

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Kwanzaa must transcend race

Given the tenuous state of the world's diplomatic affairs, there's no better time than now for the people of the world to embrace Kwanzaa as a universal, culture-embracing holiday and to cease viewing it as simply an occasion for Africans and African-Americans to reflect and rejoice.

Here's why. Aside from the residual benefit of gaining understanding of the cultural mores, idiosyncracies and history of the aforementioned groups, Kwanzaa offers a more salient perk: the knowledge that although we are different, we possess like attainments.

For instance, tenets of most of the world's religious faiths are grounded on the principal of man's humanity to man. That concept is manifest in many ways. Be it giving to the less fortunate, praying for your enemies, promoting peace, battling evil. At the base lies the fundamental precept aptly characterized by the Christian God's call for you "love thy neighbor as thyself." Other religions may phrase it different or portray the principal as a parable. No matter, the intent is the same.

Which brings us to Kwanzaa. Since its inception in the mid-1960—it was created by Maulana Kaurenga, in part to wean African-Americans from the Euro-tradition of Christmas while alternately proffering a positive outlet for self-affirmation—Kwanzaa has grown in scope and prestige. There are hundreds of books on Kwanzaa, hundreds more articles in newspapers and magazines detailing the seven-day holiday. Municipal institutions such as school systems and library districts incorporate Kwanzaa into their official programming. The result has wider acceptance.

And now it's time for Kwanzaa to step further into the mainstream. And since it's not tied to any particular doctrine, it's actually the perfect holiday for everyone.

So as the traditional yuletide holidays approach, be mindful of Kwanzaa. Take time out to study its principles, digest their universality, then go out and tell a friend. Tell two. Urge them to investigate. What they will find is a holiday that doesn't create exclusivity. They'll find a holiday that recognizes the universal plight of all benevolent people: the pursuit of love, peace and happiness.

Education bill a start

Congress deserves a pat on the back for passing historic education reform legislation. That said, let's avoid myopia and see the overhaul for what it is: a sorely needed shot in the arm for this nation's crumbling public education system. And for every good provision, there's a provision elicits a head-scratch or two.

For instance, the legislation gives states and school districts more leeway on how they spend federal funding. That's good. After all, local educators are best equipped to assess the needs of their campuses. Also beneficial is a provision requiring school districts and administrators to raise student achievement, monitor teacher quality and close the gap between poor and middle-class students and white and minority students.

But here's the head-scratcher: the bill might not have provided enough money to do the latter as some detractors complained. What's more, for the first time, test scores will affect the amount of federal funding a school gets and how school officials spend it. In essence, schools could get more freedom to teach and more money to create a top-notch learning environment only to lose both perks if their students underachieve. Seems oxymoronic. And consistently poor-performing schools could get extra money only to lose it along with local control if test scores lag.

While no one will argue that education reform was needed, this legislation left something to be desired.



Rethinking welfare reform

By Maya Rockeymoore
Special to Sentinel-Voice

In 1996, after Congress revamped the welfare system to require welfare recipients to work in exchange for their grants as a prelude to completely moving off welfare, many lauded the changes. The cheerleaders of the new act, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, confidently envisioned former welfare mothers quickly ending their dependence on public assistance and moving into the workforce.

It is true — and welcome — that since 1996 welfare caseloads dropped from 4.6 million to about 2.2 million today. Now, as Congress prepares to debate the \$27-billion program's renewal, its advocates cite that dramatic decline as evidence of the program's success.

Yet, even before the current recession began to shake the American economy this fall, studies of those who left welfare and those who stayed indicated that poverty was persisting among welfare-to-work participants.

Equally alarming, the studies also found evidence of significant differences in the success rate of black and white recipients — differences that appear to result from racial bias.

Advocates of the TANF program make two flawed assumptions about the welfare-to-work experience facing recipients.

First, they assume a "level playing field" exists both in the administration of the TANF program and in the labor market that welfare re-

ipients must try to find work in.

That's a naive assumption.

In fact, gross racial inequities in the distribution of relief among state-based poverty programs helped convince the Johnson Administration to federalize the welfare program in the mid-1960s. The program's revision in 1996 returned responsibility for the program's administration back to the states. One thing we've learned is that although much has changed racially in America since the 1960s, racial bias still exists in some areas of poverty relief.

For example, separate studies conducted in Virginia by Professor Susan Gooden, and in Illinois by the Chicago Urban League have turned up similar evidence of disparate racial treatment in some ways the TANF program is administered.

Each study found that program caseworkers were much less likely to refer African-Americans than white welfare recipients to crucial education and job-support programs, such as transportation and child care assistance, within TANF.

As for the broader labor market, African-Americans have always been penalized with far higher unemployment than whites — their rates often soaring into the double digits during periods of economic recession. In fact, after black unemployment fell to a low of 7.2 percent just last year, it's now back to double digits at 10.1 percent, while the overall unemployment is 5.7 percent.

These figures reflect a per-

sistent racial bias in the U.S. labor market that favors whites over African-Americans and Latino Americans. That bias influences job opportunities for welfare-to-work participants.

Research done under the auspices of the Urban Institute, a Washington-based think tank, show that there is less employer demand for black welfare recipients, that whites have left the rolls at faster rates than blacks, and that blacks are more likely to be forced to return to welfare.

In addition, further research by Professor Gooden shows that blacks are more likely to endure discrimination by employers during the hiring process — often undergoing drug tests and background checks when none is required of white applicants.

The second flawed assumption made by advocates of the current welfare system is that pushing welfare recipients willy-nilly into any available job is enough to alleviate their poverty and dependence on public assistance.

In fact, data from the National Survey of America's Families show that while the

employment rate of African-American families rose significantly between 1997 and 1999 — a period of robust economic expansion — there was no corresponding decrease in the rates of poverty or food hardship. Housing hardships actually increased among these families.

And numerous other sources also show that, despite its work-based philosophy, the TANF program has failed to reduce poverty among low-income families.

It is unconscionable that welfare reform has left us with a system that forces low-income people, especially women, into dead-end jobs with out adequate education or training opportunities. This "work-first" approach has the effect of reinforcing the very social and economic inequities that keeps low-income workers chronically unemployed and under-employed; and its ill effects are exaggerated by mandatory lifetime benefit limits that, once expired, leave recipients high and dry without marketable skills or a reliable source of income.

These and other flaws
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