

January 16, 2011
Arizona, in the Classroom

Last week's memorial service in Tucson, which began with a blessing by a professor of Yaqui Indian and Mexican heritage, showcased Arizona's rich diversity as well as the love and tolerance of many of its citizens.

Unfortunately there is another Arizona, one where its state government all too often promotes discord and intolerance. This was painfully clear in the state's immigration law, which empowers the police to demand the papers of suspected illegal immigrants. And it is painfully clear in a new education law that injects nativist fears directly into the public school classroom.

The law, which took effect Dec. 31, bans any courses or classes that "promote resentment toward a race or class of people" or "advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals." Arizona's new attorney general, Tom Horne, immediately used it to declare illegal a Mexican-American ethnic-studies program in the Tucson Unified School District.

Mr. Horne, who wrote the law when he was superintendent of public instruction, accused the program of "brainwashing" Latino students, of teaching "ethnic chauvinism" because it uses works by authors critical of the United States' historical relationship with Latin America and its past treatment of Latinos. He has not gone after similar programs for black, Asian or American Indian students.

It's hard to object to the portions of the law that discourage the overthrow of the government. But Mr. Horne goes way overboard in trying keep high school students from studying works like Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," a classic educational text, or any effort to deepen students' understanding of history, and their place in the world. Tucson school officials say that far from stoking teenage resentment, the program has helped students keep their grades up and stay in school.

The school district has been put in a bind: shut the program down or lose state financing. Eleven teachers have sued to block the law. The school board, regrettably, did not join the lawsuit.

Educators and parents across the state should resist this effort to clamp down on education. Justice demands it. And even this ill-considered law suggests that Mr. Horne has badly overreached. One passage reads: "Nothing in this section shall be construed to restrict or prohibit the instruction of the Holocaust, any other instance of genocide, or the historical oppression of a particular group of people based on ethnicity, race or class."

Arizona was rightly criticized in the 1980s and early 90's when it refused to join the nation in declaring Martin Luther King's Birthday a holiday. It finally agreed in 1992, and the whole country has since traveled closer toward racial harmony. Arizona's

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political leaders shame themselves and their citizens when they preach and promote the opposite.