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Educators Unveil Program To Improve Knowledge Of Ethnic Groups

A coalition of educators and business leaders yesterday unveiled an education program aimed at cultivating teacher and student knowledge of several ethnic groups.

Noting that the average national dropout rate among minority students ranges from 24 percent for blacks to 77 percent for Puerto Ricans, the program aims to bolster students' confidence, which proponents believe will lead to higher academic achievement.

"Many of our nation's culturally diverse students are not faring well under the existing system," said Roger Fish, assistant superintendent for curriculum with the Washington, D.C., Public Schools, whose district is beginning to put the program into place.

"We see this program motivating and stimulating minority children, which we believe will lead to higher student achievement," added Gail Christopher, co-director for the project.

Tested for the past two years in San Diego and Chicago, the "Americans All" curriculum examines the history and achievements of six ethnic groups--American Indians, Asians, Europeans, Mexican-Americans, African-Americans and Puerto Ricans.

The curriculum is broken down into four units to be integrated into social studies programs already in place for third-, fifth-, eighth- and 11th-graders.

Each unit examines the various ethnic groups' heroes and heroines, immigration history, music, families and education.

"This project provides new research curriculum materials on other cultures and helps ensure awareness, pride and sensitivity to our nation's cultural diversity," Fish said.

Taking Aim At Teachers

Nearly 4,000 students have been exposed to the curriculum in five cities, and project officials expect to expand it to other school districts, with Miami and Dubuque, Iowa, expected to implement the program next fall.

The project takes aim first at educators, beginning with intensive training to familiarize

teachers with the newly developed materials. Project instructors have conducted two-day workshops with nearly 400 educators in five cities. The sessions are designed to familiarize teachers with the materials and help them integrate the curriculum into their regular social studies programs.

"Americans All begins to bridge the great divide between American's most vulnerable youth and the experience and background of the teachers responsible for motivating and educating them," Christopher said.

Noting that 93 percent of beginning teachers in 1990 were white, "most don't want to teach in the urban areas and in schools that are largely minority" because they view the students as poor learners or difficult, Christopher said.

"We hope to change teachers' attitudes and to stimulate their interest in multicultural issues," she said.

Focus On Future Teachers

In addition to expanding to other cities and school districts, project officials want "Americans All" to become part of college teacher training programs, Fish said.

"Now we're focusing on teachers in the field. But we hope to eventually get this into the hands of teachers in training," Fish said.

The project tries to join school districts with business sponsors that underwrite the cost of curriculum materials and teacher training, Christopher said.

"We try to get invited by a school district, and then we seek out local or national sponsors," she said.

Seven companies and foundations are involved in the program.

"Americans All" is a project of the Coordinating Committee for Ellis Island Inc., a Washington, D.C., based education organization founded in 1982.

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--David Schumacher