

*AL DÍA, May 18 2010*

Arizona Governor Jan Brewer stirred already troubled waters May 11 when she approved a bill that targets for elimination ethnic studies programs in the state's public schools.

Its framer, state school superintendent Tom Horne, contends that the measure in no way singles out Latinos, but rather promotes social and ethnic integration.

In a May 14 interview with Hispanic Link News Service, Horne said he has worked tirelessly to distance the ethnic studies bill from SB1070, which is being challenged in court as anti-immigrant and unconstitutional by Hispanic and civil rights groups.

"I'm trying to get schools to treat students as individuals," Horne said. "I don't think it's right to divide kids according to each race... School is a place to expand your horizons, not to narrow them."

Also contacted by Hispanic Link, Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez, chair of Arizona State University's Transborder Chicano/a Latino/a Studies, labeled the new law as an "anti-intellectual" move to erase the state's historical memory of any discriminatory actions. "We were not even in history books before the Chicano movement," he said.

The legislation prohibits classes designed primarily for pupils of a particular group that advocate ethnic solidarity instead of equality as individuals. It does not "prohibit the instruction about the Holocaust, any other instance of genocide or the historical oppression of a particular group of people based on ethnicity, race or color."

If a district or charter school is found in violation, consequences include withholding up to 10% of the monthly apportionment of state aid.

State Representative Steve Montenegro (R) claims that the bill does not ban ethnic studies entirely, but does seek to eliminate those which promote “sedition and racial prejudice.”

“The intent of this legislation is to ensure that pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals,” Montenegro said. “Ethnic studies will continue and this bill does not prohibit schools from discussing controversial aspects of history, including instances of historical oppression toward a race or class of people.”

Horne emphasized his approach to integrate all students by saying, “Students will learn about their culture at home.”

He began his campaign to terminate ethnic studies that promoted extreme “separatist” ideology in June 2007 with a five-page “Open Letter” addressed to residents of the Tucson Unified School District. The letter attacked textbooks filled with “destructive ethnic chauvinism,” use of the offensive term “Raza,” charter verbiage of the student group Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), which promotes cultural solidarity, and “an almost totalitarian climate of fear” that keeps TUSD employees from speaking out against ethnic studies.

Horne described an incident that he says he witnessed during a visit by Dolores Huerta, United Farm Workers co-founder with César Chávez to Tucson Magnet High School:

“My Deputy, Margaret García Dugan, a Hispanic Republican, came to refute the allegation made earlier to the student body that ‘Republicans hate Latinos.’ Her speech was non-partisan and professional, urging students to think for themselves and avoid stereotypes. Yet a small group of La Raza Studies students treated her rudely, and when the principal asked them to sit down and listen, they defiantly walked out.

“By contrast, teenage Republicans listened politely when Dolores Huerta told the entire student body that ‘Republicans hate Latinos.’”

Horne observed, “I believe the students did not learn this rudeness at home, but from their Raza teachers...”

Such actions prompted Horne to push for state legislation that would ban such studies to be taught in public schools, he said.

Vélez-Ibáñez retorted, “If it hadn’t been for the fact of the persons who insisted on writing the history of groups in this country, we would still be erased. What they are trying to do is to erase historical memory from high school kids.”

He concluded, “Whether the instruction was done well or badly, that is another question, but to attack the notion that somehow this is a land of only American individuals...is anti-intellectual.”