Ethnic studies equals smart, politically conscious Latino students, which is exactly why its enemies want to kill it.

WHIE LIES

Enemies of the Tucson Unified School District’s ethnic studies program would have the public believe that a cabal of com- mie educators are teaching revolution in TUSD’s classrooms.

The reality is not quite as sexy as this vision of young Patty Hearsts, Huey Newtons, and Bernardine Dohrn getting groomed with lessons on Marxism and Chairman Mao.

Indeed, to listen to the likes of former state Schools Superintendent and current Arizona Attorney General Tom Horne, the primary pusher of the ethnic studies ban signed into law last year by Governor Jan Brewer, you’d think Tucson high school kids are learning how to hate whitey and make pipe bombs.

This is also the general line, BTW, that the Arizona Republic’s official crotchety old white man, Doug MacEachern, who — like a lot of mean, orner, tea-bagger-esque ofays — is genuinely terrified of young, intelligent Latinos, armed with facts and logic.

God forbid these young people ever grow up, go to college, and become Horne and MacEachern’s worst nightmares: members of a new political establishment that will condemn theirs to a timely grave.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit a Mexican American Studies class, something Horne has never done, despite his signing a “finding” that calls for the program’s elimination.

TUSD Superintendent John Pedicone rejected my request to observe such a class in action. Via e-mail, his assistant cited “distrac- tion but did not force an opinion on the teenagers. Other than the text and the subject matter, the class could have been any social studies or literature class anywhere in America.

Why do these classes exist? To answer this question, you need only look around the campuses and observe. More than 60 percent of TUSD’s students are Hispanic. One middle school in TUSD is 92 percent Latino. In one high school, 71 percent of attendees are Latino. Another high school is 89 percent Latino students.

These are shocking numbers, and evidence that the U.S. Supreme Court decision of Brown vs. the Board of Education, which held that separate educational facilities for students of different races are “inherently unequal,” has been effectively undermined by white flight and the rise of charter schools.

Tucson’s ethnic-studies classes were the result of a desegregation lawsuit brought in the 1970s. There are also African-American and Native American courses, but Mexican American Studies is the largest of these disciplines.

MAS was created to address the disparity between dropout rates and low test scores of Latinos versus other students. The idea behind it is to engage at-risk students with history and literature that speaks to them and their experiences.

“The students see themselves in the cur-riculum,” Sean Arce, director of the program, told me during my last trek to Tucson. “They see themselves as part of the American experience, as contributors to society.”

Arce, who helped develop the courses along with the teachers involved, explained that the subject matter is the “hook” educators use to motivate the kids and get them reading and writing. Many of these students may otherwise have ended up flunking their courses or dropping out.

“The majority of our kids qualify for free or reduced lunch. So, they’re at poverty level,” Arce said. “According to the AIMS data that the district released, it demonstr- ates that they’re the lowest academically achieving students coming into our classes. By the time they leave our classes, they close that achievement gap.”

Even Pedicone, who was not available for an interview by press time, has conceded that the classes have resulted in higher AIMS test scores, a higher graduation rate, and a higher rate of matriculation to college.

So what’s all the hubbub about? Right- wing blatherers, such as Tucson radio hate- monger Jon Justice of 104.1 FM, tell the nativist faithful that these Latino children learn to resent Anglos in the classes. That “American history” is not being taught, in favor of Chicoan history.

To which, I would point out that Chicoan history is American history. Chicanos are, by definition, Americans of Mexican de- scent. How can their history not be part of American history?

Up through high school, TUSD children are taught general American history. In high school, they can choose a MAS class to fulfill core requirements in history, government, and literature.

Do MAS students resent or hate white folk? Not according to the students I’ve interviewed, who’ve all been very open and intelligent beyond their years.

When I was in Tucson for a TUSD board meeting, where hundreds of pro-ethnic studies demonstrators and at least 100 cops squared off in what turned out to be a PR disaster for Superintendent Pedicone and anti-MAS board members (“TUSD’s Tues- day Night Debacle,” May 4), I talked with Julianna, a 16-year-old ethnic-studies student who doesn’t want the classes to go away.

“People think it’s a negative class,” Jul- lianna said. “Yeah, there were things that happened to our people, but we need to turn it into something positive and learn from that history and learn to love each other.”

Regarding the MacEachern-Horne de- pictions that cast her and her friends as Mau-Maus in the making, she told me how every class begins with the recitation of a poem based on a traditional Mayan greeting called In Lak’ech.

“Basically, it means that you’re my other self,” she told me. “I love you because I love myself. If I hurt you, I hurt myself.”

Other students and teachers I spoke with confirmed that In Lak’ech is commonly recited in ethnic-studies classes. To my ears, the sentiment pretty much parallels Christian teachings.

How does this jibe with the quote Horne plucks from the seminal Chicano studies textbook Occupied America, now in its seventh edition? In it, author Rodolfo Acuña quotes a speech from Mexican-American leader Jose Angel Gutierrez in which Gutierrez encouraged Chicanos to “kill the gringo.”

Outside that contentious TUSD meet- ing, where seven people were arrested for speaking out of turn, I asked a young Anglo woman named Erin about the quote. Now a freshman at the University of Arizona, she took MAS in high school and said she didn’t recall Gutierrez’s speech ever being taught.

But she explained that a phrase such as that would be presented in the context of who said it and when, not as some sort of commandment.

“It’s inaccurate to pick out one sentence in probably the 50 different texts you read each semester,” she said. “[Horne’s] just looking in the text from his perspective.”

In fact, both Horne and MacEachern skillfully utilize McCarthyism as a tactic to bash ethnic studies.

In his finding against TUSD’s ethnic studies, signed a day continued on page 13
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before the law actually went into effect, Horne slams acclaimed academic Paulo Freire, author of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, from which seniors in ethnic studies classes read excerpts.

Horne calls Freire a “Brazilian Marxist,” which he was. He also was jailed by Brazil’s military junta in the 1960s, forced to flee the country, and ended up a professor at Harvard and, later, moving on to Geneva, Switzerland.

If Horne had bothered to read and understand Freire’s work regarding the philosophy of education, he would have realized that more than anything else, Freire was a humanist, and he was influenced by an intensely repressive political system, one that might well have killed him if he’d stayed in his native land.

Moreover, if you start excluding works of those influenced by Karl Marx, you’d have to rid your library of a truckload of modern authors: John Reed, Jean-Paul Sartre, and John Steinbeck, to name a few.

Ultimately, both Horne and MacEachern have taken an anti-intellectual stance, one described, ironically, in Freire’s book.

Freire writes: “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

Do ethnic-studies teachers want their kids to transform the world for the better? Well, what good teacher doesn’t?

Horne, MacEachern, Justice, and other angry white men are clearly threatened by young Latinos — actually, kids of all races — thinking critically and becoming active and involved politically.

By downgrading or destroying ethnic studies, they would rid TUSD of the gains it has made, making it quite likely that many of those at-risk kids will not achieve at high levels.

This recalls the days when some slaves had to learn to read in secret, because the their masters forbade it.

Not an exact analogy, but close enough.

As I write this, the Arizona Department of Education is preparing to release an audit of TUSD’s MAS program, for which Huppenthal has ponied up $170,000. Many believe the audit will give him the cover to seek the program’s elimination, something Horne sought by decree but that Huppenthal has wavered on implementing.

There’s also a federal lawsuit brought by Tucson attorney Richard Martinez on behalf of TUSD teachers and students, which makes a convincing legal argument that the new ethnic-studies law is vague, overly broad, and unconstitutional. Martinez is close to filing a motion asking the judge in the case for summary judgment.

And school’s almost out for the summer. This means more students to raise more hell over this repulsive attack on their education. The backlash already has begun.