

'We Need to Know Our History'

A struggle to bring our culture into the classroom

The New York Times asked the Oregon Dept. of Education to describe why cultural competence has risen to the level that it has in the state. The department invited Sen. Avel Gordly who represents north-east and southeast Portland and others to respond to the question. This is Sen. Gordly's essay:

I will begin my answer with a statement recently made by a high school student at a community forum in Portland. The meeting was one of several convened by community members in the wake of the shooting of a 14-year old girl and a spate of other gang-related violent crimes.

The girl was an innocent victim, walking home with her friends, struck by a stray bullet. There was no warning. Suddenly she was lying on the sidewalk with a terrible head wound. The suspect in police custody is 16 years old. This tragedy is about much more than two people, much more than a neighborhood, much more even than a community.

Adults at the community meeting asked the young people present to speak about their needs. The youth responded with statements about their needs for encouragement and emotional support, about the lack of love, of caring adults in their lives.

One student stated, speaking words that resonated within us, young and old alike: "We need to know our history. We don't know who we are. All we know is that we once were slaves. We need to know our history."

The statements of these students were rooted in their lack of self-esteem, a burden they bore in common, and in their desire to achieve academically and in other

areas of accomplishment.

The struggle to develop and deliver a curriculum that recognizes the existence of the various cultures, races and ethnicities that make up our student populations, and that values and honors those groups did not begin within the last decade. Recognition that the population of our state was growing increasingly diverse, that succeeding in a competitive marketplace of ideas, services and products that would become ever more international in scope, and that our state's euro-centric curriculum was not meeting the short or long-term needs of our students is also not a new phenomenon.

Some 25 years after Brown v. Board of Education, the Black United Front was battling in Port-



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— Sen. Avel Gordly, D-Portland

land for an end to busing, for the hiring of more black teachers and administrators, and for a curriculum that addressed the multicultural needs of students, using tactics including boycotts and demonstrations. A North Portland Middle School, named after Harriet S. Tubman, stands because of those years of struggle and as a reminder of the slave past that the student spoke to. It was not—and is not—enough.

In 1991, as a Member of the Oregon House of Representatives, I began preparation to introduce legislation addressing the needs of our student populations and requiring Oregon schools to put multicultural curricula in place. This would take multiple sessions to accomplish. The bill was denied a hearing in the 1993 and 1995 ses-

sions.

In 1996, I was elected to the Oregon Senate. I reintroduced the bill in the 1997 session, where it received a "courtesy" hearing, a procedure where a committee permits limited testimony and discussion, but has no intention of acting on the bill. In the 1999 session, with the bipartisan assistance of Sen. Tom Hartung, we were able to move the bill and see it signed into law.

SB103 required that the Superintendent of Public Instruction direct the education department to increase efforts to evaluate the distribution of ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds of Oregon's public school students and advance the use of demographic data for curricula and program planning.

It required strategies to inform

The 2001 and 2003 legislative sessions passed without an SB103 compliance report from the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Multicultural curricula and competency were clearly on the back burner at the state level, but at the local and community level, there was much frustration and increasing calls for action.

Last year, I introduced a budget note requiring the Dept. of Education to conduct an evaluation of the law's requirements and report its findings to the 2005 Legislative Assembly. I —along with many, many community members across the state—look forward to seeing that report, from our new Superintendent of Public Instruction, Susan Castillo. I expect it to be a progress report.

school district boards, administrators, teachers, parents and the public about multicultural and diversity laws and policies. It called for the identification and review of exemplary multicultural curricula for different grade levels based on the needs of students; strategies to integrate multicultural curricula with other educational program; and evaluations on how current laws on diversity and multicultural education are being implemented and applied throughout the public school system.

The passage of SB 103 identified some key issues and necessary steps, but represented only part of the scope of work we need to accomplish in order to serve the needs of our students and state. These efforts are fundamental investments in our shared futures.

Also in 2003, at the urging of my office, the Teachers' Standards and Practices Commission began developing cultural competence standards for the certification of teachers and administrators. We expect to see those standards implemented.

I recall a conversation I had in 1999 with a young, bright law student from the University of Oregon. I asked the student if she knew the story of Shirley Chisholm. She was not familiar with the name. Shirley Chisholm, descendant of slaves, was elected to the United States Congress from the state of New York, serving the nation for many terms. Among her many accomplishments as a lawmaker, she stands as the first African-American woman to run for the Presidency of the United States of

America.

How can we graduate a student from the University of Oregon Law School, and not reach that student—somewhere in the curricula—with the history of our great nation, with the history that reflects the multiplicity of cultures, ethnicities and races that inhabit our land?

The absence of information in our public schools that mirrors the respective images of minority students magnifies the struggle our students make to find themselves as they learn and mature. This is a great and tragic failing directly related to how students gain self-esteem and achieve academically.

That cultural competence has risen to the level that it has in

2004 is not because the many issues represented by that label are timely. Many people have been working on this for decades, some heroically and at great personal sacrifice. It is the result of that work—their work—bearing some fruit—but not all the fruit—that brings the issue to the forefront today. The institutional and social lethargy that has blocked recognition and progress in cultural competency is still with us today.

The struggle to know and understand the history of our people continues. We owe it to our young and to future generations to deliver that knowledge, and to do so with competence and integrity. They need their history. We must deliver it.

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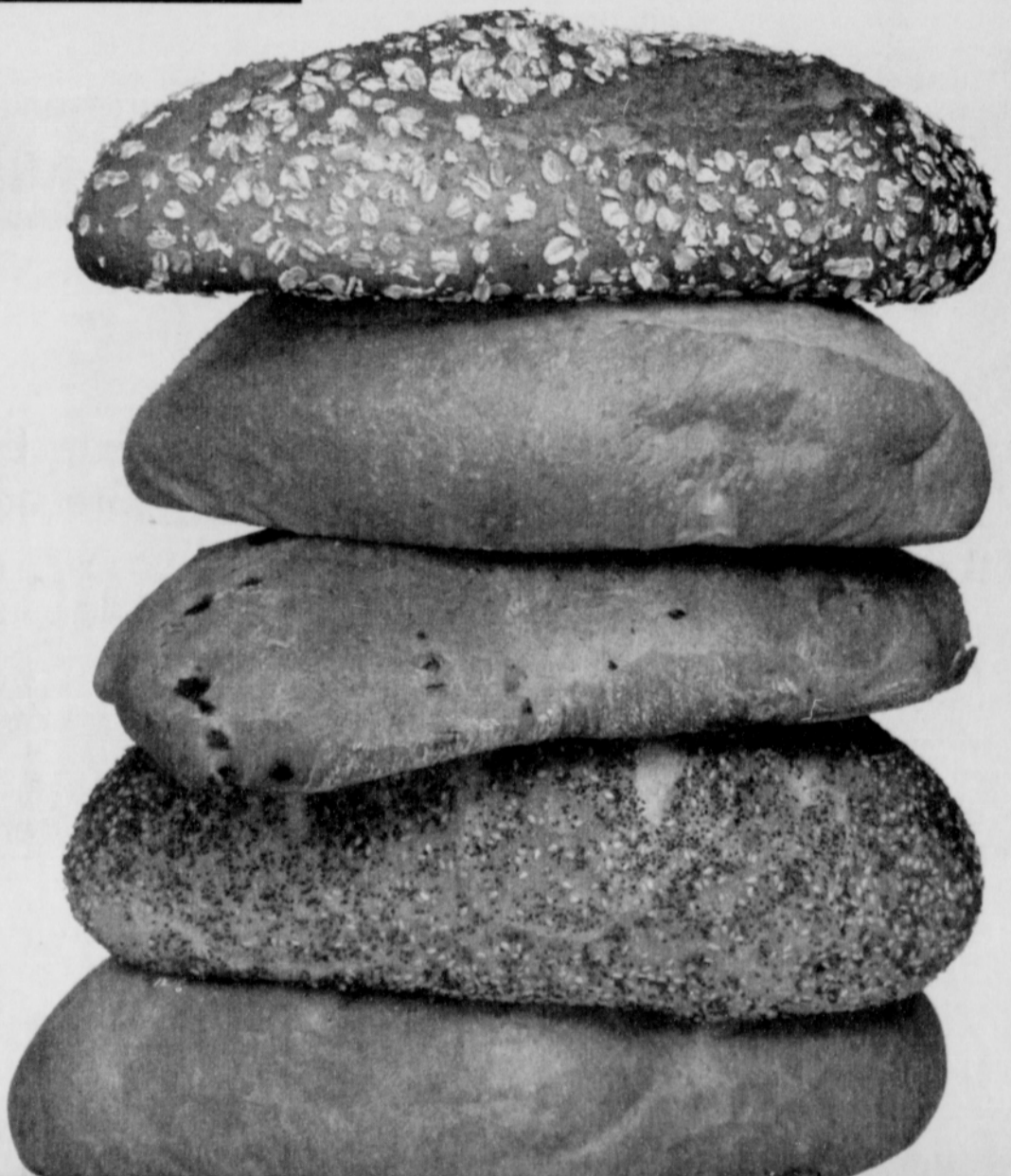
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