

Cultural Relevance at Scale

The Effects of an Ethnic Studies Expansion on Academic Outcomes

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About this slide deck

This slide deck was produced as part of the EdWorkingPapers Policy & Practice Series, designed to bridge the gap between academic research and real-world decision-making. Summary written by Christina Claiborne, EdExchange / Annenberg Institute at Brown.

Background

Student disengagement is rising. Ethnic Studies offers a promising answer.

When students feel disconnected, they disengage from coursework, miss school, and struggle academically.

Ethnic Studies (ES) centers the histories, cultures, and lived experiences of communities of color, making learning more relevant and meaningful. ES is not just a course about identity; **it is an academic intervention.**

The key question this study answers:

"Does Ethnic Studies still work when scaled district-wide, beyond handpicked teachers and self-selected students?"

Education research is littered with promising pilots that collapsed at scale. This study tests whether ES is different.

24,246

students in study sample

~40

middle and high schools

15 years

of longitudinal data (2007–2023)

6–12

grades tracked continuously

Study Design

The authors used a rigorous study design to isolate the *causal effect* of ES.

01

Student-level fixed effects

Compares each student to themselves — tracking how their own academic performance changes before vs. after enrolling in ES — rather than comparing ES students to non-ES students.

02

Grade-level fixed effects

GPA tends to shift systematically as students move through school. By accounting for these grade-level patterns, the model isolates the ES effect from the normal ebb and flow of academic performance.

03

Multiple verification checks

Synthetic difference-in-differences, robustness checks, and a falsification test (ES teachers in non-ES courses showed no GPA gains) confirm the results are course-specific.

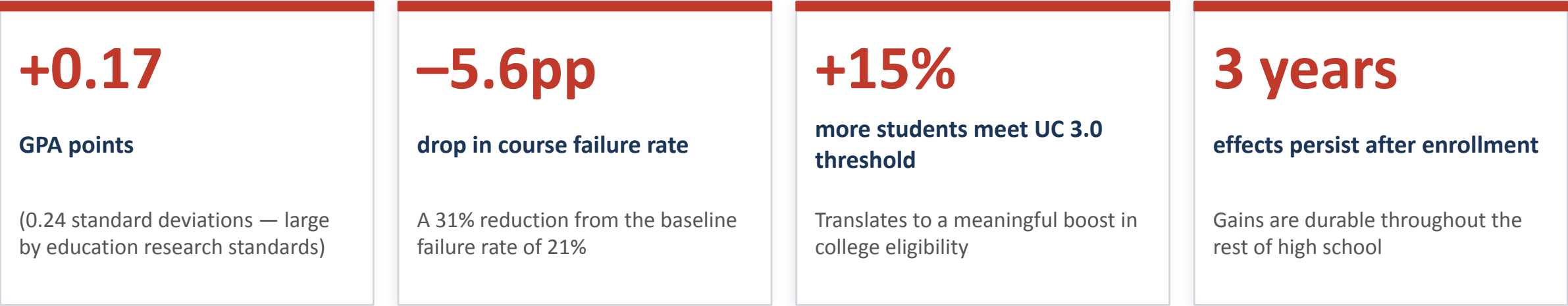
Outcomes measured:

Annual GPA (4.0 scale, excluding ES and PE courses)

Course failure rate (any failed course in a given year)

Key Finding 1

ES enrollment raises GPA and cuts course failures, and gains grow over time.

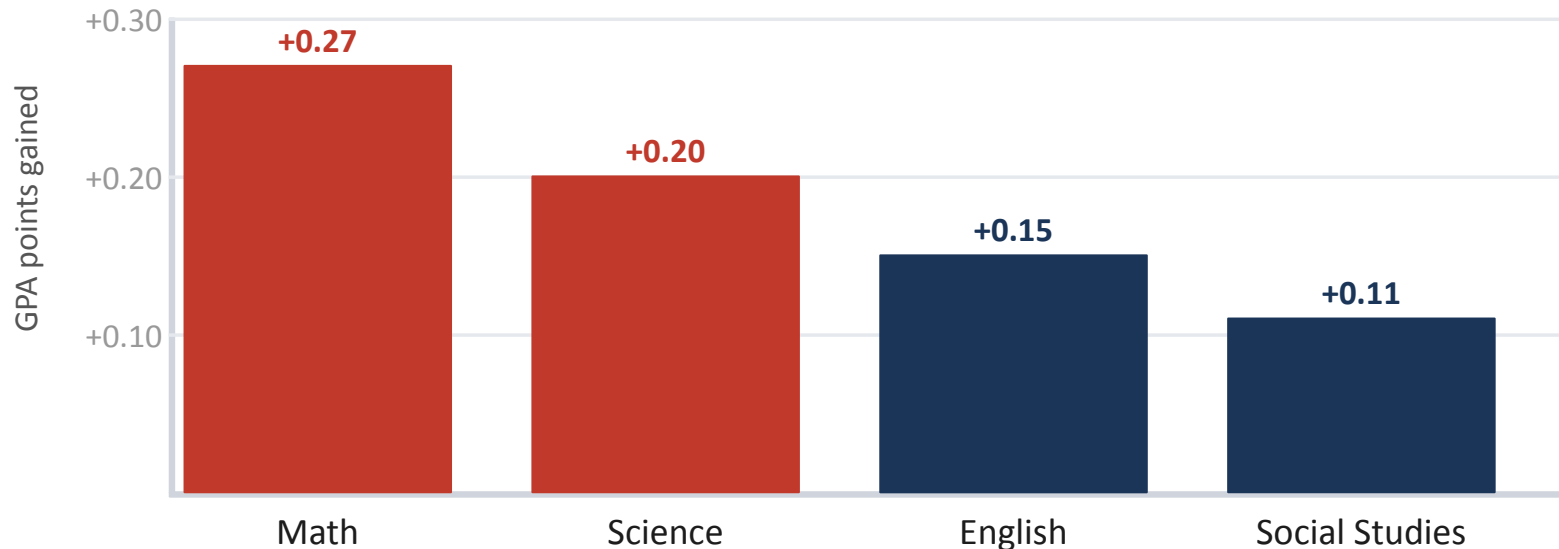


How does this compare?



Key Finding 2

The biggest GPA gains are in math and science, subjects with no obvious connection to ES content.



What this tells us

ES works by improving overall engagement, motivation, and sense of belonging in school, not by directly teaching math or science content.

Students who feel seen and connected bring that energy into all of their classes.

Key Finding 3

ES works for all student groups, but has the strongest impact on students who stand to gain the most.

Benefits extend across:

- Students with low and high prior GPAs
- All racial and ethnic groups
- Male and female students
- Students with and without special education status

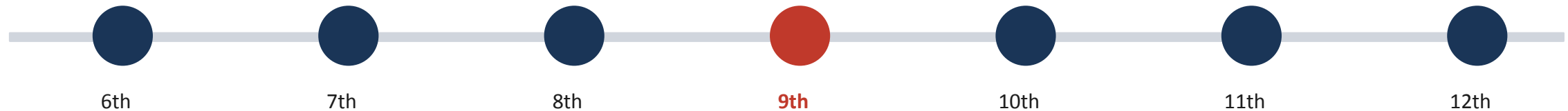
Largest gains for:

Black students	+0.23 GPA pts
Latine students	+0.25 GPA pts
Male students	Largest reduction in course failures
Students entering with GPA < 2.0	+0.18 GPA pts
Students with IEPs (SPED)	Meaningful course failure reduction

Earlier studies only examined ES as a targeted program for low-GPA students. This study demonstrates benefits are universal.

Key Finding 4

The strongest effects were found among students who enrolled in ES in 9th grade, when the transition to high school creates the greatest academic risk.



-10 percentage points

drop in course failure rate for 9th-grade ES enrollees

a 34% reduction relative to the mean failure rate of 30% — in the year of enrollment alone

Why 9th grade matters

9th grade is a pivot point:

students are most likely to fail courses, fall behind on credits, and disengage from school, factors strongly associated with dropout.

Students who never took ES showed the characteristic GPA dip at 9th grade entry. 9th-grade ES enrollees did not.

Key Finding 5

Ethnic Studies can be implemented at scale without losing effectiveness.

What made SFUSD's scale-up work

- 10+ years of sustained curriculum development
- Dedicated professional development and teacher support
- Expanded school day (6 to 7 periods) to fit ES alongside graduation requirements
- Commitment at the district level, not just individual schools

Falsification test result

ES teachers in non-ES courses produced no GPA gains. The effect is specific to the ES course itself, not teacher quality.

Critical caveat

SFUSD offered a full-year course. California's graduation requirement mandates only a semester. Whether shorter implementations produce equivalent effects remains an open question.

What this means for leaders, policymakers, and districts

1 Treat ES as an academic strategy, not an elective

At 0.24 SD, ES outperforms most large-scale tutoring programs. Districts searching for high-impact academic interventions should take this evidence seriously.

2 ES is a whole-school strategy, not just an equity program

Benefits extend to all student groups. As schools struggle with engagement and absenteeism, ES offers a whole-school tool that strengthens belonging for everyone.

3 Mandates without investment will underdeliver

SFUSD's success took a decade of curriculum work, teacher training, and scheduling changes. States requiring ES without comparable investment risk diluting both quality and impact.

4 9th grade is the moment — don't miss it

Waiting until 10th, 11th, or 12th grade means missing the transition point where ES can do the most good. Build 9th-grade access into implementation planning from the start.

Read the full paper and summary

"Cultural Relevance at Scale: The Effects of an Ethnic Studies Expansion on Academic Outcomes"

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Full paper: <https://edworkingpapers.com/ai26-1446>

Summary: https://bit.ly/edwp_ai26-1446

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