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Arizona bill targeting ethnic studies signed into law

Gov. Jan Brewer signs the bill that bans schools from teaching classes designed for students of a particular ethnic group. School districts may appeal the law, which becomes effective Dec. 31.

May 12, 2010 | By Nicole Santa Cruz, Los Angeles Times

A bill that aims to ban ethnic studies in Arizona schools was signed into law Tuesday by Gov. Jan Brewer, cheering critics who called such classes divisive and alarming others who said it's yet another law targeting Latinos in the state.

The move comes less than 20 days after Brewer signed a controversial immigration bill that has caused widespread protests against the state. The governor's press office did not return requests for comment Tuesday evening.

HB 2281 bans schools from teaching classes that are designed for students of a particular ethnic group, promote resentment or advocate ethnic solidarity over treating pupils as individuals. The bill also bans classes that promote the overthrow of the U.S. government.

The bill was written to target the Chicano, or Mexican American, studies program in the Tucson school system, said state Supt. of Public Instruction Tom Horne.

School districts that don't comply with the new law could have as much as 10% of their state funds withheld each month. Districts have the right to appeal the mandate, which goes into effect Dec. 31.

Tucson Unified School District officials say the Chicano studies classes benefit students and promote critical thinking. "We don't teach all those ugly things they think we're teaching," said Judy Burns, the president of the district's governing board.

She has no intention of ending the program, which offers courses from elementary school through high school in topics such as literature, history and social justice, with an emphasis on Latino authors and history. About 3% of the district's 55,000 students are enrolled in such classes.

Horne has been trying to end the program for years, saying it divides students by race and promotes resentment. He singled out one history book used in some classes, "Occupied America: A History of Chicanos," by Rodolfo Acuna, a professor and founder of the Chicano studies program at Cal State Northridge.

"To begin with, the title of the book implies to the kids that they live in occupied America, or occupied Mexico," Horne said last week in a telephone interview.

Also last week, Augustine Romero, director of student equity in the Tucson school district, said it now had become politically acceptable to attack Latinos in Arizona.

Ethnic studies are taught at high schools and colleges nationwide, but the Tucson district officials say their 14-year-old program is unique because it's districtwide, offered to grades K-12, and can satisfy high school graduation requirements.

In Los Angeles, more educators have been attempting to build curriculums, teaching lessons or units in ethnic studies, especially with the growth of charter schools in the area, said Maythee Rojas, the president of the National Assn. of Ethnic Studies. "I don't think it's uncommon anymore," she said.

In Tucson, the program is supported by a court-ordered desegregation budget, and is part of the district's initiative to create equal access for Latinos.

Board member Mark Stegeman said he believes the board needs to consider the program carefully and whether the courses, as taught, violate the new law. Perhaps an external audit could be done to assess that, he said.

Ethnic studies courses are sometimes controversial because people believe the programs are attempting to replace one voice with another, Rojas said.

The Tucson district plans to double the number of students in Chicano studies in the upcoming school year, said Sean Arce, the director of the program. Arce said that now that the bill has become law, he's waiting for direction from the district's legal department.

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