

Kate Brown
Governor



Oregon Commission on Black Affairs
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Joint Committee on Student Success
Invited Testimony
April 2, 2019, at 5pm in Hearing Room F

Co-Chairs Roblan and Smith Warner, Co-Vice-Chairs Knopp and Smith, and members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Mariotta Gary-Smith and I am a member of the Oregon Commission on Black Affairs (OCBA). Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony about investments in education that will benefit Black Oregonian students and their families.

In 2018, the OCBA partnered with ODE and their data center at Portland State University to review current data by race, gender, and school around disproportionate rates of disciplinary action for classroom disruption compared to schools which had received ODE investment regarding teacher training and preparedness. The low high school completion rates for Black and other students of color, as well as LGBTQ has been a longstanding issue for the OCBA and the other Commissions.

The 2018 study is its 4th policy partnership since 2014 regarding disproportionality, the role of restorative justice, and positive effects of investment around preparation and ongoing professional development of Oregon educators to become more successful in multi-cultural classrooms. Currently, 37% of students in Oregon public schools K-12 are now Students of Color, with Black, Hispanic and Native American students experiencing higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, lower overall academic achievement and experiencing the consequences of disproportionate discipline for classroom disruption at higher rates than other groups overall.

The OCBA/ODE study, [*“Responding to Disproportionate Discipline with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Practices”*](#) and the [slide deck](#), while small, showed that ODE investments with small grants to schools for teacher training paid off by improving their classroom discipline skills and lowered the number of students of color being removed from the classroom for discipline issues. The critical need for competent, meaningful preparation of teachers and administrators in cultural proficiency and culturally relevant and meaningful curriculum is moving forward in Oregon but must go faster, grow quicker, and be more robust in the array of approaches funded to have the effect this committee is seeking for students of color and other marginalized students and engage their families.

I would like to give you an example from my own experience:

-I’m a product of PPS (Portland Public Schools) and have experienced racist exchanges with administrators and faculty

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- During my high school career, I had NO African American teachers (regardless of gender/sexual identity or expression)
- During my high school career, I had no Indigenous/Native American teachers (regardless of gender/sexual identity or expression)
- During my high school career, I saw my first African American administrator (the late Dr. Charles Hobson; during my senior year)
- I was in the upper percentile of academic rankings for my school/district, but had my intelligence challenged/questioned by educators and administrators (“are you sure this is the class you belong in?”)
 - asked to “prove” my work
 - questioned about the validity of my writing/presenting skills
 - presented as “disruptive” by teachers when I asked about their sources or asked questions beyond their ability to engage
- Was often the only African American in my AP classes/Honors classes
- Witnessed multiple friends be removed from class and labeled “disruptive” by teachers; sometimes involving school police (this was back in 1989-1990)

I know that when young students of color see/hear/engage with educators/teachers that look like them, they excel. I’m a certified sexuality educator, and have witnessed the power of simply being present in the room with other students of color and witnessing their sharing of what it’s like to see someone looking like you at the front of the room.

I know that understanding how to engage young people who have experienced trauma in a way that honors and centers their needs and also respects their experience, you have a better chance of supporting them into a better situation, and opportunity for clear thinking and critical decision making. Criminalizing young people for their behavior as a practice of an educational institution doesn’t bode well, and sets a dangerous precedent - one that we’re seeing the results of now. There’s been a lot of conversation - it’s time to DO something and do it differently.

You have the opportunity to decide how you want to engage this community, my community - in a different way. There is more than enough data, narratives, stories and information to make a clear choice. There is a chance to continue to support the status quo - and do things as they have been. There is also a chance to allow a new direction and way of engagement. I challenge us all to do better, and be better - and it starts here.



Mariotta Gary-Smith