

STATEMENT ON ETHNIC STUDIES & RACISM BY ROWENA CHIU

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This statement reflects my personal views and does not represent those of the Palo Alto School Board.

On Thu 01/23, the PAUSD School Board held a Special Meeting regarding mandatory Ethnic Studies for all incoming 9th Graders in Fall 2025. The stated goal of the class, according to Superintendent Austin, was to “foster insightful, well-guided discussions” about societal power differentials. When I arrived at the meeting, there was a crowd gathered outside, Palo Alto police were in attendance, ropes had been placed to separate the board members from the public, and security manned the doors. I quickly came to feel this angry crowd had decided how I would vote - and presumed I sought to cut and not *pause* Ethnic Studies.

During the meeting, I publicly expressed feeling unsafe at least twice due to the level of animus and tension that I felt in the room. During the break, I asked for the meeting to be adjourned. At times, I felt that both my concerns about my personal safety and my questions about the course were diminished, marginalized, minimized, and negated – I heard my comments being met with jeers and mocking laughter by unidentified persons. For me, this came to an unfortunate head when a school district employee appeared to suggest that it was invalid for me to use the word “unsafe” and that I should instead use the word “uncomfortable”.

After the meeting, I requested personal protection, and I was escorted to my car by Superintendent Austin walking by my side and a security guard walking behind me. I returned home feeling attacked, isolated, and scared. When I saw the X post about the suppression of the Asian voice, I felt grateful to see my feelings of unsafeness validated and I was reassured to know I wasn't imagining my own diminishment, so I reposted that sentiment. This reflected poor judgment on my part. My intent in that moment was to elevate Asian perspective, reiterate how I felt during the meeting, and self-validate my feelings. I do not identify, and I am not associated with the group that made the original post. I fully acknowledge that in reposting, I may have overlooked any possible impact on the individual identified in the repost, and I am so immeasurably sorry.

As someone who received considerable anti-Asian hate and death threats during my campaign, I can certainly empathize with any woman of color feeling unsafe. Horrifyingly, the original post (not mine) drew appalling racist comments against both African-Americans and Asian-Americans, and against this district employee personally. As soon as I became aware of these racist comments, I deleted my post. It was never my intention to cause harm or even comment about any specific individual - the repost was about my feeling unsafe at the meeting, and about others validating those feelings, because I felt that didn't happen in the meeting. I utterly condemn hate speech towards any human being. I am especially pained by hate speech directed at other women of color, who are targeted due to intersectionality of ethnicity and gender.

During my own campaign and in my brief time as an elected official, I have had my own ethnicity, nationality, and lived experience questioned. I have been asked to produce my birth certificate, my citizenship certificate, my work contract with the World Bank, and now documentation proving multiple invitations and remuneration for teaching an ethnic studies class on college campuses, including one this week at UC Berkeley. I am saddened that my integrity constantly has been called into question. My commitment to helping oppressed groups is vital to my identity. For this to be continually doubted and questioned is painful.

Throughout the campaign, I was subjected to accusations of being an Asian “Tiger Parent”, whose four children will end up under a Caltrain before they turn 18 / Book Banner / Book Burner / Communist / Socialist - and/or a spy for the Chinese Government, or the “wrong kind of Asian”, or not even Asian at all, to name but a few insults. I have been spat on, told that I should be grateful for even being permitted to live in Palo Alto, and that if I still want more, I should “go back to China, Taiwan or whatever hole I crawled out of.” These attacks came via texts, social media, phone calls, and terrifyingly in-person, without fear of censure.

Throughout history, Asians have been suppressed in America, whether it be from the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), Japanese-American internment camps (Executive Order 9066), vicious attacks on the Asian-American community across America for COVID (49% of Asian-Americans were victims of a hate act in 2023. Source: NORC at the University of Chicago & Stop AAPI Hate), or the invisibility of Asian female small business owners who were murdered in Atlanta due to dangerous stereotyping. I have been a spokesperson for non-profits advocating for communities as diverse as Filipino hotel room cleaners and Vietnamese nail salon technicians, and I know the suppression is very real today. I am not equating my experience at the board meeting with these forms of persecution. The point is that I am deeply aware of the persecution of minorities, so I would not choose to participate in any persecution, particularly against women of color. I have dedicated a significant part of my life to fighting this exactly this kind of oppression.

Through my #MeToo activism work, my political campaign, and my time as an elected official, I have taken on the labor of speaking up against the suppression of Asian voices as one of my priorities, since Asians are about 40% of the PAUSD student body and many of their families have felt invisible, unheard and unrepresented for decades. I pledge to continue to raise awareness of racism within our school district, our nation, and the world. Hate speech and racism transcend ethnic lines and special interests, and must be actively opposed in all its forms, especially if we are to effectively educate our children about acceptance, inclusion and tolerance through more nuanced, productive and respectful conversations in Ethnic Studies.

Finally, I want to state how much I deeply admire the countless hours and hard work that the teachers have devoted to the Ethnic Studies pilot. I want to acknowledge the challenging circumstances under which they were asked to work – without the benefit of clear course standards to guide the process and with the added pressure of being expected to roll out the course quickly. I am grateful for the time that the teachers have taken to explain the work already completed and I look forward to further engagement on these issues. I look forward to seeing clarity, inclusivity, and transparency, as the new mandate is rolled out for Fall 2025.

I hope that you will join me in condemning hate speech and moving forward in healing and unity. I would especially welcome the opportunity to sit down with the school district employee referenced above, so that we might come to a better understanding of one another's lived experiences. I recognize that I have much to learn here - I aspire to approach this with humility and intellectual curiosity. I dare to dream, hope, and imagine a world where those of us who have - to varying degrees - experienced oppression can come together to work towards a brighter and inclusive future for all students in this district and society at large.