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Test Score Probe Sought

Rights panel asked to determine why whites seem to outperform blacks at 4 Denver high schools

By **Holly Kurtz** Denver Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

Colorado civil rights commissioners are being asked to quiz school officials about why whites seem to get better test scores and grades than do blacks at four Denver high schools.

They are expected to decide Nov. 16 whether to investigate academic disparities among the races at George Washington, Montbello, Manual and East high schools, said H. Rene Ramirez, director of the Colorado Civil Rights Division.

A black educational organization asked for an investigation in the aftermath of a rally at George Washington High. The rally was over a student newspaper article that said whites got better grades than blacks at the school.

"The black children were demoralized and insulted only to find out it's true," said civil rights attorney D. Dale Sadler.

Sadler filed the petition on behalf of the Denver/Aurora chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

Sadler's petition asks commissioners to find out why whites at four Denver high schools seem to be earning better grades, getting higher test scores, garnering more places in the rigorous International Baccalaureate program at George Washington, and tallying fewer suspensions and expulsions than their black peers.

Whites at these schools outperformed black classmates in most — but not all — categories of the 1999 Iowa Test of Educational Development, according to Denver Public Schools data.

Sadler wants the commission to draw up solutions and hold community forums in cooperation with other government agencies and grassroots groups.

The Civil Rights Commission has the power to order legal remedies. But director Ramirez says it lacks authority to do so in this situation.

"I would anticipate the commission working with Denver Public Schools and the administrators to work out a plan everyone could accept," Ramirez said.

DPS spokeswoman Amy Hudson said the school district had yet to be informed of the petition, which civil rights commissioners received Friday.

Sadler said he complained directly to the Civil Rights Commission because he didn't think the school district would act.

"Going to Denver Public Schools," he said, "is kind of like sending the chicken into the foxhole and saying, 'Can you solve our problems for us?' If I would go to Denver Public Schools, I would expect them to 'public relations' the problem away."

Bennie Milliner, Denver's only black school board member, sees it differently.

"We always welcome scrutiny. We love it. We wish it would come constructively. If he believes he can help us determine that's true, then help us do something about it, then that's great."

Ida Jones, Montbello High principal, says her school is not discriminating.

"I really have a hard time talking about this as some kind of conspiracy," she said. "Why would I work 12 and 14 hours a day so I could watch other people's children *not* succeed?"

Jones also questioned zeroing in on high schools.

"Looking at it from the high-school level might be just a little too late," she said.

Sadler said he focused on high school students because there's not much time to help them before they go out into the world. The next step, he says, is to examine the lower grades.

"How can we have white children thriving while black children are failing?" he asked. "Either black children aren't capable or there's something wrong with the service delivery system."

Sadler believes it's the latter.

So does Candace Tasker, the George Washington High student who organized the rally that helped inspire the petition.

"I've talked to a few students who feel like, just because they're minorities, nobody expects anything of them," she said.

Along with her classmates and principal, Tasker is working on solutions that include a tutoring program for struggling students.