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OPINION

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to news@portlandobserver.com.

Race and Portland Public Schools

A disruptive pattern documented

BY JEANETTE LONA FRUEN

The front page news item "Violent death adds to an old anger," reported that "many people in Portland are perplexed that large segments of Portland's African American community see the shooting death of Aaron Campbell through a racial lens."

Another Oregonian front page reported the attack by Portland police on 21-year-old Delese Carter. I have known Delese since her senior year at Jefferson High School. She is a fierce competitor on the basketball court, a sensitive poet, polite, and a free spirit. Her courageous truth-telling about the police attack removed any doubt that there are racists in the Portland Police Bureau.

But racism in our beloved City of the Roses has not been limited to the police. For over a decade I have witnessed paternalistic attitudes, ill-advised decisions, unconscionable actions and a refusal by Portland Public Schools to seek meaningful input from Jefferson High School students, staff and community.

Let me cite a few blatant examples.

In 1998, the PPS board sent pink slips to every teacher, secretary, cafeteria worker and custodian at Jefferson. The board called it "reconstitution."

And they did it over the articulate, research-based and emotional objections of more than 300 students, parents, educators and community members.

In nearly five hours of testimony not a single person supported PPS's drastic reorganization of Jefferson. The district even acknowledged in a memo that "there appears to be little hard data regarding improving student achievement through reconstitution."

This divisive, disruptive action ignored the successes of Jefferson students and staff. For example, Alicia Moreland, the 1998 Jefferson Rose Festival

The district failed to communicate these successes so that families would be encouraged to enroll students in their neighborhood high school.

Ambassador, was named Rose Festival Queen; went to Stanford on a full academic scholarship; graduated with honors in three years, and completed medical school and is a physician. The Jefferson Jazz Band was ranked #2 in the nation. The school's video production department won local and national awards. The Jefferson arts and literary magazine was ranked among the top 15 in the nation.

But the district failed to build on these successes. And the district failed to communicate these successes so that families would be encouraged to enroll

students in their neighborhood high school. PPS's actions and inactions had severe consequences for Jefferson students, staff and community: Nine principals in 11 years; further decline in enrollment; fewer course offerings; staff turnover; and a disruption of school, family and community relationships.

Fast forward to 2006 when once again PPS was considering restructuring Jefferson. The Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) president testified to the school board that repeated restructuring, high administrative turnover and lack of district leadership led to instabil-

77 percent said one school. On the creation of single-sex academies, 69 percent of respondents were opposed.

PTSA volunteers also documented how only 21 core courses and 28 electives would be offered in a proposed Arts and Technologies academy; 36 core courses and 8 electives in a Science and Technologies academy; but a much more robust 38 core courses and 31 electives in a community-preferred single comprehensive high school.

Despite these facts, PPS continually repeated its disingenuous claims that their proposed academy structure provided "robust and rigorous educational opportunities."

The school board and district administration created single-sex academies and once again reorganized Jefferson High School. The result: Students have had fewer course offerings, hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars were wasted employing five administrators (three from out of state) for four academies; and in the fall of 2008, the district announced that the boys' academy would close for lack of enrollment.

With experiences like these and decades of well-documented overt and covert racism is it any wonder that African American residents -- and their white allies -- view the Portland Police Bureau and Portland Public Schools through a racial lens?

Jeanette Lona Fruen is a long time Jefferson High School advocate. A 70+ white grandmother, she was awarded a lifetime achievement award at Portland's largest Martin Luther King Jr. celebration.

ity in the learning environment at Jefferson and that the proposal was "ill advised, poorly conceived, and contrary to the wishes of those most closely allied with Jefferson."

When the district denied repeated requests to seek meaningful community input, PTSA volunteers conducted a 15-question survey. Hundreds of people responded. Survey results were consistent with the top priorities identified at community meetings over years: academic achievement, family and community involvement and communications.

On the question of whether Jefferson should be reorganized, 71 percent said no. On the question of whether Jefferson should be divided into separate academies or run as one high school,

The Portland Observer Established 1970

USPS 959-680

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97211

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DISTRIBUTION MANAGER: Mark Washington

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WEB EDITOR: Jake Thomas

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Portland Observer,
PO Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208

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