

THE Skanner

Challenging People to Shape
a Better Future Now

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- Local News
- Pacific NW News
- World News
- Opinions
- Jobs, Bids
- Entertainment
- Community Calendar

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Opinion

The Fight to Protect Voting Rights Must Continue in 2017

We all know the power of the vote. One person, one vote serves as the basic ethos and measurement of any democratic nation. Without true voter protection, integrity and universal access, America's light on the hill dims.

Since *Shelby V. Holder* dismantled the Voting Rights Act, many southern states with a history of voter suppression and related oppression of Black communities, could, once again, enact laws that would attempt to manipulate the sole entity which made all Americans equal: the vote.

During the Presidential election of 2016, the first in 50 years without full protection of the VRA, six of the 14 states implementing restrictive voter laws were previously covered by Section 5 of the VRA. Additionally, five of those states — Mississippi, Texas, South Carolina, Alabama and Virginia — put in place new voter ID laws.

Since 2010, twenty states have placed additional obstacles to the ballot box and according to the Brennan Center for Justice, “states most likely to pass new voting restrictions were those with the highest African American turnout in 2008, those with the highest Hispanic population growth between 2000 and 2010, and/or those formerly covered under Section 5 of



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the Voting Rights Act.”

In 1858, when running for the U.S. Senate from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln said:

“A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other...”

Lincoln would go on to lose that election to Stephen A. Douglas, but the words he uttered would last the test of time. Today, we ask the same question: Can a nation half-slave and half-free continue?

It's the same question athletes like Colin Kaepernick ask when they are singled out for freedom, yet their brothers remain in chains. If the vote is actively suppressed in communities of color and poor communities, are we really free or just half-free?

Sometimes history will repeat itself, if we give it enough time and a little help.

What is the difference between our present, partial believers in democracy, who

callously promote gerrymandering, mischievous voter ID laws, poll moving and poll closing or voter purges, and those who engineered the post-Reconstruction elimination of Black Power in the South?

During the first post-Civil War election in which Blacks could vote, they provided 700,000 votes to help elect Ulysses S. Grant to the White House in 1868. The often-un-

“Since 2010, twenty states have placed additional obstacles to the ballot box

told secret is that before the Civil Rights Era, where Black voters in the South once again sought out the ballot box in greater numbers, we stood ready at the first opportunity to use the vote, when treated as free people. At that time, and clearly to some today who seek to suppress the vote, this was not acceptable.

During the 1898 constitutional convention in Louisiana, Thomas J. Semmes, chair of the Judiciary Committee of the Convention and former president of the American Bar Association said, “We (meet) here to establish the supremacy of the White race, and the White race consti-

tutes the Democratic Party of this State. The Convention of 1898 interpreted its mandate from the people to be, to disenfranchise as many Negroes and as few Whites as possible.”

This process was replicated throughout the South as Andrew L. Shapiro points out in his Yale Law Journal article, “Challenging Criminal Disenfranchisement Under the Voting Rights Act: A New Strategy” (1993). He highlights how Mississippi's constitutional convention of 1890 became a prototype for implementing constitutional provisions designed to disenfranchise those individuals, who committed “certain crimes, which Blacks were supposedly more likely than Whites to commit.”

This meant that, “the law removed the vote from those convicted of such ‘furtive offenses’ as burglary, theft, arson, obtaining money under false pretenses, but the ‘robust crimes of Whites,’ which included robbery and murder or ‘crimes in which violence was the principal ingredient,’ were not.”

Today, we know the impact of felony disenfranchisement and the role it plays in keeping millions of individuals, who have served their time, from being able to vote.

Read the rest of this commentary at TheSkanner.com

Parents Deserve ‘Real’ School Choice

I was recently approached by a father of a student from Ann Arundel County, Maryland that was disappointed that his son was unable to attend his neighborhood magnet school; his son met all the requirements to become classified as a magnet student. Upon inquiry, administrators informed the father that the feeder school system did not permit his child to attend the desired school, even though the campus was less than two miles away from their family home. This was especially upsetting to the father, because he purchased the home 10 years ago with that specific school in mind. The school prescribed by the feeder school system is 12 miles away from his home.

Great Schools, the leading national nonprofit organization devoted to assisting parents in unlocking educational opportunities for their children, gives the prescribed feeder school a two out of five stars rating, compared to the four stars given to the school initially selected by the father. Realizing that the school's ratings may lead to a misguided conclusion, he and his wife



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toured the school to get a first-hand look. They were equally disappointed with the school climate and physical condition of the building.

His son is a recipient of the

“It appears that this administration has allowed states and local school districts to re-segregate and to provide lower quality education to children of color

President's Award for Educational Excellence. The administrators were adamant that the prescribed school would meet his son's educational needs; despite their insistence, the father was never convinced.

After failing to make progress with school administrators in Ann Arundel County, he made the hard decision to enroll his child in a local

non-magnet school, which has only one Advanced Placement (AP) course and limited opportunities in advanced courses.

My question to Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is this: Why is it that, despite your push for “school choice,” parents are still being directed to lower performing schools with poor school climate, inadequately prepared teachers, and failing test scores?

This is contradictory to the

intention of the Every Student Succeeds Act. It is the opposite of the policies you and the Trump Administration say you support. The options offered to this parent were inadequate and did not allow him the opportunity to ensure his child will receive a quality education. Furthermore, the feeder school system, in this instance, was completely ineffective.

Instead of fixing education, it appears this administration has allowed states and local school districts to re-segregate, provide lower quality education to children of color and sentence our children to academic underachievement. This is not how ESSA was designed to operate.

Thankfully, this parent did not accept less for his child. Other parents may not have the ability to stand for their children. ESSA was supposed to provide a high-quality education to all children. Let's make sure no child is faced with choosing between potential social isolation for a higher quality education or convenience at the expense of academic achievement.

Get involved with education in your community and learn more about the Every Student Succeeds Act at www.nnpa.org/essa.

Dr. Elizabeth Primas is an educator, who spent more than 40 years working towards improving education for children of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds. Dr. Primas is the program manager for the NNPA's Every Student Succeeds Act Public Awareness Campaign.