

Teachers Represent

The importance of diverse role models in a school community BY MISSY CORR

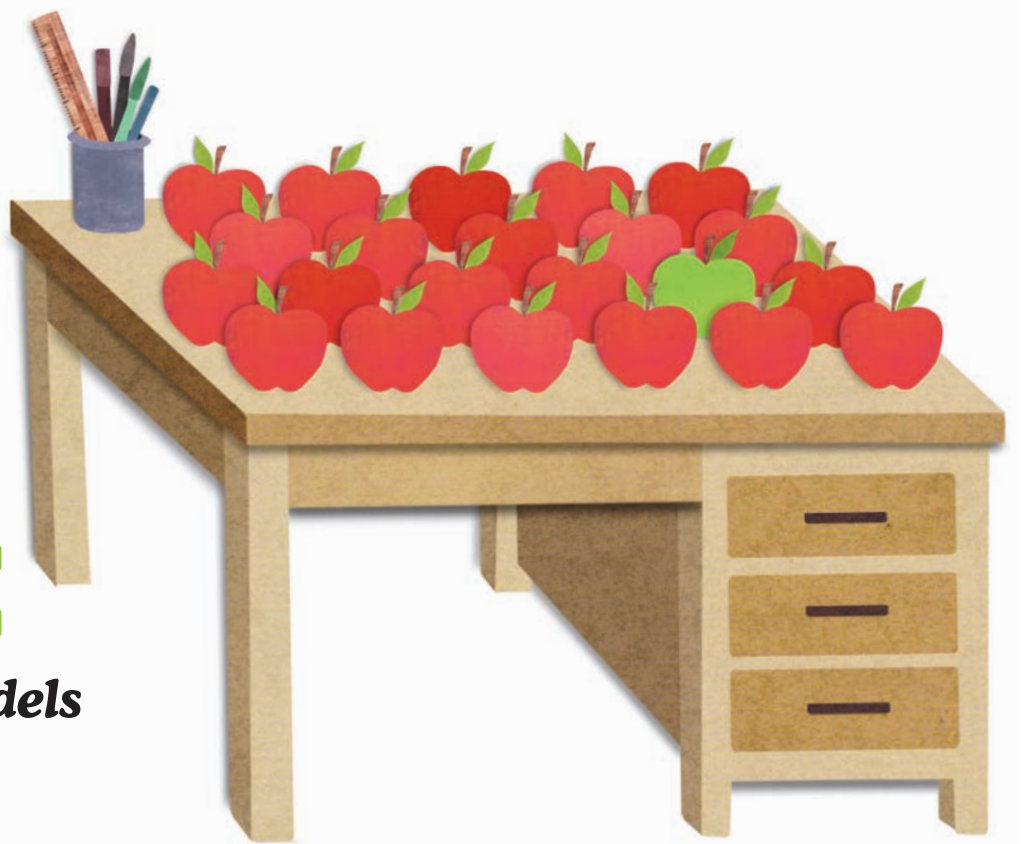


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Back when George Russell served as superintendent of 4J, he had to deal with racism on a regular basis. During a 4J Board of Education meeting about school closures, he says, a man who he assumes was a student's dad "came up to the podium and said, 'That's what happens when you hire the n-word for affirmative action reasons.'"

Teacher demographics in Eugene-area schools are far less diverse than student populations. Educators of color face unique challenges, and when they can effectively handle those challenges some say student success is more likely.

Russell says educators of color confront community resistance, mostly in subtle ways, but occasionally the pushback is overt.

"Everybody has examples that they can speak to — use of the n-word, and staff people who called me by the n-word," Russell says, "or even community members for that matter."

South Eugene High School assistant principal Stephanie Cannon is one of the school's ten staff who identify as a race other than white alone. She is half African-American and half Caucasian.

"I wish there were more teachers of color in our classrooms," Cannon says, "because I don't think that we have enough."

In the 2012-2013 school year, 27 percent of students at South Eugene High School were a race other than white — including mixed race — but only 8 percent of staff were, according to numbers from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE). Staff counts include instructional staff, administrative staff and other staff, such as guidance counselors and custodial.

"When I was superintendent," Russell says, "and I would meet with groups of students, they would always say, 'We'd like to see more teachers that look like us.'"

Approximately 30 and 32 percent of the students in Bethel and Springfield school districts respectively identify as being a race other than white alone, while only 11 and 10 percent of staff does.

"I think that our teachers of color, myself included, often feel like we have to be the spokesperson for students of color or around cultural competency or if there are different conversations to be had," Cannon says. If there were more teachers of color, she says, there wouldn't be as much pressure to be the voice of people of color.

Cannon works with local universities to place student teachers with teachers for practicums. "It's rare to have a person of color as an intern," she says, "which means to me there are not enough people of color going into education, at least in this area."

In February, the 4J, Bethel and Springfield school districts applied jointly for an ODE grant intended to fund efforts at increasing the racial diversity of Oregon students entering the teaching profession. The trio ranked 10th out of 12 applications. According to a letter to 4J from ODE Education Specialist Markisha Smith, many aspects of the application lack detail or research to support the claims the application makes.

4J communications coordinator Kerry Delf says the district is starting a program aimed at increasing the amount of educators of color in the district. The program will identify middle school students who want to teach and put them in four-credit courses while in high school.

Cannon says students of color could benefit from more teachers of color. "Just from the standpoint of being able

to have a role model, a mentor who you can relate to who is of color can provide a more supportive environment for a student."

There is an average 22.1 percent gap in academic achievement between underserved races — which ODE classifies as Hispanic or Latino, black or African-American, native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native — and white students in math and 17.8 percent in reading in the 4J district.

UO Department of Education associate professor Jerry Rosiek says one of the inhibitors to the success of underserved races is that the majority of teachers are white and often lack the cultural competence to aid in the success of culturally diverse students.

"But it's not just the student being able to identify with the person," Rosiek says. "It's the knowledge that the person brings of the kind of identity negotiations that are necessary when a child is moving through a school system."

He says children of color have trouble with navigating the racist perceptions of others. When teachers don't understand this, Rosiek says, the child's behavior leads them to believe the child is struggling because of deficits internal to the child. He describes cultural competency as the ability to see the child's responses as a sign of strength rather than a deficit.

"That ability to see is not guaranteed by someone bearing the same skin tone as the child or the same country of origin," Rosiek says. "It's born of certain kinds of experiences ... of certain kinds of ideologies where a person has become at least somewhat self-aware and critical of the way which racism operates in this society." ■

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