

Go to a Section

Go

Site Search:

News by Subject

Go

[NYTimes.com](#) > [College](#)

## OREGON CULTURAL COMPETENCY

**“We Need to Know Our History”**

By AVEL GORDLY

I will begin my answer to the question of why cultural competence has risen to the level that it has in the Oregon legislature and Department of Education with a statement that was made by a high school student at a recent community forum in Portland. The meeting was one of several convened by community members in the wake of a spate of other gang-related violent crimes that included the shooting of a 14-year old girl.

The girl was walking home with her friends when she was struck without warning by a stray bullet. To onlookers it had seemed that she was suddenly lying on the sidewalk with a terrible head wound. The suspect, now in police custody, is 16 years old.

The adults at the community meeting asked the young people present to speak about their needs. The kids responded with statements about the lack of encouragement, emotional support and love they felt — and especially about the absence of caring adults in their lives.

One student spoke words that resonated with all of us there, young and old alike: “We need to know our history. We don’t know who we are. All we know is that we once were slaves. We need to know our history.”

This statement, and those of others who spoke that night, were rooted in their lack of self-esteem, a burden they all shared. It also reflected their desire to achieve academically, and in other areas, a desire that remains unfulfilled.

The struggle to develop and deliver a curriculum that address the variety of cultures, races and ethnicities that make up our student populations, and that values and honors those groups, began 20 years ago. We began to recognize that the population of our state was growing more and more diverse, and that succeeding in an increasingly international marketplace of ideas, services and products would require an overhaul of our educational priorities. It has been obvious for some time that our state’s eurocentric curriculum was not meeting the short or long-term needs of our students.

Some 25 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Black United Front was battling in Portland for an end to busing, for more black teachers and administrators in the schools and for a multicultural curriculum that addressed the needs of students. The Front used tactics including boycotts and demonstrations. A North Portland middle school, named after Harriet S. Tubman, stands as a reminder of those years of struggle. It was not — and is not— enough.

In 1991, as a member of the Oregon House of Representatives, I began preparation to introduce legislation

[Create/Edit E-mail Alerts](#)

Avel Gordly is a State Senator from Oregon.

**Leadership for Learning**

- [Leadership for Learning Main](#)
  - [Project Abstract](#)
  - [Education Policy News](#)
  - [Opinions](#)
  - [Links and Resources](#)
- 
- [Wallace Foundation Mission Statement](#)
  - [Wallace Foundation Web site](#)

requiring Oregon schools to put multicultural curricula in place. The bill was denied a hearing in the 1993 and 1995 sessions of the House.

In 1996, I was elected to the Oregon Senate. I reintroduced the bill in the 1997 session, where it received a so-called "courtesy" hearing, a procedure by which a committee permits limited testimony and discussion, but has no intention of acting on the bill. In the 1999 session, with the bipartisan assistance of Senator Tom Hartung, we were able to move the bill, by then known as Senate Bill 103, and see it signed into law.

SB103 required that the superintendent of public instruction direct the Department of Education to take several important actions:

1. To increase efforts to evaluate the distribution of ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds of Oregon's public school students and advance the use of demographic data for curricula and program planning. (We needed data that described the actual demographics of each school district.)
2. To examine strategies to inform school district boards, administrators, teachers, parents and the public about multicultural and diversity laws and policies.
3. To identify and review exemplary multicultural curricula for different grade levels based on the needs of Oregon's public school students. (Exemplary curricula exist. What was lacking—and still is lacking—was a systematic way of identifying, connecting, sharing and delivering this curricula.)
4. To identify and review strategies to integrate multicultural curricula with other educational programs.
5. To evaluate how current laws on diversity and multicultural education are being implemented and applied throughout the public school system.

SB103 identified some key issues and necessary steps, but represented only part of the scope of work we need to accomplish in order to serve our students and the state of Oregon. These efforts are fundamental investments in our shared futures.

The 2001 and 2003 legislative sessions passed without a compliance report from the superintendent of public instruction. Multicultural curricula and competency were clearly on the back burner at the state level; but at the local and community level, there was much frustration and increasing calls for action.

In the 2003 session, I introduced a budget note requiring the Department of Education to conduct an evaluation of the requirements of SB103 and report its findings to the 2005 Legislative Assembly. I—along with many, many community members across the state—look forward to seeing that report, from our new superintendent of public instruction, Susan Castillo.

Also in 2003, at the urging of my office, the Teachers Standards and Practices Commission began developing cultural competence standards for the certification of teachers and administrators.

I recall a conversation I had in 1999 with a young, bright law student from the University of Oregon. I asked her if she knew the story of Shirley Chisholm. She was not familiar with the name. Shirley Chisholm, a descendant of slaves, was elected to the United States Congress in the state of New York, serving many terms. Besides her many accomplishments as a lawmaker, she stands as the first African American woman to run for the presidency of the United States of America.

How can we graduate a student from the University of Oregon Law School, and not reach that student—somewhere in the curricula—with the history of our great nation, a history that reflects the multiplicity of cultures, ethnicities and races that inhabit our land?

The absence of such information in our public schools magnifies the struggle our students make to find themselves as they learn and mature. This is a great and tragic failing directly related to students' self-esteem and academic achievement.

That cultural competence has risen to the level that it has in 2004 is not because the focus on it is new. Many people have been working on it for decades, some heroically and at great personal sacrifice. It is that work—their work—

that has brought the issue to the forefront today. The institutional and social lethargy that has blocked progress in cultural competency is still with us today.

The struggle to know and understand the history of our people continues. We owe it to our young and to future generations to deliver that knowledge, and to do so with competence and integrity. Our students need their history. We must deliver it.

*Avel Gordly is a State Senator from Oregon.*

---

#### TOP COLLEGE ARTICLES

---

- [A Taliban Past, and a Cloudy Yale Future](#)
  - [University of Colorado Professor in 9/11 Controversy Appeals to Keep Job](#)
  - [On Education: An Empty Campus, Full of Friendship](#)
  - [Critic's Notebook: David Lewiston, a 'Musical Tourist' of the World](#)
- Go to [College](#)

---

#### TOP NYTIMES.COM ARTICLES

---

- [Iraq's Premier Is Asked to Quit as Shiites Split](#)
  - [Labor Shortage in China May Lead to Trade Shift](#)
  - [New York City Losing Blacks, Census Shows](#)
  - [In Death of Bronx Charter School, a Wider Problem](#)
- Go to [NYTimes.com Home](#)