This month in my President’s message, I am pleased to feature an article on Ethnic Studies by my former BTA co-president, Kim Allender.

Why We Need Ethnic Studies in California (and America)

By Kim Allender
BTA President Emeritus

The late American poet, Langston Hughes had a 5th grade California state history textbook (America Will Be) named after a phrase in one of his most famous poems, Let America Be America Again.

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

This simple idea, America will be, is the basis for California’s new requirement that by 2030 every high school student will have completed a class in Ethnic Studies in order to graduate. According to a recent article written by reporter Melissa Gomez in the Los Angeles Times, “the California law envisions a class designed to help students understand the historic and ongoing struggles of marginalized people – Black, Latino, Asian, Indigenous Americans and others.”

In her article entitled, No Typical History Class, Gomez writes, “But ethnic studies courses have been dragged into political attacks by conservatives and right-wing activists against critical race theory, an academic framework used mainly in universities that examine how race and racism are embedded in American institutions, policies, and law. Ethnic studies in California high school classrooms encourage students to think more broadly about history by considering the perspective of other groups, races and cultures.”

For the past three decades public school opponents have tried to shift funding for public education into a plethora of proposals in support of charter schools and school vouchers, all with the general goal of privatizing education, thus enabling those with wealth and political muscle to sidestep many of the state guidelines that govern public education. The result has been a trend of exclusivity instead of diversity and a troubling list of poorly regulated charter schools engaged in malfeasance and outright fraud while diverting funds from public education.

According to an article by Amanda Litvinov in NEA Today (Issues & Impact, Oct. 2021), “Today, this far-right, media-fueled campaign rages against an inclusive curriculum that venture outside of White supremacist, heterosexual, male-dominated norms. Districts, schools, and even individual educators – who provide honest, age-appropriate lessons on these topics – have become targets at schoolboard meetings and in state legislatures.”

This latest attempt to use the media to stoke a “culture war” involves the wholly disingenuous attempt to conflate ethnic studies with critical race theory. It’s a nefarious way to take a legal and higher
education concept, critical race theory, and falsely claim it is being forced into K-12 curriculum. It is designed to scare people about race and gender issues. Los Angeles Times columnist, Frank Shyong (A Clash of Race, History, Dec. 10, 2021) puts it this way, "So it is truly a shame that we prefer to condemn a straw man called critical race theory rather than wrestle with the very real gaps in our understanding. It is a shame that we employ convenient, vague labels such as "cancel culture" and "wokeism" to mock and shut down any attempt to critique racism. And it is a shame that ethnic studies in California has become such a contentious issue, because we need the facts, today, right now. We are tilting at windmills while ignoring the dragons slumbering beneath."

First, let’s examine the word “critical” in the context of critical race theory. When it is loosely thrown out as a fearmongering pejorative, the assumption is that the theory is intended to criticize something, presumably white culture. But that is not at all what “critical” means in this context. It is akin to the meaning of “critical thinking” and “critical problem solving.” The applicable dictionary definition appears as, “involving skillful judgment as to truth, merit, etc.” So, the word “critical” in this usage is about seeking truth, not criticizing anyone or any group, and it did not begin as an education theory.

According to an article in Human Rights Magazine appearing on the American Bar Association website (Janel George, January 11, 2021), "CRT is not a diversity and inclusion “training” but a practice of interrogating the role of race and racism in society that emerged in the legal academy and spread to other fields of scholarship. [legal scholar Kimberlé] Crenshaw—who coined the term “CRT”—notes that CRT is not a noun, but a verb. It cannot be confined to a static and narrow definition but is considered to be an evolving and malleable practice.” Additionally, George states, “CRT also recognizes that race intersects with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, and others. CRT recognizes that racism is not a bygone relic of the past. Instead, it acknowledges that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and the imposition of second-class citizenship on Black Americans and other people of color continue to permeate the social fabric of this nation.”

So, let’s get back to why ethnic studies is essential for our students in understanding American history and helping them build a country that comes far closer to the constitutional promise of, “domestic tranquility and a more perfect union.” The effort to revise our history books and tell a more complete story of America’s rise to greatness has been going on for at least the past thirty years and probably has its origins in the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. Far from being an attempt to demean the majority culture, or teach that white people are inherently evil, it is an effort to reveal the missing narratives from our complicated history so that we can do better for everyone in the future.

Let me give you some examples:

My wife, Pam, and I are volunteer docents at the Autry Museum of the American West. We have been a part of the Autry’s shift to an emphasis on rediscovering the erased or missing accounts of multiculturalism in the history of the West. The Spanish, Chinese, Mexicans and Indigenous Americans all played a vital role in how the west developed.

Richard West Jr. is the president and CEO emeritus of the Autry Museum, and founding director of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. In a recent article titled Museums Must Be More, West says, "What happened in the museum community was linked to, and then in turn reflected, the “multiculturalism movement” in the United States that occurred during the late 1980’s and 1990’s. In that era, marginalized cultural communities, frequently minority and of color, challenged -- often successfully -- their continued marginalization.” In regard to the Autry, specifically, West says, “The Autry Museum of the American West’s 2017 exhibit, “La Raza,” is an exemplar. It addressed one of the most tumultuous periods in the civil rights history of the Chicano/Chicana community in Los Angeles from 1967-1977 through the lens of the photographers employed by the legendary publication of the same name.”

In describing another exhibit at the Autry, West says, “The Autry lens is “intercultural” as well as “multicultural.” The exhibition “Empire and Liberty” addressed, to the surprise of many visitors, America’s Civil War and its considerable impact on the American West. There the cultural voices were multiple and often first person: white, Native, Chinese American, and others. Many different stories and perspectives were presented, all of them authentic, all of them based upon authoritative and multiple voices.”

Today, under the guidance of new president and CEO, Stephen Aron, Professor of History Emeritus, UCLA, the Autry Museum of the American West is in the process of reevaluating its huge mural of...
western history, spanning three walls in its Heritage Court. Painted in 1988, the mural itself has become an historical artifact, presenting mostly the triumphal Euro-American story of the west with little context for such things as mistreatment of Chinese railroad workers or government policies to eliminate Native Americans. A documentary on the mural titled Imagined Wests recently aired on KCET as part of their series, Artbound. According to the documentary, a possible addition to the mural now under consideration is to include visible links projected onto the mural that will enable visitors to access more contextual information.

As you can see from these examples, ethnic studies in education is not occurring in isolation from other societal efforts to promote social justice and equity. Efforts to silence other authoritative, adjacent histories of our country’s development are attacks on democracy itself - - which cannot exist with a contrived and “sanitized” creation story. Yale history professor Timothy Snyder raises this caution, “The move against factuality should concern us all. Putin’s Russia has gone further than other governments in seeking a monopoly on the past. That shows us the general danger of legislating memory for political comfort. We are all tempted by the simple stories, and should respect those who help us to resist them. If we cannot see ourselves, we cannot rule ourselves.”

Kim Allender is a lifetime member of CTA and a former BTA Co-President, serving with Diana Abasta from 2001 to 2007. A 5th grade teacher at Miller Elementary, Kim retired in 2008 but has continued to help edit the BTA Benchmark since 2016.
doesn’t mean that they’ll prevail in court, though, or that the lawsuit will ever make it to court. In California, public employees are protected from litigation while they’re performing services at work. As an employee of Burbank Unified School District, which is a public employer, you’re protected by California Government Code Section 820.2, which states, “Except as otherwise provided by statute, a public employee is not liable for an injury resulting from his act or omission where the act or omission was the result of the exercise of the discretion vested in him, whether or not such discretion be abused.”

In the unlikely event that you are individually sued by a parent, the District should provide legal representation. If they don’t represent you, BTA members can contact CTA for free legal representation. Thanks to Ca. G.C. Sec. 820.2, you’ll prevail in any litigation brought on by a parent. You could, however, face discipline from the District if you are insubordinate and refuse to carry out a directive that you disagree with or if you make a mistake that is bad enough to warrant disciplinary action. The best course of action, if you are given a directive that you believe to be unlawful, is to ask for the directive in writing. If you can show proof that you were performing a directive and something goes wrong, you should not face discipline. Others in the chain of command may face discipline for issuing such directives and the District may face litigation, but you will be protected.

BTA HAPPENINGS

HEALTH CLASS AT BHS FOCUSES ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

by Diana Lopez

Our primary focus at the beginning of this school year was social-emotional learning. As a health teacher, I knew a more extensive conversation around mental health was necessary for a smooth transition back to in-person
learning. Although there was a sense of anxiety to return to campus after not stepping foot inside the classroom for over a year, students were incredibly receptive to discussing skills for better mental health.

During the first week of school, I had students write down any anxieties they felt about being back on campus on a small sticky note. I asked them to keep the messages anonymous to encourage honesty. I posted the notes on our class wall to show that many students share the same stressors, and essentially, we are all in this together. A couple of weeks later, after learning various coping skills to deal with stress and anxiety, I had them revisit the wall and respond to a note they related to with words of encouragement. I am so proud of the support my students have shown one another and how well they have adjusted over the last few months, not just with this activity but also through small acts of kindness, acceptance, and generosity. Together, we are breaking down the stigma of mental health and working as a small community to encourage these important and much-needed discussions.

A VISIT TO BRET HARTE
by Diana Abasta

Nate Banditelli, Sarah Schwartz, and I had the pleasure of visiting Bret Harte, the elementary school closest to the BTA office, on December 1, 2021. Although we did not get a chance to observe any of our colleagues in classrooms, we met outside with principal, Martha Walter, and observed some P.E. classes. Many students from several classes were participating with their classroom teachers. Since we lost elementary P.E. teachers, our colleagues have had to include P.E. in their daily planning and lessons. Getting elementary P.E. teachers back continues to be a priority for BTA.

Sarah joined us at lunch as we met with the different grade levels. It was great to see our colleagues and to hear their concerns. The concerns varied from struggling with low morale to dealing with heavy workloads as they try to meet the needs of all students. We appreciate our Reps Dahlia Dobbertin, Cassidy Gavin-Jennings, and Amalia Hernandez, and all of our members who took time out of their lunch to come and talk with us.

PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS ENHANCES DRAMA INSTRUCTION
by Donovan Glover

This is my fifth year teaching Drama at Burbank High School, although I’ve been teaching for eighteen years and writing/directing theatre for thirty. In recent years, I haven’t often had much time or energy to direct outside of school, but my last venture was an absurd comedy that I wrote and directed called Just Like Life. After a successful run in L.A., it made it Off-Broadway, and played in New York’s Soho Theater. That was a dream come true.

I adore teaching at BHS. My students’ enthusiasm inspires me to share as many aspects of Drama as I can. This week, we’re exploring stage combat, last week was voiceover, and Pantomime the week before. My intermediate class will be playwriting soon and my advanced class is focusing on directing right now.

I was thrilled with how our recent production of The Wizard of Oz came out. Musicals are the most difficult thing to put together, but they’re often the most rewarding. For two preview shows, we filled our auditorium with excited 4th and 5th graders. That was an amazing experience for all involved!

Next up is a student-written, student-directed One-Act Festival this January. In April, we’ll be presenting an Expressionistic drama called Radium Girls in Burbank’s Colony Theatre. On good days, I feel like I just play hard for a living. And most days are good days.
Parents: Rebecca Cooper (BHS) & Dani Luv
Baby girl: “River Danielle” Luv Vargas
Born 10/22/21 @12:07pm
7lb 3 Oz  20.25 in

CTA offers different conferences throughout the year and BTA budgets for a certain number of members to attend. We ask members to contact us if they are interested in attending a conference. If more members apply than spots allocated, we have a drawing to pick the lucky winners. According to BTA Standing Rules, BTA pays for the registration and travel. If it is a conference that is far or requires a multi-day attendance, BTA also pays for the hotel at the CTA rate.

Take this opportunity to look at what conferences are available at cta.org. Contact the BTA Office if you are interested or if you have any questions.

CTA In-person conferences are back, better than ever and we want you there!

**CTA Issues Conference**, Las Vegas, January 21-23 - This conference brings educators together to discuss and strategize around current issues in education, bargaining, leadership and organizing.
New Educator Weekend, Santa Clara, February 25-27 - This conference has everything new educators need to be successful in their first years in the profession. Send educators in their first three years to this event.

Equity & Human Rights Conference, Los Angeles, March 4-6 - Bringing members together to foster a greater understanding of how to impact the issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice.

The Good Teaching Conference, Garden Grove, March 18-20 - This conference supports excellent teaching and learning practices for classroom teachers.

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