

WHO IS PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR THE YEAR 2000?

Statewide Response to Observer Article on Minority Teacher Training

A rapid series of exciting events has followed on the heels of a June 18 telephone call to the Portland Observer from the office of the Speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives, Vera Katz. Mr. Mark Skolnick, legislative assistant to the speaker, sought the appearance of McKinley Burt, Observer feature writer, for testimony at the July 25 meeting of the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission for the State of Oregon.

The interaction was initiated, however, with our June 27 publication of the front page article reproduced at right. It represents a rather caustic viewpoint of both the commission's decision in May to suspend the Basic Skills Test for 180 days--and the Task Force recommendation that the tests be abandoned altogether. We do not believe that either action represents anything other than moves which will further deteriorate the educational environment for minority children.

We wonder why it is at these times when the education structure is pronounced to be failing in so many of its mandated missions, that a task force

presumed to be minority advocates would espouse such a short sighted gambit--one that obviously will only further their disabilities and frustrations. The parents of minority children in this state do not deserve this "cop-out". Professor Burt is quite right when he points out in his article that there are classic schools in this country--models of excellence for educating these minorities--models "pursued by hundreds of thousands of African Americans in revolt against the educational travesty imposed upon them..."

The rather feeble and plaintive protest of the task force--"The California Basic Skills Test is not a test that will determine whether or not you would make a good teacher"--stirs a deep suspicion. There is a definite temptation to make inquiry: "Have the members of the Minority Teacher Task Force passed the California test themselves?"; and if so, how many attempts were required? Think about it! The Portland School District is in almost the tenth year of its long-heralded "Curriculum Desegregation Project". Even if it had been able to

deliver many of the key materials submitted--identity, motivation, role models--could you even imagine one of the test failure persons developing a class exercise around the following?

"The gifted African Poet, Alexander Pushkin, was (and is) Russia's most honored man of letters. Inspiring millions with the beauty and drama of his verse, it was the strength and nobility of his lines that moved the peasants to wrest their freedom from the Czar--much as you have learned in your other classes the peoples of Eastern Europe have been inspired to throw off their yokes and seek democracy. Now, pupils, I shall project a picture on the screen--This is Moscow's famed "Pushkin Square" where yet today a magnificent statue of the poet overlooks the square. Yes, that arch at the intersection is the new McDonald's fast food outlet! Now I will assign you the following reading, and I shall want an essay by the end of the month."

Well, of course, the question was rhetorical. But need we go on? Our report on the commission hearings follow.

It All Began with this Critical Analysis of a Recent Recommendation by the Minority Teachers Task Force (Portland Observer, June 27, 1990)

Legislature's Task Force Says "Minority Teachers Don't Need Know Nuthin'--Look Who They is Teachin'"

By Professor McKinley Burt

Under the heading "Task Force Calls Teacher Test A Failure", last Tuesday's Oregonian reported that in the opinion of a legislature task force, "Oregon should scrap a basic skills test for teachers." Their findings lead to the conclusion that "The California Basic Educational Skills Test is not a test that will determine whether or not you would make a good teacher." The spokesperson was LaVonne Lobert-Edmo, a Salem student resource specialist and chairman of the Minority Teacher Task Force.

Oregon's Teacher Standards and Practices Commission voted in May to SUSPEND THE BASIC SKILLS TEST FOR 180 DAYS. Now it is suggested that a permanent educational travesty may be inflicted upon the "minority" students of this state--for it is quite certain that school principals will not allow teachers who fail the test to teach other than minority pupils. when I refer to these persons as half-literate I use the term advisedly as you can determine for yourself from the following statistics (multiple choice questions, yet).

"During the 1988-89 school year in Oregon, about 55 percent of the 152 minority persons taking the California test passed. Eleven of 25 black test takers passed; 19 of 47 Hispanics passed. By contrast, 2,413, or 80 percent, of 3,027 white test takers passed."

That makes it quite obvious what it is exactly that the test does determine; large numbers of our populations have suffered educational disabilities which have assured them a listing among those who will be unable to compete or otherwise effectively interface in today's world of technology and increasingly sophisticated workplaces. But, it would seem that we have those who would empower these failures to transfer their disabilities to yet another generation. And it seems like only yesterday that we had to put down the assault of the

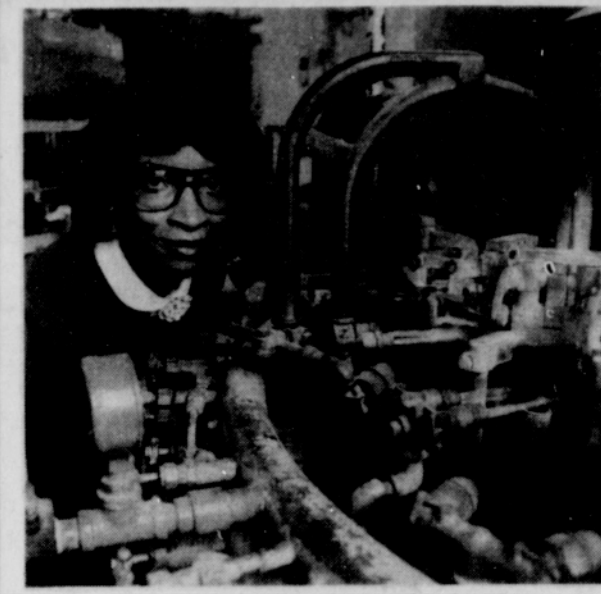
neo-primitives who wished to introduce "Black English" or similar degeneracies into an already defective curriculum.

The oldest of canards has been trotted out: "But because the exam,

years later by his second book, "Why Johnny Still Can't Read"). The book "Cultural Literacy" is an excellent exercise in middle class polemics (intellectual masturbation), but hardly addresses the problem of a seriously flawed delivery system for providing a decent educational product to our children.

Rather than continue the "litany of inequities", I prefer to re-emphasize the "Success Models" which were described in last week's front page article and in the "Perspectives" column. We were told of the exemplary accomplishments of 22 nationally-recognized principals who are successively educating African American children at the same level (or better) as white pupils in their cities ("National Association of Schools of Excellence"). Further, we saw that this quite feasible methodology had been packaged into a manual and video and delivered to every school principal in the state of Oregon: "Partners For Success: Business and Education." National distribution will follow.

And it was in the Perspectives column that we described the one hundred year-old model of Bishop Daniel Payne's "classic curriculum" for "free Negroes" in the antebellum South. And the fantastic accomplishments of the Black Catholic priest, Father Clements, whose classic school is the model pursued by hundreds of thousands of African American parents in revolt against the educational travesty imposed upon them by an uncaring and inept school district. I know that this week I promised "specific science models and role models, but this local travesty required our immediate attention. On page nine of this issue be sure to see our feature on Miss Tara Louise Johnson, a high-achieving African American student who obviously was not taught by teachers who failed the California Basic Educational Skills Test.



General Electric Co. engineering apprentice; Do you think that a "skills test" failure taught her?

like most standardized tests, is biased against minority groups, teacher-training schools are looking for "other" ways to assess a teacher's basic skills... WHAT THE TESTS ARE BIASED AGAINST IS IGNORANCE!--An ignorance of the basic skills and techniques (math and language) necessary to decode the elaborate data base of knowledge which supports our contemporary culture. And whose fault is that?

There is little need to cite again the litany of educational debacles and inequities that have brought about this horrendous situation--this newspaper and other media across the country have detailed the problem ad infinitum. Parents, taxpayers and a "minority" of effective educators have screamed almost in vain for too long--ever since that Catholic priest in Chicago wrote, "Why Johnny Can't Read", and that was decades ago (to be followed on

A special Observer focus THE HEARINGS A special Observer focus

Teacher Standards and Practices Commission, State of Oregon
Notice of Hearing on the Proposed Repeal of the Basic Skills Test
9 a.m., July 25, 1990
Autzen Senate Chamber in Putnam Center at Willamette University,
Salem, Oregon

■ A reporter and staff photographer covered the hearings for the Portland Observer ■

Seventeen members of the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission were present to hear testimony from educators around the state. The members of the commission, primarily, are elementary and secondary teachers with two principals each from private and state colleges, one school board member, and two representatives of the public at large.

The audience was drawn from an even more diverse group of citizens, drawn primarily from the ranks of the educational establishment. Among them were a number of strongly opinionated

part, BUT I HAVEN'T READ IT! African American members of the audience bowed their heads while the others exchanged knowing glances--or stared directly at Blacks they knew.

The testimony of Professor Burt pretty well followed the thrust of his June 27 article reproduced above. He made a strong positive case for continuation of the tests with sharp, sometimes brusque dismissals of the rather weak but dangerous conclusions put forward by the proponents for cancellation of the skill test. There were many nods of assent from the commission when Burt

needs to tell the truth and so many are afraid!"

Professor Burt went on to describe his experiences in industry and to state he could well understand the business community's exasperation with the "Basic Skills" level of the young employees provided to them by school districts that apparently lacked certain skills themselves. He cited two experiences of his own, 14 years apart. The first in Los Angeles (1957) where at the Globeware Manufacturing Company, Blacks and Hispanics were hired off the street to produce pots and pans and skillets. "The tolerance required for quality control was minimal and housewives seldom complained if a skillet was "a tiny bit out of round". It was not essential that the workers possess any more than the most minimal skills necessary to read the few measuring devices that were used."

But in the second instance at a Portland manufacturing plant where tolerances as fine as 10,000th of an inch were required, Burt stated that the production line was a disaster (the workforce drawn heavily from minority groups). He made the telling point that in this age of demand for reading and computational skills which will enable this nation to compete in this world's high technology marketplace, American industry has made it clear that something has to be done in a hurry in respect to the education system they rely upon. "And yet we have here a body of people who wish this commission to participate in a further crippling of a failing system by cancelling the Basic Skills Test". The blind cannot lead the blind.

Many more telling points were made by Burt including the advice that his association and conversation with those 22 "Teachers and Principals of Excellence (tops in the nation" left no doubt in his mind that they would never hire a teacher who had failed the "California Basic Schools Test", when high school students in many areas were "passing the very same test." It seemed to our reporter that while over half the testimony was in favor of cancelling the test, the testimony of Professor Burt may have turned the tide in favor of AT LEAST A MINIMAL STANDARD OF COMPETENCE FOR THOSE WHO ARE GOING TO TEACH OUR CHILDREN.

The year 2000 is almost at hand. We ask our readers to show there support for at least some screening in this process of selecting teachers. Write att.: Vera Katz, Office of the Speaker, House of Representatives, State Capitol, Salem, Oregon 97310-1347. Do it today!



Professor McKinley Burt, delivers his pro-CBEST testimony at the school district hearings

and quite articulate antagonists--for or against the proposed repeal of the skills test. Officials of several social advocacy agencies were present, including the "Oregon Commission on Black Affairs". Unbelievable, the Executive Director, Ms. Amazonas Olivella, PLEADED FOR REPEAL OF THE SKILLS TEST. Her position, "tests must be 'above' suspicion of possible unfair treatment of people from culturally diverse heritages". What needs to be "above suspicion" is the competency of those teachers engaged by the State of Oregon to teach our children!

There was an interesting and revealing interchange between Ms. Olivella and a member of the executive committee of the commission. In her testimony Olivella had repeated the old 1960s polemic that "significant portions of the exam are culturally and racially biased." When asked, "what parts of the test are biased; there are three principal components, you know?", the reply was, its in the English/Essay

prefaced his testimony that he was raised in an age of educational competency and that his mother and aunt were graduates of teacher colleges (Normal Schools)--"they would turn over in their graves if aware that things had gone downhill ever since."

He scored again with the commission when he recited his experiences at a teacher at Portland State University. Ill-prepared minority students--many preparing to be teachers--that he would give a D, only to have them return with an essay or test from a class taught by whites, which basic skills-deficient document had received a grade of A- or B. So much for the member of the Minority Task Force who had tried to make the case that skills-deficient minorities need not take tests for there would be helpful hands to "bring them up to par". Several members of the commission followed Burt from the hearing room to shake his hand and congratulate him on his forthright testimony. "Somebody

OPINION

Exercising the Right to Question Authority

BY ANGELIQUE SANDERS

With the "education president" in office, Oregon State is debating whether teachers need to demonstrate their qualifications through a skills test.

As in making any ludicrous decision such as this one, the capitol saw fit to hold a meeting, inviting any measurable figureheads. At first glance, the meeting promised to be boorish and pointless: the "audience" brought to mind overaged schoolchildren assuming the "attention" stance, yet legitimately hearing nothing. Late-entering visitors were treated with a vacant gaze, like new students in class. I presumed that the obvious conclusion of this meeting--if for no more reason than preventing a disruptive educational backlash--was to conclude, "okay, so we DO need some method of proof that the authorities of education can prove they have more knowledge than the students."

Upon further listening, I found that people were taking this very seriously. One gentleman, Walter Hathaway, Director of Research Evaluation for Portland Public Schools, ridiculed the test by saying something to the effect of, so you don't know a certain algebra trick...does this make you a bad teacher? My response is, probably it

does not, but when your students ask you that same question--that you were unable to answer on the skills test--what will you say? There ARE teachers out there who not only have so-called valid teaching skills, but can also pass a cursory knowledge test. If they cannot, let's question why they're leading our youth.

The very institution--Willamette University--where this meeting was held requires the test. How can teachers have the audacity to test the students constantly, but when the teachers have to prove a certain ability of general knowledge, they can just smile back and say, "Well, I've got a degree, don't I?" Just as there are many illiterate students that are graduated from high schools, similarly there are--and we can all attest to this fact, as we've all been taught by some--teachers that have filtered through any vague testing requirements during college and gone on to educate (or just ramble mindlessly to) the masses. I view the skills test as an additional sieve of poor teachers: while it is not an automatic assurance that a potential educator is qualified, it will help strain out some bad apples (I'll spare you the tired ditty "one bad apple...").

One of the complications of the CBEST is that the records illustrate a higher passing rate for high school students than college students. This, concludes the school district, proves that the test is warped and fallible, not a valid test at all, surely justification for surrendering the test. But what they don't say is, if the test is inadequate, then let's develop a better standard of testing teaching aptitude, instead of dropping the final assessment we have.

Another point the district pushes is that the time limit is ludicrous. Many teachers out there have passed the test in the designated time (not to mention high school students). Are these teachers saying that they cannot pass this type of evaluation that even their students have little trouble with? Who's teaching whom?

In conclusion, I'd like to ask readers the following: firstly, if you were a principal, who would have first hiring priority: a skills test failure or victor? Secondly, if you were a student, how would you feel if you found out your teacher was a failure in a basic skills test? And lastly, if you are a parent, how would you feel about your children being schooled under skills test failures, or teachers that never took one?

To voice your opinion as a parent, student, teacher, or concerned citizen, address your ideas to:

Attention: Vera Katz
Office of the Speaker
House of Representatives
State Capitol
Salem, Oregon 97310-1347