Teacher makes indigenous people the focus of alternative missions project

Susan Killebrew, a 4th grade teacher in the Oakland Unified School District, says she never really had her students do the traditional project to create models of various California missions. “I do have my students learn about the Califor...
“Obviously, when they learn about these rich, rich cultures, and then they learn that these ways were decimated by the Spanish people when they came, of course it’s disturbing to them,” says Killebrew, explaining that some teachers shy away from discussing such sensitive issues at all.

“It’s part of California history, so we need to talk about it,” she says, “but we need to contextualize it and really honor the culture of the people who were here before the Spanish came.”

It’s also important to Killebrew that students put the events of the Mission era into context and that they try to understand the Spaniards’ point of view. “They’ll say, that’s a really ignorant point of view. And I say yeah, it was. But I want you to understand that’s where they were coming from. It was out of ignorance, but that’s where they were coming from. They thought they could better the lives of these people who, of course, didn’t need their lives to be bettered.”

Killebrew thinks it would be a great help to teachers if they could easily access curriculum and teaching tools that add more complexity and cultural sensitivity to their lessons about the mission era.

“It would be great if there could be resources to learn from, say, Chumash people if you’re down in Southern California, and Miwok people if you’re up in the Sierras, and Ohlone along the Northern California coast,” she said. “It would be a lot of work, but it would be awesome.”