

OPINION

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Our Future Cannot Wait

BY ELIJAH E. CUMMINGS

On April 1, the United States Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in the University of Michigan's voluntary efforts to include African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans within its highly-selective undergraduate programs and school of law.

The Congressional Black Caucus has filed a brief with the court expressing our support for the university. We are deeply gratified that scores of other House leaders, including Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Chair Ciro Rodriguez and Asian Pacific Congressional Caucus Chair David Wu of Oregon have joined the CBC in this just and critical cause.

There are two central issues for the court to resolve.

Do we truly believe that the fair and inclusive representation of all Americans within our major, publicly-funded universities is no longer a "compelling state interest" that justifies voluntary actions to move us closer toward that goal?

Can we devise methods to achieve that representation that are even more "narrowly tailored" than the modest commitments that the University of Michigan has made?

When it considers its answers to these questions, the Supreme Court should lay to rest the opponents' inaccurate assertion that "these affirmative action policies may have been necessary 30 years ago, but the playing field is fairly level today."

The court cannot avoid the racial and ethnic realities of life in this country.

The Education Trust has found that this nation's poorest schools—the schools that African Americans and Hispanic Americans disproportionately attend—receive the least amount of state and local funding. President Bush and the Congress acknowledged this fact when we enacted the "No Child Left Behind" legislation—an initiative, I should note, that we have yet to fully fund.

We have not created a "level playing field" in preparatory education. Now, opponents of affirmative action want to keep Americans of color off the public university playing field altogether.

Today, fewer than 1-in-10 Hispanic Americans go on to college and African Americans attend college at only one-half the Caucasian rate. Credible research concludes that, without affirmative action, the percentage of African American students being educated on many campuses would drop below 2 percent.



Congressman Elijah E. Cummings

The Supreme Court should give these facts very careful consideration.

Contrary to President Bush's inaccurate assertion, the University of Michigan's admissions process does not reward unqualified applicants—and it is not based upon quotas. Rather, the university awards minority applicants 20 additional points on a 150 point scale—the same number of additional points that are allocated to Caucasian students from low-income families.

If ethnicity were to be entirely replaced as a factor in college admissions by the economic background of the applicants—as some have

suggested—racial diversity would plummet. A computer simulation of incoming students at the University of California at Berkeley has predicted that the number of black students would drop by 60 percent if socioeconomic status were the only permissible consideration.

We also know that the minority students who have studied at world-class universities like Michigan's live up to our highest aspirations. They make substantial contributions to the well-being of their communities and often rise to national leadership.

If the Supreme Court rules in favor of the university's diversity process—as we believe that it must—the Court's message will be one of a future America that is unified, capable and strong.

However, if the opponents of inclusion prevail in the Supreme Court, that will also send a message to the tens of millions of American young people who look like Congressman Rodriguez and me.

The Court would be telling them, in effect, that some groups in America must always follow while others have the exclusive opportunity to lead.

That would be a profound error. Our children are this nation's future—and our future can no longer wait.

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, D-Md., serves as Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus.

We have not created a "level playing field" in preparatory education. Now, opponents of affirmative action want to keep Americans of color off the public university playing field altogether.

—Elijah E. Cummings, chair of the Congressional Black Caucus

Raise Revenue for Vital Services

In an address to the National Alliance of Mental Illness at the state Capitol, state Sen. Avel Gordly called for state legislators to act immediately to raise revenue to help Oregonians with mental illness and other medical needs.

"We have reached a point in this state where, with the budget crisis getting deeper and darker every day, the only way through this is to get more revenue. That means tax reform now," said Gordly, D-Multnomah County. "Not five months from now or three years from now. It must happen now."

As an example, Gordly supports a proposal to increase beer and wine taxes and dedicate some of the new revenue to support for mental health services.

Gordly has made mental health issues a top legislative priority and is one of the founders of the legislative Mental Health Caucus. She said mental health parity is "long overdue."

"Now more than any other time in our history, the state of Oregon and our Nation must have a mental health system that works for all who need it," Gordly said.

She urged members of NAMI to remind legislators that their constitutional responsibility includes levying a tax when there are insufficient revenues to support state services.

"Hold your legislators accountable to the oath they each took to uphold the constitution, not the 'pledge' they took to get elected," she said.



LOTTERY NOW OPEN

OPAL SCHOOL

A unique Portland Public Schools Charter Elementary located at CM2—Children's Museum at Washington Park, across from the Zoo

- NO TUITION for morning preschool & kindergarten
- NO TUITION for grades 1-3
- TRANSPORT OPTIONS include public transport, car pools, and self-transportation

Opal School—a program of the Children's Museum—will serve Pre-K through 3rd-grade students (ages 3-8 years old) in Fall 2003, with additional grades added in subsequent years. Students living in the Portland Public School District are selected through an open lottery. To get a lottery application, stop by the Children's Museum or call (503) 471-9900. All applications must be postmarked by 5 PM Monday, March 31, 2003.

COVER THE UNINSURED WEEK

CoverThe
UninsuredWeek
March 10-16, 2003

HEALTH FAIR

Free and open to the public!

The public is invited to a health fair on Wednesday, March 12 in Pioneer Courthouse Square where free screenings and educational materials will be available as part of a week-long series of events to bring greater awareness about the plight of the more than 41 million Americans and 440,000 Oregonians without health insurance. Screenings and information include:

- ✓ Blood pressure & diabetes screening
- ✓ Children's Health Insurance Program enrollment info
- ✓ Disaster Preparedness
- ✓ Fitness
- ✓ Foot care & massage
- ✓ Hearing & eye exams
- ✓ Nutrition
- ✓ Oregon Health Plan enrollment info
- ✓ Senior Rx drug assistance info
- ...and much more!

WHEN: **Wednesday, March 12th**
10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

WHERE: **Pioneer Courthouse Square**
Downtown Portland

Cover the uninsured Week (CTUW) is a nationwide grassroots effort to highlight the urgency that action must be taken now to address this growing health care crisis. For more information about the health fair* or any other Cover the Uninsured Week event in Portland, please call: 503-226-9353 or log onto www.covertheuninsuredweek.org

The health fair is sponsored by the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems

COVER THE UNINSURED WEEK

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