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## Mandating an Elective? The Implementation of Black and Latino Studies Courses in Connecticut High Schools

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In December 2021, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont signed a bill requiring all high schools to offer elective courses on African-American, Black, Puerto Rican, and Latino Studies in the 2022-23 academic year. This course, frequently called the “Black and Latino Studies Elective,” affected over 165,000 students in 192 Connecticut public high schools. It was the first Black and Latino Studies statewide mandate to be enacted in the nation.

This policy brief presents survey data on the implementation of this mandate in the 2023-24 academic year. We surveyed teachers, department heads, and administrators across Connecticut and gathered responses from 80% of the state’s public, magnet, independent, and technical high schools, for a sample of 154 schools in 121 public school districts. 118 schools (77%) of these 154 respondents ran the Black and Latino Studies Elective in 2023-24. Survey data showed that:

- Of the districts not running the elective in 23-24, 86% of the respondents cited low enrollment as the primary reason the course did not run.
- Schools that enroll more Black, African American, or Hispanic students and fewer White students were more likely to run the course.
- Schools were more likely to run the course if they enroll more students who are eligible for free or reduced price lunch.
- Larger schools were more likely to run the course than smaller schools.

### What is the Connecticut mandate?

The Black and Latino Studies mandate requires all Connecticut high schools to offer students (but not necessarily run) a year-long elective course on African-American, Black, Puerto Rican, and Latino studies. This course follows a state curriculum developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education and the State Education Resource Center that is based on themes from the state’s framework for social studies instruction. The first semester curriculum focuses on African American and Black history, while the second semester focuses on Puerto Rican and Latino history. Students must enroll for both semesters, which are taught by the same teacher. While the state funded professional development and curricular materials for this course, it did not fund staffing.

## What makes this mandate unique?

The Connecticut Black and Latino Studies mandate is similar to and different from ethnic studies mandates in other parts of the country. **The Connecticut legislation requires that schools offer, but not run, an elective course.** In other words, if the elective has very low enrollment or if staffing is difficult, the course may not actually be taught that year. In contrast, a recent California state mandate requires all high school students to pass an ethnic studies course beginning in the 2029-30 academic year (Penner & Ma, 2023), meaning that schools must find a way to enroll all students in the course before they graduate.

**Other efforts to encourage ethnic, Black, and Latino studies courses have primarily focused on districts serving majority students of color.** In contrast, in 140 of 177 Connecticut school districts, more than 50% of students are White. Previous to the Connecticut legislation, the most widespread mandates for ethnic studies elective courses were in San Francisco and Tucson, cities in which fewer than 20% of students enrolled in public school are White.

## What are the potential benefits of the mandate?

Ethnic studies courses are recognized as benefiting many students. Research on an ethnic studies program in five San Francisco high schools found that participation had significant long-term effects: a group of racially diverse students who took the course in ninth grade reduced their unexcused absences by 21 percentage points, increased their GPAs by 1.4 points (e.g., from a GPA of 2.0 to 3.4), and increased course credits by 23 graduation credits over the course of their high school careers, compared to similar students who did not take the course (Dee & Penner, 2017). These students were also significantly more likely to graduate high school and to enroll in college (Bonilla et al., 2021). Analyses of Tucson's ethnic studies program yields similar results; participants were significantly more likely to pass state standardized tests and graduate from high school (Cabrera et al., 2014; Camarota and Romero, 2009). What is more, students enrolled in ethnic studies courses in Southern California demonstrated increased civic engagement and social awareness (de los Ríos, et al., 2015; de los Ríos, 2020). Additional studies have indicated that students enrolled in ethnic studies courses increase their higher-order thinking, reading, and writing skills, as well as their academic motivation (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020).

## Why aren't schools running the Black and Latino Studies Elective?

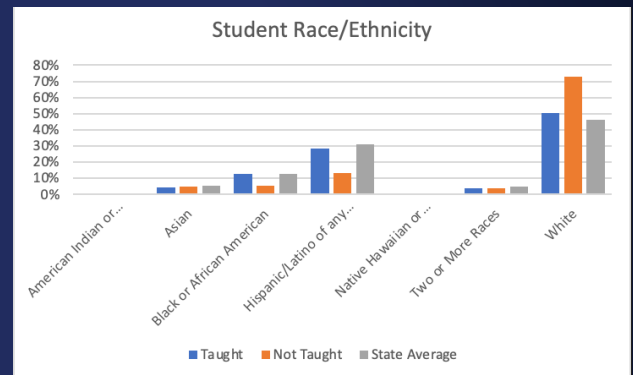
In all, 36 of 154 (23%) schools that responded to our survey did not run the course in 23-24. **Of these 36 schools, 34 cited low enrollment as the primary reason it was not taught.** Staffing and scheduling challenges were identified as the primary reasons for not running the course at the remaining two schools. One respondent at a school that did not teach the class in 2023-24 mentioned the low enrollment was due to "competing electives with similar topics." Of the 36 schools that did not teach the class this past year (2023-24), almost half (16) of the schools did run the course during the 2022-23 school year.

Of the 36 schools that did not teach the class in 2023-24, five schools indicated the class will be taught next year. Another 22 of the 36 schools indicated that they are waiting until students choose classes to determine whether the course will be taught. Five of the schools that taught the course in 2023-24 required the course for graduation, which increased the number of students enrolled in the class and the number of sections of the class.

## Which schools are running the Black and Latino Studies Elective?

Figure 1.  
Trends in Connecticut High Schools  
Offering Black and Latino Studies Course in  
2023-24 by Student Race and Ethnicity

Source: Qualtrics survey and EdSight



**Of the 154 schools that responded to our survey, 118 schools (77%) taught the course in 2023-24.**

**Schools that enroll more Black/African American and Hispanic students are more likely to run the elective.** In schools that ran the class, 41% of the student body is Black/African American or Hispanic on average (see Figure 1). In schools that did not run the class in 2023-2024, 18% of the student body is Black/African American or Hispanic on average. Schools enrolling higher percentages of White students are less likely to run the class. These trends are also geographic: schools in Connecticut cities are more likely to enroll greater numbers of Black/African American and Hispanic students, while rural schools are more likely to enroll greater numbers of White students. Since there are students of color enrolled in every school district in Connecticut (Landa, 2019), students of color most likely to experience racial isolation because they attend schools with greater numbers of White students are also the least likely to have access to the Black and Latino Studies course.

**Larger schools are more likely to run the course than smaller schools.** The average number of students in schools that ran the class is 917, while the average number of students in schools without the class is 691. Smaller schools may have fewer students interested in enrolling in the course, as well as more significant scheduling and staffing challenges.

**Schools that teach the course are likely to have a smaller percentage of staff who are White and a larger number of staff who are Black/African American.** As is true across the country, the majority of teachers in Connecticut are White. However, on average, schools that taught the class have a staff that is about 88% White, while schools that didn't run the class have a staff that is 93% White (see Figure 2). On average, schools that ran the class have more than twice as many (4.5% compared to 1.9%) Black/African American teachers as schools that did not run the class. About 5.3% of the teachers in schools that ran the class in 2023 are Hispanic, and about 3.2% of the teachers in schools that did not run the class are Hispanic.

**Figure 2.**  
**Race and Ethnicity of Teachers of Black and Latino Studies Course in Connecticut High Schools in 2023-24**

American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latino	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	Not Reported	Two Or More Races	White
0.7	3.7	0.7	4.4	0	0	0	90.4
0	1.2	0	1.2	0	0	0	97.6
0	2.5	1.3	3.2	0	0	0	93
0	2.4	1.6	3.1	0	0	0	92.9
0.7	2.1	0	4.2	0	0	0	93
0	0	0	3.4	0	0	0	96.6
0	0.9	0	1.8	0.9	0	0	96.3
0	2.4	1.2	3.6	0	0	0.6	92.3
0	2.8	0	1.4	0	0	0	95.8
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
0	1.5	0	4.5	0	0	0	93.9
1	1	0	2.1	0	0	0	95.8
0	0	0	1.4	0	0	0	98.6
0.7	1.5	3.7	0	0	0	0	94
0	0	1.7	1.7	0	0	1.7	94.9
0	0.9	0	2.7	0	0	0	96.4
1.2	0	2.3	3.5	0	0	0	93
0	2.5	0	2.5	0	0	0	95
0	3.5	0	5.9	0	0	0	90.6
0	1.8	0	5.5	0	0	1.8	90.9
0	1.4	1.4	0	0	0	1.4	95.8
0	0	0	1.2	0	0	0	98.8
0	0	1.9	1.9	0	0	0	96.2
0.7	2.2	1.5	7.5	0	0	0	88.1
0	2.1	0	2.1	0	0	0	95.8
0	10.5	3.5	12.3	0	0	0	73.7
0	0	0	2.7	0	0	0	97.3
0	0	1.3	3.8	0	0	0	94.9
0	1.2	1.2	3.5	0	0	0	94.2
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
0	0	0	3.4	0	0	0	96.6
0	0	1.7	0	0	0	0	98.3
0	3.8	0	0	0	0	0	96.2
0	6.5	6.5	3.2	0	0	0	83.9
0	0	35.4	16.7	0	0	0	47.9
0.13888 8889	1.62222 2222	1.85833 3333	3.17777 7778	0.025	0	0.15277 7778	93.01944 444

# What resources are available for teachers?

The majority (61%) of teachers teaching the course have more than 10 years of experience in the classroom (see Figure 3). More than two-thirds of the teachers of the Black and Latino Studies Elective reported having attended course training offered by the Connecticut State Educational Resource Center (SERC) (see Figure 6). Teachers also reported that they had received support from the SERC-recommended resource materials, external professional development, local museums, and the Anti Racist Teaching and Learning Collective.

Figure 3.  
Experience Levels of Teachers of Black and Latino Studies Course in Connecticut High Schools in 2023-24

Source: Qualtrics survey data

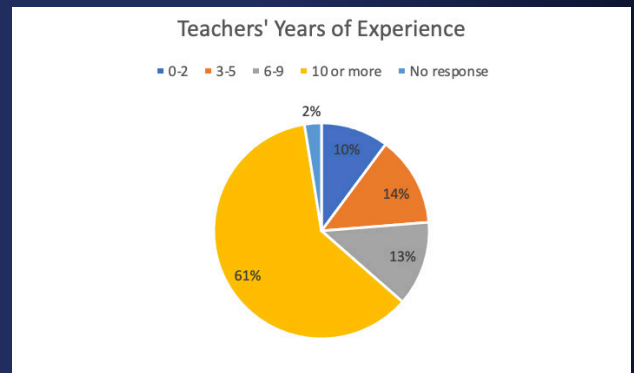
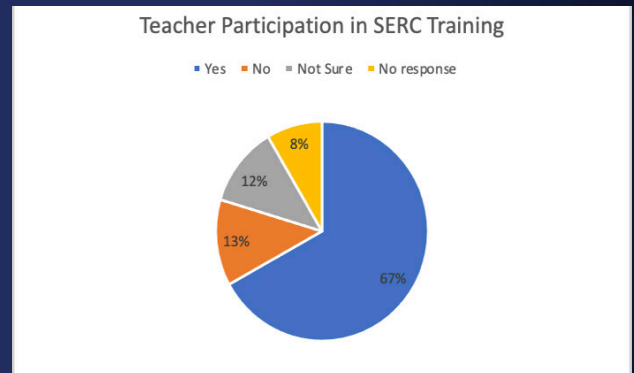


Figure 4.  
Teacher Participation in SERC Training for Black and Latino Studies Course, 2023-24

Source: Qualtrics survey data



# Recommendations

In sum, the state mandate has promoted Black and Latino Studies courses, but the implementation is unevenly distributed. White students and students of color who are more racially isolated in predominantly White communities do not have the same degree of access to the course as their counterparts who attend larger, more diverse schools.

Policy reforms with even the best of intentions are unlikely to be successful without concrete implementation plans and sufficient funding (Edgerton, 2019; Honig, 2006). Moreover, districts need to make decisions based on their own specific needs. In order to address the uneven distribution of access to the Black and Latino Studies course, the Connecticut State Department of Education and other policymakers should:

- Analyze course enrollment data from smaller schools and schools with low proportions of students of color, where the course is less likely to be taught, in order to plan and provide specific support for course recruitment, scheduling, and implementation.
- Allow flexible implementation of course curriculum and scheduling to better meet the needs of smaller schools and schools with low proportions of students of color. The mandate currently requires that the course be year-long, which exacerbates both staffing and enrollment challenges. One alternative might be that the material be divided into two semester courses, taught in alternating years.
- Work with community and research partners to gather and analyze feedback from schools related to the challenges and opportunities involved in implementing the course.
- Offer schools funding to underwrite the expense of staffing the course. Currently, schools must decide between staffing this course and sections of other classes, such as graduation requirements or other electives. This may pose a particular challenge in schools that project low enrollment for the Black and Latino studies course.

School and district administrators also have the responsibility to increase the availability of the course. While more information about the nature of these challenges is needed, some initial steps might include:

- Planning to teach the course on an alternating schedule (every other year) in order to increase enrollment in the years in which it is taught.
- Offering US History course credit to students enrolled in the Black and Latino Studies elective.
- Explicitly communicating the purpose of the course in school newsletters, PTO meetings, and meetings with guidance counselors.

To conclude, this mandate requires high schools to offer the Black and Latino Studies course. However, school decisions about actually running this elective course depend on multiple variables. These preliminary data reveal patterns of uneven implementation across the state. While the state provides resources and support, the schools and districts must respond to local conditions and are required to staff the course from their existing budgets.

As Connecticut's K12 population becomes more diverse, the state and districts will need to further adapt in order to serve students and families well. Given the proven benefits of ethnic studies courses to a wide range of students, all Connecticut students deserve access to this resource.

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