

Is your child learning at grade level?

by Lanita Duke

Grassroot News, N.W.—"Is my child learning at his or her grade level?" This question is being framed by the Portland chapter of the Black United Front for parents as parent-teacher conference time nears. This year's conferences coincide with the release of achievement levels which show Black students starting two grades behind and staying behind with each successive grade.

These achievement levels were released after the publication of last spring's test scores in October by *The Oregonian* newspaper. The scores showed the North side of Portland on the other side of the track educationally as they scored below the District's average in Reading, Math and Language Usage.

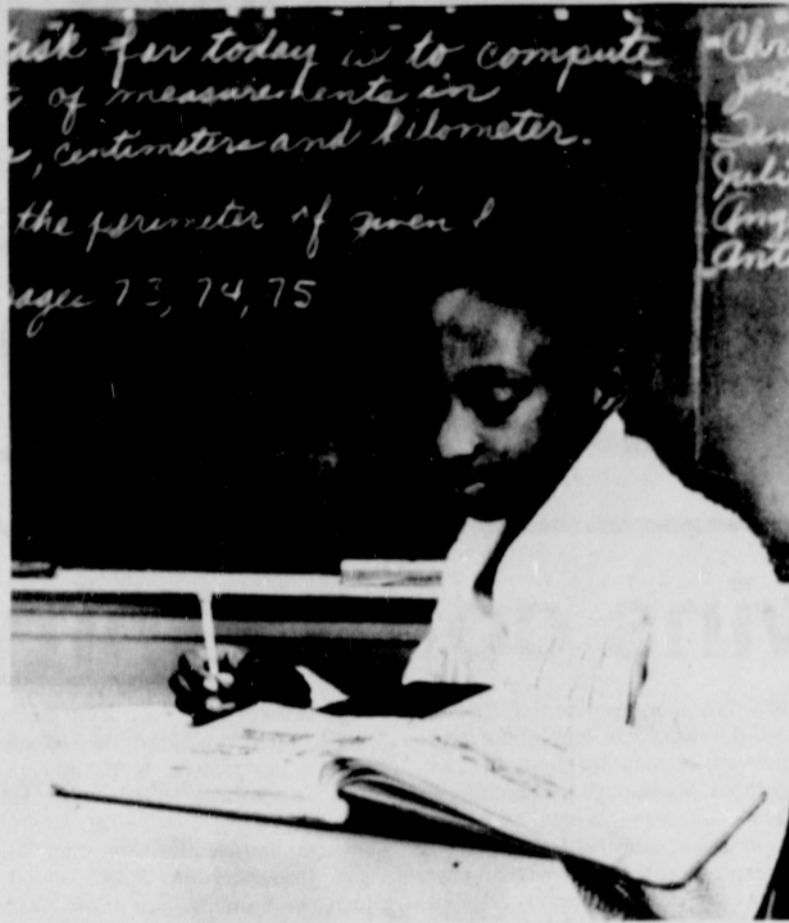
Karen Powell, Educational Program Director for the American Friends Service Committee, said these test scores reveal that Black students are starting the third grade behind and stay behind in the Portland Public School system.

"Across the board there is no change. Not only are they not recording a change but they are starting out and staying behind white students in the same grade."

She called this phenomenon "strange." "What is not coming across to my child is coming across somewhere else. The excuses of being a single parent and low-income does not bear any weight with me. If that is the case why is this discrepancy not showing up with white students?" Powell attributes the low scores in schools in the Albina area to poor classroom management. There are many teachers who have yet to learn how to control kids."

Another reason for this disparity among achievement scores between Black and white students is the historical stand once taken by the School District regarding Early Childhood Education Centers.

Powell states, "ECECs were used as magnets to bring white students



Doing fine: Tiffany Mitchell, a 5th grader at King School, is doing well at her grade level. The BUF wants parents of kids who are not cutting it to find out why. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

into the area while locking out neighborhood kids. At one time Humboldt School had more white students while the neighborhood kids were being bused to Beech and other schools. The District pulled the white kids out in the second and third grade and they went to schools in the Southwest side where they continued to climb."

Schools in inner Northeast, because of demographics, received additional federal money known as Title One or Chapter One funds. Powell said she believed the extra funds are not benefitting the pupil. "Schools in the Northeast are using that money for staff and staff training but the benefits from this additional training are not being realized

by the child in terms of achievement. Schools in the South and Southwest area who receive Chapter One money will invest that money in equipment, and schools in the Northeast will invest in personnel. A lot of it gets back to the attitude of the teachers who feel "these kids cannot learn."

Ronnie Herndon, co-chair of the Black United Front, agrees with Powell. "There are teachers who don't expect Black children to learn. We also have principals and administrators who are not able to give the proper kind of direction because when they were in the classroom they were not able to educate Black children. Not only are low expectations experienced by Black children

across the board, but the achievement scores are also below the District's average in poor white neighborhoods."

Herndon discounts theories which say poverty is the reason for poor achievement. "The one program that shows being poor does not limit a child's ability to learn is Head Start. Since 1964 it has worked with poor children and tests show that they do much better in school and in all areas of life."

Thelma Brown, Principal of Humboldt School, said poverty is one of the reasons schools in the Albina area are below the District's average in Reading, Math and Language. "The kids on the west side are not subjected to this kind of poverty. It has a lot to do with their income level and family stability. A lot of students come to school with external problems and we have to deal with those."

Next week, as parent/teacher conference time arrives, the Black United Front wants parents to:

- Find their child's achievement level;
- Compare it to the District's average;

• Ask the teacher three questions: (1) Is my child performing at grade level? (2) What level test did my child take? (3) What can I do to bring my child up to grade level?

The answers to these questions seriously affect the education of children in the inner city for years to come. The published fact that Black children stay two grades behind is a sweeping indictment of the Portland Public School system and its staff. Others said the bulk of the weight must be borne by parents in the Albina area. It is their responsibility to see to it that their children are performing at grade level. And if not, it is their responsibility to take the necessary steps to bring their children up to grade level.

The most frightening aspect of this disparity will show up among the children in their senior high school years as many will not be able to pass the minimal competency test if they are allowed to stay behind their white counterparts."

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School district admits errors

The Portland School District has announced that an error was made in its earlier report on the comparative achievement of Black and white students.

The rate of gain of average Black student achievement scores in the last two years in reading, language arts, and arithmetic has been 33 percent higher than that of white students (not 67 percent) or 3.2 RIT units vs. 2.4 units (not 3.5 RIT units vs. 2.1 units).

If reading and mathematics alone are considered, the difference in rate of gain is 36 percent (not 100 percent) so the average achievement levels of Black students have increased one-third more rapidly than white students.

Petitions ask zones for board members

The Committee for a More Responsible Portland School Board announced a petition drive to require the Portland School Board to put to a vote of the people, the question of zoning the district.

"We live in a time in history when all people are demanding more representation on the government bodies that affect their lives, spend their money, and educate their children," Frank Shields, Chairman of the committee said. "People want representation that is as accountable as possible, and that means, they want a local state representative, state senator; they also want a local school board member."

The Portland district has been the only district in the state prevented by law from zoning. The Portland School Board opposed SB 740 which removes the restriction and allows the Board to zone. It also provides that the citizens can petition the board to zone.

Currently candidates run and are elected city-wide, requiring high finances and often professionally run campaigns. Shields explained that it is difficult for new persons to "break into" the system, perpetuating current school board members and denying some areas of the city representation. Two areas of the city—the West Hills and Irvington have five of seven board members but 17 percent of the population. Southeast Portland, with 39 percent of the population, and North Portland, with 12 percent, have no representation.

City-wide campaigns require much money and therefore largely restrict candidacies to professional people while the poor remain unrepresented.

"This is an idea whose time has come long ago in most places," Shields said. "Regardless of the whisper network of the rich and powerful, regardless of any form of subtle repression, it is an idea whose time has come now to Portland."

SB 740 allows only nomination by zone, with elections district-wide. "This is a first step," Shields said. "Zone elections will be our next target."

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The ears of corn we eat today were, in their wild form hundreds of years ago, only an inch or so long.

Saguaros, which are huge cactuses found in Arizona, are often called "apartment houses of the desert" because they provide living quarters for so many bird species.

It takes 21 days for a grape to become a raisin in the sun.

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Street Beat

by Lanita Duke and Richard Brown

With the coolness of the night and the increase in utility costs, the **Street Beat** team asked, "The Public Utility Commission is comprised of one individual. Do you as a utility payer feel the rates would be more equitable if the decision was made by more than one person?"



Lewis Johnson
Company Head Person

Yes. The decision affects too many people and the job goes beyond one person.



Ruth King
Homemaker

It would work better with a committee. Others would bring in different ideas from their different experiences.



Josephine Bell
Housewife

Yes, I do. It is too much for one man to handle. We need others to make this decision or help him make these decisions.



Bev Scott
Data Processing

Yes, it sounds better to have a group make those decisions than one man. There needs to be a change.



Mike Fouts
Unemployment

I think it will work better with more than one person. We need more opinions to change and fix utility rates.



Dennis Burke
Woodcarver

It would be better for the public if he had some help. It is a lot involved and maybe we need a panel. There will be better input.