

Desegregate Schools Now

School Superintendent George Russell should be commended for bravely taking on the sensitive and difficult issues of school choice and segregation. The 4J School Board should move quickly to enact Russell's suggestions to move, merge or close alternative schools and enact other changes to make the school system fair to all kids. The proposed reforms are modest and long overdue.

As Russell has reported, alternative schools have become a magnet for white and wealthy kids with educated, stable families. That leaves too many neighborhood schools with higher concentrations of the children that research shows are often the hardest to teach: kids from poor, frequently moving families with less educated parents.

Many in Eugene's socio-economic elite have loudly opposed changing the current system, which they see as benefiting their kids. But the largely voiceless kids left behind in neighborhood schools are hurt by the system. School choice has concentrated the most challenging students to teach and contributed to a widening achievement gap, Russell reported.

It doesn't have to be this way. Research shows mixing wealthier and poor kids raises test scores for poor kids while not hurting the wealthier kids — a win win.

Eugene's two-tiered school system doesn't just hurt education. Weakening neighborhood schools in turn weakens neighborhood cohesiveness that makes the city more livable and safe. The healthy exercise of walking to school and playing with neighborhood kids has been replaced by driving kids all over town to choice schools. In addition, common schools that mix kids by race and class teach tolerance, provide equal opportunity and are a pillar of American democracy.

Reforming the system with better information, transportation, funding and lottery preferences for disadvantaged children is a start. But the district will have to do far more to have much of an impact in desegregating the school system. Magnet neighborhood schools won't be able to attract elite students if the current alternative schools are allowed to keep all their advantages. You can't level the playing field while holding alternative schools harmless. The difference in altitude is just too great.

Funding to make neighborhood schools more attractive will also have to be permanent and at much higher levels to provide effective incentives for parents.

Classroom size caps at alternative schools should be removed. Neighborhood schools too often suffer crowded classrooms. Alternative schools should also share in teaching high mobility kids that move in and out of classes. Class caps and sibling preferences too often make alternative schools like private clubs, and they rarely admit families who have just moved.

It's outrageous that the district has concentrated special education kids almost entirely in neighborhood schools. Alternative schools should share in educating and mainstreaming these children.

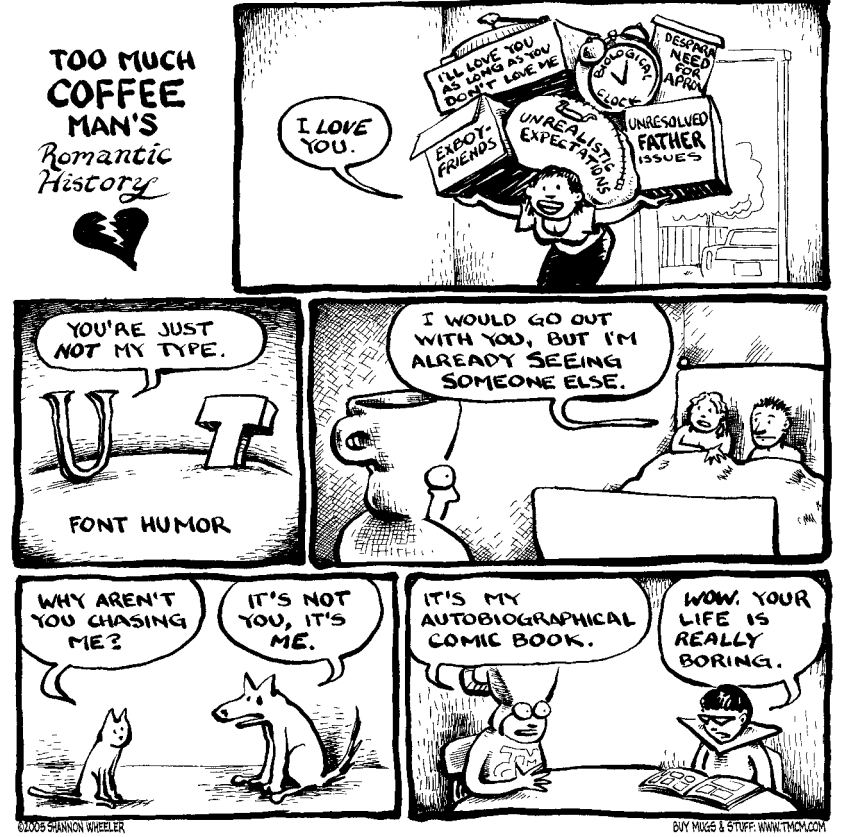
Neighborhood schools losing students forecasts a spiral of decline and the threat of closure or merger. Alternative schools should share in that threat of closure if they don't meet district diversity goals and offer some unique values. High test scores are less a sign of the success of alternative school curriculum than a reflection of the concentration of the most privileged students in the district.

Alternative programs nestled in wealthier neighborhoods just reinforce segregation. They should be moved to poorer areas and converted to magnet neighborhood schools that will draw richer families and increase integration. The current system is backwards.

We've heard the argument that well-educated and highly involved parents deserve the chance to create a learning environment that benefits their children. But it's not that simple. Relatively poor and uneducated parents also care deeply about their children, and many see education as their family's only ticket to success. We shouldn't look down at these parents if they have to work, can't get child care, don't have a car or otherwise can't be as involved as they would like to be in their children's education.

Powerful parents back the current system and political reality may mean 4J's style of choice is here to stay. But the unfair system shouldn't continue without major and prompt changes. Imagine Eugene 15 years from now if the current system continues while the Latino population grows to 20 percent. Will we still claim to "honor diversity" with a distinctly class-driven school system?

TOO MUCH COFFEE MAN BY SHANNON WHEELER



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

JUST ASS-KISSING

Kudos to *Eugene Weekly* for placing the disclaimer at the end of Valdas Anelauskas's viewpoint article (2/24) noting that Ward Churchill has some history with Anelauskas. It became quite clear to me that the bulk of the article was nothing more than thinly veiled ass-kissing on Anelauskas's part.

Anelauskas asserts that because of the U.S.'s continued violent crimes against the rest of the world, 9/11 was a well-deserved, long overdue payday for America. He then uses Hiroshima as one example of our bloody crimes. I would think that Anelauskas would argue that Hiroshima was a well deserved payday for the Japanese people because of the Japanese government's actions at the time.

It appears as though Anelauskas is simply stomping his feet and throwing a temper tantrum because his buddy Ward Churchill is not blindly accepted as being truthful.

Doug Lane
Junction City

WRONG DIRECTION

Regarding the LTD labor representative's contention that we don't need capital investment projects like the EmX (the planned rapid bus corridor between Eugene and Springfield): The EmX will make travel to Springfield less convenient, not more. I spoke with an LTD representative about the EmX, and he admitted that this first route alone will not add convenience; that in fact it would take 20 to 30 years and many more dollars before the other lines will add up and achieve real bus convenience: rigging the entire metro area into compatible systems.

Given how rapidly technology is changing, it is most likely that better transportation technologies will appear before that time. I just can't see us withholding fair labor treatment of the drivers and continuing a trend of route-cutting over money for this project when this will discourage existing bus customers, not attract more.

We can just switch to hybrid electric buses (which is now the industry standard anyway) without having to widen roads and build platforms. Let's return the money to the feds, keep our 20 percent, and tell them, "No thanks, we support our drivers." If we want cleaner air in Eugene, we should beautify the parks, put filters on the factories, and stop ugly strip malls — so people choose to walk and aren't in such a hurry to drive out of it all the time.

Cathy Seitz
Eugene

START AT HOME

Are the Lane County Circuit Court judges fighting for equality rights? Being that Eugene is a city filled with activists, hippies and minorities, and is such a widely diversified city — why is it that gay rights activists are traveling to the capitol for this issue: gay/lesbian marriage. Should we not all start right here in Lane County? Then move up in the chain?

Don't get me wrong — Eugene's finest traveled the 60 miles to the state Capitol and fought for our rights. The main question here is: What are Lane County judges willing to do for gays and lesbians? I would sure like to know. What about you?

Brian M. Peterson
Native Eugene homosexual

WHAT'S NEXT?

It has started. Measure 37 claims have begun rolling in, and eight waivers have been granted in Yamhill and Jackson counties. County commissioners have first approved the least problematic applications, but what's next?

Many Oregonians live here and love their state because of quality of life. Our quality of life results in large part from Oregon's system of land use planning. Having grown up in a small coastal town near San Francisco, I have come to appreciate the benefits of intelligent and rigorous land use planning. Half Moon