

## Arizona Law Targets 'Ethnic Studies'

May 12, 2010

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On the heels of the state's highly controversial immigration law, Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer has signed a new bill targeting "ethnic studies" classes in public schools. The law prohibits schools from offering classes "designed primarily for students of a particular ethnic group" — or that "advocate ethnic solidarity." Michele Norris talks to NPR's Ted Robbins about the new law.

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MICHELE NORRIS, host:

In Arizona, Governor Jan Brewer has signed another controversial bill into law. This one takes aim at ethnic studies programs in public schools.

NPR's Ted Robbins is in with us from Tucson. And, Ted, Arizona's tough immigration law is still fresh in out listeners' minds, now we have this new measure to talk about. Explain to us what this one does.

TED ROBBINS: Michele, this one prohibits school classes, which I'm going to quote here, "promote resentment toward a race or class of people, are designed for particular ethnic groups or advocate ethnic solidarity instead of treatment of pupils as individuals." Those are the more salient provisions.

NORRIS: Now, you're based in Tucson, and I understand that this law has a clear, intended target: the Tucson Unified School District. Why is this all aimed at that school district in particular?

ROBBINS: You're right, it's a state law, but it's really aimed at the Mexican-American Studies Program at the Tucson Unified School District. It's a high school program which students can take instead of general U.S. history and government. The class teaches government from a Latino perspective, emphasizing heroes such as Cesar Chavez. And the head of the Department of Education of the state, Tom Horne, has been trying to get this law passed for four years, his office has.

I caught him as he was driving to Tucson to meet with school officials today, and here's his reasoning.

Mr. TOM HORNE (Superintendent of Public Instruction, Arizona): One of the functions of the public schools is to take kids of different backgrounds and teach them to treat each other as individuals. And this ethnic studies program does the opposite. It divides kids up by race.

ROBBINS: And, Michele, we have to note that Tom Horne is running for Arizona attorney general. And, of course, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer is up for election, as well.

NORRIS: Now, what's the reaction there in Tucson and perhaps in other districts that also offer ethnic studies programs?

ROBBINS: Well, outrage from Hispanic activists, especially in California and Arizona. Some folks from California have traveled here. In Tucson, let's I'll give you an idea. Let's play some sound from students

protesting outside the district headquarters this afternoon, followed by acting superintendent Maggie Shafer.

(Soundbite of protest)

Unidentified People: (Chanting) (Unintelligible).

Ms. MAGGIE SHAFER (Acting Superintendent, Tucson Unified School District): We believe these classes are meaningful and they do a lot of good for students, and they are in full compliance with the law that was signed yesterday.

ROBBINS: Now, Shafer says that because the classes are open to all students, not just those of one ethnic group. The law says that's okay. Ultimately, though, the law gives the state head of education full discretion to decide if the classes violate the law, which takes effect next January.

NORRIS: We've been also hearing about a state directive in Arizona that targets teachers with accents. Does that have anything to do with this new law?

ROBBINS: Absolutely nothing. There's been some confusion over that. That is a directive, not a law, and it says that students have to be able to understand their teachers, essentially. The state says that it's been going on for a few years, 1,500 teachers have been screened in '08 and '09. Twenty teachers with fluency problems were identified, and their respective school districts put them into professional development courses.

According to the state, no one's been fired. But along with all the other laws that Arizona has passed, it's enflaming civil rights activists and the Hispanic community in Arizona and across the country.

NORRIS: Thank you, Ted.

ROBBINS: You're welcome.

NORRIS: That's NPR's Ted Robbins, speaking to us from Tucson, Arizona.

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