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By AMAKA WATSON, WORD IN BLACK

NATION
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FUNDING DISPARITIES PLAGUE HBCUS:

Biden Administration Demands State Leaders Bridge \$12.6 Billion Gap

The Biden administration has urged governors in 16 states to rectify the underfunding of historically Black land-grant universities, which has resulted in a deficit of \$12.6 billion in funding over the past 30 years.

By STACY M. BROWN, WORD IN BLACK

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**\$17.7 MILLION IN GEER 2 MONEY
WENT TO SIX PROJECTS**

OK governor distributed remaining federal COVID-19 relief dollars for education, just under \$18 million, prior to a Sept. 30 deadline. **A6**

**THEME PARK UPDATE: VINITA ANNEXES
LAND, RV CAMP GROUNDBREAKING SET**

Vinita City Council showed their enthusiasm and support for a proposed \$2 billion theme park and resort. **A7**



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

A Call To Invest Our Country’s *Brightest Minds*

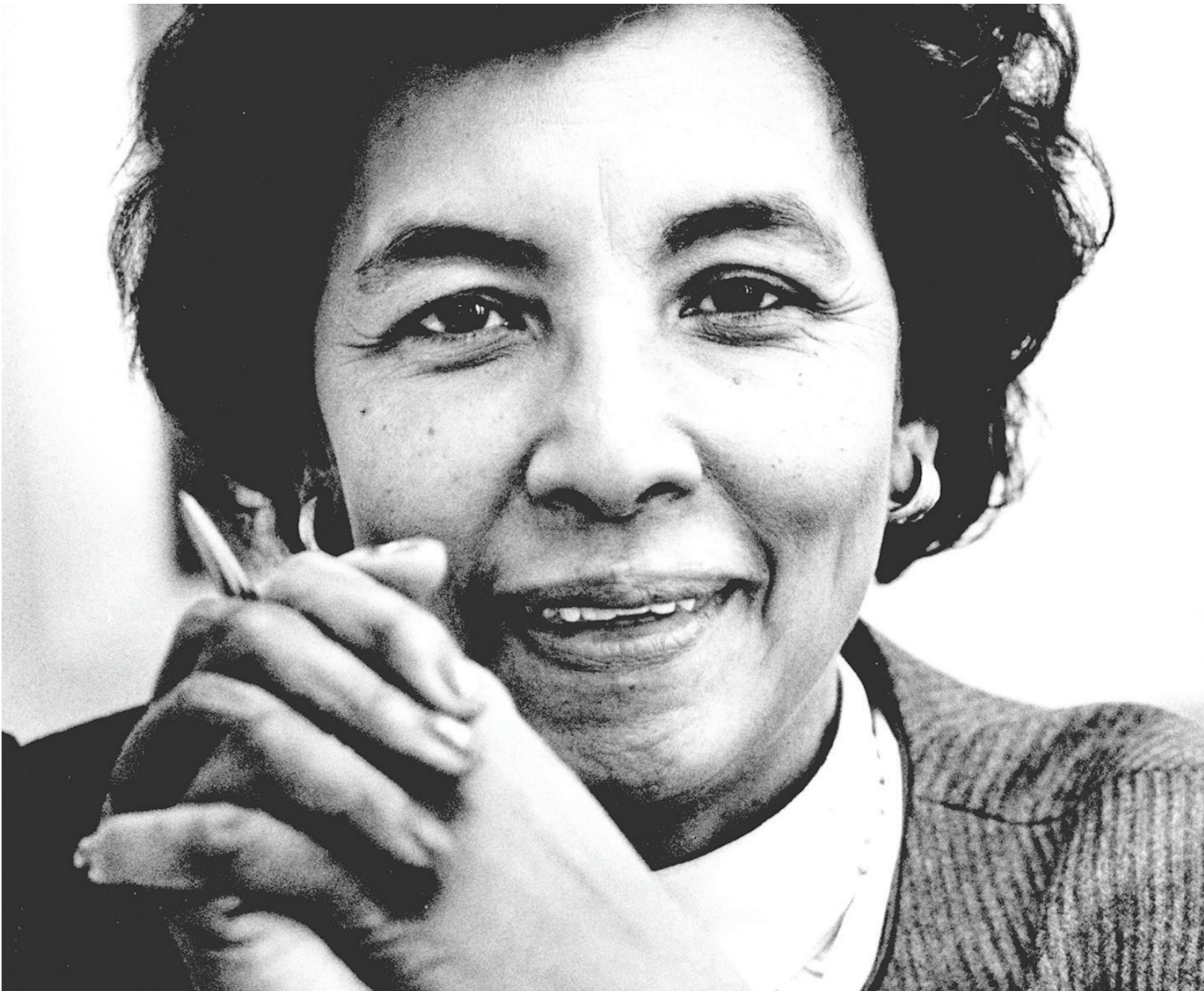
HBCUs from A1

Historically Black land-grant universities across 16 states have been denied a staggering \$12.6 billion in funding over the past 30 years, according to the Biden administration. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona and Secretary of Agriculture Thomas Vilsack announced that they have contacted governors in each affected state, urging them to rectify the funding gap, which has had its most significant impact in Tennessee, according to a news release. Tennessee State University has suffered an underfunding deficit of \$2.1 billion. “Unacceptable funding inequities have forced many of our nation’s distinguished historically Black colleges and universities to operate with inadequate resources and delay critical investments in everything from campus infrastructure to research and development to student support services,” Cardona emphasized. Similar letters were dispatched to governors in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. The nation’s land-grant universities, established in the 19th century, were designed to advance agricultural education and research. While federal law mandates equitable distribution of state funding for all land-grant universities, this has not been realized for many historically Black institutions, as revealed in a comprehensive analysis. Utilizing data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the federal agencies uncovered funding disparities in 16 out of 18 states hosting Black land grants. Only Delaware and Ohio provided equitable funding. Cardona spoke fervently about the accomplishments of HBCUs and their impact on various professions. “The Biden-Harris administration is proud to have made record investments in our HBCUs, but to compete in the 21st century, we need state leaders to step up and live up to their legally required obligations to our historically Black land-grant institutions,” Cardona demanded. Vilsack echoed Cardona’s sentiments, recognizing these institutions’ pivotal role in agricultural advancements. He emphasized the need for governors to invest in HBCUs at levels commensurate with their contributions to society and the economy.

In a news release, administration officials noted that the Second Morrill Act of 1890 mandated that states establishing a second land-grant university for Black students ensure equitable distribution of state funds between their 1862 and 1890 land-grant institutions. The 1862 land-grant universities were established through the First Morrill Act of 1862, which provided states with federal land to support the colleges. Drawing on data from the National Center for Education Statistics from 1987 to 2020, the departments calculated the amount these institutions would have received if their state funding per student equaled that of 1862 institutions. Officials said the discrepancies in appropriated funding ranged from \$172 million to \$2.1 billion, creating significant financial disparities. Over the past three decades, these funds could have been channeled towards crucial infrastructure and student services, enhancing the universities’ capacity to pursue grants and expand educational opportunities. The Departments of Education and Agriculture said they have extended their offer to collaborate with each state’s budget office to analyze the funding data and redress the disparities in investments for 1890 HBCUs that have faced chronic underfunding. Each letter outlined the specific underfunding per student for each state’s 1890 HBCUs between 1987 and 2020 and suggested remedies for the situation. “We want to make abundantly clear that it is not necessary to reduce funding to other institutions, nor make a reduction in general fund allocations to (HBCUs) in addressing these disparities,” the secretaries wrote. “We are at an inflection point that will determine our place in the world as leaders. We need to solidify our country as the top producer of talent and innovation – demonstrating to the global community that nothing can beat American ingenuity.” “The state that serves as our nation’s economic engine for the next generation is sure to be one that fully realizes all its assets and is committed to ensuring that opportunity is equally distributed. Given the career opportunities that will be available due to recent bipartisan federal investments for key industries, strengthening these universities to provide tomorrow’s workforce will enhance your state’s economic viability.”

Hannah Diggs Atkins: Librarian, Legislator

By LARRY O'DELL, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



A librarian, a legislator, and an ambassador, Hannah Diggs Atkins was born November 1, 1923, the daughter of James and Mabel Diggs in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Hannah married Charles Nathaniel Atkins and had three children, Edmund Earl, Charles Nathaniel, and Valerie Ann. In 1943 Atkins received a Bachelor of Science degree from Saint Augustine's College and later obtained a Bachelor of Library Science from the University of Chicago in 1949. She held a number of positions as a law and reference librarian before moving to Oklahoma in 1952. She worked as the branch librarian for the Oklahoma City Public Libraries (1953–56) and at the Oklahoma State Library, first in the position of reference librarian, then as the chief of the General Reference Division and acting law librarian (1962–68). She also taught both law and library science courses at the University of Oklahoma.

In 1968 Hannah Atkins was elected to the

Oklahoma House of Representatives, and she served as the first African American woman to be a legislator until 1980. During her term as representative she fought for child welfare, health care, tax and mental health reforms, and civil rights. In 1980 she was appointed by Pres. Jimmy Carter as a United States delegate to the Thirty-fifth Assembly of United Nations, an honor she considered the highlight of her career.

After her term as state representative ended, Atkins was appointed assistant director of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (1983–87) and later to the dual post of secretary of the state and cabinet secretary of social services (1987–91). She held positions and memberships in the American Civil Liberties Union, NAACP, National Association of Black Women Legislators, Oklahoma Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Oklahoma Chapter of the National Women's Political Caucus (co-founder), and Oklahoma Black Political Caucus (founder). She also served

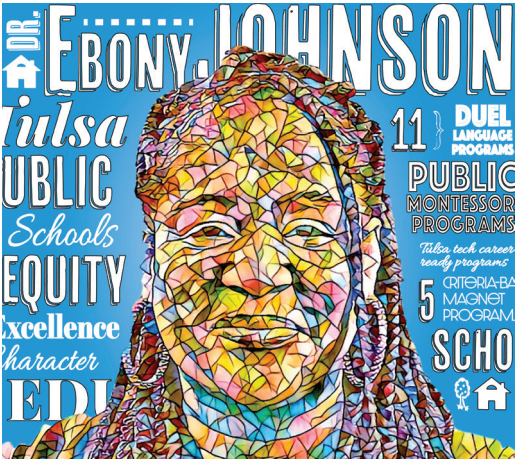
in different capacities in the Democratic National Committee.

Throughout her career Hannah Atkins acquired numerous awards and honors, including Theta Sigma Pi Woman of the Year (1968), National Public Citizen of the Year (1975), Hannah Atkins Day, University of Oklahoma (1978), and Oklahoma ACLU Angie Debo Award (1980). She was inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame in 1982. She was also honored with an endowed professorship in the political science department at Oklahoma State University. In 1998 she received an honorary doctorate from the University of Oklahoma and in 2000 an honorary doctorate from Oklahoma State University. Into the twenty-first century Atkins continued to serve her community as a member of the Oklahoma Task Force for the Bombing Memorial. Hannah Atkins died on June 17, 2010.

THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY is an agency of the government of Oklahoma dedicated to promotion and preservation of Oklahoma's history and its people by collecting, interpreting, and disseminating knowledge and artifacts of Oklahoma.

HANNAH ATKINS, 1983 (2012.201.B0044.0887, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

Featured Last Week



Dr. Ebony Johnson's Mission To Uplift Tulsa Schools



Ryan Walters Promotes The 'Science of Reading'



Why Mass Incarceration Still Has Mass Appeal

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Left to right **BEN HARRIS, DAVID CHANEY**, co-founders, Epic Charter Schools. PHOTO **OKLAHOMA WATCH**

NEW CHARGES, POTENTIAL FRAUDULENT MANAGEMENT

AG CHARGES AGAINST EPIC from A1

New developments occurred this week in the criminal case against Epic Charter Schools co-founders Ben Harris and David Chaney and their longtime chief financial officer, Josh Brock.

Attorney General Gentner Drummond, who took over prosecution of the case in January, added four new charges, including an additional count of embezzlement and money laundering.

Harris and Chaney founded Epic Charter Schools, the state’s largest online charter school, in 2011 and also operated Epic Youth Services, a for-profit company contracted to manage the school.

Several of the other new charges are related to the alleged false invoices, including using a computer to prepare the invoices and submitting them to the state.

Harris, Chaney and Brock were arrested in June 2022 and accused of using school funds for personal gain, including political campaign donations, a lobbyist, and personal expenses like vacations. Investigators allege the men ran a criminal enterprise using the online charter school and a for-profit company, Epic Youth Services, to bilk the state out of at least \$22 million.

In one of the new charges, filed Oct. 4, prosecutors say the men transferred money from Epic Youth Services to a shell company called Edtech, LLC, then transferred the money to themselves to falsely justify fraudulent management fee invoices, according to the court documents.

Several of the other new charges are related to the alleged false invoices, including using a computer to prepare the invoices and submitting them to the state.

Prosecutors are expected to detail their evidence to support the charges in a week-long preliminary hearing now scheduled to start Jan. 22. The hearing was set to start Monday but the judge agreed to give Chaney, Harris and Brock more time.

JENNIFER PALMER has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2016 and covers education. Contact her at (405) 761-0093 or jpalm@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @jpalmOKC.

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STUDENTS work on an activity with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Oklahoma County at Adelaide Lee Elementary School in South Oklahoma City. Boys and Girls Clubs of Oklahoma County is one of several projects chosen for the governor's federal COVID-19 relief funds. PHOTO **BOYS AND GIRLS CLUBS OF OKLAHOMA COUNTY**

GEER 2 Money from A1

The governor distributed all of his remaining federal COVID-19 relief dollars for education, just under \$18 million, prior to a Sept. 30 deadline. Six projects were funded with Gov. Kevin Stitt's second round of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund, or GEER. The largest of those dedicated \$11 million to purchase classroom supplies for thousands of Oklahoma teachers through DonorsChoose, an online platform where teachers post needs and donors select projects to donate to. Stitt received \$17.7 million from GEER 2, passed by Congress at the end of December 2020 in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Stitt's office delayed dispersing the money to shore up oversight and federal grants management after auditors found millions of dollars misspent in programs funded with his initial \$40 million GEER allocation. In that first round, \$8 million went to the Bridge the Gap Digital Wallet program, which distributed \$1,500 grants to low-income families to buy school supplies and was the subject of a joint investigation by Oklahoma Watch and The Frontier. A state audit found participants spent \$1.7 million on items that were not educational and a federal audit found the state failed to oversee the funds. The attorney general is investigating whether state officials should be held legally liable. State auditors also found problems with the \$10 million Stay in School program, intended to help families affected by the pandemic continue to send their children to private school. According to that audit, released in June, \$6.5 million didn't align with the program's purpose. None of the GEER 2 funding went to the state Education Department led by Superintendent Ryan Walters, who oversaw the Digital Wallet program as head of the nonprofit Every Kid Counts Oklahoma. This time, the state's Office of Management and Enterprise Services is managing the grants, and they've hired a consultant to assist with oversight and administration of the funds. The governor's staff solicited proposals for the \$17.7 million at the end of 2021. Ultimately, all of the funded projects were pulled from those ideas. The recipients have to spend down the entire amount by Jan. 31.



PHOTO **ADOBE IMAGES**

Here is a breakdown of the projects, according to OMES:

- \$11.6 million for teacher classroom supplies through DonorsChoose. Between Aug. 9-19, the state fulfilled more than 12,000 requested projects of up to \$1,000 each, according to DonorsChoose.
- \$1.9 million to Boys & Girls Clubs of Oklahoma County, focusing on the Capitol Hill neighborhood and south Oklahoma City, to pay for building improvements, supplies and staff salaries for programs such as tutoring, STEM activities, sports, and arts.
- \$200,000 to Boys & Girls Clubs of Oklahoma County to operate mobile clubhouses.
- \$2.5 million for The Children's Center, a

private children's hospital in Bethany, to provide health and wellness resources to elementary schools across the state.

- \$600,000 to Special Care, a nonprofit organization providing early childhood education, specialized care and therapeutic services to children with and without disabilities, for teacher and support staff salaries and retention bonuses.
- \$400,000 for a statewide, one-year subscription to Learning Blade, an online platform to promote middle school students' awareness of STEM and computer science jobs and career and technical education. Learning Blade started working with Oklahoma schools this spring and about 70 schools signed up so far, Founder Sheila Boyington said. Access is available to any organization working with students.

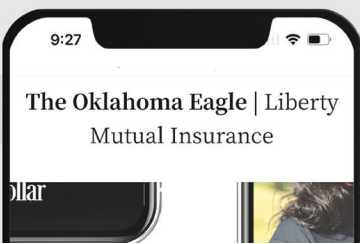
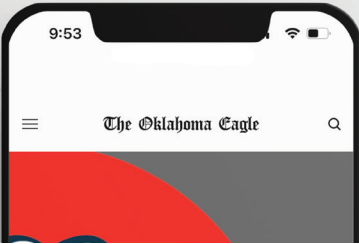
- \$250,000 for a consultant, Guidehouse, to help the state oversee and administer the funds.
- \$272,950 is earmarked for other administrative costs.

The leader of one organization said the delay in receiving those funds doesn't mean it's too late. "There is such an overwhelming need to help kids catch up," said Teena Belcik, president and chief executive officer of Boys & Girls Clubs of Oklahoma County. "I'm tired of COVID, thinking about it, talking about it. We all want it to be in our rearview mirror. The problem is, if you walk into any school or any Boys & Girls Club, you are going to see lingering repercussions of what kids have been through." Some of these organizations previously received COVID-19 relief funding from other agencies. The state Education Department twice in 2022 allocated federal COVID-19 relief money to fulfill DonorsChoose projects — \$6 million in March 2022 and an additional \$6 million in October 2022. The Legislature awarded the Oklahoma Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs of Oklahoma, which has 17 organizations and 95 locations, \$30.1 million in American Rescue Plan funds to increase the capacity of its programs serving at-risk youth. The organization also received money from the Education Department to expand summer programs in 2021. Special Care also received ARPA funds: \$2.5 million to expand and add six classrooms and a therapy classroom. The expansion is expected to allow the organization to serve 120 additional children and their families, a 50% increase. Bethany's The Children's Center received \$2 million under ARPA to renovate 100 existing beds and buy medical equipment.

JENNIFER PALMER has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2016 and covers education. Contact her at (405) 761-0093 or jpalmer@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @jpalmerOKC.

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To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial" is the cornerstone of our continued success.



Enthusiasm & Support

THEME PARK UPDATE from A1

At their meeting Tuesday, members of the Vinita City Council showed their enthusiasm and support for a proposed \$2 billion theme park and resort being planned east of town by voting overwhelmingly to annex six square miles near the project in an effort to maintain influence over area development.

Mansion Entertainment Group, which announced plans in July for its American Heartland Theme Park and Resort as well as its associated Three Ponies RV Park and Campground, posted Wednesday on Facebook that a groundbreaking ceremony for the RV park is scheduled for Oct. 30. Mansion Entertainment bills itself as the leading performing arts, animation and studio brand in Branson, Missouri.

“We are thrilled to announce the start of construction on Three Ponies RV Park and Campground will begin this month,” the post states. “The project team will gather with state and local officials on Oct. 30 to break ground. We look forward to celebrating this major milestone as we begin our journey together.”

The campground is expected to open in 2025, and the theme park is proposed to open in 2026. But questions linger about what level of state support will be requested to improve infrastructure and support the proposed park, answers to which likely will not come until Oklahoma’s 2024 legislative session in the spring.

Meanwhile, a consultant who has spent more than 50 years working with theme parks, amusement parks, resorts and other entertainment venues, said the proposed campground could work, but he remains skeptical about the American Heartland Theme Park.

“The market isn’t there,” Dennis Spiegel, founder and CEO of Cincinnati-based International Theme Park Services, Inc., told NonDoc on Thursday. “It’s not a supportable investment in that market for a theme park. Now for an RV park, that’s totally different. There may be a million campers that go through that area, and that could be fine. But in terms of building a theme park that’s going to draw 4.9 million people in the first year, it’s just not practical, and it’s totally unrealistic. They don’t have the tourism, and they don’t have the local population to support it. And the industry as a whole, I haven’t heard anybody say they think it’s a viable and possible idea.”

Vinita annexation of land effective immediately

With little discussion, the Vinita City Council voted 7-1 on Tuesday to annex six square miles from east of Vinita to Ten Mile Corner and State Highway 82. The council also passed an emergency measure making the annexation effective immediately.

Police Chief Mark Johnson wrote city council members in August that his department is capable of providing law enforcement services for the annexed area. However, as the area becomes developed and draws an influx of traffic, “expansion of the police department is also expected to maintain a satisfactory level of service to the citizens of our growing community,” he wrote.

Fire Chief Kevin Huxtable wrote to council members that “the majority of the area is already within our fire protection district” and that fire, rescue and first-response services to the new area will not be an issue.

Mayor Josh Lee told council members Tuesday evening he didn’t know when city trash service would be made available to the annexed area or how many residents would sign up for the service.

Kristy Adams, American Heartland Theme Park LLC’s senior executive vice president of sales and marketing, provided a statement to NonDoc saying her company appreciates the council’s action.

“We commend the Vinita city leadership for their diligence in pursuing a path forward that is mutually beneficial to both the project and the community,” she said. “We look forward to continued positive and productive conversations in the next steps of this development.”

‘I need more information’

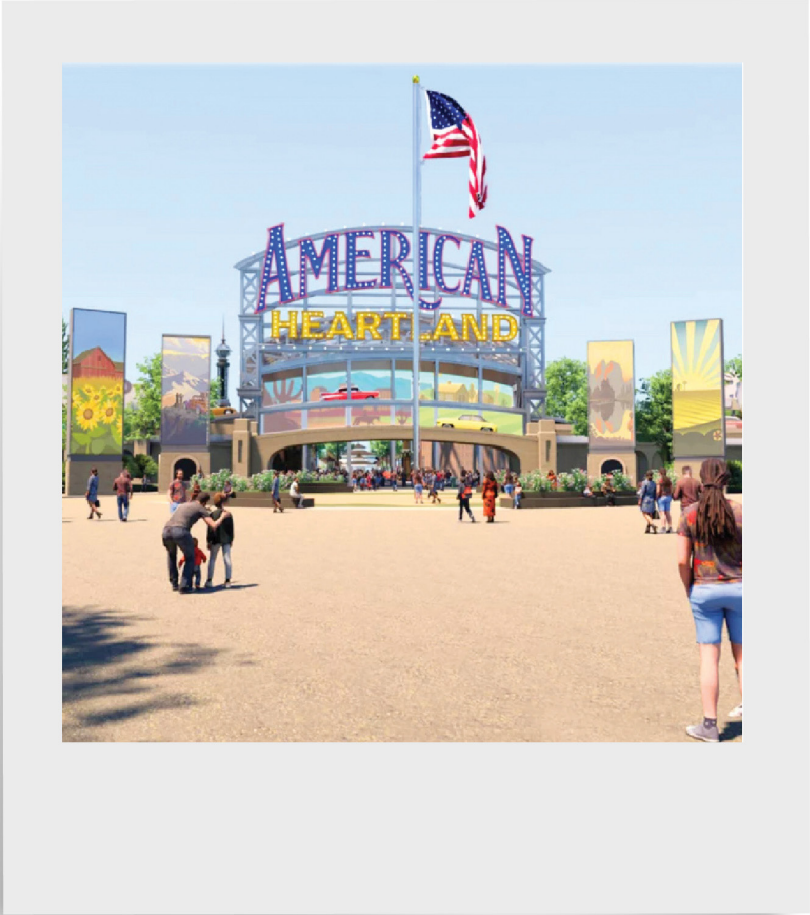
On Sept. 26, the Vinita City Council on held a public hearing and advanced the proposed annexation ordinance to the Oct. 17 meeting. During the nearly two-hour meeting Sept. 26, council members heard from several residents concerned about the amount of water the theme park and resort would need and the tons of trash it would produce each year.

Ward 1 City Councilwoman Stephanie Hoskin voted against the annexation both times, saying she was concerned about the strain it would have on city services and the cost. The spouse of former Vinita Mayor Chuck Hoskin Sr., Stephanie Hoskin said she is concerned there were no written agreements in place from the state, sovereign tribal nations or Mansion Entertainment to help with costs, especially those associated with water and sewer improvements.

“I need more information,” Hoskin said during the Sept. 26 hearing.

Lee, the town’s current mayor, assured Hoskin more information would be forthcoming, perhaps as soon as next month’s city council meeting when it’s anticipated Mansion Entertainment will present a proposed memorandum of understanding on “certain aspects of the project.”

“There have been plenty of discussions since our last meeting,” Lee told Hoskin on Tuesday. “There’s a lot of discussion every week on that. They’re getting closer and closer. As far as having money in our bank account that we can start spending on water and sewer, no, we do not have any of that at this point in time.”



AMERICAN HEARTLAND is a planned \$2 billion theme park and resort development planned for northeast Oklahoma. PHOTO PROVIDED

Lee told NonDoc on Sept. 8 that the city is still tallying what kind of financial assistance it will seek from the Oklahoma Legislature.

“I think \$30 million, \$35 million is probably the bottom number on that,” he said. “It could be north of that. It could be closer to \$60 million if you start talking wastewater facilities, water storage and those kinds of things. It’s a big project, and it comes with big numbers. But it comes with a huge, huge, huge potential upside for us.”

Lee said it is logical for the Vinita community to reach out to the state for financial help because the theme park and resort will have a statewide economic impact.

Two weeks after the proposed park was announced, Senate Appropriations and Budget Chairman Roger Thompson (R-Okemah) said July 31 that he was surprised project backers had not met comprehensively with legislative leaders before issuing their press release.

“For you to come to the state and say, ‘I’m going to spend \$2 billion and then you’re going to be my partner,’ when I don’t know what that partnership looks like? I’m starting at a disadvantage,” he said. “I like to be a good partner, but I don’t like to be boxed in.”

Thompson said he has signed a nondisclosure agreement that prevents him from discussing some of what he has been told about the theme park venture.

“Anybody who’s drinking that Kool-Aid is in for a real shock”

Planned as a 1,000-acre development with a 125-acre theme park, the American Heartland Theme Park and Resort would be

comparable in size to Magic Kingdom Theme Park and Disneyland Park. The proposal features an Americana environment with a variety of rides, live shows, family attractions, waterways and restaurants. The development is also slated to include a 300-room hotel and indoor water park.

The adjacent 320-acre Three Ponies RV Park and Campground, designed by Oklahoma architects ADG Blatt and announced as the development’s first phase, is being billed as the largest campground in the central U.S., with 750 RV spaces and 300 cabins, plus amenities.

As a proposed \$2 billion investment, American Heartland officials have said their project will create more than 4,000 jobs and attract more than 4.9 million visitors from all over the world each year.

Speigel, who has been in the business of consulting and drawing up feasibility analysis for theme parks and amusement parks for nearly 50 years, said if you took all the people who live in states surrounding Oklahoma, tipped the states up and slid the people into the theme park, there still wouldn’t be enough customers to generate the revenue to service the debt.

“You gotta have the market,” he said. “You have to have the foundation for a theme park, and it just isn’t there. I hate to see them waste their money if they’re putting money from the state and any local money into this idea. It’s just not viable there.”

Speigel’s company has worked with such entertainment venues as Paramount Parks, the Fort Worth Zoo and Hershey Park. He said he has seen various ventures, some with state and local funding, fail even after sounding like good ideas. Those include the Wizard of Oz theme park in Kansas west of Kansas City — where construction never started after 10 years and an escalating budget that reached more than \$800 million — and Hard Rock Park, which later became Freestyle Music Park. The music-themed park, which opened in 2008 with a concert by the Eagles and the Moody Blues in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, shut down after two years with foreclosure proceedings filed against it.

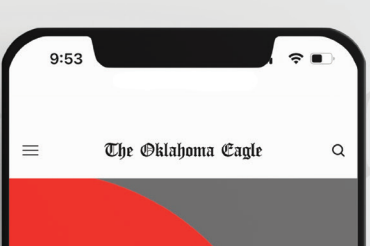
“Just because you have an idea doesn’t mean it’s a good one, and that’s the situation with this park,” Speigel said of American Heartland Theme Park and Resort. “It might be a great campground, but as a theme park and talking about Disneyesque quality, no they’re not. One attraction in Disney costs \$200 million to \$300 million-plus these days — one attraction, one ride. Anybody who’s drinking that Kool-Aid is in for a real shock.”



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Minister RJ Smith

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Sunday Worship - 10:45am
Monday Worship - 6:00pm
Wednesday Bible Study - 5:00pm

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1962 N. Sheridan Rd.
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Pastor Ruthie I. Howard

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Morning Worship
11:00 a.m.

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Sunday Morning
Worship 11 a.m.

Bible Study
Wednesday
7 p.m.



Rev. Emanuel L. Collier, Sr.
Pastor

Gethsemane Baptist Church

727 East 56th St. North
(918) 425-6613

Dr. W. T. Lauderdale

Sunday School
9:00 a.m.

Church Services
11:00 a.m.

Zoe' Life Church of Tulsa

Rudisill Regional Library
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Tulsa OK 74106
(918) 409-4899

Pastor Richard and Cher Lyons

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Wed- Healing School: 6:30p - 8p

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Praise & Worship 11:00 a.m.
Choir Rehearsal
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3101 N. M.L King Jr. Blvd.
Tulsa OK
(918) 625-2374

Sunday School -
10 am

Sunday Morning
Worship - 10:45

Sunday Evening Prayer - 7 pm
Sunday Worship - 7:30 pm
Wednesday Prayer - 7:30 pm
Wednesday worship - 8pm

Rev. John W. Anderson

VERNON AME CHURCH

307-311 N. Greenwood Ave.

P: 918-587-1428
F: 918-587-0642

vernonamechurch@sbcglobal.net

Sunday
Church School
8:30 am

Worship Service
10:00 am

Wednesday
Bible Study
6:00 pm

Rev. Dr. Robert R. Allen Turner

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Sunday Morning Worship.....10:00 a.m.
Sunday Evening Worship.....6:00 p.m.

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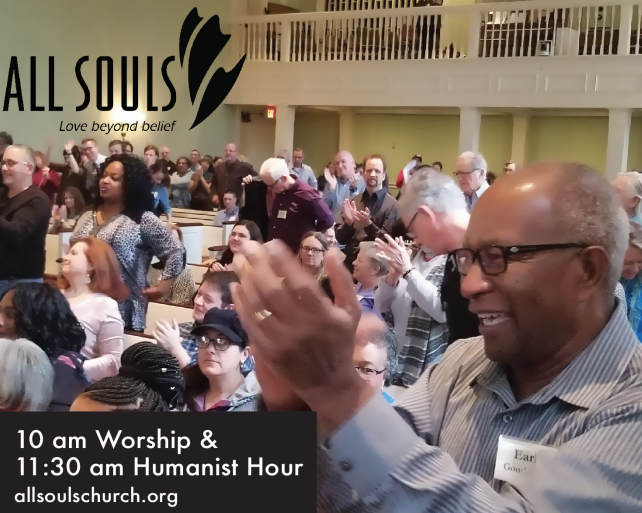
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Fax:

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Morning

Worship 10:45

Wednesday

Bible Study

Noon and 7:00



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TOP 5 MOST CHALLENGED
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Discover the top 5 banned books written by Black authors and the reasons behind their bans. [All](#)

HOWARD UNIVERSITY NAMED
AMONG TOP MUSIC BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Howard University has been recognized by Billboard as one of the best schools for music business degrees. [All](#)

ACT Scores for Black Kids Drop to New Lows

Aziah Siid
Word In Black

The latest ACT report raises concerns about post-pandemic learning and long-standing systematic inequalities.

From annual high-stakes state testing to high school exit exams, standardized testing is a part of student life in the United States. In the case of tests like the SAT and ACT, these exams, typically taken during a student’s junior or senior year of high school, are supposed to tell us how ready a kid is for college — even as a majority of four-year colleges have adopted test-optional or test-free admissions policies.

But a new report by ACT, the nonprofit organization that administers the ACT exam, raises the question of whether or not the nation’s students are as prepared as they should be, and sounds yet another alarm about the achievement of Black students.

According to the report published on Oct. 10, ACT scores for American students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds have declined for the past six consecutive years.

For the graduating class of 2023 — students who were freshmen when the COVID-19 pandemic began — only 21% of students met all four of the ACT’s college readiness benchmarks, while 43% met none. In addition, 70% fell short of the readiness benchmark for mathematics.

Black Students Score Lowest on the ACT

Across the board, Black students scored lowest on every ACT benchmark — mathematics, reading, science, and English, and a composite score, which is the average of your four scores.

In 2023, the average composite score for all students was 19.5 out of 36, but for Black students, the score was 16 out of 36 — the lowest score since 2019.

Indeed, this is not an isolated problem. Since 2019, Black students have scored lowest or tied for lowest with students who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native.

In a statement, ACT CEO Janet Godwin noted that growing numbers of high school seniors are “leaving high school without meeting any of the college readiness benchmarks, even as student GPAs continue to rise and students report that they feel prepared to be successful in college.”

Godwin said the hard truth is that not enough is being done to ensure that graduates are truly ready for postsecondary success in college and career, and those systemic problems require sustained action and support at the policy level. But teachers and principals can’t solve the problem alone.

“It is a shared national priority and imperative,” Godwin said.

A Trend of Systemic Educational Inequity

“ACT has always measured what students are learning in high school, and connecting it to what colleges and universities tell us are most important for students to know and understand to be successful in their college courses,” Rose Babington, senior director of state and federal programs at ACT, tells Word In Black.

The score decline that students experienced in the 2022 graduating class is a concern because it reflects both the impact of the pandemic on students as well as a much longer 30-year trend that points to fundamental, systemic inequities in education, Babington says.

In 2022, just under 1.4 million high school students took the ACT, down from roughly 1.8 million in 2019. The

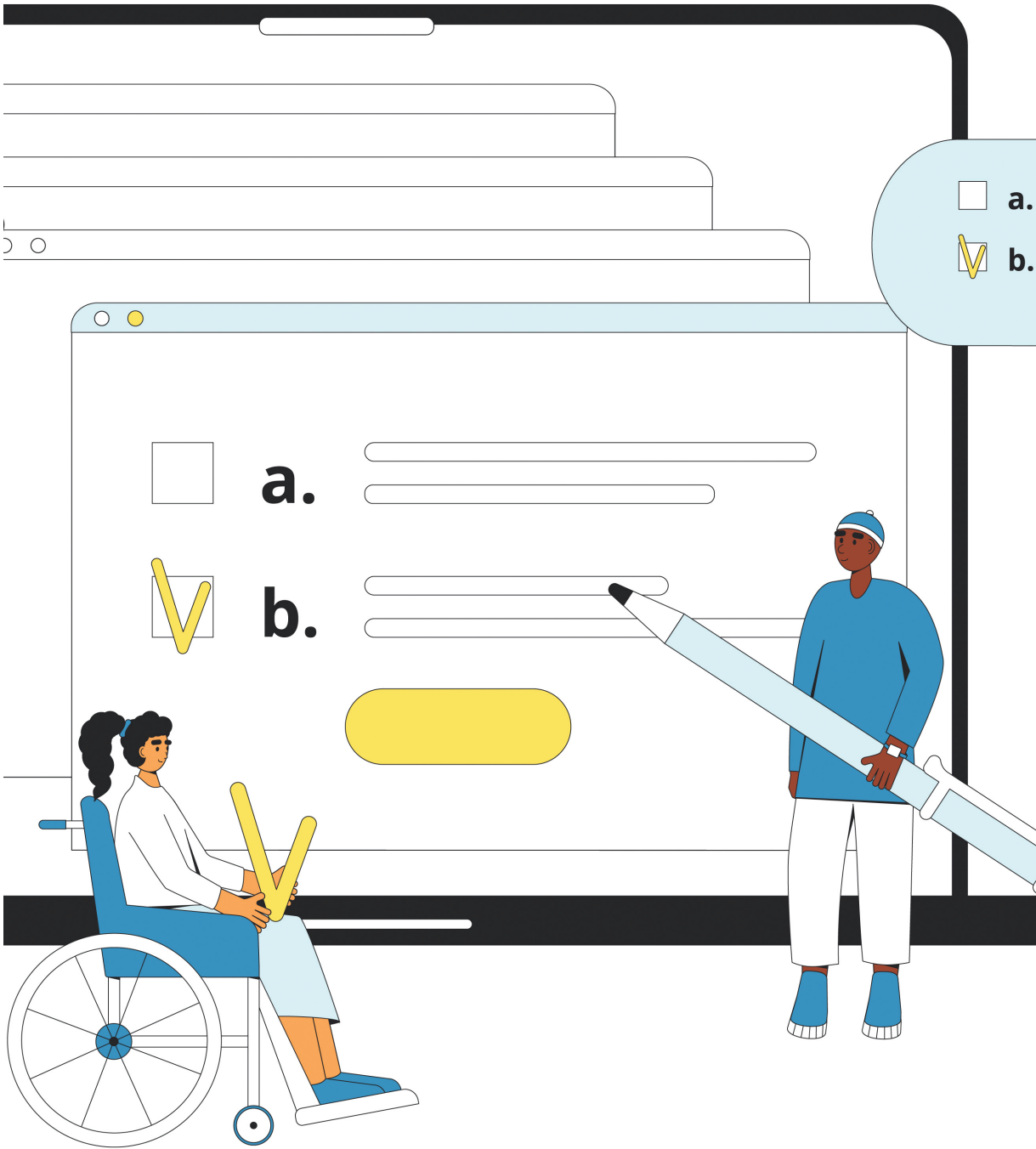


PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

organization’s research shows that students who do well on the test have about a 50% chance of earning a B or better in college classes and a 75% chance of earning a C.

“We know that an ACT score doesn’t define a student, it doesn’t define the person, and represents one day that a student took a test in their life,” Babington says. But she says the ACT score creates opportunities for admissions, scholarships, placement into classes, and even majors.

Is the ACT Actually Helping Black Students?

However, according to FairTest — an organization that has spent the past 40 years working “to promote equitable and reasonable assessment of teachers, students, and school systems” — the ACT contributes to inequities in education and life.

The test “consistently under-predicts the performance of females in college and over-predicts the performance of males,” according to FairTest. And that’s even though girls and women earn better grades at both the high school and college levels.

FairTest says that given that Black and other minority students score lower than white students, “Rigid use of the ACT for admissions will produce freshman classes with very few minorities and with no appreciable gain in academic quality.”

The ACT is “very effective at eliminating academically promising low-income and under-represented minority students who apply with strong academic records but relatively low ACT scores,” notes FairTest.

The organization found a move to being test-optional helps colleges be more diverse with “no drop off in academic quality.”

How to Help Black Students

Babington says the scores indicate a bigger systemic question of how to work with communities and policymakers to implement changes that apply to COVID-19 cohorts so Black students can be successful after high school.

One common-sense recommendation she gives is to ensure students are taking the most challenging high school

curriculum.

“When students are taking that core curriculum, they’re scoring significantly higher than students who are not taking that core curriculum,” she says.

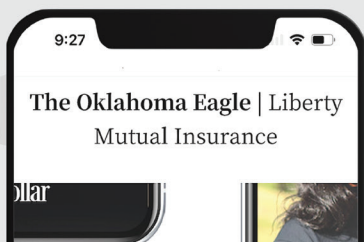
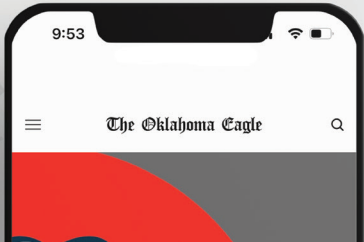
However, that hinges on ensuring Black students actually have access to advanced courses, like AP classes. Research from Education Trust shows 225,000 Black and Latino students don’t have access to advanced classes, even though data shows enrollment in these courses is linked to increased scores on exit exams.

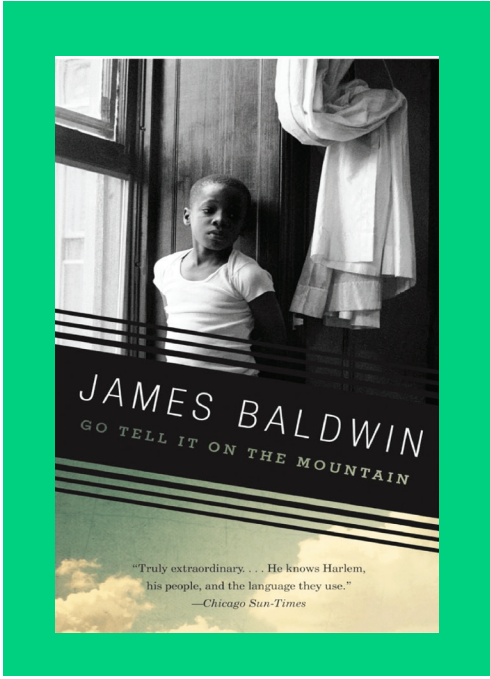
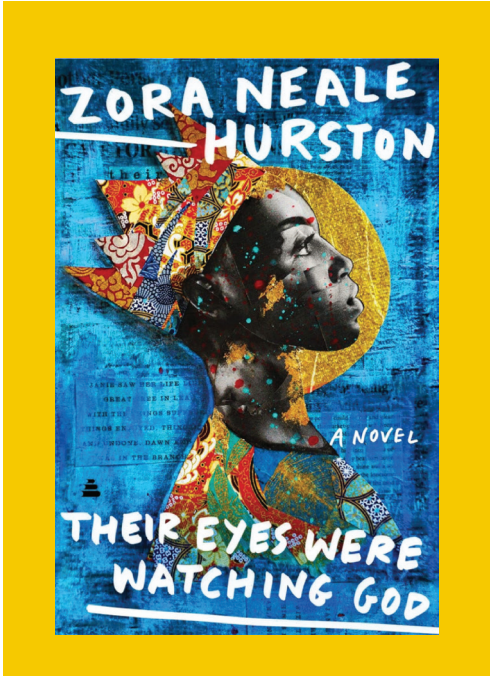
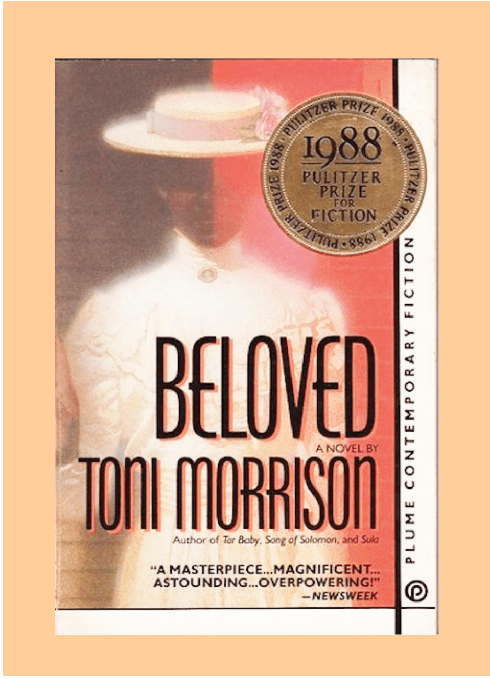
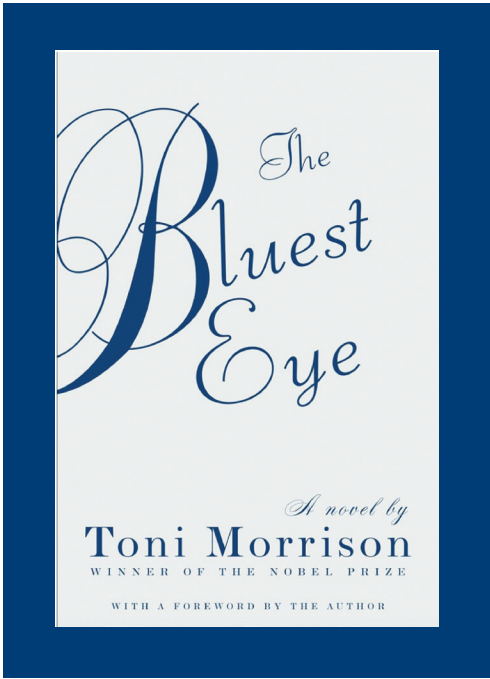
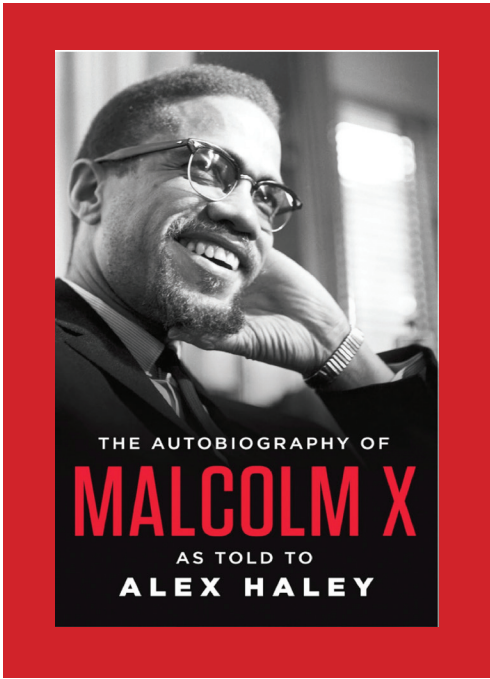
One encouraging point says Babington is the number of Black students who retest for the ACT is higher than the national average of students who retest.

“Students are saying, ‘I’m going to test again, and I want to get that higher score, and really show my abilities and put my best foot forward when I’m going into the college admissions process.’”

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To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial” is the cornerstone of our continued success.





PHOTOS PROVIDED

Top 5 Most Challenged Books by Black Authors

Discover the top 5 banned books written by Black authors and the reasons behind their bans

Amaka Watson Word In Black

Book bans, especially those that target the works of Black authors, are a growing concern in today’s society. As we witness a disturbing trend of censorship, where literary voices are stifled, it’s crucial to shed light on the importance of preserving these invaluable narratives.

Black authors have been at the forefront of shaping conversations about race, identity and societal change. Yet, their books are frequently banned in school districts and libraries across the nation. This censorship, often driven by religious or political beliefs and a misguided sense of protection, robs readers, particularly young minds, of the chance to explore different perspectives.

When we erase these books from our literary landscape, we miss the opportunity to expand our children’s horizons and engage in vital dialogues about lives and thoughts that differ from our own. It’s noteworthy that many of the banned books deal with issues of race and sexuality. And it’s no coincidence that a substantial portion of these authors identify as LGBTQ or Black.

While some seek to restrict access to these books, it is equally essential to champion their place on our shelves, ensuring that these powerful stories continue to inspire and educate.

“The Autobiography of Malcolm X” by Malcolm X and Alex Haley

Reason for Ban: This seminal autobiography, a candid exploration of Malcolm X’s journey from a life of crime to his transformation into a civil rights leader, has faced repeated bans due to its perceived radical content and criticism of white supremacy.

“The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison

Reason for Ban: Toni Morrison’s powerful novel about a young African American girl’s struggle with her self-esteem and identity is often challenged for its frank exploration of racism, sexual abuse, and controversial themes that some consider unsuitable for young readers.

“Beloved” by Toni Morrison

Reason for Ban: Another classic by Toni Morrison, “Beloved” has been banned for its graphic content, including scenes of violence and sexuality, as well as its unflinching portrayal of slavery’s brutal legacy, which some find disturbing.

“Their Eyes Were Watching God” by Zora Neale Hurston

Reason for Ban: Zora Neale Hurston’s masterpiece has faced bans due to its portrayal of a Black woman’s journey to self-discovery and independence. Some critics argue that the novel’s frank depiction of sexual awakening and unconventional relationships make it inappropriate for certain audiences.

“Go Tell It on the Mountain” by James Baldwin

Reason for Ban: James Baldwin’s exploration of themes such as religion, sexuality and racial identity in “Go Tell It on the Mountain” has led to its censorship in some school districts. Baldwin’s unapologetic approach to addressing these topics challenges traditional beliefs, making it a target for censorship.

Howard University Named Among Top Music Business Schools

Stacy M. Brown Word In Black



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Howard University, the renowned historically Black college in Northwest D.C., finds itself in esteemed company alongside institutions such as the Abbey Road Institute in London, the Berklee College of Music in Boston and Spain, and the Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts in Liverpool, England.

These distinguished higher education establishments have earned a spot on Billboard’s prestigious list of the best schools for music business degrees.

Billboard’s selection process, which refrains from ranking the institutions, is based on a comprehensive evaluation that includes executive recommendations, alum feedback, information furnished by each school, and a decade’s worth of reporting on music business programs. Publishers said the decision not to rank the schools stems from Billboard’s acknowledgment of widespread criticism

surrounding conventional college ranking practices.

American University, also located in Northwest D.C., secured its place on the list, emphasizing Washington’s significance in music education.

Of note, Howard University is one of only two historically Black colleges and universities recognized on the list, the other being Tennessee State University in Nashville.

Howard’s remarkable achievement is underpinned by the establishment of the Warner Music/Blavatnik Center for Music Business in 2021, made possible by a generous \$4.9 million donation.

Billboard highlights the center’s one-year fellowship program, which offers invaluable coaching, mentorship, and real-world industry exposure through collaborations with partner organizations. The program is specifically designed to combat the underrepresentation of Black executives and professionals within the

music and entertainment sectors.

According to Billboard, one of Howard’s standout offerings is the course “The History of the American Music Industry: What Isn’t Black Music.” This unique perspective aims to give students a comprehensive understanding of the industry’s roots and evolution.

Billboard’s methodology emphasizes more accessible public colleges and universities, focusing beyond the traditional music capitals of New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville. The publication underscores that attendees of these top music business schools are primed for success in an increasingly intricate music industry landscape.

“The schools listed are selected through executive recommendations, alumni information provided by honorees from our multiple power lists, information requested from each school, and a decade of reporting on these programs,” the Billboard publishers explained. Notably, the publishers said students

could find robust curricula in cities such as Philadelphia, Memphis, and New Orleans, as well as in Syracuse, New York; Kennesaw, Georgia; Stillwater, Oklahoma; and Cleveland, Mississippi.

This extensive list encompasses the Valencia, Spain, campus of Boston’s renowned Berklee College of Music, the esteemed BRIT School located outside London, LIPA, and the BIMM Institute, the largest provider of contemporary music education in Europe.

“By any measure, the colleges and universities here offer impressive opportunities for students seeking an edge in music-industry careers — running campus record labels, devising business plans, volunteering at top festivals, traveling to major music industry events, and meeting with leading artists and executives,” Billboard affirmed, while also solidifying Howard University’s place among the foremost institutions in the field of music business education.

NO LESSONS SHALL BE LEARNED FROM THE PAST

The latest high profile racist event to hit Florida’s schools highlights the biases Black students face across the United States.

Akil Bello Word In Black

While Florida recently made news because of controversial laws, spats with the College Board, remaking colleges, questionable standards, and elevating unproven ideological exams, the Sunshine State has long been known for its reliance — or overreliance — on high-stakes tests.

From bonusing active teachers based on their high school test scores to suddenly abandoning the PARCC exam after investing resources in its development, to being the only state to require admission tests during the height of the pandemic to adopting an unproven pseudo-Christian test for scholarships and college admission, how Florida implements testing requirements is often at odds with the best practices.

In addition to the testing environment, Florida’s governor has created a racially hostile environment under the guise of racial blindness and anti-wokeness. Ron DeSantis publicly said AP African American Studies is “lacking in educational value,” created state history standards that claim slavery was a benefit to Black Americans, attacked the Critical Race Theory strawman, and banned the study of anything that might suggest white Americans have a history of racial crimes.

These dual forces came to a head at Bunnell Elementary at the start of this school year.

A School Assembly Just for Black Students

After the third straight year of low scores, the Flagler County school held an assembly to address those scores. Under the leadership of principal Donelle Evensen, the assembly gathered all Black fourth and fifth graders for a presentation to address low scores.

Yes, the solution administrators came up with was to segregate, stereotype, and blame Black students (and only Black students) for the systemic failures of the school.

In a school district with just 3% Black teachers, two Black teachers were tasked with delivering a presentation that identified “The Problem” as “AA have underperform “ (sic) to fourth- and fifth-grade students.

This typo-ridden presentation claimed that the school is “supposed to have at least 41%” of students scoring level 3 or higher. The clear message of the assembly and presentation was that Black students were to blame for the low pass rate.

Apparently, the principal believed the Black students, who made up only 19% of students, were the cause of the more than 50% of students scoring below a 3 on the state tests.

The implications of this assembly go well beyond this single occasion and emphasizes the need for critical analysis of systemic practices and policies with a focus on racially discriminatory impact.

But, since Florida has endeavored in the last few years to ban any study of the impact of race on their policies and decision-making, it will be increasingly difficult to put events like what happened at Bunnell Elementary in proper historical context. The entire event highlighted the challenges Black Americans still face in this country and highlights how wrongheaded the Supreme Court finding in SFFA is.

The Presumption of Lower Intelligence

The presumption of low test scores (and thus lower intelligence or ability) has not only led to assemblies but has driven policies and curtailed opportunities. The impact of discrimination doesn’t stop at the assembly in middle school but continues to hurt students at every educational level.

A large body of research has shown that even college application letters of recommendation can perpetuate biases. Most recently, research led by Brian Kim with the College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative, found that “on average, Black students had fewer sentences in their letters mentioning Intellectual Promise, even among letters written by the same counselor.”

The persistent underestimation of Black students’ intelligence has been shown to restrict access to gifted and talented programs, AP courses (especially those in STEM), and dual credit programs.

Dr. Jack Schneider, professor at the University

of Massachusetts Amherst and author of “Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning,” wrote:

Student standardized test scores are only useful if they change learning conditions for students. Channeling additional resources to particular neighborhoods and schools, for instance, is a logical and equitable way of acting on patterns in test results. Simply demanding more from educators and young people, however, is beyond useless — it suggests that motivation, rather than structural inequality, is the root cause of the so-called achievement gap.

The discriminatory impact of bubble tests has even been felt in professional sports. The National Football League, as part of their concussion settlements, used “race-norming” to allocate Black players lower payouts based on the presumption they had lower starting intelligence, based on test scores.

But if bias and perception of lower scores were the only problem, that might be manageable. According to reporting in the Dayton Beach News-Journal, a teacher told students that if they didn’t improve their test scores, they would end up in “jail or being shot or killed.”

Hostile School Environments

Comments like this further stigmatize students and create hostile school environments. Research shows that Black students face racist actions five times a day. Bias causes Black students to be seen as older and less innocent and subjects them to harsher discipline and more frequent suspensions, all of which can lead to lower grades and worse educational outcomes. Facing a near-constant barrage of direct and indirect negative messages about their academic ability creates a cycle of low expectations and underperformance.

Seemingly, intelligent adults charged with educating students should have considered that there could be multiple reasons for underperformance on tests over the last three years, ranging from a pandemic to scores having no consequences and limited benefits for students, which would clearly impact performance.

What’s the Incentive to Do Well on Tests?

In Florida, almost everyone has an incentive to do well on tests, except students.

Districts and schools are provided additional funding, schools receive higher rankings, and teachers can receive salary bonuses, but students gain little to nothing. Test scores for fourth and fifth graders aren’t used for promotion or to provide timely instructional feedback to students and teachers. Additionally, the test questions are not provided to students, teachers, or parents, so students have no way to review their performance and understand what they might need to work on. So why would students care about test scores?

Compounding the callous insults of the low score accusations and segregation, the administration’s proposed solutions were equally insulting and demonstrated a lack of knowledge about educational best practices.

The presentation instructed students to “commit to maintaining high iReady scores”

and to “concentrate on passing all curriculum-based assessments.” So the best solution that these trained educators could come up with was to say “do better” and “try harder.” Adding insult to injury, these non-solutions, which presumed the students weren’t trying, were couched as a competition with Chick-fil-A and McDonald’s as prizes.

Sadly, Evensen is apparently unaware of the years of research that has shown that incentive programs have marginal benefits at best and often have no measurable impact on scores. The session likely reinforced stereotype threat, discrimination, and segregation and undermined the confidence of all Black students regardless of their scores.

Bunnell Elementary fourth-grader Kenadee Robinson told The Dayton Beach News-Journal, “I don’t think they pulled us in for our test scores. I think they pulled us in for our race and because they just wanted to congratulate all the other students and not us,” she said. “Our test scores were really good, but they made it look like our test scores were not good at all, and other students tested higher.”

Black Students Aren’t the Problem

In putting the blame on students, the principal is not only projecting her anxiety about scores onto students but is also overlooking the responsibility of the adults in the building.

This seems on brand for someone who, after being forced to resign, blamed a Black teacher for the assembly, said that she “certainly didn’t deserve what’s happening to her,” and tried to claim community with the Black students she’d wronged; all the while seeking the absolution of the largely white faculty and staff.

Rather than being a model of effective educational development for all students, Florida has emerged as the poster child for indoctrination and reform that reinforces systemic biases and inequalities disguised as education. This latest event shows not only the failure of individuals in the system but the continued problem of the system itself.

Florida’s laws, policies, and practices created an environment of test and punish that allowed this most recent WTF moment and highlighted why affirmative action and race-conscious admissions were implemented and are still necessary.

After 250 years of slavery and 90 years of segregation, Black children have been forced to navigate 70 years of bias and stereotyping.

But the rest of the nation isn’t innocent, either. The racist perceptions of the academic abilities of Black children exist beyond Florida.

To excel as a Black student in the American educational system, a child must overcome economic, racial, systemic, and other biases while still achieving academically in a system that either refuses to acknowledge this country’s painful history or uses it to humiliate you, criminalizes your hair, and presumes your skin color makes you less capable.

Despite these attacks, Black children and their families have and will continue to achieve despite the educators who use test scores to reinforce their biases against Black children.



AKIL BELLO is an educator, entrepreneur, and advocate who has worked in admissions testing and educational access for almost three decades. A nationally recognized authority on educational access and standardized testing, Akil was a founding partner and CEO of Bell Curves, a test preparation company that helps schools and non-profit organizations develop affordable solutions for underserved students. Currently, Akil serves as Senior Director of Advocacy and Advancement at FairTest, where he works to build resources and tools to ensure that large-scale assessment tests are used responsibly and transparently to benefit students. Akil attended an HBCU and ultimately earned a bachelor’s degree from a university in Brooklyn.

Jocelyn Noveck Associated Press

MOVIE REVIEW: SCORSESE’S EPIC ‘KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON’ IS SWEEPING TALE OF GREED, RICHLY TOLD

OSAGE INDIAN MURDERS

The Osage Indian murders were a series of murders of Osage Native Americans in Osage County, Oklahoma, during the 1910s–30s.

Newspapers described the increasing number of unsolved murders and deaths among young adults as the Reign of Terror. Some sixty or more wealthy, full-blood Osage persons were reported killed from 1918 to 1931. Newer investigations indicate that other suspicious deaths during this time could have been misreported or covered-up murders, including those of individuals who were heirs to future fortunes. Further research has shown that the death toll may have been in the hundreds.

There tends to be lots of fast talking and fast moving in Martin Scorsese films, often from shifty types trying to get away with something. Or sometimes, simply because the master filmmaker has so much to pack in.

But in “Killers of the Flower Moon,” everything seems to slow down, and especially when the camera lands on Lily Gladstone. As Mollie, the Osage woman at the heart of this sprawling, real-life tale of greed and treachery on a scale both broad and intimate, Gladstone is the quiet, powerful center — taking her time, letting her eyes do the work, and unafraid of silence.

It’s a beautifully cadenced performance, all the more impressive because Gladstone’s sharing the screen with two of our most celebrated actors. Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro both turn in superb work for their legendary director, appearing together for the first time in 30 years. But Gladstone, in the rare Scorsese film that gives center stage to a female character, is the emotional core here, and it’s her face that stays etched in our memory.

Based on David Grann’s gripping whodunit set among the Osage in 1920s Oklahoma, “Killers” is a departure in other ways for the 80-year-old filmmaker. It’s his first Western, a genre he’s long wanted to explore — albeit a uniquely Scorsese Western, with an upended world of heroes and villains. And in telling this Osage story, he focuses on a people he’s never depicted before, deeply mindful of honoring their experience and their rituals, beliefs and customs.

It surely won’t surprise anyone that Scorsese brings his full wealth of artistic resources to this endeavor, along with his brilliant cinematographer, Rodrigo Prieto, and inspired production designer, Jack Fisk. Together, on location in Oklahoma, they’ve created an oil boomtown astonishing in its precision, detail and spirit.

It may also not surprise anyone that Scorsese has taken three and a half hours (albeit three minutes less than “The Irishman”) to tell his tale. This may be a source of debate, but it’s hard to argue that a story this hefty — a chronicle of a dark chapter in American history and a shocking true crime tale, all framed in a fraught love story — doesn’t deserve the length, considering the craft in every shot. And with some scenes — a boisterous prairie wedding, or a dance on a boomtown main drag — you feel you could have stayed longer still.

We begin with a late 19th-century ceremony, one of many portrayals of Osage spiritual life. Then, in a memorable image, there’s a whoosh from underground: Oil, spurting from land that was supposed to be worthless.

Thanks to this discovery, we learn in a terrific prologue using silent-movie title cards, the Osage become enormously wealthy. But they’re deemed “incompetent” and appointed white “guardians” who control their assets. This is how we meet Mollie, asking for her own money to pay medical bills.

Meanwhile, Ernest Burkhart (DiCaprio) steps off the train, a World War I vet with a taste for women and finer things, but no money, or talent to speak of. Perhaps his uncle can help. William Hale (De Niro) is a cattle rancher but more like a king around these parts — indeed, King’s his nickname — a white man who speaks the Osage language and calls himself their best friend.

But it’s clear from the get-go Hale has sinister motives, and De Niro’s just the guy to ooze sinister from every pore as this Godfather-like figure (he commits crimes, and they’re organized). Scorsese and co-writer Eric Roth depart here from Grann’s book, which holds us in suspense as to Hale’s motives. He wants Osage money, and tells Ernest that if he woos and marries Mollie — well, even less-than-brilliant Ernest can do the math.

So can Mollie. Trusting but hardly naive, she knows Ernest covets her wealth, but there’s growing affection between the two, and their marriage, gorgeously rendered, is a happy occasion.

But then the Osage start dying, one by one, in suspicious ways — including, eventually, Mollie’s sisters and mother. As for Ernest, he’s no angel, spending time robbing and gambling. But is he doing more? DiCaprio’s mouth settles into a tortured frown as he becomes increasingly torn between marital loyalty and fealty to his venal uncle.

Finally, federal agent Tom White (Jesse Plemons, perfectly cast) shows up, working for J. Edgar Hoover in what became the FBI. (It’s White who figured most prominently in Grann’s book, and indeed DiCaprio was once slated to play him.) This last act finds its way to a crackling courtroom scene perhaps only Scorsese could bring together: jittery DiCaprio and menacing De Niro, joined by a bombastic Brendan Fraser and a sputtering John Lithgow.

Indeed, the vast supporting cast includes countless faces you may recognize, as well as cameos of a number of musicians, and dozens of Osage actors in key parts. Scorsese’s late friend Robbie Robertson wrote the memorable score.

We won’t spoil the ingenious epilogue in which Scorsese ties up the loose narrative ends — with another significant cameo. But the fact that this epilogue comes after, oh, 200 minutes of expertly sustained tension is just another sign that in the latter years of his career, Scorsese is upping the ante — in terms of scale, yes, but also ambition.

He has called his work an offering to the Osage, and to other Native peoples. It also feels like an offering to those who love cinema, allowing us to watch a master of the craft continue to force himself, unlikely as it seems, to stretch and learn. May he keep stretching — himself, and us.

“Killers of the Flower Moon,” an AppleTV+ release, has been rated R by the Motion Picture Association “for violence, some grisly images, and language.” Running time: 206 minutes. Four stars out of four.



TOP THIS IMAGE RELEASED BY APPLE TV+ SHOWS LILY GLADSTONE, LEFT, AND LEONARDO DICAPRIO in a scene from “Killers of the Flower Moon.” PHOTO MELINDA SUE GORDON/APPLE TV+ VIA AP

BOTTOM THIS IMAGE RELEASED BY APPLE TV+ SHOWS, FROM LEFT, JANAЕ COLLINS, LILY GLADSTONE, CARA JADE MYERS AND JILLIAN DION in a scene from “Killers of the Flower Moon.” PHOTO MELINDA SUE GORDON/APPLE TV+ VIA AP



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