

## OUR VIEW

## Dropping Off

It's a sad day when we point to a declining high school dropout rate as something to shout about. You can read all about it in Wednesday's edition of the Review-Journal. The first paragraphs of the story set the stage:

*"The Clark County School District has reduced its dropout rate for high school students for two consecutive school years, and its minority populations have shown substantial improvements in the statistical measure during that time. The school system has improved its dropout rate to 5.9 percent for the 2005-06 school year, a reduction from the 2004-05 school year, when 6.8 percent of high school students dropped out. The district's dropout rate was 7.6 percent for the 2003-04 school year.*

*Hispanic, Asian and American Indian students reduced their dropout rates more significantly than the population as a whole during the past two school years. But students from every ethnic category saw marked improvements in dropout rates. Asian students had the lowest dropout rate among any group during the 2005-06 school year, with 3.5 percent dropping out last school year.*

*Superintendent Walt Rulfes said that although the district's dropout results for the 2005-06 school year have not been verified by the Nevada Department of Education, he is confident the results will stick. "We're seeing the effects of three years of programs in the works. If we continue (improving), we'll have a district that is recognized for being progressive and not just being big."*

When did declining dropout rates become something worthy of veneration? To be fair, any decrease in the number of students dropping out of school is positive. Because dropout percentages represent real people—living, breathing, studying students—the dropout rate is totally consequential. But the *Sentinel-Voice* leans toward the comments of a school district official who said that the improvement in dropout rates should translate to an improved graduation rate; emphasis on *should*.

Even better would be coupling the decreasing dropout rate with an uptick in student performance on standardized test scores and more schools meeting the aptitude set for in the controversial No Child Left Behind federal educational law. Where is the data showing Black students are closing the academic achievement gap? Where are the statistics showing that Hispanics and students who are English Language Learners are doing better on the fourth-grade and eighth-grade standardized tests used to compare scholastic aptitude in Clark County with the rest of the nation? Show us that minority students and those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are passing the state proficiency exam in higher numbers. Prove that learning-disabled and behaviorally challenged students are earning diplomas and general equivalency diplomas (G.E.D.) at higher rates than ever before.

We want to see that more students are taking honors and advanced placement classes—while you're at it, provide corroboration that grade inflation isn't rampant or even problematic. As well, show us that more graduates are earning academic college scholarships—and not just the in-state Millennium Scholarship—and that fewer graduates (scholarship winners included) have to take remedial college courses just to catch up.

If this sounds like a harsh rebuke, it is. But it's important to understand that these issues weren't raised to dampen the good news about falling dropout rates. They were raised to remind us—yes, us, not educators because they're familiar with these problems, but we, the taxpayers—that school district officials have an unenviable Herculean job in front of them: to provide kids from all walks of life a quality education. Easier said than done.

Superintendents must beg state lawmakers for money. Teachers are not paid very well, have scant resources (pay nearly \$1,000 for supplies) and must deal with students of all ability levels. At some schools, parental involvement is nil. Simply put, we (taxpayers) have to put money into education. It's a wonder that any learning takes place. But it does. And that's the thing.

As much as we're happy that the dropout rate is falling, we'd be even happier to know that if students drop out, they're missing out on a top-notch education.



SIGN OF THE TIMES

## Mardi Gras fetes Blacks

By Harry C. Alford  
Special to *Sentinel-Voice*

The annual New Orleans Mardi Gras is known throughout the world. Many nations and cultures celebrate the period before Ash Wednesday and Lent as "Carnival" and the culture-rich New Orleans has the distinction of calling it Mardi Gras — and no place on Earth can match the total community effort that is put into the celebration. At the airport in New Orleans, you see foreigners coming in and hearing languages of various types on faces with much anticipation. Airline employees flock to the city with their free air passes ready for anything goes.

One of the most important things about the Mardi Gras is that it is very much a Black culture event with local Whites, et al, joining in. The costumes, makeup, dances and participants of the numerous parades are Black-oriented, and the people are doing what their forefathers have been doing for decades.

The celebration is a sign of vibrancy. It tells the world that "we are healthy, happy, and thank God for a good life." After Katrina came to town, there were naysayers who wanted the Mardi Gras to come to an abrupt end. How fickle and idiotic that would have been. It would



HARRY C. ALFORD

have been tantamount to shutting down Christmas.

Last year was quite challenging. Mardi Gras was at about 50 percent capacity and that spoke of the despair and enormity of the tragedy. This year was a total success. More than 700,000 participated in the events that went off without a hitch.

Mardi Gras is back to normal, and the hotels and restaurants, which were enjoying 90 percent-plus occupancy were doing their part in rejuvenating the New Orleans economy. A monumental tragedy was not enough to crush the spirit of New Orleans. Mardi Gras lives and so does New Orleans, despite a pitiful responding federal government. Despite the blatant corruption at the top end and the incompetence shown by tax-paid bureaucrats, the people and the culture thrive.

"That, which does not kill us, makes us stronger," and the people and culture of New Orleans are stronger

than ever. We at the National Black Chamber of Commerce have been totally focused on the recovery of the Gulf. Personally, my wife and I have become so attached to New Orleans that many believe we have permanently moved there. Our passion and involvement in every aspect of the rebuilding is almost fanatical. We can't help it. It has become our mission to make New Orleans one of the greatest cities in the nation — a total return to greatness.

Kay and I were more than honored to accept seats on the famous King Zulu Float because of our efforts, which was truly a special moment. This is highly prestigious and was sponsored by the New Orleans Regional Black Chamber of Commerce.

The Zulu Parade is one of

two on "Fat Tuesday." It started at 8 a.m. and was followed by the other big parade, Rex.

The participants of Zulu usually celebrate beginning at sundown on Monday. The dinner, dancing, toasting lasted until about 2 a.m. People disbursed to dress and apply make up. Participants reported to the floats that were assembled at the Super Dome by 5 a.m. At 6 a.m., the floats line up and assemble with the bands starting at Jackson and Clyburn streets. By 8 a.m., the parade kicked off with Mayor Ray Nagin riding on a magnificent horse. As the float turned the corner to join in the parade, I become totally in awe.

There, on both sides of the street, were tens of thousands of citizens cheering, clapping

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NEVADA'S ONLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER  
**LAS VEGAS Sentinel Voice**  
GRIOT COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.  
NO FROM SMALL LET YOU FEEL

Nevada's only African-American community newspaper.  
Published every Thursday by Griot Communications Group, Inc.  
900 East Charleston Boulevard • Las Vegas, Nevada 89104  
Telephone (702) 380-8100  
Email: lvsentinelvoice@yahoo.com

## Contributing Writers:

Frank Albano  
Debbie Hall  
Lés Pierres Streater  
Kanika Vann

Photographer:  
Joseph Sawyer III

Ramon Savoy, Publisher, Editor-in-Chief  
Parker Philpot, Copy Editor  
Don Snook, Graphics  
Ed & Betty Brown, Founders

Member: National Newspaper Publishers Association  
and West Coast Black Publishers Association