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OPINION

Cultural Competence in Schools Essential

Closing the achievement gap cannot be achieved without it

By SUSAN CASTILLO

SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Oregon classrooms have changed significantly in the past 20 years. The state has been working to increase the academic achievement of minorities and students of limited English proficiency and has made a lot of progress at closing the achievement gap, especially in elementary schools.

Minority students have always looked to education as a way to gain better opportunities for themselves and their families. Oregon schools, like public school systems throughout our United States, have continually refined what it means to provide an equal educational opportunity to every student we serve.

In the 1950s this meant eliminating segregated schools. In the 1960s this meant eliminating the disadvantages caused by poverty. In the 1970s schools tried to eliminate barriers to students with disabilities. In the 1980s, all schools began receiving the same amount of funding per child, per school year. In the 1990s systems focused on making sure that all

students were learning the same subjects and were learning it at the same pace. Today, our focus is on making sure that all children achieve the goals that have been set.

Changes in our state over the past few years tell us that the number of students with special needs has risen and will continue to rise in the future. Between 1980 and 2002,

Hispanics grew to 12 percent of the student population, but only 2 percent of teachers are Hispanic.

Children learn best in environments that are safe, respectful and nurturing. Their teachers should understand how their backgrounds influence their school

experience. Every teacher and principal needs to gain a thorough understanding of the culture, family and social values, community beliefs and expectations of the students they serve. Students, families and community members deserve schools that provide strat-

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egies for effective communication, such as translated materials and access to bilingual staff.

We must also be sure that all teachers have the most effective strategies, tools and materials for creating success for all students. We are currently working with the universities to ensure that all new teachers are well equipped in these key areas. We need more research on the ways that we can close the achievement gap and increase the learning of all students, especially our minority students.

workforce and find ways to attract more teachers and administrators of color and with bilingual skills into our schools. One of the most effective ways to ensure a climate of welcoming support for students and families is to increase the number of staff who share

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> their racial and cultural background and who can speak their language.

Finally, we also believe these goals cannot be accomplished without leadership. Principals and superintendents must be prepared to raise difficult questions about the achievement gap in their schools and districts, and courageously initiate the strategies that will be needed to improve.

With local school decision making and the creation of smaller learning communities, teachers are expanding their role beyond their classroom and accepting the challenge of leadership for school-wide change and focus on high performance for all students. Creating a school climate that is knowledgeable of and responsive to the culture of the students and community is necessary if we are to truly accomplish our goal of bringing every student up to the high levels of academic performance we know they can achieve.

It is critical that we seek ways to diversify our

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Florida Vote Headed for Another Disaster Voting rights still

wrong

not protected BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

It is 2004 and Florida is still in the dark. Four years after one of the worst voting crimes in recent history, the state still does not have its act together. In an effort to shed some light on this dark truth and pressure state officials to step up and protect the voting rights of all Floridians, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference recently held its national convention in Jacksonville, Fla. The loca-

tion was significant because 27,000 votes went uncounted in Jacksonville alone in the last presidential

voting power of African Americans. This 1868 law prevents voting rights from automatically vesting in those citizens who have paid their debt to society.

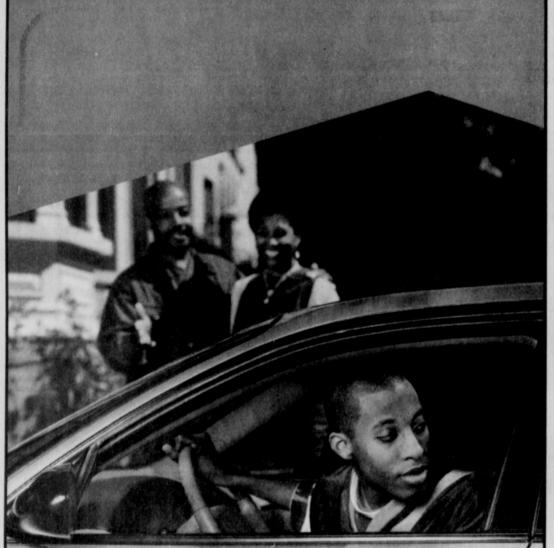
This debacle disproportionately affects African Americans and Democrats. With the ratio of ex-felon potential voters shaping up to be 3 to 1 Democrat to Republican, the Republican power base in Florida has done its best to make sure these citizens continue to be disenfranchised.

The Tampa Tribune notes that at least five bills addressing felons' voting rights were introduced in the 2004 legislative session. All died in committees without a hearing. Something is

This issue was barely discussed at the Democratic







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election.

Even more troubling is that Florida continues to be unprepared to handle this year's national election. One official in the state has revealed that 11 Florida counties are currently without viable voting systems. These flaws are alarming in their enormity.

In 2002, Congress crafted the Help America Vote Act that was supposed to help ensure that elections would run smoothly. One method of improving elections, in theory, was to switch from paper ballots to touch screen voting machines. This "solution," however, compounds the problem. Touch screen voting machines are unreliable. Chief in this unreliability is the lack of a paper trail. Without a paper trail to follow in case of a close election, touch screen voting machines are de facto fraud inducers.

Technology is not the only problem. A Civil War throwback law has the effect of disenfranchising the

National Convention. Considering that voting irregularities and back-room politicking cost the Democrats the White House, one would think that the party would want to give some camera time to efforts to improve and restore faith in the voting system. Voting integrity is a major issue that needs to be discussed.

Perhaps African-Americans are more sensitive to voting rights issues. Unlike other groups that make up the core of the Democratic Party, African Americans have fought long and hard for the right to vote. The reality of Jim Crow is less than 50 years old. We should demand that the Justice Department send monitors to Florida to ensure a fair election. It is a shame that in 2004, we must bring the light to the socalled Sunshine State.

Judge Greg Mathis is chairman of the Rainbow PUSH-Excel Board and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Letters to the Editor Kerry Represents Our Values

in murky circumstances, deceived changes. us into an un-necessary war, alien-

President Bush went into power think we should not attempt experience and strength, moral-

On the other side, it seems to tax cuts to the rich and bailed out much the values of this country. his corporate friends. He keeps play- He has wisdom and intelligence, ing scare tactics in order to make us integrity and courage. He has

ity and principle. He is a strong leader with who can steer our ated all of our potential allies, gave me that John Kerry represents so country back on course through these difficult times.

> J. Gutierrez Northeast Portland

Bush is Just Too Dangerous

who would vote for each candidate could work. and it ended up that she and I were side of the room.

It started for me when I was 12. I'll never forget; perhaps my first actually endanger me physically. The year was 1972 and the election sense that the minority can often be I'm now concerned that this adminwas Nixon-McGovern. My 6th right and my first taste of a Jew istration may "accidentally" push grade social studies teacher, Ms. standing with a black person, my the button or take us to war unnec-Moore, asked the class to divide by teacher, and how that dynamic essarily again.

the only ones on the McGovern dential election since then - Carter, George Bush & Co. It's just too Mondale, Dukakis, Clinton I and II, dangerous for Americans and the We spent the next hour and much Gore and now Kerry. The elections peoples of the world. of the week debating the merits of have always been important, but the two candidates - it was a time I've never felt that the results could

At 43, I don't believe this coun-I don't think I've missed a presi- try can afford another 4 years of

> Albert Kaufman Southwest Portland

Change the Channel from Bogus News

the news and let you decide for their own pundits instead. yourself. But during the Democratic Convention, Fox shut out to a baseball game where the an-

Watching Fox is like listening

Fox News says they'll give you many of the speeches and showed nouncer only tells you only when one team scores.

> Sunny Petit Northeast Portland