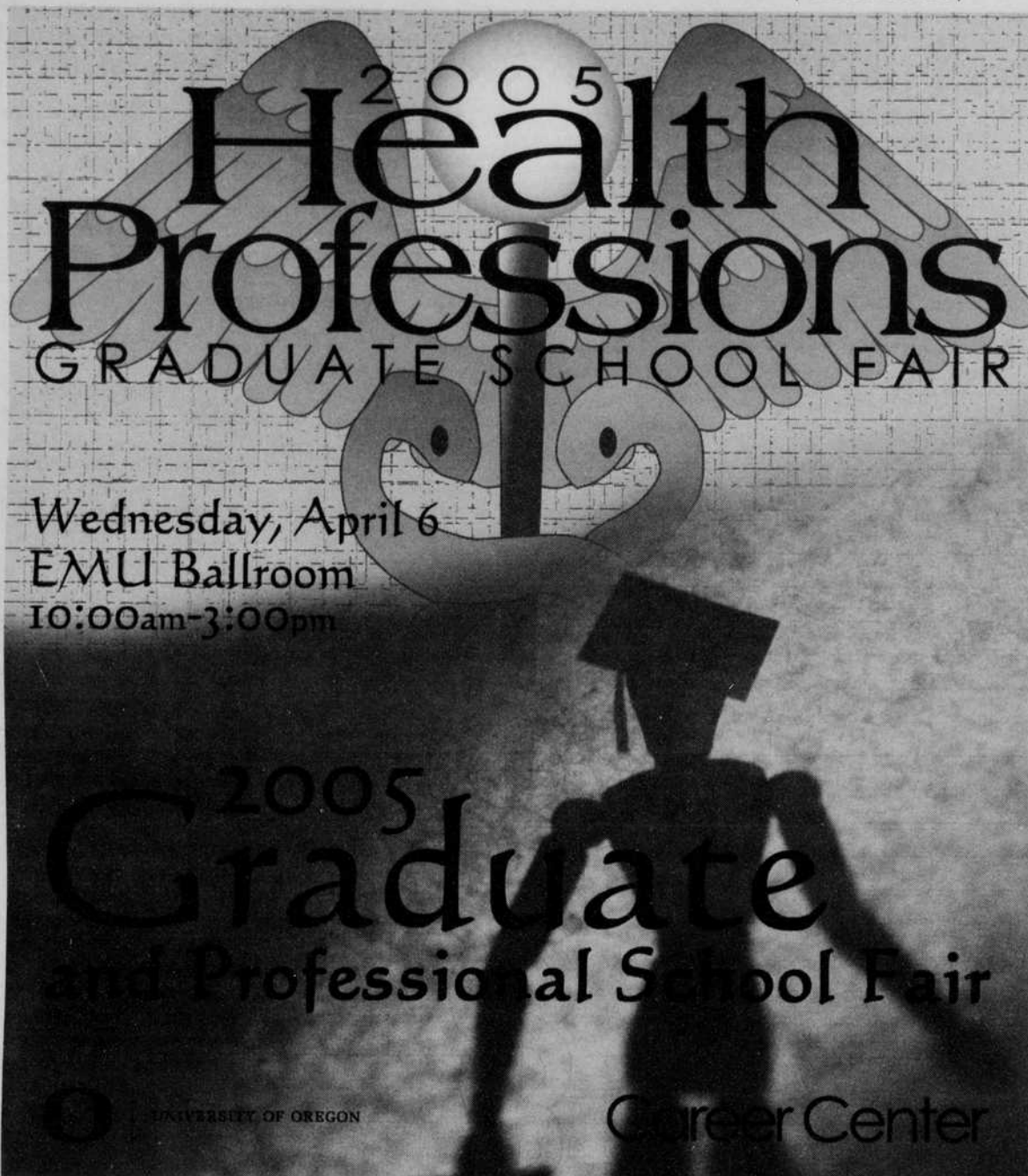




2005 Health Professions Graduate School Fair

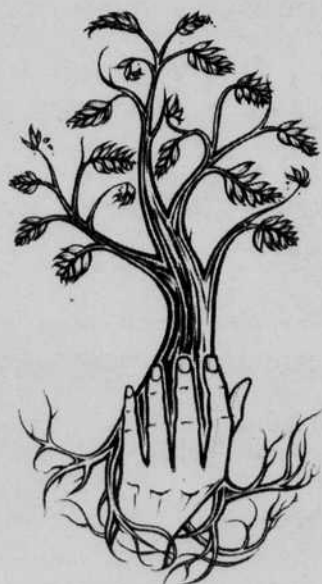
Wednesday, April 6
EMU Ballroom
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Efforts for cultural competency face criticism in House

A proposed bill stresses the importance of educators being able to teach students of varied backgrounds

BY JULIA SILVERMAN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PORTLAND — A quiet effort by state officials to require that all newly certified Oregon teachers be "culturally competent" looks to be dead-on-arrival in the Republican-controlled House, despite firm support from education advocates.

In its broadest sense, "cultural competence" in the classroom means the ability to successfully teach children from all different backgrounds, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic level or disability.

For example, it can mean not assigning homework that requires a computer to a homeless student or understanding that in some Hispanic cultures, it's considered rude to look an authority figure in the eye. The idea is that understanding a student's background will eventually help him or her to perform better in class and on tests.

A bill requested by Gov. Ted Kulongoski on behalf of the state Teacher Standards and Practices Commission, which regulates teaching licenses, sailed through the Senate Education Commission, easily passed the full Senate by a vote of 25-3 and went to the House Education Committee.

There, though, it has run into trouble.

The problem, House Republicans say, is the state's working definition of what it means to be culturally competent, which was devised during a by-invitation summit sponsored by the Oregon Department of Education last year.

According to the working definition, cultural competence is based on "a commitment to social justice and equity," and individuals should, "have a defined set of values and principles ... that enable them to work effectively in a cross-cultural manner."

Those phrases sent up red flags for Rep. Linda Flores, R-Clackamas, who chairs the House Education Committee, and her staff.

"This seems to require of teachers that they think and believe" certain things, said Dave Mowry, Flores' legislative coordinator. "If you don't have the same viewpoint of equity and social justice, does that mean you don't get certified?"

Mowry said the bill may not even get a hearing in front of the House Education Committee.

"It's just beyond the pale," he said. "We're the only state that has enlarged the definition to include advocating for equity and social justice."

Flores said she is generally supportive of encouraging teachers to be more culturally aware in an effort to close the persistent gap between the test scores of minority students and their white counterparts.

But the working Oregon definition seems tinged with politics, Mowry said.

Even with the Republican

objections, the cultural competency concept still has legs in Oregon and influential backers.

"I do believe that there is an issue of social justice inherent in the achievement gap," said Pat Burk, chief policy officer for the Oregon Department of Education. "There is a fundamental question of whether we are willing to allow our public institutions to serve some people better than others."

Oregon is one of 20 states to receive a leadership development grant from the New York-based Wallace Foundation. Funded by the \$600,000 grant, teachers and administrators in eight school districts — Springfield, Lincoln County, Beaverton, Eugene, South Lane, Nyssa, Bend-La Pine and Portland — are receiving cultural competency, literacy training, or both.

The goal is for them to pass their newfound knowledge along to their colleagues and to share those practices with other school districts, said Rob Larson, the Oregon Department of Education's federal liaison.

Already, Larson said, the Teachers Standards and Practices Commission has adopted new standards that will require any new school administrators to demonstrate cultural competency skills, starting in 2007.

Teacher preparation programs at universities across the state have been putting more emphasis on cultural competency as well, Larson and others said.

"The Oregon student population is changing dramatically," said Peter Cookson, dean of the Graduate School of Education and Counseling at Lewis & Clark College. "We need to have teachers and administrators who are able to deal with language acquisition in a sophisticated manner. Literacy is key to the future of a kid by any measure."

Vickie Chamberlain, the executive director of the teacher licensing agency, said the state can look for incentives to encourage school districts to include cultural competency training in current professional development opportunities.

Chamberlain's agency is itself a target of House Republicans, who have introduced a bill to eliminate it. But that prospect seems unlikely to win support in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

In the meantime, Chamberlain said the commission may be able to push forward with cultural competency requirements for teachers without a legislative seal of approval, especially because representatives of the teachers' union, school administrators and school boards have been supportive.

"The commission has made it a personal goal of ours to begin work on cultural competency standards," Chamberlain said. "We don't need legislation to pursue those goals. (Lawmakers) delegated the authority to set the standards and requirements for all licenses to the commission."

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