

# California's First Black Secretary of State, Shirley Weber

By Adjoa Aikins



*I just feel like the power is in numbers, so as long as we're educating ourselves, we can use that to then educate our kids when we have kids and try to change the perspective of everything,*

— Shirley Weber,  
California Secretary of State

Progress starts with understanding the successes and failures of our history and where we are placed within it.

Engagement and discussion within the ethnic studies curriculum cannot be achieved if students in California and nationwide are not actively seeing themselves within the history that is being taught. This was the core of California Secretary of State Shirley Weber's speech, on Thursday, Feb. 9, to commemorate 50-plus years of Black Studies.

"If you're in the picture, you're happy, if you're not in the picture then you're made to feel less than everybody else because you're not the one that the message is coming to, whether you're a person of color or whether you're a woman. You don't get a sense that this is your history, and so it becomes difficult for you to be engaged in it," Weber said during her speech.

Weber is California's first Black Secretary of State, born to parents who worked as sharecroppers in Hope, Arkansas. Although her family moved to California when Weber was 3-years-old, it was her family's experience in the Jim Crow South that drove her activism and legislative work.

Weber taught at San Diego State for over 40 years, and sponsored numerous bills to protect civil rights and promote racial equality in California during four terms as an assembly member in the California State Assembly.

During her speech, Weber talked about the difficulties in breaking barriers and inspiring change within history, but that someone has to be the first one to do it.

"History develops a character. It helps you to understand who you are so you're not floating out there without any context of what it took to struggle, what it took to basically move issues and to bring things forward. Women have the same thing, Latinos have the same thing. We all have these challenges in life that we need to confront," Weber said.

Weber added, "After beginning to study these materials, I began to like history, because I was in history. I could see what Fredrick Douglas was doing. I could listen to him construct arguments so there wasn't just, you know, nobody said anything about Black folks and slavery, nobody ever said anything about persecution."

In addressing the issue that while some groups don't acknowledge their involvement in history, Weber emphasized the importance of understanding our roles and impact on the world's "power nation."

"What ethnic studies needs is consistency. Consistency in leadership, consistency in crucial development and engagement with students that would go far beyond just the campus, or put students

in positions where they to can become advocates for ethnic studies, and to put them in positions that you can be proud of the stuff that they've done, and they can then take what

they've learned and changed the world in their own career," Weber said.

As a member of the California legislature, Weber passed Assembly Bill 101 on Oct. 8, 2021, mandating students at The California State University to take an ethnic studies class.

"History is not designed just to give you information. You memorize 1492, a long time ago. You know 1865, you know 1917, you know all these numbers and people, but you really don't know why you're giving it to people," Weber said.

Weber added, "You're helping people to understand, that this is who you are, that you're a great nation, that you fought wars and you won. That you came into nothing and you built these huge factories and places where people could work. That you became, in a short period of time, the power nation in the world."

Shane Moreman, an Intercultural Communications professor who attended the event, said that he wasn't particularly happy that there is now a lot of push within the College of Arts and Humanities to reconfigure how faculty are thinking about disciplines and how they equal jobs.

"I don't promote jobs, I promote communication," Weber said in response.

Weber added, "Most parents will push jobs, and kids are gonna get jobs, there's no question about that. Look at the people who have jobs, they have great jobs, but it's probably not something they went to school to learn about. One of the things I learned when I was teaching at UCLA, is that you learn what the university is about. The university's about developing you, not following you."



California Secretary of State Shirley Weber, seen in a 2019 file photo, authored a measure as an Assembly member creating a task force to study reparations for slavery. (Howard Lipin/San Diego Union-Tribune/TNS)