

Minority league looks to schools

TribTown • New nonprofit aims to engage young people of color with debate teams

BY JENNIFER ANDERSON

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For the past two decades, Promise King has worked in politics at the city, state, national and even international levels.

The Nigerian-born policy wonk (and former columnist for the Portland Tribune) now has returned to the place he loves, North Portland, to help the city's minority youths become as active in public policy as he has been.

He is the executive director of a new nonprofit, perhaps the first of its kind in the country, called the Oregon League of Minority Voters.

The group, which formed last summer with a 16-person board of directors and four staff members including King, aims to create opportunities for young blacks, Latinos, Asians and American Indians to gain a broader understanding of public policy and how it affects their lives.

"We want to groom young leaders of color ... to have the critical ability to explore their point of view in the public arena," King said. "It's an investment in Oregon to have every ethnicity represented at the policy table."

So far he's begun working with schools with high minority populations to establish a debate team that would be supported by his staff. He has started conversations at Jefferson and Roosevelt in North Portland, as well as Forest Grove High and Woodburn High.

At each school, he hopes to attract at least 10 interested students who'll sign up to attend "vigorous" debate sessions about issues relating to their community, such as the achievement gap, economic disparity and the overrepresentation of minorities in prison.

As early as this fall, the students would enroll in classes that would support the debate focus, such as a high-level English course, social science, logic or ethics. Since Jefferson and Roosevelt don't offer logic and ethics, King said he'd provide instructors to teach those subjects after school.

In the meantime, he's encouraging local students to attend a debate his organization is coordinating Feb. 27, with Oregon U.S. Senate candidates David Loera, Jeff Merkley, Candy Neville and Steve Novick.

In late April, the league will host a summit for all candidates of color who are running for office statewide, to speak about issues relevant to minority communities. Students and the public are invited.

Some of the league's founding members, who now serve on the board of directors, are attorney and City Council candidate Nick Fish, The Skanner newspaper publisher Bernie Foster, Multnomah County Commissioner Jeff Cogen, and Jennifer Harry, vice president of Portland's Asian American Business Alliance.

For information, e-mail leagueofminorityvoters@gmail.com, or call 503-289-7520. The league office is at 2225 N. Lombard St., Suite 210.