

Diversity Training Helps Schools Connect

Students sometimes separate themselves between the minority and the majority. And that can take its toll on student achievement, as minority-race students are less likely to share in class, to raise their hand, to ask for help.

That's why North Salem High School's English as a second language teacher Mark Till attended a voluntary training Monday on diversity and cultural competency.

"I'm here to learn how to better facilitate equality," he said. "How do we knock down the barriers?"

Forty-three participants attended the daylong training Monday, a day schools were closed in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

The conference, called "They're Our Children," was sponsored by the Salem-Keizer teachers and classified staff unions. It's thought to be the first joint training they've offered on diversity.

"The students that we teach come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and speak several different languages," said Michele Ford, who co-organized the conference.

In the 2008-09 school year, about 44 percent of Salem-Keizer students — or 17,600 students — identified themselves as a minority race, according to state data.

About 30 percent identified themselves as Hispanic, 6 percent as multi-ethnic, 4.1 percent as Asian-Pacific Islander, and 1 percent as black.

Salem-Keizer

students also come from diverse language backgrounds, with more than 30 languages spoken at students' homes, according to the district.

"Our classrooms and schools are evolving, and we've got to keep pace," said Gail Rasmussen, president of the Oregon Education Association.

Keynote

speaker Debbie Goforth, an author, educator and consultant, urged participants to place themselves in their students' shoes.

"We have to be very careful, as educators, that we're looking through the child's eyes, not our eyes," she said.

She said that being a "campus parent" might not have been what they signed up for — but it's a vital roll that every school staffer plays.

"I'm going to see the child first, and then I see the student," she said. "Once I acknowledged to the child that I really cared about them, then the learning took place."

Many participants attended not only for the training, but for the opportunity to network with other school staffers.

"The most important thing is making connections with different teachers," Whiteaker Middle School Teacher Sally Welter said. "It sounds like we have a lot of the same issues that we're concerned about."

And many hope to incorporate the messages and concepts discussed into their work with students.

Auburn

Elementary School Counselor Miguel Wahl said he hopes to "thread topics

of tolerance, diversity and acceptance into what's already being done" at the school.

"Diversity ... it's a buzz word unless something actually gets done," he said.

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