

Perfection not good enough for minorities aspiring to Berkeley

By Gillian Foster
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When Gregory McConnell, Jr. learned that he had earned a 4.0 grade point average, he thought gaining acceptance to his choice school, UC Berkeley, was assured.

His successful high school career included extra-curricular activities and varsity sports. He was confident that the university's mission of excellence would land him a coveted slot in the 1998 freshman class.

But Berkeley's rejection letter said he wasn't good enough.

For young McConnell and other African-American, Latino and Filipino students, that wasn't good enough.

McConnell is in the center of a twist of fate that suggests the struggle for equal educational opportunity is continuous.

His grandfather, Wendell McConnell worked with Thurgood Marshall and the

NAACP Legal Defense Fund to overturn desegregation in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education.

McConnell has joined in a lawsuit charging California's flagship institution with racial discrimination in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. McConnell now attends Hampton Institute on a full Presidential Scholarship.

In collaborating on a lawsuit against Berkeley filed on Feb. 2nd, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, The Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund seek to stem the growing trend of an admissions policies that shuns minority students off to other campuses in the UC system.

"The process is fundamentally unfair,"

declared Kim West-Faulcon of NAACP Legal Defense Fund, which is representing African-American students in the suit.

"And while Gregory's case is certainly worthy of note, his isn't even the norm. Many of the minority students who attained a 4.0 GPA did so with little access to the advanced placement classes, a criteria that is heavily weighed by the admissions board at UC Berkeley."

More than 750 African-American, Latino and Filipino students with 4.0 grade point averages or better were denied admission to the school. In fall 1998, the number of African-American students admitted to Berkeley totaled 248, less than half the number (562) in 1997 — a 57 percent decrease. The same is true for Chicano/Latino students whose numbers fell from 1,266 in 1997 to 647 in 1998, almost a 50 percent decline.

A reason for this decline, the lawsuit

contends, is that Berkeley places heavy significance on students who take advanced placement courses, yet more than half the students in the state's public high schools have no access to those courses whatsoever.

Further discrepancies also occur in the rate of admissions because Berkeley places undue weight on minor differences in standardized test scores, which do not predict a student's success.

In addition, Berkeley's practice of mining more than half of its in-state students from five percent of California's schools further diminishes the admission chances of many qualified minority students. These schools have a disproportionately lower number of minority students.

The lawsuit requests that UC Berkeley revise the process by which it currently evaluates students and develop a system that is more equitable.

San Francisco abandons school racial limits, but promises diversity

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The city's school system agreed last week to abandon race-based admissions and come up with a new enrollment plan that might increase consideration of students' economic hardships.

For 15 years, the school system has operated under a court-approved desegregation plan that says no school can have more than 45 percent of any one racial or ethnic group. Sought-after "magnet" schools, including the district's academic flagship Lowell High, have a 40 percent limit.

Facing a suit by Chinese-Americans who were denied admission to Lowell and two elementary schools, the district agreed to stop assigning students primarily on the basis of race, but said it would preserve racial diversity through other means.

The settlement, which

avoids a potentially divisive trial, brought proclamations of harmony from former legal and political foes: on one side, the school district and the NAACP, and on the other, Chinese-American students and parents who have become the city's largest ethnic group.

The agreement includes a ban on the use of race or ethnicity as the primary reason to assign any student to a school or program.

The ban would begin this fall with students entering kindergarten, middle and high schools, as well as students new to the district — about 20,000 of the district's 62,000 students. It would extend to all students a year later.

But the new enrollment system that the district would design for 2000-01, with help from the state school superintendent and advice from parties in the lawsuit, could include diversity — racial, ethnic and economic

— among its goals.

And if any school showed signs of "racial isolation," a return to the days of de facto segregation in poor minority neighborhoods, the district or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People could ask the judge to approve changes in enrollment, as long as students aren't assigned primarily because of race.

U.S. District Judge William Orrick called on all sides to agree on a new long-term admissions plan by Oct. 1. He gave preliminary approval to the settlement and scheduled a hearing on final approval for April 20.

The settlement comes at a time of increasing judicial hostility to race-based admissions. In November, a federal appeals court struck down race as an admissions factor at the prestigious Boston Latin School, a ruling the school board decided not to appeal.

Control, said Watts' support of the NRA is not surprising since Oklahoma lawmakers are strong supporters of gun owners' rights.

"An Oklahoma congressman appearing in an NRA ad is dog bites man," spokeswoman Naomi Paiss said. "It's an expected thing."

GOP's Watts appears in ad for NRA

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republican Conference Chairman J.C. Watts is appearing in a Time magazine ad as a spokesman for the National Rifle Association.

Watts, the fourth ranking Republican in the House, is the second Oklahoma Republican lawmaker to appear in an NRA ad. Rep. Steve Largent was featured in an advertisement last year.

"The Second Amendment is very clear that all Americans have the right to bear arms for whatever lawful purpose they choose," Watts said in the ad. "I grew up with a healthy respect for guns as a way of life — as American as mom, football and apple

pie." In 1995, the lawmaker supported the NRA and voted to repeal a ban on assault weapons. Pam Pryor, an aide to Watts, said he did the endorsement at the request of an Oklahoma City advertising executive.

A spokeswoman for the advocacy group, Handgun

Mutilation

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their daughters behave better."

That in turn fits into what Mbugua calls a "culture of silence," in which deeply-rooted traditions that violate women's rights are barely discussed, so that the extent of the problem remains murky.

But with the focus on female circumcision since the Cairo conference, that culture of silence has been broken in part, and consciousness has been raised on the issue, Kedees said.

San Francisco officials insisted last week they can find ways of maintaining racial diversity without race-based admissions.

State Superintendent Delaine Eastin said it could be done with a computer-designed enrollment system keyed to students' socioeconomic status.

"There's a strong correlation between race and poverty," said Anthony

Anderson, an associate district superintendent.

The district also will redraw attendance boundaries for 2000-01 and try to maintain diversity by combining different ethnic neighborhoods, Anderson said.

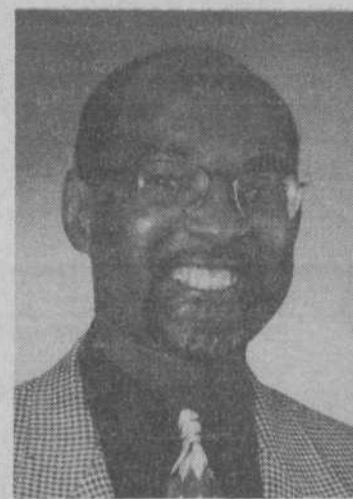
NAACP lawyer Peter Cohn said the settlement still lets the district "use all its tools to bring about an end to school segregation."

Daniel Girard, lawyer for three Chinese-American students and their parents who sued the district, said the settlement is "in many ways better than what we could have achieved through litigation," since parents can work with the district to oversee compliance.

"We think this gives control of the district back to the population of San Francisco," he said.

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