

Overview: This brief provides an overview of SFUSD's 9th grade ethnic studies (ES) pilot and the research partner's analysis of how student participation in this course influenced longer-term high school persistence (i.e., enrollment, attendance, credits earned) and educational attainment (i.e., high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment).

Program Motivation:

On February 23, 2010, the SFUSD Board of Education adopted resolution No. 101-26A1 in support of an ES program. The course examines the social and political histories of many racial and ethnic groups that have contributed to American and Californian history, and helps students to develop knowledge and love of themselves and their communities, solidarity and respect for all people particularly the marginalized and dispossessed, and self-determination for youth to problem-solve their and their communities' most pressing issues. The Board hoped that the ethnic studies curriculum could help to: promote a culturally relevant curriculum, reduce truancy, reduce dropout rates, reduce incarceration rates, increase graduation rates, close the achievement gap, and earn students up to 6 units of college credit through SFSU. It would be important for SFUSD to understand how the ethnic studies curriculum influences these student outcomes if and when the SFUSD school board would weigh making the ethnic studies course a graduation requirement.

Sample & Research Design:

Our research design leverages the fact that, for five 9th grade cohorts in three SFUSD high schools (Balboa HS, fall 2011 to fall 2013 and Lincoln HS and Washington HS, fall 2011), entering 9th graders were assigned to the ES course if their 8th grade GPA was below 2.0 (an Early Warning Indicator for high school failure). We use the assignment rule to estimate the causal effects of ES participation through a "regression discontinuity" (RD) design that effectively compares outcomes among students whose 8th grade GPA placed them just below (i.e., "treatment") versus just above (i.e., "control") the 2.0 GPA threshold.

Key Findings:

Our key findings are that ES participation:

- Increased 5-year high school graduation by 15.7 percentage points (i.e., from 75 percent to over 90 percent).
- Increased student instructional time (i.e., reduced unexcused absences) in years 2, 3 and 4 of high school by 5 to 7 percentage points.
- Increased credits earned in years 2, 3 and 4 of high school by the equivalent of 3, 5 and 6 semester-long courses, respectively (i.e., 16.7, 24.7 and 31.5 credits).
- Increased postsecondary enrollment 5 and 6 years later by 13.4 and 14.9 percentage points respectively.

These large longer-term effects are robust to a variety of robustness checks. We think these findings have particular importance because causal claims based on an RD design are widely understood to have the same reliability as those based on random assignment for those students close to the assignment threshold (i.e., 8th grade GPA close to 2.0). Many

educational interventions experience “fade out,” whereby immediate impacts decrease over time. Our findings are noteworthy because the positive findings endure over time and because the ES intervention targeted a vulnerable student population, those identified under the EWI system.

Important Considerations:

However, in contemplating the scalability of these findings, there are two caveats that merit careful attention:

1. Our inferences are defined only for academically at-risk 9th grade students (i.e., those with an EWI indicator) and for those students who followed the assignment rule (i.e., enrolled in Ethnic Studies due to having an EWI). Whether a broad expansion of Ethnic Studies among SFUSD would have similar effects is unknown.
2. We suspect that a high degree of implementation fidelity among a small and dedicated group of teachers (e.g., several years of development, piloting, peer and outside support) characterized these results. An increase in the scale of ES offerings that lack these antecedents may not achieve similar results.

Current & Planned Uses for the Findings:

In December 2014, the San Francisco Board of Education approved and supported the expansion of ethnic studies to all SFUSD high schools, with the plan to explore the possibility of further expansion. SFUSD leaders used the original research study on 9th grade impacts of the pilot Ethnic Studies course to support several key decisions in this process. SFUSD used the findings as evidence when advising the board on whether to support the policy, and how quickly to consider expanding the course offerings. The original findings helped drive district efforts to build from the strong foundation laid by the pilot curriculum and founding teachers, while formalizing content that can be utilized at school sites that were not part of the original pilot.

Currently, the district is considering integrating components of the pilot Ethnic Studies curriculum in a revamped English sequence that would shift World Literature to 9th grade to give more SFUSD students access to culturally relevant pedagogy. SFUSD is also considering whether to prioritize the enrollment of 9th graders in Ethnic Studies or offer it as an elective to older students.