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Students Unite to Demand Districtwide Ethnic Studies

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San Diego Ethnic Studies Now Coalition. Photos: Gloria Verdieu

In March of 2016, the San Diego Unified School Board voted to ensure resources are in place to expand Ethnic Studies in the San Diego City School District after hearing a report from the Ethnic Studies Now Coalition Advisory Committee. The report was based on research done by members of the advisory committee which confirmed that an Ethnic Studies curriculum increases student attendance, grades, participation

and overall interest in school. The advisory committee developed Ethnic Studies courses at two San Diego high schools for the 2016-2017 school year as part of a pilot program.

That was two years ago and even though there has been some progress, it is moving much too slow. Too slow for Latinx students at High Tech High in the neighboring city of Chula Vista, which is why they decided to create and implement their own Ethnic Studies curriculum.

At the Association of Raza Educators (ARE) general meeting on Feb. 12, two students who participated in the struggle to demand Ethnic Studies in all schools spoke on how they successfully implemented an ethnic studies curriculum at their school.



High Tech High students Luz Victoria and Fernanda Siordia led an Ethnic Studies program in their school.

High Tech High students Luz Victoria and Fernanda Siordia began their

presentation with a slide that read “Ethnic Studies — Fight for Ethnic Studies — No History, No Self — Know History, Know Self” — artistically designed and laid out like a banner. The next slide had interesting facts about High Tech High: 70 percent of its student body are Latinx; the school is located 15 minutes away from the U.S./Mexican international port of entry, in nearly four years of high school these students only experienced four Latinx teachers, and the school is project-based and has been culturally impacted by the 2016 presidential election.

At the meeting, there were students from Castle Park High School, Lincoln High School and Lindsay Community School, which is where the meeting was held. These students were not only interested in how students at High Tech High were able to implement an Ethnic Studies program, but some wanted to know, what is Ethnic Studies?

Ethnic Studies is important

Luz explained that the current school textbooks do not include the rich history of the Indigenous people, African people, Asian people, Palestinian people, and the list goes on. It is as if these people had made no contributions to the development of the world. It is important, she emphasized, that we know our history and our contributions. Since the textbooks don’t have it, we have to bring our own books, do our own research and challenge what is being presented to us.

Luz noted that the students received a lot of resistance at first, but as the teachers began to see the improvements in the students who participated in Ethnic Studies classes, the students began to get more support from them. Teachers began to see the value in students learning about who they are in relationship to the world. The classes discussed topics like solidarity, respect and listening, as well as the concepts of imperialism, class consciousness and white supremacy, she continued.

Organizers encountered challenges recruiting male students, white students and

students with the ability to speak on pressing issues. For this project to work, students must increase their consciousness by studying and leading.

The big question is: How can these school-based advances be maintained? One way is through community involvement. That is what ARE and Unión del Barrio had in mind when they began Escuela Aztlan Saturday classes, an Unión del Barrio project for barrio youth.

Escuela Aztlan is an independent school organized by young people and educators to develop cultural and political consciousness. Its mission is to educate youth about Raza history, current events and the power we possess to change our communities. Topics in the school's curriculum include May Day history, Chicano Park Day, the Mexican Revolution, Education vs. Prisons, Farmworkers, LGBTQ2S issues, Indigenous struggles and more.

Classes begin in February and end in December with Escuela Aztlan graduation and the Raza Liberation and Youth Conference.

All attending the ARE meeting applauded Luz and Fernanda for their hard work, leadership and presentation. We know it is not easy, but if we want to succeed, we can't just wait. We have to move forward and do it ourselves. These students are setting an example for all students in all schools to intensify the movement for Ethnic Studies from preschool to graduation.

