

# The



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# Portland Observer 41

'City of Roses'

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## On Mission to Change the Numbers

### Advocate for children, parents tackles barriers

BY MINDY COOPER  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Ron Herndon, 65, has worked his entire adult life fighting the battle to eliminate the barriers to a quality and equal education for low-income and minority children.

As the Board chair of the National Head Start Association and the Director of Portland's Albina Head Start since 1975, Herndon has seen what works and doesn't to proclaim that when a child begins preschool, they should be convinced college graduation is their academic goal.

Herndon believes the support from parents and the community and a 'head start' in education is the only way to fight the odds against children who attend a school system that does not work well for economically disadvantaged and minority students.

"I wish public education functioned well enough that they could take any kid and help them realize their potential," he said. "But if you look at the statistics, school systems often do a horrible job educating low income and minority children. And this begins in kindergarten."

According to Herndon, the numbers show only 48 percent of economically disadvantaged students graduated from Portland Public Schools in the 2009-2010 school year. For black students, the number was 46 percent. He calls the public school system 'drop out factories,' because less than 60 percent of students graduate from high school with a regular diploma.

Currently, said Herndon, there are more

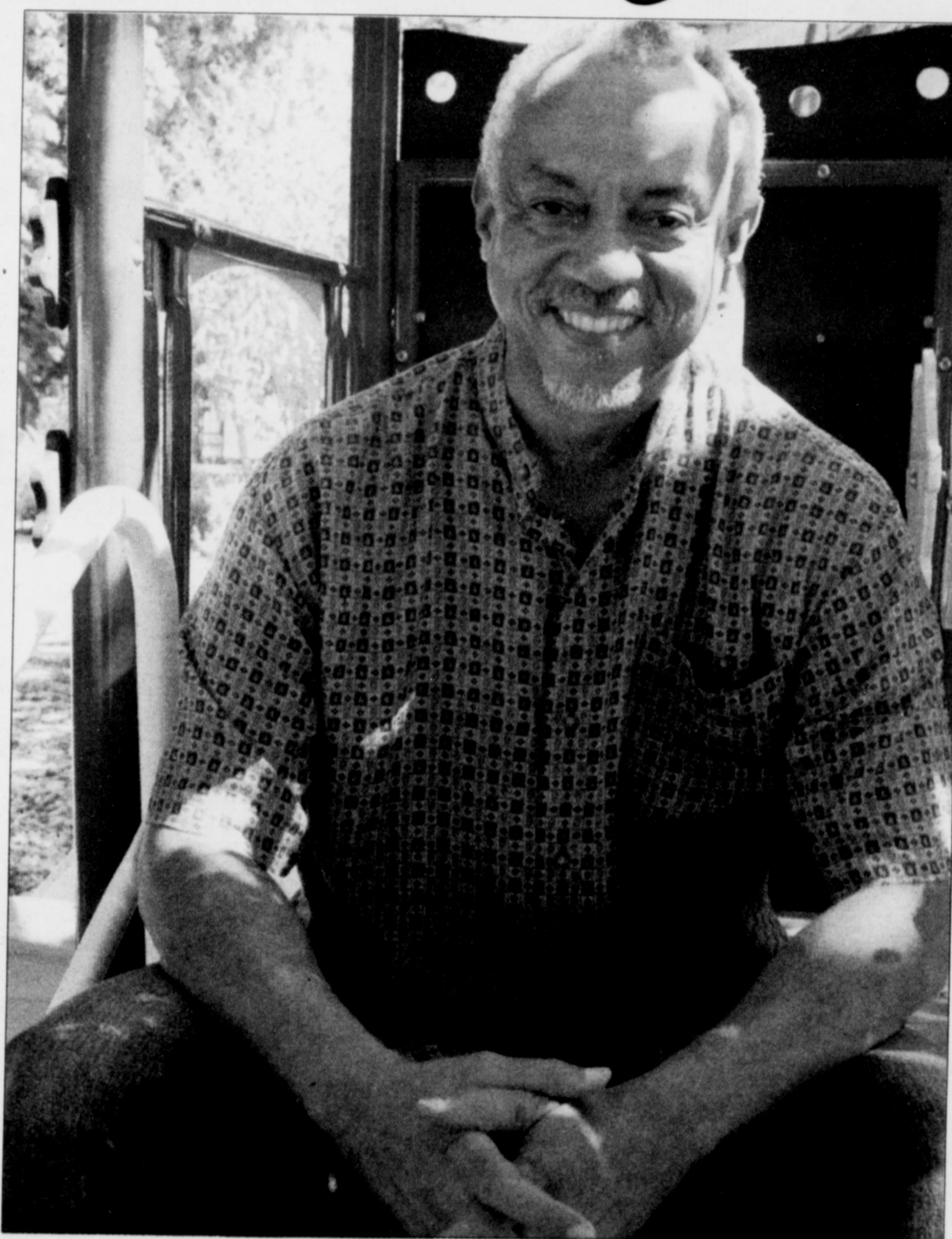


PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A long-time advocate for quality and equal education, Ron Herndon directs the preschool Head Start program in Portland. Herndon is also chair of the National Head Start Association.

low-income children within the country than there has been for years.

"Many low-income children aren't able to have the experiences that middle income-children have that will enable them to become successful in public schools," he said.

And within Portland—the rate of student's graduation isn't any higher.

He said, however, "if children could see encouragement and academic exposure, they can do well."

Growing up in a small town in Kansas, Herndon said all of his primary school teachers were African American like himself, and truly instilled in him early on the value of education.

"I grew up in an era when schools were segregated in the 50s, and because of racism and segregation, one of the few professions the smartest black people could enter was education."

If you were black, smart and had a college degree, you couldn't work in business or for the city or county, he said. Instead you became a teacher.

He said his first and second grade teachers, many with Master and Doctorate degrees, talked to them about college, and why they needed to go.

"We were being taught by some of the smartest people in town, so they not only had expectation," he said, "but everyone in the black community expected you to do well."

Several decades later, he still believes advocacy from parents, mentors and the community for children determines if they receive an education that will enable them to graduate from college.

Growing up, he said there was not an assumption that if your black and poor you couldn't go to college. "Quite the contrary," he said.

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## Parent's Corner

BY RON HERNDON

Editor's note: The following column by Ron Herndon, a long-time advocate for educational opportunities for African-American

## By the Numbers: An Academic Failure Rate

children, begins in the Portland Observer this week. Herndon has served a director of Head Start in Portland since 1975.

In a few short weeks parents will again place their children in a school system that does not work well for economically disadvantaged stu-

dents, Hispanic students or black students.

By the numbers, Portland Public Schools' four-year high school graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students was just 48 percent in 2009-10. For limited English proficiency students, the graduation rate was 33 percent; for

Hispanic students it was 34 percent; and black students, 46 percent.

If your child, grandchild or relative is currently in one of these groups, the odds are against them graduating from high school in four years.

The numbers are actually worse

when compared with skills required to live independently and earn a living in today's world.

The prestigious National Assessment of Educational Progress, called the "Nation's Report Card," measures the aca-

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