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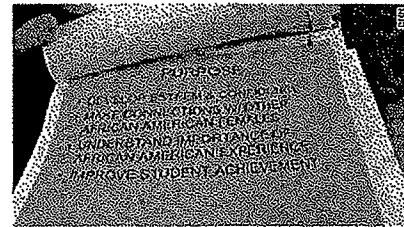
Pennsylvania school experiments with 'segregation'

January 27, 2011 | By Monika Plocienniczak, CNN

A Pennsylvania high school says some students are separated by race, gender and language for a few minutes each day in an effort to boost academic scores, raising controversy over the historically contentious issue of segregation in schools.

The initiative is a pilot program intended to capitalize on "enriching students' experiences through mentoring" and is derived from school research "that shows grouping black students by gender with a strong role model can help boost their academic achievement and self esteem," according to a statement from McCaskey East High School in Lancaster.

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"Educators immediately noticed strong bonds being formed between all students and mentor teachers," the statement said.

The junior class at McCaskey East is voluntarily segregated by the students, who organize themselves "by gender, race and/or language," said school spokeswoman Kelly Burkholder.

But some school experts say the experiment is misguided.

"When we talk about reducing the achievement gap, do we mean merely reducing the discrepancy of test scores of white students and students of color?" asked education consultant Sam Chaltain. "Or do we mean reducing the predictive impact that things like race, class and gender have on all aspects of student engagement, performance and learning?"

The school's principal defended the policy.

"One of the things we said when we did this was, 'Let's look at the data, let's not run from it. Let's confront it and see what we can do about it,'" said school principal Bill Jimenez. "In visiting the classrooms, I saw students planning their path for success after graduation."

But while McCaskey East students are "segregated" for six minutes each day and 20 minutes twice a month, some say other school systems in the country appear to be reverting to real segregation.

Last month, the NAACP held a three-day education summit in Raleigh, North Carolina, where the Wake County School Board, bolstered by the election of four new conservative members last year, ended the school system's 10-year-old diversity policy that used the number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches to assign students to schools.

They plan to replace the policy with a "neighborhood schools system" that critics say will establish real segregation.

"School boards across this country are rolling the clock back to the time before Brown vs. the Board of Education," NAACP President Benjamin Todd Jealous said in a statement. "The NAACP will not let this happen."

The 1954 case from Topeka, Kansas, ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, overturning an earlier ruling in a decision that determined "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

But as educators look for new ways to improve student aptitude, some point out that McCaskey East High School could have the right idea. A national study from UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies claims to show that girls from single-sex schools have an edge over their co-ed peers.

"Single-sex education appears to produce favorable outcomes for female students, especially in terms of their confidence, engagement and aspirations, most notably in areas related to math and science," the 2008 study said.

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