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The Skanner Newspaper, established in October 1975, is a weekly publication, published every Wednesday by IMM Publications Inc.

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The Skanner is a member of the National Newspaper Publishers Association and West Coast Black Publishers Association.

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Opinion

Get Real About Graduation for Black and Brown Students

Our nation's graduation rate is at an all-time high. The national figure shows 84 percent of young people, overall, graduating from high school within four years after first entering the 9th grade, a trend that has been on a consistent upswing since the 2010-2011 school year.

Still, despite much progress with that indicator, major gaps still exist. And there is great concern that the graduation rate hype not only masks those gaps, but distracts us from what must be our ultimate goal: ensuring all students earn a high school diploma and are college and career ready.

Even as overall graduation rates improve, Black and Hispanic students continue to lag behind that curve. Graduation rates for African American students are 76.4 percentage points—8 percentage points behind the national average — and Latino students are at 79.3 percent. Native American students fare even worse at just 72 percent graduation. Meanwhile, White and Asian students are anywhere from four to six points higher than the national average.

None of us can reasonably expect the closure of inequality gaps, if we're simply satisfied with overall graduation



Nate Davis
CEO and
Board of
Dir. Chair,
K12 Inc.

rates while resigned to stubborn achievement gaps. Yet, it seems as if we're in a phase whereby these disparities are being treated as normal—"the way it is"—as opposed to addressing a larger parity problem.

We have to ask ourselves: are we having a responsible

“The persistent normalcy of lower achievement among certain disadvantaged student populations is deeply troubling

and responsive conversation about high school graduation?

The most recent “Building a Grad Nation” report from America's Promise Alliance says that, “Twenty-three states have Black-White graduation rate gaps larger than the national average, including five states—Wisconsin, Nevada, Minnesota, New York, and Ohio — where the gap is more than 20 percentage points...Twenty-four states have Hispanic/White graduation rate gaps that ex-

ceed the national average, and in two states — Minnesota and New York—the gap is more than 20 percentage points.”

The persistent normalcy of lower achievement among certain disadvantaged student populations is deeply troubling. Closing those gaps should be as important—if not more—than simply raising overall graduation rates.

At the same time, graduation rates can be used to unfairly malign schools that are serving underprivileged youth and, in fact, helping at-risk students earn a high school diploma. Alternative

schools are singled out for having four-year cohort graduation rates that are generally lower than the national average, but left out of the conversation is how these schools are intentionally designed to serve credit-deficient transfer students and former dropouts at risk of never earning a diploma at all.

Measuring how well schools are graduating students is important, but it should be done right, and must not create disincentives for schools to serve credit-deficient stu-

dents or dropouts looking for a second chance. After all, what is more important for these students: graduating or graduating “on-time”? It's why graduation rate calculations should be reformed altogether so schools are held accountable for students' annual progress toward graduation every year, not just in the fourth year of high school.

Sadly, the drive to meet on-time graduation has led to recent cases of manipulation and fraud, which, of course, is wrong, but it also misses the primary purposes of high school altogether: preparing students for higher education, careers, and the workforce. The linkage between these goals—graduation and college and career readiness — is crucial for broader national competitiveness. Graduating students is meaningless if they are not prepared.

The number of high school students heading into remedial courses in their first year of college are staggering, and the gaps between varying demographics are even more troubling. Nearly 60 percent of African American students are forced to enroll in non-credit remedial classes in college.

Read the rest of this commentary at
TheSkanner.com

Enough with the Racism in the Rooftop Solar Industry

There has always been bigotry in this country. In 2018, thanks to the leaders of the civil rights movement who risked their lives fighting for equality and justice, things are much improved. But these days some racists in this country are feeling encouraged to express their ugly views in public or discriminate against people of color.

Recently, Vivint Solar — one of the largest sellers of solar panels in this country — was sued in California by a Black employee who alleges that his superiors likened him to a monkey; used a racial epithet against him; and that his coworkers used cardboard boxes to build a fort around their desks that was marked as “White only.” The complainant's lawyer provided pictures of this absurd and abhorrent cardboard façade to the media and *The Sacramento Bee* published the photo.

David Bywater, the top executive at Vivint Solar, told the media that he was “deeply disturbed” by these allegations.

“I want to firmly state that Vivint Solar has a zero-tolerance policy for racial discrimination and harassment in the workplace,” Bywater said. “Our company is built on the strength of diversity.”

This is precisely what a CEO



Julianne Malveaux
NNPA
Columnist

is supposed to say, but a person of conscience would back their words up with action.

A deeper dive into Vivint's practices makes me question Bywater's sincerity.

In March, Hector Balderas, the Attorney General of New Mexico filed a lawsuit against Vivint Solar, accusing them of fraud, racketeering, and unfair business practices. Balderas says the company, which sells rooftop solar panels employed “high-pressure sales techniques and procedures designed to mislead consumers” and lock their customers into contracts lasting 20 years, with rates that increase “by over 72 percent,” as the agreement matures.

Also, according to the Balderas' office: “The complaint also charges Vivint with filing improper notices in consumer real estate records that operate to cloud titles, in some cases, making it difficult for New Mexico consumers to sell their homes.” There is also some evidence that consumers of color and low-in-

come consumers are targeted for these pressure tactics.

I've been interested in the solar industry, because it is an expanding industry that increasingly provides new opportunities. However, there also seems to be additional opportunities to exploit con-

“His coworkers used cardboard boxes to build a fort around their desks that was marked as ‘White only’

sumers, especially minority consumers. I've written about my concerns about the ways the industry targets less sophisticated consumers, echoing concerns raised by several members of Congress in a letter to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in early 2017. In response to my concerns, the Solar Energy Industry Association (SEIA) used a consultant to harass me and my staff. I received and accepted an apology from the CEO of SEIA. I hoped they were sincere in their stated concerns about consumer protection and also about di-

versity in their industry.

But Vivint Solar, with its “White only” fort, is a member of SEIA. The allegations of racial discrimination and harassment involving Vivint Solar seem inconsistent with SEIA's stated values. What must they do? I have some ideas:

First, SEIA should ask Vivint Solar to leave their trade association. If SEIA wants to represent rooftop solar makers that respect consumers and employees, then Vivint Solar needs to go. If SEIA doesn't take action against Vivint Solar, there is no accountability, which only further erodes trust with minority communities.

Further, SEIA should back up their statement, that CEO Abby Hopper has established diversity of solar's workforce and customer base as among her top three priorities. SEIA should also work to increase awareness about their “Diversity Best Practices Guide” by funding and hosting consumer education seminars around the country to better inform consumers, especially minority consumers, about their rights when it comes to the rooftop solar industry.

Silence is complicity. It is time for good people to stand up against racism. SEIA: What say you?