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Deborah Mathis

OPINION

3B

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OUR OPINION

Madison can close achievement gap

The Wisconsin State Journal's ongoing "Schools of Hope" series shows that the Madison school district is doing many things right. Chief among them is refusing to rest on its laurels.

Teachers and administrators are constantly evaluating the ways in which students are taught, as well as what they are taught. They strive to make learning relevant, to make sure university-bound students are academically prepared, and to smooth the road to work or trade school for those who choose not to go to college. They don't always succeed, but they never stop trying.

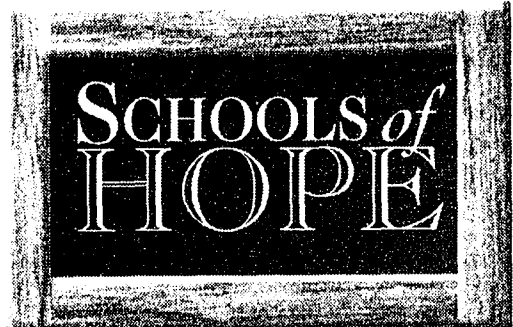
But these best efforts fail when it comes to the city's growing number of poor African-American students. Certainly there are successes: Many young black students in Madison recognize that education is the first rung up the ladder toward economic success. Many refuse to be intimidated by taunts from other blacks that doing well in school means they're "acting white." Many have parents who push them and prod them and refuse to let them fail.

But too many do not. The academic achievement gap between white students and black students has increased in the past five years. Madison may have the best school district in the state, but it also has the largest achievement gap between blacks and whites of any school district with a significant black enrollment.

It is partly the schools' fault. There is institutional racism. There are teachers who expect black children to fail and are not surprised when they do. But the majority of black students who fall into the lowest category of academic achievement have been victimized by poverty and failed by their own parents long before they walk through the schoolhouse door.

But if any community can solve this crisis, Madison can, says mayoral aide Enis Ragland, president of 100 Black Men and one of the community leaders tackling the black achievement gap.

While the task force headed by



Ragland and Leslie Ann Howard of United Way studies what the schools can do to boost black student achievement, there's something any Dane County resident can do now: Get involved.

A study of African-American youngsters from all over the nation who succeeded, despite having been raised in slums so bad they make Simpson Street look like Rodeo Drive, showed one common factor: Each child had at least one adult in their lives who cared.

That's what 100 Black Men and similar groups want to do for Madison's poor African-American youngsters: Find them mentors. Adults who'll call them up or stop over once a week. Families who'll include them in an outing or invite them over for dinner once a month. You don't have to be black; all you have to do is care.

Successful kids of any color are busy kids, and so are their parents. The groups involved in matching mentors with children recognize this, and try to craft programs that are not so demanding of time and energy they will scare people off. Ask yourself: Could I not spare an hour a week, or one day a month, to help a child and make this community a better place to live?

It could work. It could teach black kids that there's nothing "white" about getting good grades — it's simply a matter of hard work. It could teach whites to be more empathetic about the enormous obstacles some black youngsters face.

It could turn some lives around — if enough of us care.

Social Security debate not only for aged

Shirley Chater, the commissioner of the Social Security Administration, says she often talks to young adults who doubt benefits will be there for them when they reach retirement age.

"I tell them, 'Social Security covers you right now through disability and survivor's insurance,'" Chater said last week in Madison. "Most young people are totally unaware of that."

Indeed, many twenty- and thirty-somethings probably don't stop to think about the chances they could be disabled or die before retirement age. Statistically, however, those odds are chilling.

The Social Security Administration says there's a one-in-three chance that a man will be disabled and unable to work before he's 65 and a one-in-five chance that he'll die before 65. The actuarial tables are better for women, but the point is clear: A lot of bad things can happen to people before they ever see their first retirement check.

Chater says that's why young people should pay attention to the debate over the future of Social Security — just as much as "baby boomers" within sight of retirement age or people already drawing benefits. Young people may not think Social Security is a part of their personal or family safety net, but they're statistically wrong.

In a meeting with members of the State Journal editorial board, Chater discussed various options to re-engineer Social Security to ensure its solvency in the 21st century. (See the Forum section from Sunday, May 5, for a detailed analysis of those options.) Whatever path is chosen, she said, the time to put Social Security on solid footing is now.

"I hope we don't wait until there's a crisis," she said.

Most people can agree with that, but President Clinton and Republican challenger Bob Dole will likely handle the issue with kid gloves during this fall's campaign. It's viewed as too risky to debate during an election year.

Maybe Clinton and Dole can talk instead about the federal budget deficit, because that has an effect on Social Security, too.

Chater explained: Social Security has never contributed to the federal budget deficit — in fact, it's against the law for Social Security trust funds to be used for anything other than Social Security. But much of the system's assets are invested in government securities that must pay dividends to the system over time. If the deficit is not brought under control, the government may not be able to repay Social Security when the money is needed.

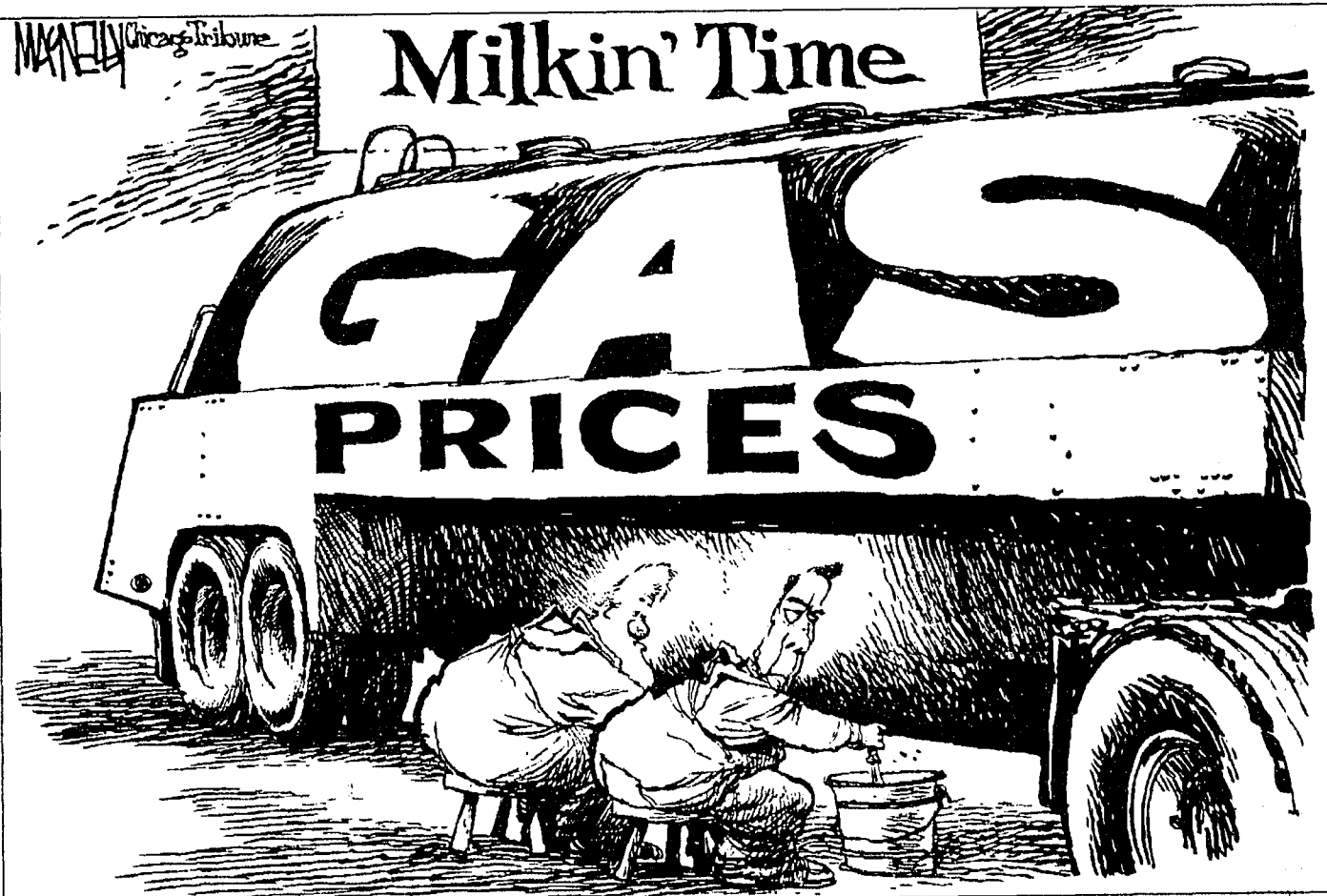
In short, failure to control the deficit will deepen cash-flow problems for Social Security in the 21st century, when today's young workers near retirement age.

Young adults can't shrug their shoulders and take a fatalistic view of Social Security. If they leave the debate to the boomers and retirees, they'll pay in the end — even if the end is 40 years from now.

WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL

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Unity behind a well-spoken Dole is GOP's chance

WASHINGTON — Recollecting in tranquility the delights of politics in 1800, a retired congressman said, "It was a pleasure to live in those good old days, when a Federalist could knock a Republican down in the streets and not be questioned about it." In 1996, Republicans knock Republicans down. Bob Dole, who talks about leadership, should show some by knocking enough heads together to restore order in his party's ranks.

Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan have been called liabilities by Al D'Amato — talk about being called ugly by a frog — and some conservatives suspect that Govs. Pete Wilson, Christine Todd Whitman, George Pataki and Bill Weld have begun their campaigns for the next Republican nomination by planning to convulse this year's convention with a fight over the platform's pro-life abortion stance. (A stance which did not prevent Reagan and Bush from carrying 133 states in three elections.) The suspicion is that the three would be dry-eyed if a debacle in San Diego — "another Houston" — were followed by defeat in November, allowing them to argue that the party must be "taken back" from . . . ? From some of its most intense and reliable components — religious and pro-life conservatives.

After Dole tells the frog and the governors to subside or they will suffer, he



GEORGE F. WILL

Will is a columnist for the Washington Post

should try to stop Republican whining about his awkwardness and Bill Clinton's nimbleness.

It is not news that Clinton is our Henry of Navarre, the French king who was raised a Protestant but twice converted to Catholicism for political convenience, saying, "Paris is well worth a Mass." Clinton thinks the presidency is worth some disparagements of big government, waivers for state welfare experiments, embrace of the adoption provision from the Republican Contract, denial of welfare benefits to unwed teen-age mothers who quit school or do not live with responsible adults, and all his other recent political plagiarisms.

They are genuflections to the country's conservatism. So the conservative party should stop complaining and start presenting a coherent conservative rhetoric distinguished from Clinton's by its sincerity.

Dole says he is a doer, not a talker, but it is time for him to be more of a talker and less of a doer. He can remain majority leader but must get off the Senate floor and into serious discipline as a talker to the nation, not the other legislators.

By hanging around the Senate he risks convincing the country he should stay there because he thinks the presidency is not important enough to pursue single-mindedly. And when he tells an audience, "Like everyone else in this room, I was born," he calls to mind another Kansan who was a Republican presidential nominee — Alf Landon, who said, "Wherever I have gone in this country I have found Americans."

That was 60 years ago, the last time a Democratic president won a second term. Clinton will win one unless Dole can say, reading carefully crafted

speeches, why it is important, even with the world relatively calm and the economy tolerably strong, to change presidents.

Regarding foreign policy, the country is safer than at any time since the 1920s. The stakes of politics were lowered by the end of the Cold War. The electorate's standards have been lowered, too. That is one reason why Clinton is president, and why Dole's strengths of experience, integrity and character may have less salience than he hopes they will in the contrast with Clinton.

However, the country also is more conservative than at any time since the 1920s, so the conservative party's candidate has an advantage Dole has barely begun to exploit. To do so he must do what he is often uncomfortable doing — voice Americans' anxieties about the coarsening of the culture and the Balkanizing of the citizenry.

He will get help from Hawaii's supreme court if it angers an overwhelming majority of Americans by discovering a right to contract same-sex marriages. He is being helped by the presence on California's ballots this November of the initiative to ban the state government from administering racial preferences.

He must force Clinton to fight for California, lest Clinton linger all autumn where the election will be settled, in the crescent between New Jersey and Wisconsin, where Catholic voters — one-fourth of the population and a bit more of those who vote — will be crucial. Which is why some conservatives, looking for reasons for enthusiasm about Dole, and for a way to stay busy, other than by complaining about Dole, may unite in advocating as his running mate Rep. Chris Cox, an ideologically conservative California Catholic.

More mail: Students reply to editorial on Regents

'Search-and-screen' panel backed for Regents

Thank you for your editorial "Board of Regents needs diversity." You are right that the current board is not adequately representative of Wisconsin.

You are also correct about the need to ensure the appointment of qualified board appointees who add to a balanced board. United Council of UW Students has promoted a bill (SB 330), sponsored by Sen. Fred Risser and Rep. Tammy Baldwin, that would modify the Regent selection process to limit the influence of politics and ensure qualified Regents.

The bill creates a Board of Regents nominating committee to screen prospective nominees. By delegating the search and screen process to an independent council, the regent appointment process is insulated from political

pressure without unduly restricting the power of the governor to select regents. The governor would still be able to select the nominee from the pool of qualified candidates recommended by the committee.

Another benefit of the bill is that it creates a list of statutory criteria for regent nominees.

This is a good bill which would help create the more diverse Board of Regents that the State Journal, students and Wisconsin citizens are demanding.

— David C. Stacy, president, United Council of UW Students

Editor's note: The April 28 editorial incorrectly said there are four women on the board; there are five.

Thompson shouldn't delay in appointing Regents

I strongly disagree with your Sunday

editorial suggestion that Gov. Tommy Thompson take his time making new regent appointments.

Notice of regent vacancies are usually provided well in advance, but Gov. Thompson has been slow to make such appointments. Everyone has known that the terms of Lee Sherman Dreyfus and C. Daniel Gelatt were going to expire this May.

Previous Student Regent Joshua Tregoning was robbed of almost one-quarter of his two-year term when the governor took more than five months to make the appointment.

We need a full Board of Regents in these challenging times. Delays of up to six months in appointing new regents leave the board and citizens of the state shortchanged.

— Michelle Diggles, chairwoman, Associated Students of Madison

Coolness, and cheesiness, are in the eye of the young beholder

WASHINGTON — I once enjoyed the reputation of the "coolest mother in the world." That label was applied, I am proud to say, by my own children and, I am flattered to add, by some of their good friends.

Notably, this was before my children were themselves cool, or even old enough to really know what cool was. Still, I took the compliment as verification that my children and I would always be close, communicative and simpatico.

Not that I ever wanted them to mistake me for their peer, you understand. I may be a modern mother, but not *that* modern.



DEBORAH MATHIS

The way I figure it, if God had wanted children to be their parents' equals, we'd have all been born as a single, bound package. Since mothers and fathers apprentice here first, I take it to confer oneupmanship — even supremacy. At least until the young'uns are grown.

But back to coolness.

It was nice, in those days, to be regarded as something other than a stick-in-the-mud or a Medieval throwback. I remember the kids got a kick out of my dancing and singing and even the way I wore my hair sometimes. Mom was cool.

That was then.

The operative word today is not "cool" but "cheesy." My kids say I'm "cheesy." This, I have learned, is not complimentary.

Turns out "cheesy" is the current equivalent of "corny" and is, in some contexts, interchangeable with "nerdy."

Having learned this, I feel neither cool nor cheesy but appalled.

My style has changed only minimally, yet suddenly, rather than being the envy of other mothers, I was no different from the rest of the housecoat-wearing, scarf-to-bed, pancake-flipping, coffee-primed set who scared the stuffing out of their kids when friends were around.

Whereas it used to be, "My Mom can do the Snake and the Roger Rabbit. Mom, come show So-and-So," now it's "Mom, pleeeeeease don't dance when So-and-So comes over."

At first, I thought this was feigned trepidation, the kids endearingly playing out the generation gap bit just because everyone else did it. Kind of the way an ecstatically satisfied married man will occasionally invoke the "take-my-wife, please" cliché just for a laugh.

When I caught the rhythm and came finger-snapping and gliding into the living room that fateful afternoon, however, I soon learned that the gentleness of the children's pleading was, in fact, a function of their diplomacy and tact, not their casual concern.

The oldest screamed — I mean literally screamed — with laughter. The middle kid fled the room wearing a furious look. The youngest froze with his mouth agape and his eyes wide, but watery.

Would they ever live this down?

Interestingly, I noticed the friends seemed quite amused by this. One even mustered a compliment: "Wow, look at you, Miz Mathis!"

On second thought, maybe that wasn't a compliment.

Maybe I was no longer cool, but I was no dummy. I got the message and skipped out of the room, pretending I had been clowning, though, in truth, I had given modern street dance my best shot. Perhaps the children would forgive me, I thought, if I played it off as a joke.

Since then, my sense of humor, my preference in sneakers, and even my style of small talk have been assailed as "cheesy." Just the other day, when a group of the kids' friends were dragging across the street like December molasses,

holding up traffic, I leaned out of the car window and said, "OK, move it. Pyle. Move it, move it, move it."

When the young pedestrians saw it was me, they smiled back — genuinely, it seemed. They waved and picked up their pace.

The two Mathis children in the car had all but vaporized from shame.

"What?" I demanded.

"Nothing, Mom."

"No, what? Was that bad? Those kids know me."

"Yes, Mom."

"No, really. Are you telling me something was wrong with saying that? I suppose you think that was cheesy, huh? Corny, huh? Well, so what? I'm not one of your friends, you know. I am almost 48 years old. If I'm cheesy, I'm cheesy."

"Mom," one said sadly.

"What?" I was on a tear.

"We didn't know those kids."

Oh, no. Not the eyesight, too.