

**“Experience Has Taught Us  
That Our Story Will Not Be Told  
Unless It Is Required To Be Told”**

# *Italian American Studies Committee*

## **Statement of Purpose**

One of the major public policy goals of the Italian American Taskforce is to promote the study of the Italian American experience in the public schools and universities of California.

This goal was set forth as the intent of the California State Legislature in two Resolutions adopted by the State Assembly and authored by Assemblyman Dominic Cortese.

These two Resolutions also set the stage for the establishment of the California Italian American Taskforce.

The Governor of California also issued a Proclamation in April, 1994 -- in conjunction with the showing of the Italian American wartime exhibit "Una Storia Segreta" in the State Capitol Rotunda -- to promote a greater awareness of the wartime restrictions placed upon the Italian American population of California during World War II.

At the same time, a Resolution authored by Assemblyman Cortese and State Senator David Roberti and passed on April 28, 1994; included a provision that *"this story needs to be told and included in the State's history books to acknowledge that these events happened and to help repair the damage to the Italian community of California."*

## **Why Italian American Studies Are Important**

There are many reasons why the study of the Italian American experience is important and why it should be included in the school curriculum.

- 1. Italian American Studies are necessary to repair the damage caused by governmental actions against the Italian population of the State during World War II.**
- 2. Italian American Studies are necessary for our children to combat the effects of more than a century of cultural prejudice and defamation.**
- 3. Italian American Studies are necessary for our children to overcome the stigma of their ancestry which results in loss of self esteem and lowered achievement.**
- 4. Italian American Studies are necessary to develop strong identities in young Italian Americans necessary for success in a diverse American society**

## **I. To Repair the Damage of World War II Government Actions.**

During World War II, the Italian communities in California, especially those in the Coastal zones, were severely restricted. Italian language schools and newspapers were shut down by the federal government and Italian community leaders, school teachers, newspaper editors and even political leaders were arrested and interned.

Over 100,000 California Italians were restricted during the war. They were required to register and carry identity cards, their travel was curtailed, they were subjected to severe curfews and seizure of their personal property, all in violation of their civil liberties. Over 10,000 Italian residents of the state were forced to evacuate their homes in coastal communities or face arrest and internment.

The suppression of the Italian American community has not been recognized in the states textbooks which teach that only the Japanese community was affected by the wartime restrictions.

The impact of the wartime experience on the Italian American communities was devastating and is still being felt. The bonds which tied the Italian people to one another and their communities were damaged. "After the war, people were afraid to be too Italian" says wartime scholar, Rose Scherini.

**Italian American studies are necessary to help Italian Americans to rescue their heritage and rebuild their sense of community.**

## **II. To combat the effects of more than a century of cultural prejudice and defamation.**

Italian Americans have a big "image problem." The problem is real and has been documented in study after study. Recent studies show that most Americans, almost 80%, associate Italian Americans with organized crime and that this image of Italian Americans is attributable to the negative portrayal of Italian Americans by all segments of the media.

**The way that Italian Americans have been portrayed by the media has become ingrained in the national psyche and has contributed to a persistent and underlying prejudice against them.**

This cultural prejudice has affected the way that Italian Americans have been treated by American society and institutions. It has contributed to numerous lynchings of Italian Americans during the earlier part of the century, to restrictive immigration laws in the 1920's which barred most Italian immigration, to the arrest, restriction and internment of tens of thousands of Italian immigrants during World War II, and to problems of lowered self esteem and achievement among Italian youth who today have among the highest high school drop out rates.

**Italian American studies are needed to overcome the disadvantages of continued negative treatment by the media.**

### **III. For our children to overcome the stigma of their own ancestry.**

Italian Americans do not merely suffer from an image problem, they suffer from a devastating lack of awareness about themselves. This nation, including Italian Americans, is terribly misinformed about the Italian American experience. The association of Italian Americans with organized crime illustrates how devastating this lack of knowledge can be.

While young Italian Americans are expected to be proud of their heritage or to feel good about being Italian, they are not given much reason to do so. If they accept the popular cultural images of Italians as presented in the media they cannot be expected to respect or care about their heritage.

The way Italian Americans are portrayed by the media does not provide young Italian Americans with any support or affirmation that their heritage may have value for them. Rather, the way the media portrays Italian Americans stigmatizes them and distorts their heritage.

Young Italian Americans need to experience their distinctive cultural roots as a positive force rather than a hurdle to overcome. Our children need to find value in their heritage and only the education they receive in the schools can teach them about their heritage. Relying on the family to teach them has not been successful.

**Italian American studies are necessary for our children to overcome the stigma of their ancestry and for the nation to overcome its prejudice against Italian Americans.**

### **IV. They too should be included in the story of this nation.**

Everyone has a history. And Italian Americans have a unique history. Our children deserve to learn about that history in school. But the schools are failing Italian American children in that regard.

Italian American kids really do not know much about who they are or where they came from. They suffer from the same lack of understanding about their cultural heritage that their parents do. They deserve better.

Part of the problem lies in what our children are exposed to and not exposed to in the schools they attend. Schools play a key role in exposing students to images and ideas about themselves. In California schools, Italian American children are exposed to books that neglect them.

Today's school curriculum focuses on the experiences of other ethnic groups and promotes the values and attitudes of those groups. The Italian American experience is not included in the educational experience provided by our schools. As a result, our children's educational experience is culturally biased. It does not include the distinctive cultural and historical role played by Italian Americans.

Despite the fact that Italian Americans are the fifth largest group in the entire nation and have made enormous contributions to the progress of the nation, they are still not considered part of all

this by our nations schools. Yet, Italian American children need to find value in their heritage as much as children from any other ethnic group. The message being received by Italian American kids is that their Italian heritage has less value than those cultures they are exposed to in the schools.

But Italian American studies are vital to the the building of strong identities in young Italian Americans. They are needed to expand our childrens awareness of their place in this country and to strengthen their identities as Italian Americans.

Instead, Italian American children are told they they must learn about and appreciate other peoples cultures. But that does not include the opportunity to learn about their own. This unfairness is being promoted by the schools.

**Italian American students are entitled to know about themselves and about the history and accomplishments of their people. They are as entitled as any group. That the need is there is undisputed. They too should be included in the story of this nation.**

## **Committee Goals**

- 1. To amend the State Education Code to require the study of the Italian American experience -- including the settlement, the World War II experience and the contributions of the Italians in California -- in the public schools of the State.**
- 2. To work with the Department of Education in an advisory capacity to implement the Italian American experience requirement.**
- 3. To promote the establishment of Italian American Studies Programs in the public universities of the State and work with the State University system and the University of California for the establishment of such programs.**
- 4. To promote the establishment of Italian American historical, archival and research Collections in the State University systems for the preservation and study of the Italian American experience.**





