
On the Portland Plan: A Conversation with Matthew Prophet

Students' and staffs' lack of knowledge about ethnic groups spurred Portland schools to begin compiling "baseline essays" about the contributions of six major geocultural groups. Superintendent Matthew Prophet discusses the philosophical beliefs that undergird that effort.

JOHN O'NEIL

Portland's multicultural education plan has been described as a national model. What does the plan entail?

Our plan is based on the idea that a multicultural education is one that, by virtue of specific content, perspectives, and a structured process, prepares students to live, learn, and work in a pluralistic world. We want our schools to foster an appreciation, respect, and tolerance for people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. We achieve this through broadening the perspectives of both students and staff.

Most of the attention that's been paid to the Portland plan has come from our effort to address the specific content needed to foster multicultural awareness. We're compiling a set of what we call "baseline essays." These are what we, at least, regard as highly factual histories of six major geocultural groups. We began by developing essays that explain the contributions of Africans to the cultures of the world. In addition, we are focusing on the other five major geocultural groups: Asians, Hispanics, American Indians, Pacific Islanders, and, of course, Euro-

pean Americans.

At this point, we have established African-American baseline essays: these have been published and are a resource for all subjects at all grade levels. We also have lesson plans on the African-American content for grades K-5. A second draft of the American-Indian baseline essays is being prepared, and the first draft of the Hispanic-American baseline essays will be finished June 1992. The baseline essays on the contributions of Asian Americans, Pacific Island Americans, and European Americans will be completed in that order, we hope, before the beginning of the 1993-94 school year.

What made the creation of these essays necessary?

We felt that there was a gap in the knowledge of our students and staff about ethnic groups besides Europeans. We needed to establish a set of baseline information that shows the contributions of various geocultural groups in each of the major disciplines: social studies, science, mathematics, language arts, and art and music.

Are there basic philosophical ideas you're trying to get across through the baseline data?

We have a number of recurring themes that we wanted everyone to buy into as much as possible; they really undergird practically everything we're attempting to do. The first of those themes is that we believe that early civilization evolved in Africa, and that Africa is the cradle of civilization. Egypt was and still is a significant African civilization. People of African descent have a history that precedes slavery and civil rights. The culture of African people was not destroyed by slavery.

Another overriding principle is that each of the six geocultural groups has made significant contributions. No geocultural group is innately inferior or superior to another. People, wherever they are, are interdependent and need one another. We're attempting to build in all of our kids, whatever their ethnicity or cultural identity, an awareness of their culture and ethnic heritage. We're trying to have them develop an understanding and respect and appreciation for the history, culture, and contributions of all groups of people, trying to eliminate personal and national ethnocentrism so that one understands that a specific culture is neither intrinsically inferior or superior to another. We're trying also to give some general suggestions that we think teachers should integrate into what they do that will bring about greater understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Some critics say the essays in fact work against an appreciation of

cultural diversity: that they actually take on a tone of superiority on behalf of African Americans.

Well, that could be. We had to begin somewhere, and we don't put our professional reputations on any of these essays to the extent of saying that all of their content is necessarily 100 percent accurate. This is the first edition, and we're constantly receiving suggestions on ways that their content can be improved. There was not a single point in any of these particular disciplines that did not have opinions running around the spectrum. At some point we had to come to a conclusion in order to publish something, and I did my very best, with the input and expertise from within Portland and around the country, to synthesize these views in a way that would minimize conflict and yet not refute what was most documentable as events that had actually occurred. With each reprinting of the baseline essays, we've corrected known errors.

Portland was probably the first major urban school system in the United States to take on this task. Unfortunately, we didn't have a precursor to provide to us any kind of a road map, so we initially encountered a predictable amount of resistance. There are some who, by virtue of their having gone through the traditional American educational system, have ingrained in their minds certain historical "truths" that are irrefutable to them.

If historians and scholars can't agree on some of these points, how does a teacher make sense of all the conflicting information?

Well, we don't believe that teachers can ever be made to deny their own



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beliefs, their own sense of values. However, they need to be exposed to new information and perspectives. Take one example from the African-American baseline essays: "African Americans have a history that precedes slavery and civil rights." That's true and not subject to debate. Curriculum reform can take place using that theme as a catalyst. Students need to know the history of African peoples in antiquity and the current contributions of

Americans of African descent: we don't have to organize this treatment around slavery and civil rights.

We think that teachers have to weigh this information against their own conscience, against their own judgment, against what they themselves regard as fact. We think that the content of the essays themselves is of less importance than the overriding principle of respecting all geocultural groups. It's good to argue about content. I think too many of us in our country have become too involved with trying to refute or to prove certain factual content rather than to really know the purpose. The purpose is to gain recognition that all people have made contributions.

Doesn't the publishing of the essays constitute a major endorsement, just as if you'd endorsed a particular textbook that teachers could use? Your support for the factual accuracy of the essays seems to be lukewarm.

Well, textbooks change, too. What we have now is a first edition. Nothing is etched in stone. In chemistry, there were 91 or 92 elements when I was in college, and now there are 107, 108 elements. That's based on new evidence. The essays contain information that is the best that we can determine at this time, based upon input from a variety of experts in the particular disciplines involved.

We don't have to necessarily agree what truth is. If we raise the level of awareness enough that certain issues become arguable, that represents a significant advance over where we are

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now, which — at least in my lifetime — has been a singularistic, Eurocentric perspective. There has to be, simply, a greater appreciation for all people.

Some would say there's a conflict within the multicultural education movement between advocates of a pluralistic approach, in which the roles of many cultures are treated, and those who promote a more separatist approach, which teaches children through the lens of their own culture. The second approach has been identified more with the Afrocentric view. Does Portland follow the approach of those who say: "Look, we've got 95 percent African-American kids in this school; we've got to teach them the curriculum through the lens of African-Americans?"

No, we don't see it that way. We see the contributions of Africans as having a distinct nature, a distinct character, a distinct, provable historical context. We also see, similarly, the potential contributions that have been made by

all ethnic groups. We had to begin somewhere. We began with the African-American history and culture and an attempt to share that geocultural group's world view. The Eurocentric view of Africans is already well entrenched in both the curriculum and in our society.

Now, as we're developing materials from Hispanics and Asians and American Indians and European Americans, there are also certain points that people could regard as being Hispanic-centric, or Asian-centric; it depends on the perspective from which one views it. It's impossible to view phenomena without an implicit view. That view is usually Eurocentric, and we are simply acknowledging that there are other points of view. But we are not presenting any particular ethnic or cultural group as being inherently superior to another. We're trying to build a comprehensive mosaic to show how all people have made contributions.

What about those who say that the contributions of the West have to be at the forefront of our core curriculum, because it's where we derived our government and many of our traditions?

Well, I think world studies needs to be at the forefront. I think that, again, it depends on your perspective. As we look at things that are developing in the Middle East and in the Soviet Union and all around this globe, we can see the shrinking of the globe and see the importance of having an overall view. Look at the problems we're beginning to experience when it comes to international competitiveness. Many of the deficiencies that we're now experiencing as Americans stem from our rather insular view of ourselves and our Western orientation,

without a clear understanding of logic and principles of reasoning and strategies and understandings that others around the globe have.

But hasn't a lot of progress been made? History textbooks are far less distorted than in the past, and teachers are generally much more sensitive to the cultural differences among students.

I know in certain areas, particularly the social studies, there's been some success in infusing multicultural principles. By the same token, a lot more progress needs to be made in certain areas of the sciences and in math.

It's really a travesty that a single school system had to generate the so-called textbook of baseline essays. But, our having done that, we have stimulated across this country a discussion — a movement is under way. I predict that the textbook industry, by virtue of the pressure that's going to be exerted nationwide and the arguments that are ensuing now, will certainly begin to change.

How successful would you say Portland has been in infusing the material in the baseline essays into school curriculums?

The first phase of our plan is the Afro-American baseline essays. Those have been implemented. I can't claim that they've been implemented to a 100 percent success level. There are varying levels of acceptance. We've had more success at the elementary level than at the middle school level, more success at the middle school level than at the high school level.

Why is that?

We've been very specific in terms of the development of our K-5 lesson plans for the African-American content. And teachers are more used to integrating information because they have students for more than one subject. It's been more difficult for us to infuse this content in the high school, which is more discipline-based. We're developing now a particular curriculum matrix that can also be integrated into the holistic learning objectives at the high school.

Overall, I'd give ourselves about a C+ at this time. I'd give ourselves about an A- at the elementary, maybe a B or so at the middle school level, and a C- or so at the high school level. We still have a long way to go.

You seem to have a deep personal interest in multicultural education. How did that come about?

Growing up, I went to segregated schools in Mississippi—what amounted to educational apartheid. And I've been powerfully influenced by spending 20 years in military service in Korea, in Vietnam, and in Europe, where I came in contact with many, many cultures and ethnic groups around the world. My interest not only in promoting cultural understanding but also in conflict resolution evolved from these experiences—serving as a nuclear weapons officer, finding out the futility of war. Vietnam, Korea, the whole bit.

So in Portland, we're not only interested in helping students learn about other cultures, we'd like to promote conflict resolution.

Why are conflict resolution and multicultural education linked?

Well, in America we still have, unfor-

tunately, a lot of hatred and a lot of racism. Out of this hatred and racism comes conflict in all segments of our society. I believe that for future generations of Americans to benefit from the efforts that we're making, they need to understand that many of these conflicts are based on these ideas of intrinsic inferiority and superiority. We're trying to eliminate that attitude, and we believe that linking multicultural education and conflict resolution will help. □

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