

## I Am Staying in My Post as Iowa/Nebraska NAACP Education Chair

Written by Jonathan Narcisse  
Thursday, 28 June 2012 14:17

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After the resignation of the Reverend Keith Ratliff as the president of the Iowa/Nebraska Conference of the NAACP, which followed the National Board's decision to support gay marriage as a civil right, I have been asked by several members of the media if I intend to stay on as education chair for the Iowa/Nebraska Conference of the NAACP.

I do not mean to diminish the issue, but over the past few years, the advocates of marriage equality and the opponents of same-sex marriage have, through their actions, asserted this is the only issue that matters.

Period.

As education chair of the Iowa/Nebraska conference of the NAACP and as a former director of the Des Moines School Board, I have witnessed Iowa's academic crisis, especially the urban academic crisis, worsen to a near state of emergency. Yet, most Iowans remain ignorant of the important data and proposed solutions to these solvable problems while the body politic and the media refuse to report, and at times, even acknowledge the severity of this crisis.

For example, over Labor Day weekend 2010, the Culver Administration made available

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devastating findings naming every single school district, every single high school, and every single middle school except two in Iowa's 10 largest cities as "Officially Failing."

The Culver administration's tradition was to make available to the public annual academic updates over the holiday weekend when Labor Day celebrations and the opening of the Iowa and Iowa State football seasons dominated the media cycle.

This annual attempt to bury the decline in urban academic achievement was assisted by major media and legislators who, after being provided the data by me personally, still refused to report the findings.

Instead of sharing with Iowans tax-dollar-financed conclusions, major media rationalized why the numbers meant very little and key legislators simply denied or denounced the findings.

Meanwhile, the number of stories on gay marriage in Iowa's leading publications, month after month, has far exceeded coverage of Iowa's most populated areas' failing education performances.

Issues such as poverty, justice, and welfare dependency have been equally ignored by both media and the body politic in our state. These issues are inseparable from the caliber of education our students receive, especially in Iowa's and Nebraska's urban districts.

As a longtime education advocate, I cannot walk away from the opportunity to continue making a difference in the lives of the students in both the Iowa and Nebraska education systems and the communities impacted by education.

Effective education especially improves an urban center's economy and reduces societal ills such as poverty, incarceration rates, addiction, and social-welfare dependency. Poor, unaccountable education in urban areas has the opposite impact.

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Politicians keep talking about creating jobs – but nothing improves job security more than providing relevant education to this generation. Unfortunately, many job applicants struggle with passing drug screens and filling out applications legibly.

Health and human services, education, and justice – all areas ballooning in cost to taxpayers primarily due to the dismal education students receive – commands approximately 90 percent of Iowa's annual general-fund appropriations.

Consideration of, discussion about, and any solutions to this vicious circle of dependency command significantly less attention and focus from media, lobbyists, and politicians than does marriage equality versus same-sex marriage.

Part of the reason I was asked to serve as education chair of the Iowa/Nebraska Conference of the NAACP is my statewide advocacy for all children, including our state's white students, during my tenure as president of the State of Black Iowa Initiative.

Through our landmark statewide education hearings, we made many discoveries. It surprised no one when we documented the crisis amongst Iowa's Black students. The front cover of the 2001 State of Black Iowa Report reads:

**"A State of Emergency.** On October 29, 2001, Dr. Eric Witherspoon, superintendent of the Des Moines Independent Community School District, gave opening remarks at the State of Black Iowa Initiative's Des Moines hearing addressing Iowa's Black Academic Crisis. Soon after his presentation started, emotions were running high. An already grim picture of Black Iowa got progressively worse. Especially when he announced 81 percent of the Black students enrolled in the Des Moines School District live in poverty.

"A floor, not a ceiling, the 81-percent figure only includes those students willing to claim their poverty status – not all the poor Black students in the district. And if it's this bad for Des Moines, it's worse in Davenport and Waterloo – Black communities much poorer than Des Moines' Black community. It also means the poverty level for children under five is approaching 90 percent in our state's largest Black community."

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Our education hearings produced a number of things from national media coverage to a White House collaboration. It also, due to its thoroughness, unearthed an emerging white academic crisis that the powerful in this state were loath to acknowledge.

While our education advocacy in general was enthusiastically embraced, our pronouncement that the emerging white academic crisis rose to the level of a civil-rights concern was all but ignored even when I took the data to federal education officials, state education and political leaders, and major media.

Then, the first real breakthrough on this issue took place. Carol Hunter, editor of the *Des Moines Register*'s editorial board, asked me in the spring of 2006 to write a piece on the black academic crisis. I agreed to do so if she would also publish our work on the white academic crisis in this state.

Soon after she published my piece on the black academic crisis. Then, on December 28, 2006, she published the piece reprinted below on Iowa's white academic crisis.

The data-driven commentary was dismissed by politicians, business leaders, and educators, as were subsequent warnings until my last year on the Des Moines school board, when state reports confirmed that the largest group in crisis was not kids on free and reduced lunch but affluent and middle-class white kids. Despite the fact children of means were a super-minority in our district – approximately a third – they composed more than 50 percent of the district's dropouts.

I remember standing across from Central Campus on the lawn of WHO-TV saying to the stunned reporter, "Our dropouts look like you, not me." While I did not take comfort in these findings, I was pleased that after nearly a decade of sounding the alarm, notice was finally being taken.

Then on November 1, 2011, a decade after I brought the issue to light, Jason Glass, the director of the Iowa Department of Education, issued a solemn and ominous call to action stating: "White students, who make up about 80 percent of Iowa's student population, have fallen behind their white peers nationally. This problem persists across the assessed grade levels and content areas."

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A decade of denial has endangered the future prosperity of our state. The untreated sickness not only has spread amongst our urban districts, where high poverty and academic failure thrive; but we find 68 percent of the students in Washington County on free and reduced lunch and less than 20 percent of our state's students college-ready.

I am not going to abandon years of advocacy on the most critical issue facing our state – education – just because advocates on all sides of the gay-marriage issue have concluded no other concerns matter. They may not care about our kids, families, or economy, or the future of Iowa – I do. I am going to continue this education advocacy as outlined in [the white paper titled "Restoring Our World Class Education Plan."](#)

Systemic solutions are critical, especially in light of the Nancy Sebring (former Des Moines school-district superintendent) revelations (not the sex), which lay bare the vulnerabilities of school boards and education systems to manipulations and the abuse of power both in Iowa and Nebraska.

Sebring's selection as the Omaha school district's superintendent, in the face of her very public record of academic failure as superintendent in Des Moines, proves just how important continuing in this unique chairperson role is.

Recently my focus has been on improving what families themselves can do to improve their children's education accountability. It is not all the system's fault. Parents must ultimately reclaim their authority. This void of parental participation contributes greatly to the poor education and basic preparedness of Iowa and Nebraska's children.

Going forward, the pressure on both the state departments of education, and our school-district boards of directors, must intensify.

Our children deserve no less, and will receive my best.

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*The commentary below originally appeared in the Des Moines Register on December 28, 2006.*

### **Too Many Kids Failing in School, Whites Included**

There's been a welcome focus recently on the so-called achievement gap between this community's white students and students of color, who face severe academic challenges.

But so do white kids.

The federal No Child Left Behind law forced the disaggregation of academic data. The goal: to identify academic failure previously hidden in aggregated data. Now, for the first time in our nation's history, achievement data are readily available by racial and socioeconomic breakdowns.

Unfortunately, the law did not anticipate the manipulation of data, particularly relating to white kids. As a result, countless white kids in academic crisis are hidden, if not erased, by the education bureaucracy.

For example, the Des Moines school district reported 97.9 percent of its juniors (1,624 out of 1,659) in 2004-05 took the Iowa Test of Education Development. The school board praised then-Superintendent Eric Witherspoon's administration. The feds claimed victory for raising participation levels of kids tested. What has never been addressed is the fact that 2,624 sophomores were served by the district less than 12 months earlier. Of the 1,000 unaccounted-for students, nearly 70 percent of them were white.

In 2000-01, the Des Moines district served 2,301 white kids as freshmen, but 357, or 15.5 percent of them, never made it to a traditional four-year high school, instead attending night school or alternative-education programs. In 2000-01, 936 black, Latino, Asian and Indian kids were served as freshmen, with 108, or 11.5 percent, never reaching a traditional four-year school. Why is a higher percentage of white kids hidden from our traditional high schools than

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children of color?

The problem for white kids begins well before high school. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, only 37 percent of Iowa's white kids by fourth grade in 2003-04 were proficient in reading and only 39 percent were proficient in math. That's a high point .

White kids of all socioeconomic classes from fifth grade through eighth grade experience massive academic declines. Internal Des Moines district tests show 20- to 40-point declines in reading, math or science among our non-poor white population from fifth through eighth grade. Schools like McCombs, Weeks and Hiatt see academic failure rates for white kids approaching 80 percent or more in reading, math or science.

By high school, failure has reached a critical mass. In 2000-01, 597 students, or 25.9 percent of the white freshmen served, failed to earn a single credit. The district served 2,301 white kids as freshman that year, but only 1,442, or 62.7 percent, of white students made it to the junior class.

The Des Moines school board reported 84 percent of the white freshmen from 2000-01 graduated in 2003-04. Yet the data actually show only 1,101, or 47.8 percent, of white students graduated in 2003-04. Our traditional high schools served 1,944 white freshmen in 2000-01, but only 1,068, or 54.9 percent, graduated in 2003-04.

At East, which served 450 white freshmen in 2000-01, 216 graduated, or 48 percent. At Hoover , there were 276 white freshmen and 170 graduates, or 61.6 percent. At Lincoln, 659 freshmen and 351 graduates, or 53.3 percent. At North, 235 freshmen and 108 graduates, or 46 percent. And at Roosevelt, 324 freshmen and 223 graduates, or 68.8 percent.

Even among our college-bound white students, recent reports document less than a third are prepared to perform postsecondary work at a competent level.

One of the tragic consequences of white supremacy is that it sacrifices many whites, especially children, to maintain the myth of superiority. Iowa was settled, after the Black Hawk purchase,

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by poor whites fleeing the economic consequences of slavery.

The late Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. died fighting for white workers in Memphis .

Racism is wrong. The sacrifice of white children to service a bureaucracy is wrong, too. All our children, including the white ones, deserve a voice and opportunity.

*Jonathan Narcisse is president of the State of Black Iowa Initiative.*