OPINION&COMMENTARY

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Kudos

Grover Cleveland was president of the United States when Edna Parker was born on April 20, 1893, in Morgan County. At 113, Parker, who lives in Shelbyville, is believed to be the ninth-oldest person in the world. Happy birthday, Edna.

Outrage

The president of Indianapolis-based MicroVote General Corp. told the Indiana Election Commission last week that his company had installed unapproved software on voting machines in several counties. Voters in 22 counties may have to use paper ballots if the company is unable to receive state certification before the May 2 primary. Is this the kind of service taxpayers should expect?

Overheard

"It's telling us we don't have enough opportunity inside our borders to keep our own (people) or to attract others."

Pat Barkey,
director of economic and policy studies at Ball State University, commenting on a Census report showing that more people moved out of Indiana than into the state between 2000 and 2004.

A generation of lost boys

IPS ranks as worst in nation in graduating males

Our position:
Addressing the male achievement gap is a key to turning around IPS' education crisis.

Derrell Washington should have been a graduate of Broad Ripple High School's class of 2004. Instead, he's one of the thousands of males, blacks and whites, who have dropped out of Indianapolis Public Schools.

By the end of his sophomore year, Washington had clashed with teachers and been suspended twice. He thought, "I was pushed away." By 2003, he left Broad Ripple for good.

Since then, he's held three different jobs while struggling to attain his GED. Now on his fourth gig, prepping food at the Union Jack Pub in Broad Ripple, he realizes that without a diploma "all you can do is flip burgers. And that's no future."

It isn't.

The Star Editorial Board last year brought attention to the academic achievement gap for black males and for males overall. The issue received renewed focus last week with the release of the Manhattan Institute's annual study on graduation rates. The report found that in Indiana black males' graduation rate was 16 percentage points lower than black females' in 2003. Only five other states recorded such a wide disparity.

In most of Indiana, white males' academic performance outpaces that of blacks. But IPS is the worst in the nation in graduating black *and* white males, according to the Schott Foundation for Public Education in a study scheduled for release next month.

The state's largest school district fares worse than other poor-performing school systems in Pinellas County, Fla.; Cincinnati; Chatham County, Ga.; and New York City.

About one of every five black or white males who entered IPS' five high schools in the 2000-2001 school year graduated four years later. Where did the rest go? In all likelihood they dropped out.

Just 21 percent of about 1,200 black males who made up IPS' original class of 2004 earned diplomas. The district has gone from being the fifth-worst in the nation for graduating black males to the worst.

The numbers are as atrocious for whites. A mere 22 percent of the 667 white males entering IPS high schools in 2000 made it to graduation. Pinellas County, Fla., which has the second-worst white male graduation rate, handed diplomas to 42 percent.

EDITORIAL

As Schott Foundation researcher Michael Holzman says: "If you have a 20 percent graduation rate for black males and white males, you have a problem."

First-year IPS Superintendent Eugene White began acknowledging that problem last year when he created the Edgar H. Evans Academy for boys with disciplinary problems. White also recently announced plans to open a single-sex academy for middle school-grade boys as part of a partnership with the national Knowledge Is Power Program of charter schools.

But those opportunities are arriving too late for Russell Ralston, who left Arlington High School at age 16 because "I was just done with school."

By 17, he was an expectant father. He also began a 15-month stint at a juvenile prison in Plainfield for battery. There, he gained his GED.

Ralston now spends his days at an outreach center run by Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring, when he's not detailing cars at an Eastside carwash. Although he hopes to go to trade school, he realizes he'll need financial aid to foot tuition costs because "I can barely support myself."

One in 10 white male dropouts and 52 percent of black male dropouts are likely to have done prison time, according to Bruce Western of Princeton University. Even if they obtain their GED, their convictions preclude them from getting student aid, limiting opportunities to improve their job prospects.

IPS' struggles are a reflection of how many schools throughout the nation have been unable to help males adapt to the realities of a knowledge-based economy. This is especially true in Indiana, where the dependence on traditional manufacturing has fostered a culture of low educational achievement.

Boys also find few male role models in schools; women make up most of the teaching ranks. The fact that teachers are usually white can contribute to cultural differences that keep students and educators from connecting. Holzman says those cultural clashes factor into higher rates of suspensions and expulsions of black males.

They also may contribute to an overdiagnosis of learning and emotional disabilities among black males.

Robb Warriner, IPS' director of special education, admits that gaps in learning caused by frequent school transfers, the rambunctious nature of boys and an unwillingness to use techniques that match boys' different learning styles can lead to misdiagnosis.

About 2.7 percent of black males in IPS in the 2001-2002 school year were labeled as suffering from an emotional disturbance; less than 1 percent of black females received such a diagnosis. Black males, who account for a third of IPS enrollment, made up 48 percent of the district's emotionally disturbed population.

And white males in IPS are four times more likely than white girls to be diagnosed with a learning disability.

Warriner says special education officials are crafting new learning plans for boys to address their academic gaps before they are evaluated. Programs such as the Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Supports, which has been rolled out in three schools, are reducing the emphasis on suspensions, expulsions and special ed referrals.

As IPS' new leader, White has repeatedly stated the belief that all children, including black males, can learn. It's a message that must be accepted throughout the district for the achievement gap to narrow and for the dropout crisis to subside.

Power couple pushes education in citizenship

DAVID BRODER

WASHINGTON — Between them, Sandra Day O'Connor and Roy Romer have had enough successful careers to satisfy half a dozen ambitious individuals. O'Connor was a rancher, a lawyer, a leader of the Arizona Senate and, most famously, the first woman justice of the Supreme Court. Romer was a successful businessman, the governor of Colorado, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee and, for the last six years, the superintendent of schools in Los Angeles.

When I saw them over coffee in Washington last week, the two senior citizens were proverbially breathing fire about the younger generation. What had stirred them was not worry about the youths' clothes, language or morals. It was a lot more basic — a concern that these young people are coming out of school uninformed about the basics of American government and unengaged in the civic life of their country.

Civics and government instruction, O'Connor said, "was routinely required at several levels in high school and it was integrated into the grade-school curriculum as well. And that just has disappeared."

The trend has been in place for some time, she said, citing a 2003 report from the Carnegie Corp., but it may have been accelerated by the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires a concentration on math and reading skills.

The 2002 legislation was not intended to push other subjects out of the schools, but Romer said, "Quite often, the tests that states will use for No Child Left Behind will be only on certain core subjects, such as language arts and math and sometimes science, and school systems, if not careful, can be warped into the neglect of social studies."

O'Connor and Romer are the national spokesmen for a concerted pushback against these trends, calling itself the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (www.civicmissionofschools.org). Twenty-nine national organizations and a dozen notable private individuals have lent their support; there's foundation money behind it as well.

There are signs that the effort is beginning to succeed. Coalitions have been formed to promote the cause in at least 18 states. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the nation's report card, has agreed to test students on their civic knowledge every four years instead of every eight.

Two veteran representatives, Republican Mike Castle of Delaware and Democrat Dale Kildee of Michigan, have agreed to form a congressional caucus aimed at turning students into more knowledgeable citizens.

The challenge is heightened by the influx of immigrants, both legal and illegal, into this country. Sen. Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican, has added an amendment to the stalled immigration reform bill creating a fund and incentives for preparing those recent arrivals for the duties and privileges of citizenship. But obviously with voting participation as low as it is, especially among young people, many native-born Americans need training in civics as well.

Their latest enterprise could be as valuable a contribution to this society as anything that O'Connor and Romer ever have done. He is concerned about political apathy and cynicism; she worries about preserving the independence of the judiciary. Together, they are reminding us that democracy, representative government and the rule of law don't just happen; they take work — and the understanding that the public schools must provide.

Still in debt

The Treasury Department has informed me that it printed 2,100 copies of the Financial Report of the United States Government for fiscal 2005, not the 1,000 copies I reported recently. You may recall that this is the document which sets forth that the real budget deficit for last year on an accrual basis — the way all corporations are required to keep their books — was $760 billion, not the $319 billion widely reported on a cash basis. I am happy to correct the printing-order figure, but the shocked reaction to my column confirms that the grim news about our unfinanced obligations had not registered previously, even with many people who follow government closely. The report is also available on the Treasury Web site, so you can read it yourself.

Speaking of the budget, President Bush made a first-rate choice when he named Rob Portman, now the head of the Office of Special Trade Representative, to succeed Josh Bolten, the new White House chief of staff, as the director of the White House Office of Management and Budget. Portman, a former Ohio representative and member of the Ways and Means Committee, is both substantive and politically skilled. Now, if only the Republicans in Congress would get serious about disciplining deficits, something might be accomplished.

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RUSS PULLIAM

Judge also enjoys sitting on piano bench

If it weren't for the law, Superior Court Judge Mark Stoner might be a poverty-stricken, starving musician.

Yet if it weren't for his music, Stoner also might have been a poverty-stricken deputy prosecutor in his early days as a lawyer.

Judge Stoner still keeps his music close at hand. He is one of the top-notch freelance pianists and organists in town, playing for churches and synagogues. He keeps a practice piano in his office, next to his judicial chambers. It has a synthesizer, four-track recording and harpsichord.

According to the Mozart effect, classical music training boosts young people's IQs. Perhaps as an extension of that theory, Judge Stoner finds he does better on the bench with the help of some music.

"The piano was a present to myself when I came on the bench," he said. "It gives me a chance for something to do and relax when a jury is deliberating, or it gives me some relief if I get mad at the lawyers."

Whether as a deputy prosecutor or a judge, Stoner has discovered an interesting synergy between the law and music. He was a government and music major at the University of Virginia before he got his law degree.

Growing up in Union City north of Richmond, Ind., Stoner took the usual assortment of music lessons in his youth. He joined a popular band in high school, making some money from it. A music-writing class in college sparked further interest, and he kept developing his piano and organ skills.

Judge Mark Stoner

As a deputy prosecutor under Steve Goldsmith in 1979, he found he could supplement his low pay of $13,500 a year by singing in a choir and playing the organ for churches and synagogues.

"For 21 years I prosecuted murderers and robbers. I don't think I could have done that without another creative outlet where you are talking about the good things, music and church, those things that put a proper balance on the really horrible things that you see in a courtroom."

He plays both popular and classical. "I can sit down and play for hours without music. It's very relaxing," he notes. "The classical music requires a lot more discipline, knowledge and practice. I'm not a concert performer. I play a pretty good church service. But I have to work at it."

These days he sings in the St. Paul's Episcopal Church choir and is the organist for the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation.

"What I really wanted to do was to retire from law at age 50 and then write movie scores," he recalls. Now he's 50. "I am a little behind schedule. It's become a crowded field. I don't have any illusions that I'm going to be able to do that. As you get older, you realize that some things are practical and others are not."

Stoner entertains fellow judges and lawyers at the state's annual Judicial Conference. "People ask him to play all the time," says fellow Superior Court Judge Becky Pierson-Treacy. "He's played at my house before, at judges' events, social events."

Along with other Superior Court judges, Stoner is up for re-election this year. He doesn't need to do much advertising; under the county's new court election system each party is given an equal number of judicial positions.

Music not only paid Judge Stoner's way through law school but also gives him some of that classical balance needed on the bench. Look for a campaign slogan: "Harmony in the courtroom."

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