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Opinion

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Education week aids basic rights

BY REG WEAVER
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

America Education Week will be observed November 14-20 in cities and towns across the country. The week offers us all a good opportunity to consider just how our neighborhood schools are doing, and provides the chance and challenge to get personally involved in making a difference for our school children. Over the past several months, I have had the privilege of speaking before gathering of local chapters of the NAACP. It's heartening to share concerns with these committed sister and brothers, because through all the struggles of the last 50 years, the labor and civil rights movement have stood arm and arm, braided together in a conspiracy of conscience and bound by the ideal that quality public education is a right of all children not for just a privileged few. Nothing is more critical to the strong foundation of a child's life than a solid education. Public education is society's great equalizer. It is the engine that moves the poor into the middle class, that equips every child—regardless of color—the wherewithal to succeed. Public education is about upward mobility and economic opportunity. Today, few would argue that all children in this great country are getting the good education they deserve. The sorry fact is that not all of our schools, and to many in the inner cities, are serving our children well. Too many are just not good enough. The civil struggle brought us crucial victories. But these hard-fought Right means precious little to a child who has been denied a decent education. The right to quality public education is a basic right—an enabling rights and key to all others. So how do we ensure every student is well served by our public schools? We are faced with a choice—a choice

between "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," essentially giving up on our schools and turning to vouchers as some sort of salvation, or joining together to make the school work for all children. When only two institutions remain today to anchor inner-communities—the churches and the public schools—I would argue that we cannot afford to abandon those schools. As the father of two sons, I understand that parents are tired of schools that are underperforming. We all want the best for our children. But for public schools vouchers are not the cure; they would be one more cancer. Vouchers are a fundamentally dishonest scheme. Voucher advocates promise us that the free market will fill our neighborhoods with quality private schools. But where is the evidence that the free market values our neighborhoods? Where in the inner city do you find Wal-Mart or Macy's or Home Depot? In fact, poor folk are already given one form of vouchers. They're called food stamps. Have these food stamps vouchers brought quality supermarket chains into inner cities? No. Instead, what we see is a proliferation of run-down corner stores, selling mostly malt liquor and lottery ticket. The food in these stores cost more—and it is lower quality. Advocates tell us that vouchers will give "choice" to inner-city parents. In reality, however, parent have no choice when the private school admissions committee says, "sorry, your child would not be appropriate for our school." Nor do parents have a choice when private and religious schools already have a long waiting list, or when there is no transportation to voucher schools across town or in the suburbs. What's more, it is a profoundly terrible choice when several thousand children are given vouchers, but tens of thousand remain behind—in school that are left

with fewer resources, fewer high-performing students, and fewer involved parents. For those who would choose abandonment of our schools to succeed, however, they first have to convince the rest of America that public education has failed and that public schools are beyond repair. The fact is, we have thousands of terrific public schools in the country. By any measure, this public schools—yes, most of them in affluent suburbs—are performing at world-class levels. Our challenge is to create those same kinds of schools in every inner city, in every rural town, and in every neighborhood will be enabled to achieve at the same high level as top students in the best suburbs. Our challenge is to demand they schools expert the—best and produce the best—in every one of our children. We owe it to our kids to create something lasting and enduring for them—something that will treat them all equally, with nurturing and respect. Something that will endow them with hope, inspiration, guidance, and the too for a better future. We can all help make that happen. American Education Week is a great time to make a personal commitment to our local public school. Be an advocate for the things we know work—smaller class sizes, tougher standards for students' achievement and student behavior, and teacher quality. Join the PYA, volunteer in the classroom or administration offices. Offer to read with younger students, or share your expertise as a guest speaker. Get to know your child's teacher. Just don't do anything. Teachers cannot transform urban schools all by themselves. But with help of caring, concerned member of every community, working together, we can prevail. We owe it to the children. This education week, let's all resolve to work together to ensure every child's civil right to quality education.

A little known Veterans' Day story

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

There are many virtually unknown and untold veterans stories. They're the stories of men and women of color who risked their lives for a country which discriminated against them, in some cases even unfairly incarcerated them or dishonored and discharged them. On this Veteran's Day let us remember one group of soldiers who served their country honorably but without thanks. The Navajo language is unwritten and complex, like many of the languages of native peoples. During World War II, it became the basis of a code used by Navajo soldiers who were recruited to transmit thousands of radio messages during the toughest battles in the Pacific. Called the Navajo Code Talkers, these heroic soldiers never had their code broken by the Japanese during the war and the code was kept secret until 1968, when it was declassified. But the Navajo Code Talkers were so successful not only because of their ability to send and receive messages without error. They also devised an even more complex variation on their language which they used for their code. Thus, fighter planes were called hummingbirds and other planes and ships were given nature-based code names. They even transposed and changed letters in their language and created alternative words in order to transmit names of places in an extremely complex code. The idea for the Navajo Code Talkers came from Philip Johnston, the child of missionary parents who lived on the Navajo reservation as a child. Johnston, who could speak the language himself, overcame the racism and skepticism of the armed forces and persuaded the marines to train Navajo men. It was a wise decision. The Navajo Code Talkers, in the first hours of the battle at Iwo Jima, sent and received 800 coded messages without error. Their code is one of the few in military history which was never cracked. But while their service probably saved thousands of lives and was part of the reason for the U.S. armed forces' success in the Pacific, the Navajo men were themselves victims of racism. More than once white soldiers, for example, looked at their physical characteristics and thought they must be Japanese. Moreover, the Navajos are not the only native American people who acted as Code Talkers for the armed forces—both Comanches and Cheyennes did as well. Their stories, however, just have not received the public attention. And the irony is that these men who used their native language to help protect a nation that often has not protected them, now see those languages in danger of extinction as fewer and fewer young people are fluent in them. A recent book and History Channel program on the Navajo Code Talkers have brought public attention to these brave men and their story. There are even filmmakers interested in their story, but even a half a century later they find themselves still fighting racism. One director, for instance, wants to tell their story through the eyes of the white bodyguards who were assigned to protect the Code Talkers from the Japanese. Even now, it seems, we are reluctant to let native people tell their own stories. Even now we don't know how to honor those who served this nation admirably—the same nation that took their land and almost destroyed their people and their way of life. Thank you, Navajo Code Talkers, Comanche Code Talkers and Cheyenne Code Talkers for all that you have done and for all that you are. May you have the opportunity to tell your own stories and may we listen. May you always be remembered with gratitude and with respect.

Letter to the editor

Veterans Day Reflects Common Bond of Service

What is it about America's veterans that brings us together on Veterans Day? Are we living in the past—attempting to capture a fleeting moment in time that has long since past? Certainly not! What brings veterans together for Veterans Day is a bond formed in uniform. It is the bond that is entwined within our hearts and minds, which is simply stated: I shall not fail those with whom I serve. It has been more than a quarter century since the guns fell silent in Vietnam. Longer still for Korea—and nearly a lifetime for World War II. Yet, that bond of military service—which transcends the years—compels us to come together and keep the faith with those with whom we served. This final Veterans Day of the 20th century will include observances with the

youngest generation of veterans, the men and women of the Persian Gulf War. These are Americans who continue to serve us in uniform. These are Americans who will gather on many more Veterans Days because they also feel that common bond. As young American military members spend this day deployed to Kosovo,

Bosnia, Iraq, at-sea and in distant remote locations, it is appropriate for all of us a nation to take the time to say 'thank you'. As veterans we have kept our bond of service to our nation. For America's veterans are a special group of men and women bonded through service, committed to the future.

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