

DISTRICT 202 COMMUNITY COLUMN

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It may not always seem like it, but February is a great month.

It's usually the first time we see some break from winter, The Super Bowl, held on the first Sunday in February, is always something for football fans to look forward to – especially Chicago fans, this year. And of course there is also Valentine's Day for all of the lovers.

And, more importantly, February is also the month when we honor and celebrate the many vital contributions that African Americans have made to American society.

So what better time than February to reiterate District 202's strong commitment to our increasing diversity?

For several years District 202 has been working to create a climate of inclusion, trust and shared responsibility among all of the growing population we serve.

We are dedicated to making our school district better reflect and support the community around us. And we embrace the opportunities that diversity brings for teaching and learning, building relationships and preparing our children for the world in which they will live and work.

We are so committed to doing these things that we even wrote them into our Five-Year Vision and goals.

Our Five-Year Vision guides everything we do to help each and all of our students achieve their maximum potential. By "codifying" these objectives we must now put our money where our mouth is, so to speak, and we have done so.

District 202 in recent years has actively worked to hire more teachers of color. It's a slow process, but we are seeing some progress. About eight percent of all of the certified staff hired between March and September 2006 were minorities.

Last fall District 202 used a grant to hire the Kaleidoscope Group to assess and advise us about our cultural climate. Kaleidoscope has interviewed staff, administrators and elected officials about their perceptions of the district's diversity. Similar interviews will be conducted with citizens this spring. The full report is expected by the end of this school year and will guide our work to further define and implement our diversity and inclusion initiative.

And our curriculum plans incorporate numerous strategies designed to ensure that all of our students grow academically and personally regardless of the language they speak, method of learning or life experiences.

Some have asked why District 202 is going to such lengths? Is it the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires all students to meet minimum learning proficiencies? Is it our local community's changing demographics? Is it the need to prepare our students to take their place in a global economy?

The short answer is "Yes."

But the better answer – in fact the best answer – is because it's the right thing to do.

Every child who comes through the doors of our 25 schools is a special gift. We best appreciate that gift by respecting and celebrating it.

Diversity is not an enemy to fight, or a problem to overcome. It is an asset that will make us stronger, a tie that will bind, an opportunity to keep the American Dream alive. Public education does this best by helping all of our young people succeed in a world that changes minute to minute, no matter who they are, what they look like or where they come from.

That is a great lesson to remember and teach our children this month, and every month.