

A Victory Seen Over 'State-Sponsored Racism'

The restoration of a Mexican-American studies program in Tucson, Arizona public schools is being hailed as an important step in telling the more complex history of the American West, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Advocates of Mexican-American studies are celebrating a federal court ruling restoring one of the most successful programs in Arizona public schools as a victory against "state-sponsored racism."

Nolan Cabrera, associate professor at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona, has been involved from the beginning in resisting the controversial removal of ethnic studies from the Tucson Unified School District. I spoke to Cabrera on Aug. 26, after a U.S. District Court judge's decision in favor of the restoration of the program.

Cabrera is a recipient of the prestigious education early-career award the National Academy of Education/Spencer Postdoctoral fellowship and is a fellow for the American Association for Hispanics in Higher Education.

Dennis Bernstein: Nolan Cabrera, you created an ethnic studies program at the University of Arizona that provided the informational background for the students who fought the effort to shut down ethnic studies in Tucson. How did you get involved?

Dr. Nolan Cabrera: I became involved in the struggle around Mexican American studies running statistical analyses on the efficacy of the program.

Interestingly, I was doing this for the desegregation case, which was a separate issue from House Bill 2281, that banned ethnic studies. But then that became the basis for the other statistical analyses, which demonstrated the program's remarkable achievements in terms of student development over the years.

DB: Could you talk about the pressure that is building in Arizona right now? President Trump just made a kind of campaign stop in Phoenix, praising Sheriff Joe [Arpaio] and saying that he plans to pardon him. What does it mean for Trump to be there?

NC: When ethnic studies was banned in 2010, there was also a massive anti-immigrant bill and a move to eliminate affirmative action. We had border militias, there was the shooting of Rep. Gabby Giffords. It is almost as if the

rest of America has become like what Arizona was at that time. So, while it is important that the president is here in Arizona, in terms of emboldening white supremacists and those advocating for regressive social policies, it is very much par for the course. We have been dealing with this for the better part of a decade in Arizona.

DB: When Trump praises Sheriff Joe, in spite of the fact that he has been convicted of breaking the law, what message is he sending and how does that reverberate with white supremacists?

NC: Firstly, there is this whole macho bravado that really resonates with a lot of Trump supporters, of which Sheriff Joe is a classic example. He likes to call himself "the toughest sheriff in the country." Actually, he was picking on poor undocumented migrants, subjecting them to inhumane conditions. That's not toughness, that's not strength. It is just bullying, cowardice and racism.

If he is pardoned, it will send a clear message that racial profiling, hunting down Mexicans, etc. is acceptable. As a colleague of mine in Colorado, Susana Munoz, says, "Dehumanizing policies give a license to dehumanize."

In Arizona, it has had a twofold effect: It is emboldening racist action and, at the same time, it is sending up a flag welcoming new membership. The Southern Poverty Law Center is currently tracking 18 substantiated hate groups in the state of Arizona. One of my friends remarked that he didn't realize the number was so low. And when rhetoric from the top draws false equivalencies between neo-Nazis and Black Lives Matter, it allows the white supremacists to feel vindicated and it justifies violence against civil rights organizations.

I am glad that a lot of the people who have been playing overt racist politics have been voted out of office in Arizona: Russell Pierce, John Huppenthal, Tom Horne and Joe Arpaio. In some respects, the voting populace as a whole is pushing back on this politics of racism and division. This is an incredibly important symbolic act.

DB: You were a key witness in the recent case in Tucson regarding the attempt by certain legislators to end the ethnic studies program there, which was proven to be incredibly successful. Could you remind people exactly what the case was about? And didn't the judge rule that ethnic studies was a positive part of the educational system in Tucson?

NC: Back in 2006, superintendent of public education Tom Horne had an ax to grind with Mexican American studies. He worked three times to get a bill passed to allow him to eliminate the program.

In 2010, he was finally successful and that is when we got House Bill 2281,

which allowed Horne to withhold ten percent of state funding for any district that had any class found to promote racial antagonism or treat students as representatives of their race. And it was up to Horne to determine what constituted a violation. So if students are reading a well-known book such as Rudi Acuña's *Occupied America* or Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, according to the state superintendent of public instruction, that constitutes a violation.

What came out in the federal lawsuit was that Horne had found the district out of compliance before the law had even gone into effect, so it was a predetermined outcome to eliminate the Mexican American studies program, and that Horne and Huppenthal acted out of racial animus.

Actually, John Huppenthal was caught anonymously blogging that he thought the Mexican American studies program was the KKK by another name. When he ran for state superintendent of public instruction, he ran a radio ad saying that, if elected, he would stop La Raza.

Students were only able to take Mexican American studies in their junior and senior years of high school. I started looking at the academic achievement of students prior to taking Mexican American studies and I found that they were abysmally low. These same students, after taking Mexican American studies, had some of the highest graduation rates in the entire district.

It was such an amazing accomplishment that the state, as it was trying to defend HB 2281, made the case that there was no way these statistics could be credible. The judge ruled that the law did harm to these students because it stripped them of this very promising educational opportunity. He also found that representatives of the state were using coded racist language for partisan purposes.

DB: There was strong support for these programs from the students, who knew how crucial they were to their own lives.

NC: Every time that Mexican American studies would come as an issue before the school board, the room would be packed with students. And then when the board was going to unilaterally destroy the program in April, 2011, a group of student activists chained themselves to the diocese before the school board was able to convene.

So much of the commentary at the time was, "Oh, these kids are throwing a temper tantrum, the adults need to reassert themselves." But the students explained that they had studied civil disobedience and the actions of the '60s. This was an intentional political act and they knew that they could get arrested. A lot

of them were applying to colleges but they were willing to take this risk if it meant saving their studies. The level of personal risk these students were taking, as well as the sophistication of political strategy, was phenomenal.

This is what participatory democracy is supposed to look like. All too often, we have ignored the roles of the students in these important social movements and forget that it is their education that is at stake. These students continually reminded folks of that. So, you had multiple student-led demonstrations, students speaking at board meetings, students working with the media.

In fact, when they finally succeeded in eliminating the Mexican American studies program, the student group UNIDOS actually created a School of Ethnic Studies, a one-day event where people could come and learn from the curriculum that Arizona had outlawed.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
