Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum* adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE) on March 18, 2021. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/documents/ethnicstudiescurriculum.pdf>

⁶ California Department of Education Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/>

absenteeism rate is significantly lower at 10.5%. SDUHSD does not receive Title I funding and relies on over \$11.4 million in local property tax revenue.

Districts Performance Overview provided by California School Dashboard⁷



Since 2017, the SDUSD has been spearheading support for the Ethnic Studies For All graduation requirement, formally establishing the Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee in its district bylaws⁸. The class of 2025 will be the first to meet the requirement, five years ahead of the statewide mandate. In contrast, the SDUHSD recently concluded their Integrating Community Partners and Student Voice meetings for the optional Ethnic Studies pilot. Students or parents can choose between a traditional English 9/9 with Honors course or an English 9/9 with Honors with the Ethnic Studies Optional Course Pilot for the 2025-26 school year⁹. This contrast highlights how districts vary in their approaches—from mandatory integration to optional pilots—reflecting differing timelines and levels of community involvement.

Findings on The Four Key Themes of Ethnic Studies Implementation and Its Challenges:

1. Significance of Ethnic Studies Centered on Students

Respondents emphasized that Ethnic Studies plays a vital role in the K–12 curriculum by promoting representation, teaching accurate and inclusive history, and helping students develop the skills to read, think, and engage critically with course materials. They also noted that widespread misconceptions, such as the belief that Ethnic Studies promotes division or blame, remain a major barrier to implementation. Educators stressed the importance of walking communities through the process, explaining the purpose and content of Ethnic Studies in transparent, accessible ways. When communities understand that the goal is to reflect students' lived experiences and recognize the contributions of all people, support tends to grow.

An anonymous executive member of the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) explained:

Ethnic Studies isn't about changing beliefs—it's about meeting students' needs. When the majority of students are Latino, the curriculum should reflect their histories and contributions. Ultimately, this is about what's best for kids. Let's talk about how the contributions of people of

⁷ The California School Dashboard <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>

⁸ Bylaws San Diego Unified School District Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee, San Diego, CA, August 7, 2017 (revised July 17, 2019; August 19, 2020; May 18, 2022), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Znn9YXwLnn7D2yM_qWdxomCEMQTQh9lh/view.

⁹ SDUHSD English Course Descriptions <https://docs.google.com/document/d/111EOlftgMZg44z0JhDJtmwOWf1rXT0oHcmY9fS9NLfw/preview?tab=t.0>

colour have shaped this country. The biggest fear people have about ethnic studies—like, if you go to any board meeting or hear any argument about it—is this idea that ethnic studies is about dividing us. That it’s about blaming and shaming white people. You’ll hear things like, “It’s making white kids feel like they’re oppressors. When you’re able to show that that’s not what this is about—it’s about recognizing history, telling the truth, and speaking from a particular community’s perspective and lived experience—then people can start to understand what we’re really trying to do.

This quote reframes Ethnic Studies as a student-centered initiative rooted in truth-telling and cultural relevance, not division. The speaker addresses common misconceptions—particularly fears that Ethnic Studies promotes guilt or blame—and instead emphasizes that its purpose is to reflect students’ lived experiences and histories. In districts with a majority of students of color, such representation is essential to educational equity and engagement. By clarifying intent and shifting the narrative, this perspective helps foster broader understanding and support for implementation.

Julie Goldman, Director of Equity Curriculum and Instruction at SDCOE, added:

How are we teaching it? Are students doing youth action projects, interviewing elders, and learning about the true history of their city? This work develops critical thinking and strengthens literacy. That is the one of the huge benefits of Ethnic Studies on a k-12 level.

Goldman highlights the pedagogical value of Ethnic Studies, pointing to its impact on real-world skills like critical thinking, research, and literacy. Her remarks stress that how Ethnic Studies is taught is just as important as what is taught.

Guillermo, an Ethnic Studies teacher and trainer in SDUSD and professor at San Diego State University, offered a powerful metaphor:

What I often tell people is this: think about a buffet. Ethnic Studies is adding to that buffet. If you’re eating the same food every day, eventually you get tired of it. Ethnic Studies adds something new to the table. A lot of people think we’re trying to take their food away, but we’re not—we’re just adding to it.

Guillermo’s metaphor powerfully challenges the misconception that Ethnic Studies displaces traditional curriculum. Instead, he frames it as an addition that enriches the educational experience for all students. By comparing Ethnic Studies to new options at a buffet, he emphasizes inclusion and variety—highlighting that the goal is not to subtract, but to expand what students are offered in the classroom.

2. The Disconnect between Theory and Practice in Ethnic Studies Curriculum

Respondents consistently identified a gap between the traditional “banking model” of teaching, the theoretical foundations of Ethnic Studies shaped by higher education, and the pedagogical needs of K–12 classrooms¹⁰. While Ethnic Studies did originate in higher education, K–12 educators emphasized the importance of adapting it into developmentally appropriate, student-centered practices that meet the unique needs of younger learners.

Kiki Ochoa, an Ethnic Studies teacher and trainer at SDUSD added:

While Ethnic Studies may have originated in higher ed, teaching it at the K–12 level is a completely different scenario. College students are usually more focused and have their

¹⁰ The banking model of education is a term coined by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It describes a traditional teaching approach where teachers “deposit” information into passive students, who simply receive, memorize, and regurgitate it.

basic needs met. In public schools, we have to meet them where they are. We can't rely on a traditional lecture-based or "banking model" of education. Our approach has to be hands-on, interactive, and responsive. It requires a slower pace, more exercises, and deeper engagement to truly connect students with the material. Ethnic Studies has to be grounded in pedagogical practices that make space for student realities and development.

As Dr. Gomez and Kiki Ochoa pointed out, K–12 Ethnic Studies must prioritize engagement, interactivity, and responsiveness to students' lived experiences—especially in public schools where students may be navigating trauma, academic gaps, and resource scarcity.

Richard Barrera, Board Vice President for the SDUSD expressed:

In higher education, the Israel-Palestine conflict is often a major topic, frequently framed in terms of oppression and resistance. So many educators enter the field with that framing already in mind. From a district policy standpoint, we've tried to be very clear: we're not including the Israel-Palestine issue in our ethnic studies curriculum. The focus is on the four major racial/ethnic groups that have been historically marginalized in the U.S.

Dr. Fabi Bagula, Superintendent for the SDUSD:

We aren't doing liberatory ethnic studies or having conflict around Gaza in our curriculum. One of the high schools had this issue where she was following an ethnic studies model critical race theory. We need to follow what the state of California deemed to be the curriculum So we've been trying to get ahead of the game by publishing all of our courses live to the community¹¹. We don't want to cause controversies we just want to tell the truth. From there we could publish them and then offer what standards could look like.

Barrera and Dr. Fabiola Bagula, further highlighted the need for clear boundaries and alignment with state-approved curriculum. They cautioned against importing contentious topics or college-level frameworks—like international conflicts or abstract critical theory—without careful consideration of age-appropriateness and local context.

3. Polarization and the Necessity for Community-Responsive Implementation

A key challenge in implementing the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum is navigating political polarization and varying community contexts. In politically divided districts like San Dieguito Union High School District (SDUHSD), the curriculum has faced resistance. In response, SDUHSD launched Integrating Community Partners and Student Voice meetings to foster local buy-in and adapt the curriculum. While this approach helped introduce the model to the community, several respondents emphasized that in order for these meetings to be replicated in other districts they must intentionally include racially diverse participants to ensure authentic representation and curriculum relevance.

Jane Lea Smith, a board member from SDUHSD, emphasized the need for statewide standards and credentialing:

I would like standards. I would like accreditation. I would I would like something better for Ethnic Studies from the state side so that it actually is more defensible in polarized districts

¹¹ Beginning with the Class of 2025 students need to complete one ethnic studies course to earn an SDUSD diploma. Below are approved ethnic studies courses. Additional courses will be added as they are approved.
<https://www.sdusdequity.com/ethnicstudiescurriculum>

like San Dieguito Unified, but they don't have that with the lack of state support to push forward within the community.

An executive member of the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) pointed to contentious debates surrounding the Ethnic Studies Core Curriculum and its interpretive “grey areas,” which have opened the door to controversial proposals such as units on “White American Studies”:

There's a purpose behind those ideas. The key is asking: How do we open ourselves up to understanding where those proposals are coming from? What are the fears or concerns behind them? Creating space for open dialogue is critical. That kind of engagement helps us understand different perspectives—and it also helps ensure we're doing what's best for kids.. If we're serious about serving all students, then we have to find a way to meet in that middle space.

Kiki Ochoa (SDUSD) reflected on how deeply community-rooted their district's implementation was—well before any state mandates:

San Diego Unified didn't hold community listening sessions because we had already been organizing and implementing Ethnic Studies before it was required by the state. The Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee reflects the student demographics of our district

At the same time, Ochoa acknowledged that this approach may not work for every district:

For San Dieguito, holding listening sessions is essential—understanding where the community's tensions are, what concerns or hopes they have, and what they'd like to see in these courses. That's how you build something truly community responsive. That's one of the key pillars of Ethnic Studies. It's going to look different in Santa Ana Unified than in LA Unified. San Dieguito will be different than San Diego Unified. And that's how it should be. It has to be community responsive.

Jane Lea-Smith (SDUHSD), reflected on the district's approach to community engagement during the rollout of Ethnic Studies:

The main purpose of the community meetings was really transparency. That's hard for people sometimes, but the goal was to say, Here's what we're doing. If you have questions or concerns, now's the time to raise them. We also offered an online form for people to respond to the curriculum I think that was really hard for our teachers.

While the Integrating Community Partners and Student Voice meetings did help launch the Ethnic Studies pilot in SDUHSD, questions arose about who was truly in attendance at the meeting. Two English teachers noted that although the intent was to include the broader community:

Many attendees were not from the four most racialized groups the meetings. Instead, meetings were often attended by parents with the time and resources to participate, limiting diverse voices. It watered down a lot of the curriculum. Even in developing the curriculum, there wasn't much guidance. I had a prep period to work on the four Ethnic Literature units, but progress was slow and accountability was limited. It really felt like the district was just extracting labour from us and didn't know what it was doing.

This critique was echoed by Dr. Gallagher-Geursten:

A community-based group is absolutely what's needed to drive curriculum and pedagogy. Many California districts have Ethnic Studies Advisory Committees. These are the perfect spaces to ensure fidelity to a community-responsive and hyper-local Ethnic Studies curriculum. But the makeup of these groups matters deeply. The racial makeup should reflect the student population, and if there are white members, they should be in the

minority. When decision-making power is shared with people who don't hold a commitment to Ethnic Studies—or worse, oppose its core values—fidelity is eroded.

4. Teaching with Fidelity and The Lack of Proper Teaching Training

Respondents emphasized that achieving the best student outcomes requires teachers to be thoroughly trained and accredited in both the content and pedagogy of Ethnic Studies. Proper preparation ensures educators can authentically deliver the discipline's core principles and foster meaningful learning experiences.

Richard Barrera (SDUSD), expressed:

The key issue was capacity building, especially around professional development for teachers. We put together a training program and created a certificate in ethnic studies that teachers receive upon completion. But it was really important to those teachers that they remain in the classroom. We really valued that model, because it's grounded in real, daily classroom experience. It made the training stronger and more relevant.

Barrera points to capacity building through professional development as a key factor in successful implementation. By grounding teacher training in real classroom experience, the program stays relevant and practical, enhancing the effectiveness of Ethnic Studies instruction and reinforcing the importance of retaining trained teachers in active teaching roles.

Dr. Tricia Gallagher-Geursten, a lead contributor to the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum and executive committee member of the UC Ethnic Studies Faculty Council, emphasized:

San Diego Unified offers a micro-certification taught by Ethnic Studies teachers who truly understand the discipline. What we really need is a full teacher preparation program. Anyone teaching Ethnic Studies should have developed a critical consciousness to question injustice and inequity. In an ideal world, Ethnic Studies students would go into credential programs and learn both the content and pedagogy.

Dr. Gallagher-Geursten emphasizes that meaningful Ethnic Studies teaching requires more than short-term certifications but a full teacher preparation programs. Developing a critical consciousness is crucial for educators to effectively challenge injustice and inequity, ensuring they can teach both the content and pedagogy in a way that reflects the discipline's transformative purpose.

Dr. Guillermo Gomez (SDUSD), shared:

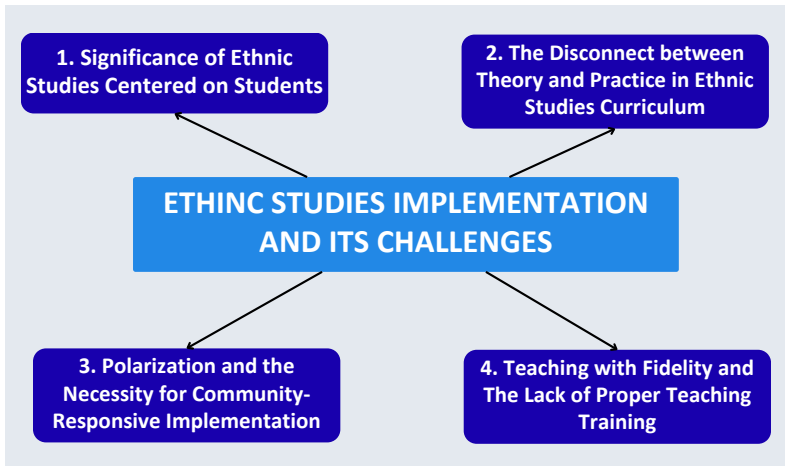
San Diego Unified actually collects a lot of data through annual student surveys about their experiences with Ethnic Studies. One key theme that emerged is teacher credibility—students can tell when teachers are prepared and when they're not. I can see this happening across California: districts technically meeting the requirement, but delivering a version of Ethnic Studies that doesn't reflect the core values, pedagogy, or purpose of the discipline. It's just a rebranded version of the old narrative.

Dr. Gomez highlights the importance of teacher credibility from the student perspective. Students quickly recognize whether teachers are well-prepared, which directly affects their learning experience. His warning about districts meeting requirements superficially but delivering diluted content stresses the risk of compromising Ethnic Studies' core values without rigorous teacher training.

Summary of Ethnic Studies Implementation and Its Challenges

1. Significance of Ethnic Studies Centered on Students

Educators emphasized that Ethnic Studies should reflect students' lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and community histories. Demystifying misconceptions and centering student needs is essential to building community support. Respondents emphasized Ethnic Studies as a student-centered, truthful, and culturally relevant curriculum that fosters engagement and counters fears that it promotes division or blame. Clear, transparent communication with communities is vital for dispelling misunderstandings. When students see themselves in the curriculum, it fosters pride, belonging, and civic engagement. These courses also strengthen critical thinking, literacy, and communication skills through activities like interviews, storytelling, and primary source analysis.



2. The Disconnect Between Theory and Practice

Many educators have highlighted a persistent gap between the theoretical foundations of Ethnic Studies developed in higher education and the practical realities of K–12 classrooms. They emphasize the need to adapt these theories into developmentally appropriate, interactive, and student-centered pedagogies that recognize diverse student experiences and learning contexts.

3. Nationwide Polarization and the Need for Community-Responsive Strategies

The politically polarized landscape poses significant challenges, resulting in a need for community-responsive implementation strategies. Successful models involve transparent communication, authentic inclusion of diverse voices, and local adaptation that respects community contexts. Advisory committees reflecting student demographics and shared decision-making authority are crucial to maintaining fidelity and combating opposition. Teachers and administrators stressed the importance of tailoring implementation strategies to each community's unique sociopolitical climate to build trust, prevent backlash, and ensure sustainability.

4. Teaching with Fidelity and The Lack of Proper Teaching Training

Respondents identified a pressing need for proper teacher accreditation and credentialing. Effective Ethnic Studies instruction depends on teachers who are well-prepared in both content and pedagogy, possess critical consciousness, and remain actively engaged in classroom teaching. Professional development grounded in real-world teaching contexts strengthens teacher credibility and student outcomes. Many advocates stressed the importance of teaching with *fidelity*.

Together, these findings underscore that Ethnic Studies implementation requires intentional efforts to align curriculum, pedagogy, teacher preparation, and community engagement within the unique local and political environments of each district.

Recommendations

1. Establish an Active Research, Support, and Monitoring Team within the California Department of Education (CDE)

To ensure consistent and equitable implementation of AB 101 CDE could establish a dedicated team responsible for research, support, and monitoring. This team would:

- a. Implement a reporting system that tracks key metrics such as district course offerings, student enrollment in Ethnic Studies, and teacher professional development related to the subject. Monitor the participation and outcomes of Community Partner and Student Voice meetings.
- b. Facilitate recurring statewide meetings (e.g., via Zoom) with educators, district leaders, students, and community stakeholders to share best practices, discuss implementation challenges, and provide updates.
 - i. Each district could discuss current status in implementation setbacks and steps forward. Not only will these meetings be solution oriented but also an effort for statewide solidarity.

2. Develop a State-Supported Ethnic Studies Teacher Accreditation Program

Participants consistently emphasized the need for strong pedagogical training, content expertise, and instructional fidelity.

- a. In partnership with the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), CDE could develop a formal Ethnic Studies accreditation or certification program. This program should align with the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum and work directly with K-12 Teachers.
- b. Offer state recognition and or designate grant funding to stipend teachers who complete the Ethnic Studies certification program. These incentives will encourage broader participation, promote instructional quality, and help retain educators committed to teaching Ethnic Studies.
 - i. Highlight rising Ethnic Studies undergraduates looking to pursue careers in K-12 Ethnic Studies.

3. Encourage Districts to Learn from Local Models and Adopt Research-Based Implementation Themes

Districts should look to local models such as San Diego Unified and San Dieguito Union High School District, which demonstrate vastly different but effective, community-driven approaches. These districts reflect eight key implementation themes:

- a. Transparency & Communication - Openly communicate goals, curriculum, and policies with families and communities. Re. Brown Act
- b. Conversation – Establish spaces for dialogue, listening sessions, and collaborative planning.
- c. Common Ground/Overlapping Consensus¹² – Identify shared values to foster unity and reduce conflict.
- d. Understanding - Promote empathy across stakeholder groups, especially amid cultural differences.
- e. Adaptivity & Relational Work – Tailor approaches to local contexts and prioritize relationship-building.

¹² John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 144–150. Rawls argues that citizens can endorse a shared political conception of justice from within their own comprehensive doctrines, a notion he terms “overlapping consensus.”

- f. Belonging without Othering Framework¹³ – UC Berkeley’s Belonging without Othering framework emphasize narrative transformation, cocreation, and centering marginalized groups while recognizing that everyone inherently has the right to belong.
- g. Center Marginalized Voices – Prioritize the perspectives and experiences of historically underserved communities.

These themes should guide district-level planning to ensure that Ethnic Studies efforts are inclusive, responsive, and culturally relevant. Ongoing statewide meetings can support districts in sharing strategies and refining their approaches to determine the most effective ways to help students across California benefit from Ethnic Studies and see diverse stories represented in the K–12 curriculum.

¹³ Othering & Belonging Institute, *A Resource Guide for Belonging Builders* <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/resource-guide-belonging-builders>