Over the last few years, Texas, Connecticut, and California have led the way in approving courses in ethnic studies to provide high school students with engaging, culturally relevant instruction.

Texas blazed the trail in 2018 when its state board of education approved an elective course in Mexican American studies. Then in April 2020, the board unanimously approved an African American studies course.

With legislation signed by Gov. Ned Lamont in June 2019, Connecticut became the first state to require all public high schools to offer an elective course in African American, Black, Puerto Rican, and Latino studies. The state board unanimously accepted the curriculum in December 2020.

In March, the California State Board of Education approved an ethnic studies model curriculum for school districts considering development of an ethnic studies elective. Intended as a resource, the model offers sample lessons and provides guidance on working within the community to ensure stakeholder input and guidance on teaching a sensitive subject. Certified teachers will teach the elective courses.

All three states are providing professional development opportunities for those who will teach the courses. For instance, California’s education budget for 2021–22 includes $55 million for ethnic studies resources for schools and professional development for educators teaching ethnic studies.

In a year marked by contentious conversations in many states about broadening standards for teaching American history to incorporate more Black and Latino history, the push by these three states to create ethnic studies courses stands out. “I view this course as complementary to our regular history offerings,” said Gladys Labas, director of equity and language at the Connecticut State Department of Education. “I believe the course needs to stand alone in order to address all the important, enduring concepts that our students need to learn. In our training, we are encouraging teachers to take an interdisciplinary approach even though the course sits in the social studies department. For example, an English teacher may be invited to guide students in reading and discussing relevant literature.”

Texas

“Texas is an example of what education officials can accomplish when they cast aside politics as usual,” said Texas state board member Georgina Pérez. The board made national headlines in 2018 when it became the first state to offer students stand-alone courses in Mexican American studies.

Just a few years earlier, such an outcome would have seemed fantastic. In Texas, Hispanic and African American students account for roughly two-thirds of the total student population. Yet students, educators, and advocates had spent years trying unsuccessfully to convince the state board to create a statewide course highlighting the contributions of Mexican Americans and African Americans, which proponents argued are often underrepresented in standard social studies courses.

“The conversation always devolved into identity politics, and we were getting nowhere,” Pérez recalled. Sensing the need for a new approach, Pérez pointed her colleagues to research on the effects of exposure to ethnic studies.
courses on dropout and graduation rates, both of which were important metrics under the state's school accountability system. The studies revealed not only improvements in attendance and graduation but also reduced disciplinary issues and increased college matriculation, a key component of an initiative supported by the state's business community to improve postsecondary readiness.

Advisory teams of Texas educators and other stakeholders developed the standards for the African American studies course as well. Based on a course that the Dallas Independent School District already offered, the course is a comprehensive survey of African American politics, culture, and history, beginning with precolonial African civilizations and ending in the modern era.

“I think students look for themselves in what they study,” said Texas Board Chair Keven Ellis. “When our students see themselves in what they’re learning, they’re an engaged student, and when you have an engaged student, that’s when you see increased student success.”

“This course exceeded anything I ever thought it would,” said state board member Aicha Davis. “It’s so rich, and it’s something I wish I could have taken when I was young. Kids for generations will become better people because of this course. And I know other states are going to pick up on it.”

“It’s a hell of a lot easier to retreat to our political corners and focus on scoring points with our base, but all that gets us is the same old crap,” Pérez said. “We have to be the radical middle, and that means breaking bread with people who may not understand us and figuring out what we have in common.”

Texas is also considering courses in Native American studies, Latino studies, and Asian and Pacific Islander studies.

**Connecticut**

A grassroots effort promoted adoption of ethnic studies in Connecticut, where students of color constitute nearly half of public school enrollment, and the General Assembly’s African American and Latino Caucus backed the plan. The Education Committee conducted hearings, at which students, parents, and educators urged lawmakers to authorize African American and Latino studies for the state’s high schools.

“Growing up Black, I rarely felt that my history was discussed in school, save during the month of February,” one student said at a legislative hearing. “Even then, we were taught a sugar-coated version of this history centered around a smooth transition from a violent, racist society to a peaceful, equitable one that we were supposedly living in.”

Said another at the hearing, “As an African American male, I tend to feel isolated in the classroom due to the fact that the U.S. history curriculum focuses on white exceptionalism and Black inferiority.”

After legislative approval, the state’s department of education developed the two-semester course in partnership with a quasi-public agency, the State Education Resource Center. Guidance came from a 150-member advisory group comprising K-12 educators, college professors and scholars, national researchers and historians, representatives of education and community organizations, students, and parents. The curriculum focuses on a two-pronged, inquiry-based approach, including content knowledge and student identity development. It incorporates themes from the state’s social studies framework.

In his announcement of Connecticut’s course in African American, Black, Puerto Rican, and Latino studies, Governor Lamont said, “Increasing the diversity of what we teach is critical to providing students with a better understanding of who we are as a society. Adding this course in our high schools will be an enormous benefit not only to our Black and Latino students, but also to students of all backgrounds because everyone can benefit from these studies.”

This year, the Connecticut General Assembly passed, as part of its budget implementer bill, a requirement for the state’s education department to develop a model K-8 curriculum that includes Native American studies; Asian American and Pacific Islander studies; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual orientations and gender identities studies; climate change; personal financial management and financial literacy; and military service and the experience of American veterans.
California

In California, where three out of four public school students are students of color, the legislature in 2016 mandated development of an ethnic studies model curriculum to serve as a guide for school districts interested in developing an elective course.

The development process began with a committee writing the first draft, which was reviewed by the state’s Instructional Quality Commission and posted for public comment in May 2019. Stakeholders weighed in on the draft, sending thousands of emails. Many expressed concerns that the curriculum lacked a balance of perspectives and did not reflect the full spectrum of California’s diversity. The state then extended the process to allow time for thoughtful revision, which involved consultation with ethnic studies experts and others.

When the curriculum came to the state board for a vote in March, it marked the culmination of four years of work to develop ethnic studies guidance aligned with California’s history and social science standards and curriculum frameworks, state board guidelines, and state law. Those testifying in favor of the model curriculum included civil rights icons Dolores Huerta, Karen Korematsu, and Temple University Professor Molefi Kete Asante, among others.

In California, ethnic studies can be either a semester- or year-long elective or can be embedded within another course. It may not always be part of the social studies curriculum. For example, an English course could include ethnic studies.

California’s model curriculum is aimed at illuminating the struggles and contributions of Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans in California. While not mandated, the curriculum is intended to give local school districts the background, ideas, and examples to begin local discussions on expanding ethnic studies offerings.

Many school districts in California already had ethnic studies courses. Others have developed and adopted ethnic studies courses guided by the model curriculum. Still others have integrated ethnic studies material into existing social studies, English, or other courses.

“It’s a very important step toward confronting and ultimately transforming racism in our society and in our state,” said California State Board President Linda Darling-Hammond in an announcement after the board’s action. “This day has been a long time in coming, and we are reminded daily that the racial injustice it reveals is not only a legacy of the past but also a clear and present danger.”

“Coursework in ethnic studies provides the opportunity for all students, regardless of ethnicity, to value diversity and become leaders in our global society,” said California State Board Member Cynthia Glover Woods, who serves as the board’s ethnic studies liaison. “California is proud to be a leader in this national movement to bring the often-overlooked contributions of people of color to classrooms.”

Illinois

Gov. J.B. Pritzker of Illinois signed the Teaching Equitable Asian American History Act into law in July, making Illinois the first state to require that a unit of Asian American history be taught in public schools. The measure is intended to ensure that every high school graduate in the state learns about the history, contributions, and traditions of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community.

Advocacy of students and parents has been key to the authorization of ethnic studies courses. State board members expressed hope that students of all ethnicities will enroll in these classes in the fall.