

RAMONA SENTINEL

Ramona Unified postpones high school ethnic studies course for 2025-26



Julie Gallant

Ramona Unified School District high school students will continue to be offered the traditional English II course only while plans to pilot an “English 2/English 2 Honors: Ethnic Perspectives in Literature” course are put on hold. (Julie Gallant)



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A proposed ethnic studies literature course for high school students in the Ramona Unified School District is being postponed because funding has not been provided for its implementation.

Starting with the 2025-26 school year, all districts in the state were required to offer the course following a state framework that provides an opportunity for students to learn about the histories, cultures, struggles and contributions of historically marginalized groups in America.

But the district's Education Services Department announced last month that ethnic studies is not currently a required course because funding was unavailable.

The current state budget doesn't include funding — estimated at \$276 million — that would trigger the ethnic studies graduation requirement, said H.D. Palmer, a spokesperson for the state Department of Finance. He attributed it to "limited available ongoing resources."

Beginning this fall, Ramona Unified students entering ninth grade would have been the first class required to pass a one-semester class at some point during their high school years.

Daryn Drum, president of the school board, said the state provided funds to the district to develop the curriculum but not to implement the course.

"RUSD staff chose to develop a curriculum that is specific to Ramona and this community instead of just adopting a curriculum that was developed elsewhere," Drum said in a June 20 email. "Our staff did an admirable job in the creation of the curriculum and they are to be commended.

"This is the first time that RUSD staff has taken on a task like this and they put in many long hours to produce a thought-provoking experience for our students."

Drum said if and when the legal requirement to offer and/or require an ethnic studies course is confirmed, Ramona Unified will take steps to implement the course. To be ready, staff will continue refining the course's instructional units, he said.

Trustees had discussed plans to pilot the new ethnic studies curriculum by trying it out in classrooms this fall. It was scheduled to be reviewed for approval by trustees in May 2026, according to a staff report.

After discussions, the board in January 2024 approved a course titled, "English 2/English 2 Honors: Ethnic Perspectives in Literature." Several staff members were involved in writing the curriculum for the course, including Julia Shotwell, Nicole Del Castillo and Laura Nelson.

Trustee Maya Phillips said she believes the district is taking the correct action to reverse its decision to require high school students to participate in ethnic studies during the next school year.

"The course had been presented as a pilot program, but in practice, it would have made participation mandatory," Phillips said in a June 15 email. "The district has also acknowledged what I have been stating since February ... in the absence of state funding, there is no requirement to offer the course."

Phillips, who has stated her opposition to the ethnic studies curriculum in the past, said she believes it violates federal law.

"In my view, the Ramona Unified School District's ethnic studies units are deeply rooted in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) ideology and promote racially discriminatory frameworks," Phillips said in the email. "DEI frameworks have been directly addressed and prohibited under President Trump's executive orders."

Phillips said she is concerned that if the district was to continue with the curriculum it could jeopardize the district's eligibility for federal funding.

At the April 22 school board meeting, trustees discussed the value of an education on topics such as race, heritage and culture and debated the merits of teaching high schoolers about social activism. At the time of the discussion, Ramona Unified's course was still being crafted.

Trustee Rodger Dohm said it may be healthy for students to talk about their heritage, backgrounds and perceived injustices.

“For some, it’s going to be a relief to talk about it and an opportunity for healing,” said Dohm, who favors students celebrating ethnicities and culture through their traditional food and clothing. “It’s important we do talk about it. People can come together and unite as one and become one Ramona family.

“The curriculum should not be saying, ‘I am a victim,’” he added. “It should be the other way around. It should say, ‘Here’s our heritage. How can I persevere through the challenges I have.’”

Trustee Dan Summers said he was “uncomfortable” with material that encouraged students to act on social justice. Summers said he also thought the content negatively portrayed America, particularly regarding its description of slavery and treatment of Native Americans.

“I don’t think we should encourage people of this age group to become social activists,” said Summers, who is also chair of the American Liberty Forum of Ramona,

Until an official appropriation is made and the requirement is triggered, the district will continue to offer its traditional English II course only, according to the May 20 memo. The decision was made “to ensure that teachers and students are not placed in a position of division or uncertainty around a course offering that is not yet mandated,” it states.