

In Lak'ech

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Tú eres mi otro yo.

You are my other me.

Si te hago daño a ti,

If I do harm to you,

Me hago daño a mi mismo.

I do harm to myself.

Si te amo y respeto,

If I love and respect you,

Me amo y respeto yo.

I love and respect myself.

- Luis Valdez

Arizona Education Officials Say It's Illegal To Recite This Poem In School

The Huffington Post By Roque Planas
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The outgoing head of Arizona's education department caught national attention earlier this month when, on his last day in office, he issued a letter saying that Tucson's public schools are [illegally promoting ethnic solidarity and the overthrow of the U.S. government](#) by teaching Mexican history and hip hop.

What received less attention is the letter's citation of a [poem penned by Chicano playwright Luis Valdes](#) that aims to instill ideas of empathy and integrity. Teachers of a Mexican-American studies curriculum outlawed by the Arizona legislature used to open their courses with a recitation of the multilingual poem, which Valdes based on philosophical concepts from the ancient Maya.

Here's the [poem](#):

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This section, recited in some Tucson classrooms, is part of a longer poem called "Pensamiento Serpentino."

Arizona's former Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal cited as a violation of the state's ethnic studies law the requirement that students recite the poem at the beginning of class and understand the concepts behind it.

Conservative lawmakers and public officials in Arizona led by then-State Sen. Huppenthal and then-Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne [passed a law in 2010](#) aimed at shutting down a Mexican-American studies curriculum in Tucson that opponents said was politicizing students and breeding resentment against whites. The law forbids classes that promote the overthrow of the U.S. government, foster ethnic solidarity, breed ethnic resentment or treat students as members of a group rather than individuals.

"I think that what was going on in those classrooms was just offensive," [Huppenthal told The Huffington Post](#) last week in an interview.

A state-commissioned audit in 2011 recommended expanding the courses. A study [published last month in the American Educational Research Journal](#) showed that students who took the prohibited courses performed better on state tests and graduated at higher rates.

Under pressure from state education officials, the Tucson school board shut down the controversial courses in January of 2011. Huppenthal's letter from earlier this month once again found the state in violation, this time for a recently developed "culturally relevant curriculum" that teaches In Lak'etch, as well as Mexican history, Rage Against the Machine lyrics and a KRS-One essay.

The incoming head of Arizona's education department, Diane Douglas, also a Republican, has also said that Tucson's culturally relevant courses violate the ethnic studies law. She has said she'll work with the district's superintendent H.T. Sanchez to resolve the dispute by March. If the Arizona education department finds that Tucson remains in violation by March, the [state will cut off 10 percent of the district's funding](#).

The three-judge panel at the [9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals heard oral arguments](#) in a lawsuit against Arizona's ethnic studies law brought by former students of the Mexican-American studies classes.

When This Teacher's Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned, His Students Took the District to Court—and Won

Curtis Acosta's classes in Mexican American Studies gave kids pride in their heritage—until the Arizona Legislature canceled them. That's when his students became activists, and some real-life lessons began.

The Mexican American Studies (MAS) program in Tucson, Ariz., began in 1998 as a few courses and grew to 43 classes serving 1,500 students in six high schools, with similar programs in middle and elementary schools.

MAS was founded with the aim of reversing some disturbing academic trends for Chicano students in Tucson. It worked. In 2011, the high school dropout rate for MAS students in Tucson was 2.5 percent, as opposed to 56 percent for Latino students nationally. A study by Tucson United School District (TUSD) found that 98 percent of MAS students reported they did homework, and 66 percent went on to college. The program was widely regarded as helping Latino youth feel empowered and achieve their full academic and human potential.

Immigration and cultural diversity are particularly controversial in Arizona. A politically motivated campaign against the MAS program culminated in a 2010 law banning Arizona state schools from teaching ethnic studies classes, described in the law as courses that advocated "the overthrow of the United States government" and "ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals." Eventually, the school district had to stop offering MAS or lose \$15 million in annual state aid.

Teachers, parents, and students filed a legal challenge to the law and lost the case. They appealed that ruling, and three years after the ban, in July 2013, a federal court ordered TUSD to reinstate high school Mexican American Studies and add African American studies. The courses are now known as "culturally relevant" classes.

The documentary *Precious Knowledge* tells the story of the high school seniors who became activists to save Tucson's ethnic studies classes. Among other teachers, the film features Curtis Acosta, a leader in developing Tucson's MAS program. He talked to YES! Education Outreach Manager Jing Fong about being an activist teacher, and his current role as a national advocate for rehumanizing education.

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—Mayan precept quoted by poet Luís Valdez

Jing Fong: Take me inside your classroom. What were your Mexican American Studies classes like on the first day of school?

Curtis Acosta: On the first day, you walk into a very sterile room filled with unbelievably vibrant young people. But I think that teachers sometimes put walls up and they're afraid to get close to the students. Or they're afraid to give up the hierarchical power. We should be able to look at students and see ourselves. And not infantilize them and think, "they're so young, and I know so much." Or, "It's your job and I'm your boss." None of those paradigms should be in a person's mind as a teacher. You should see your job as cultivating this group of folks into moving forward.

The first day...I would say the whole *In Lak' ech* thing, but I wouldn't explain it to them. I would just do it. I would clap, and recite *In Lak' ech* and look in their eyes. Sometimes I would clap by myself and the little Chicanas would feel sorry for me, "Oh look at that old man clapping. Let's clap with him." It's true, they would do that, and I loved them for it.

When our students come in, and they're too cool or hard, that's because they've been hurt. They're injured. They don't always do bad things, schools, but they have. These are institutions, and people have to survive in them.

That first day I wanted to let them know that this class is different. The first day should be indicative of the amazement of the entire time. Some days you're going to write an essay in class, but you're going to have a context where rigorous work is fun. Paulo Friere talks about how learning should never be painful. It should be joyous. And if you're getting it right, the students should have that perspective by the end of the time with you.

Fong: What do you mean when you refer to your students learning to know themselves? How did that relate to the literature curriculum?

Acosta: I used the term *Quetzalcoatl*, or "precious and beautiful knowledge," in my literature class. It's the idea of examining our lived experiences. The beginning of my classes would always be about self-reflection. Who are you? Where are you from? Who is your family? What is your family about?

I wouldn't ask these questions, the assignments would. Sometimes students would write an annotated bibliography about themselves. Sometimes the assignment would be a personal narrative about how they learned to read and write. Sometimes it would be cultural autobiography or memoir: "Tell me about how you learned who you are as far as identity."

In my senior class we studied multi-ethnic voices, multi-identity, Shakespeare. One thing those voices all had in common is that they were counter-narratives. I tried to find themes of silenced voices and getting that narrative out there. There were some Latino voices, but not to the exclusion of everything else. When you start with an indigenous epistemology, of *In Lak' ech*, "*Tæ eres mi otro yo/ You are my other me*," you start rehumanizing the classroom space, and you start rehumanizing school.

Fong: So why did you resign from your teaching job after the ban on ethnic studies?

We can learn a lot from Arizona...it's the Wild West for education right now.

Acosta: I couldn't do the work anymore. I literally couldn't. It was like somebody telling me to go dig a ditch. "OK great, I have a sweet backhoe. It'll be the greatest ditch you've ever seen, and it'll be a quality you can't imagine, and I'll be done in five minutes." And then they're like, "Here, here's a spoon." I gave it a shot, and it was painful. Painful in every sense. They took away everything; we were banned from our own curriculum, our intellect, our own selves. It was dehumanizing.

Fong: What did you do after you resigned?

Acosta: I got the idea to do a freedom school from the civil and immigration rights movement in Atlanta. I started with a group of 10 students at the youth center, small enough so that I could ask similar questions to those I was going to ask in my academic research.

One day the students were talking about how they perceived activism after the ban on MAS. I asked, "How does your class affect your activism?" One of the students, Esperanza, said, "Well, it's a banned course, and we're going to school on Sundays, and so that's activism, Mr. Acosta." She's so smart.

Fong: How does it feel in the schools in your community after the long, hard-fought battle for Mexican American Studies?

Acosta: They call the new classes "cultural relevancy." There's still a bunch of like-minded teachers in the classroom. We activist teachers pushed our state so far in rehumanizing education that once we were gone there was this vacuum that created a lot more freedom for those folks. But are they taking it to the street? To the legislature? Are they challenging those bullies that came after us? That's the piece that's missing.

Fong: Do you see your defense of MAS as part of a larger effort?

Acosta: I think we can learn a lot from Arizona, because they're divesting from education so badly. We're always at the bottom, in teachers' salaries, per pupil spending, and performance. More charter schools per capita than anyone else. It's the Wild West for education right now.

"Well, it's a banned course, and we're going to school on Sundays, and so that's activism, Mr. Acosta."

I think they're experimenting with killing public education. At my former school right now, in my district, it's about 65 percent Latino. Five years from now it's going to be 80 percent. They're just going to leave this giant defunded school district filled with brown kids: fend for yourself. We better be ready to respond.

Fong: I guess the "we" has to be defined. What can WE parents, communities, teachers, do? How do we find the energy to take action?

Acosta: People need to understand this has been happening for years. This is what's happening in Georgia, in Alabama, in Arizona. And it's happening in a lot of other places. If we share knowledge, resources, and information, we can have a national response locally. We're right back to the civil rights movement, we're right back to the Farm Workers' movement for my people. We need to find new spaces to meet and organize as a community since our public institutions, such as schools, are limiting and banning us from their spaces.

The students are the present-future. It is like blood pumping through our veins, constantly moving. If I know who I am, and I know who my students are, and I know what all of my heroes and all of my ancestors had to go through, how can I not do this? So that keeps me going, to help support our communities, and carry the message forward.