

PORTLAND OBSERVER

Vol. XVII, No. 46

October 1, 1987

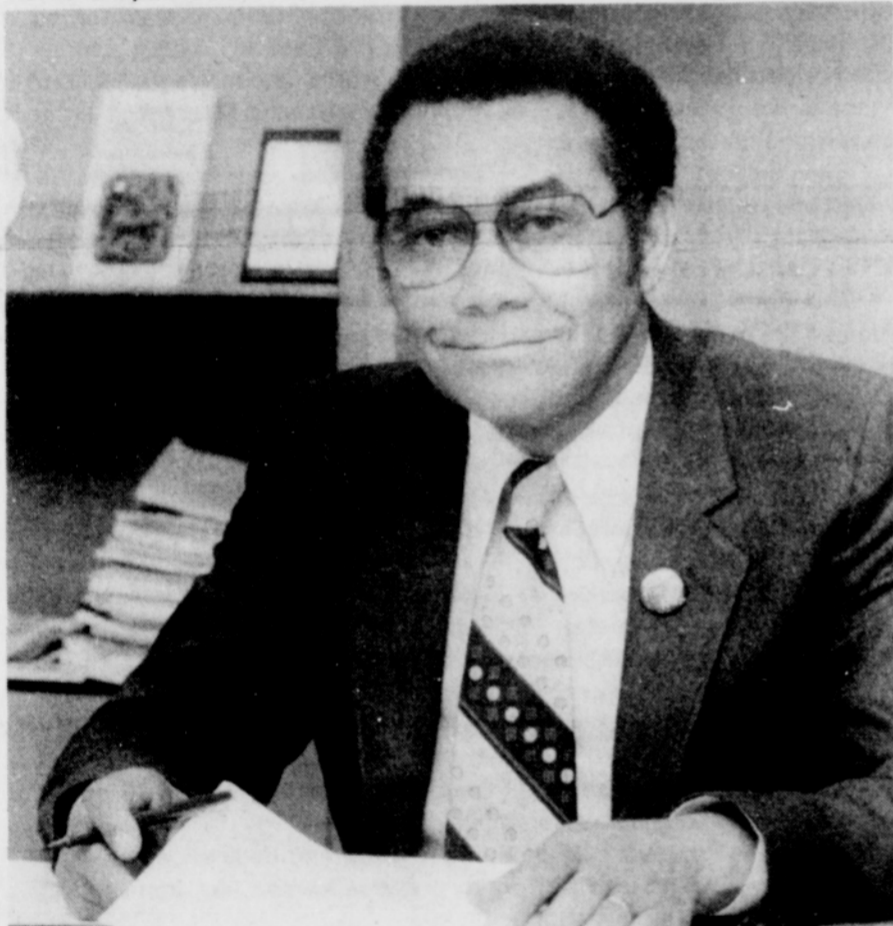
25¢

Are Portland Schools Educating Our African American Youth?

by Leon Harris

Yes! Says Dr. Matthew Prophet

Responding to charges leveled by Black United Front Co-Chairman Ron Herndon that African American youth were not receiving a quality education in Portland's public schools, Dr. Matthew Prophet, School Superintendent, labeled as unfair what he perceived as a characterization by Herndon that most African American students were performing poorly in Portland's public schools.



The charges stem from Herndon's allegations that the Grade Point Average (GPA) of African American students in Portland's middle- and senior high schools is 1.95, as opposed to 2.45 for White students and 2.75 for Asians. Herndon also claimed that based upon the school district's own projections, it would require 30 years to close the achievement gap.

While acknowledging the problem as being extremely serious, Dr. Prophet released the following statement to the Observer to counter the charges:

"The current rate of growth in the academic achievement of poor and minority students in the Portland schools is higher than ever before in the history of the school system.

Any estimate as to how long it will take for the average achievement level of poor and Black students to equal that of the highest achieving majority students must be understood to indicate that such an estimate is being made only at a given point in time and, assuming that nothing changes, or that no further initiatives will be undertaken to change the status quo.

If, for example, the question would have been asked in 1982: "How long will it take to close the achievement gap?", the estimate then (assuming no further improvement would have occurred) would have ranged between 60 and 80 years. If that same question is asked today, assuming again that no changes or improvements in programs for poor and minority are to occur beyond what currently exists, the estimate is probably in the range of 30 years.

The fact of the matter is, however, that massive improvements are being constantly made in literally hundreds of programs throughout the District on an ongoing basis, and such changes and improvements will continue to be made. Actually it is impossible to predict when the achievement gap will be closed fully, any more than it is possible to predict when other conditions in the total American society will become such that there will be equity between all ethnic groups.

I would like to make the following statements which I feel are important for the total Portland community to know:

The first is: The level and rate of improved achievement of poor and minority students are currently higher and more accelerated than at any time in the past.

The second is: The employees of this school system are dedicated to the task of closing the achievement gap and are working very hard toward that objective.

The third is: Parents and citizens who are interested in knowing more specifically about the many special programs and initiatives that have been implemented by the school system to improve our programs for all children are invited to contact my office. I will provide them with a great deal of official information which I feel will promote greater appreciation for the massive work being done in the interest of all students.

Finally: and most importantly — I will prepare a full report for our

community relating the details of specific initiatives that are underway. I will request that the Observer and other media publish and/or announce this report to the public.

Matthew W. Prophet
Superintendent of Schools

Dr. Prophet pointed out that while the school district has the ultimate responsibility for educating youth, "the process really begins at home," he states. "I am extremely impressed with the interest of parents in school activities, but there is not enough participation. Parents should really get involved even during the pre-school years by periodically visiting the school, getting to know their child's teacher, and reviewing the curriculum."

Another problem confronting the schools, according to Dr. Prophet, is the unemployed parent. "If the parent is not working, the likelihood of the child failing in school increases significantly," he claims. "Subsequently, it requires an investment from business and government, and a total commitment from all of society, to eradicate social and economic barriers in closing the achievement gap."

Prophet pointed to "The Leadership Roundtable", a group of business and civic leaders, as one which is attempting to address the problem. "The Roundtable" is headed by an executive committee comprised of Rober L. Breezley, chairman, Business/Youth Exchange of the Portland Chamber of Commerce, Vice-Chairman and Chief Operating Officer, U.S. Bancorp; Mayor Bud Clark; Dr. Prophet; and Vern Riles, Chairman, Private Industry Council, President, Poppers Supply Co. Their diverse membership is working to consolidate fragmented youth employment programs, stimulate private sector involvement in schools, and develop a master plan — "The Portland Investment" — to reduce school dropouts, provide increased employability skills, and provide access to jobs, especially for low-income and minority youth.

"We seek to provide employment opportunities for youth which, hopefully, will relieve the household of some of the economic pressure. From this could possibly come more parental monitoring of school activities," he stated.

Dr. Prophet also pointed to the District's use of national consultants as an effective means of developing, adjusting and evaluating school programs and curriculum. Some of their recommendations are being tested in programs like:

Con't. on Page 4

No! Says Ron Herndon

Calling the Portland Public Schools' programs for educating African Americans, Hispanics, poor Whites and other disadvantaged minorities a state of "disorganized, chaotic confusion," Ron Herndon, Co-Chairman of the Portland Chapter of the Black United Front, challenged the School District to develop alternatives to its current methodology for educating Portland youth.

"The Portland Public School District has chartered a course for educating African Americans, Hispanics, poor Whites and other minorities, but the course they have chartered does not address the educational needs of the students, nor does it reflect the views expressed by Dr. Prophet to his supporters when he was being considered for school superintendent." The charges were made after reviewing documents Herndon claims were shown to him by Dr. Prophet in Prophet's office which listed the Grade Point Average (GPA) for African American middle- and high school students in Portland's public schools at 1.95 as opposed to 2.45 for White students and 2.75 for Asians.

Even more shocking, according to Herndon, was the Superintendent's revelations that, based upon the School District's own projections, it would require thirty years to close the achievement gap. (NOTE: The GPA and thirty year projection are confirmed by Dr. Prophet, but with points to clarification. Prophet also strongly refuted most of Herndon's allegations in a statement released to the Observer.)

"Five years ago," Herndon alleges, "the Superintendent espoused a philosophy that appeared to be consistent with the goals of a community concerned with educating its youth. His ideologies on programs and curriculum development, his eagerness to develop a dialogue with community leaders, his remarkable track record as a public schools administrator were all factors in his selection. But the programs and curriculum developed by the School District to address minority educational needs have failed after five years and I refuse to tell my children that it's going to take thirty years to catch up."

Herndon accuses Prophet of breaking a promise he made to communi-

cate with community leaders regarding community, parental and student concerns on issues pertaining to the School District. According to Herndon, meetings he and others have had with Prophet and other School District officials to express concerns about programs or staff have resulted in luke-warm responses or just plain ignored.

"The SEED Project is a prime example of the District's naive approach to closing the achievement gap." (NOTE: SEED is a math program that teaches elementary students from lower social economic status backgrounds about advanced math concepts. Its purpose is to increase adapted version achievement and math esteem. It has been endorsed by several national consultants hired by the School District.)

"SEED is an excellent idea but is ineffective because the project requires a teacher with a math major and a strong math background. But he has yet to act on the recommendations of the consultants they brought in to make the program functional."

Herndon states the consultants are hired for a two or three week period, but, when they leave, a non-math major is assigned to teach the class. Yet, the School District expects continuity.

Herndon also accused the School District of breaking a commitment made to the Desegregation Monitoring Committee (DMAC) which was created by Dr. Prophet in 1986. The agreement stipulates that DMAC would be allowed to review documents outlining contributions ethnic groups have made to art, science, math and music from a historical and contemporary perspective. Also violated was an agreement to allow the task force access to the scripts used by the national consultants who wrote the document prior to video taping for teacher training, Herndon claims, and states these were but two of many instances of violation of trust and non-responsiveness by the School District.

These events and the fact that the Multi-cultural/Multi-ethnic coordinator has not respected written commitments made with the task force led to his resignation from the twenty-five member group, he acknowledged. "When it was brought to Dr. Prophet's attention that the coor-



dinator was ineffective, the Superintendent refused to take corrective action even though he agreed that the individual was not performing to the

Con't on Page 4