

Slater becoming factor in education reform

By John William Templeton
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON, D.C.—The man in charge of "Ice-T" has begun rapping about a real original — inventor Garret A. Morgan.

For the hip on Capitol Hill, "Ice-T" is the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), a six-year program to build buses, ports, terminals — anything that moves people and products. While his Cabinet colleagues struggle with declining resources, Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater has the enviable assignment of administering the program. And when he speaks, people listen.

More than 200 representatives, ranging from the head of Boeing and the chairman of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, to presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, answered Slater's call to honor Morgan — the inventor of the traffic light — by encouraging one million American youth to become prepared for jobs in transportation.

Slater's interest in bringing these high wage jobs into inner cities coincides with the near desperation of an industry which cannot find employees.

As African Americans, we know that this inability to find workers, often means America's industries are overlooking talent in our communities.

Michael Starnes, CEO of Memphis-based MS Carriers and U.S. Chamber chair, said the trucking industry needs 400,000 drivers immediately. He has even attempted to import truckers from England because MS Carriers has 150 trucks without drivers. "If they come to my office and are trained, they'll be at work that afternoon," Starnes said. "If they're not trained, we'll train them in five weeks."

Slater's program begins with the widespread units of his department, from the Coast Guard and Federal Aviation Administration to the Federal Highway Administration, getting involved with schools to promote student awareness of transportation careers. DOT units have already adopted 250 schools.

Slater is also using his considerable bully pulpit to encourage thousands of contractors and transportation users to do the same. One of the benefits of the meeting was to share the programs already in effect but not widely known.

Claude Verbil, a General Motors plant

manager, who is the first African-American president of the Society of Automotive Engineers, told the group that it is ridiculous that educational reformers consider a program successful if it is adopted by two percent of schools nationally.

Capt. Louis Freeman, another pioneer like Verbil as chief pilot for Southwest Airlines in Chicago, thinks the awareness of innovators like Morgan, the Tuskegee Airmen, and the Organization of Black Airline Pilots, can help guide black children into thinking about becoming pilots, engineers and ship captains.

Along with top managers from the U.S. Department of Labor and Education, the Garrett Morgan Roundtable coordinates many of those efforts like the World in Motion curriculum available from the Society of Automotive Engineers and provides schools with coherent repertoires of school-to-job materials.

To the extent that Slater's stakeholders actually roll up their sleeves and get involved with schools, they'll have to notice the communities around them. Hank Wilfong, C.P.A., president of the National Association of Small Disadvantaged Businesses, told the group,

"The best role model is when their parents have a job."

Practically all transportation trades have long histories of discrimination. However, when African Americans have broken into transportation like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, it has proven to be a door opener for many other opportunities.

Sandra Morgan, a Cleveland import-export developer and Garrett Morgan's granddaughter said he would be proud to be connected with creating jobs for the future.

Just as the traffic light has prevented many collisions, Slater's initiative has the potential to thwart the impending social collisions of attacks on the black family through barriers to higher education and jobs, by routing us in the direction of greater opportunities.

To learn more about the initiative and how to get your local transportation contractors involved, e-mail: garrett.morgan@rspa.dot.gov. or write: Attn. DRP-2, U.S. DOT, Washington, D.C., 20590.

John William Templeton is executive editor of "Griot," the African-American, African and Caribbean business daily.

School choice, vouchers get mixed reaction

By Chris R. Watson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

School districts across the country are confronting the issue of school choice and vouchers which proponents say provide an alternative for poor and minority children to receive a quality education.

But school officials in the Commonwealth of Virginia view both concepts skeptically.

Officially, the state has not adopted a policy allowing parents or students to choose a public or private school facility outside of their home district. However, if a child qualifies, many localities do provide sufficient opportunities for specialized courses in magnet schools.

It is also understood that parents can send their children to private schools if they can afford the tuition or qualify for private financial aid programs.

Virginia does not allow the use of school vouchers or the use of public monies to fund private educational facilities. Many public school officials say this would be an unnecessary and inappropriate use of funds.

Newport News Public School board member Effie Ashe says, \$10 taken out of a public school and transferred to a private institution is money that could have been used to purchase a school book or other supplies for a public school student.

Unless a law is passed, "not one penny of public money will go to a private school," says Virginia Department of Education spokeswoman Margaret Roberts. "Our state constitution prohibits it."

Roberts said the only exception is for the child that requires an individualized education plan (IEP).

By state law, if the public school system cannot meet the "special needs" of students, the district is required to place them in any institution that can.

Hampton School Board chairman James Haggard said even with a voucher, students, especially those with special needs, are not guaranteed space in private facilities.

Unlike public schools, private institutions are neither required nor necessarily prepared to deal with the full range of learning needs of students.

Virginia private schools, like Peninsula Catholic High School, are prepared to handle students with slight to moderate learning disabilities but, "we do not have the resources like public schools to teach children with more severe learning problems," said Bill Hammond, the school's president.

However, he said, with the low student/teacher ratio at many private schools, "it's easier to work with students on a one-on-one basis."

Bob Clemons, private school development director for Hampton Roads Academy, said private schools could also lose their "independence" if vouchers are allowed. "With government funds will come government control. We could lose our control of the school."

The NNPS board has outlined key areas of concern that must be addressed if school choice and vouchers are to be seriously considered: Overcrowding at some schools; meeting transportation needs; handling enrollment of handicapped and other special needs students; establishing tuition charges in the case of inter-district programs and the fiscal impact of

accommodating parental preferences.

Board members also insist consideration must be made to maintaining the racial balance in public schools.

They say vouchers and school choice would create an educational re-segregation.

According to a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, Blacks were more supportive of vouchers for private or religious schools than Whites, 64 to 47 percent respectively.

Major cities like Cleveland, Milwaukee and Washington, D.C. are also currently embroiled in the debate.

Chris R. Watson writes for the Richmond Voice.



Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

Now you see it...

A Make a Difference Day participant recently tries at Planet Hollywood to locate the missing coin on Merlin the Magician of Caesars Magic Empire.

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