

Your View: Civil rights and education interact in New Bedford

By **JI TAE "JT" GHIM**

Ji Tae "JT" Ghim lives in Fairhaven. He is vice chairman of the Commission on Human Relations, City of New Bedford.

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Civil rights are a series of laws enacted by federal and state governments to ensure that individuals and groups are free from discrimination, particularly in the domains of education, employment and housing, based on their difference (sex, race, ethnicity, national origin, language barriers, age, disabilities, sexual orientation, etc.) as individuals and groups.

The Commission on Human Relations for the City of New Bedford was established precisely to ensure the local implementation of civil rights laws, in addition to serving as a body "to promote mutual understanding and respect among, and encourage and assure equality of opportunity for, all people of the city" (City Ordinance, Ch. 2, Art. IX, Sec. 2-131).

The commission has a unique opportunity in having Mayor-elect Jon Mitchell as the soon-to-be leader of New Bedford and its schools in the domain of education.

One concern that has been noted recently in this newspaper is the particular challenges that English Language Learners face in our schools and the state. While our student-to-faculty ratio in our regular and special education classes are about 14:1, the ratio between our ELL students and properly trained ESL teachers is about 514:18 or 28:1.

In addition to the disproportionate student-to-faculty ratio, the Department of Justice and its Civil Rights Division "informed the state (of Massachusetts) that its voluntary approach to (Sheltered English Immersion) training and ineffective monitoring process over the past seven years violated the Equal Education Opportunity Act by failing to ensure sufficient numbers of teachers who are qualified to deliver the state-mandated SEI program." It continues, "To comply with the Equal Education Opportunity Act, the state must improve and then mandate the improved training to ensure that ELL students receive the services to which the law entitles them." The U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts, Carmen Ortiz, whom Mr. Mitchell served under, stated, "Our education system must provide our children with opportunities to develop into productive citizens regardless of their proficiency in English.

"When English language learners lack properly trained teachers, those opportunities are curtailed." According to the same source, there are nearly 68,000 ELL students in Massachusetts's public schools (Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, Sept. 27). Despite the presumptions and biases, 76 percent of elementary school and 56 percent of secondary school students are American-born and/or naturalized citizens. This particular fact could not be more true in the diverse and multi-lingual community that we have here in New Bedford.

The link between civil rights and education was also identified by current Mayor Scott Lang. In response to Emily Rooney's question regarding the failure of "English Immersion" in Massachusetts as commented

by state Rep. Tony Cabral, Lang said, "This gap performance issue in inner cities' schools is really a civil rights issue as much as an education issue. And I think we need focus on it from that perspective or otherwise we are building a caste system that will define itself from generation to generation. That's one of the things we're focusing on right now in New Bedford, how to lift all of the communities from an educational attainment standpoint" (March 30, "Where We Live: New Bedford," WGBH, Boston).

More so than ever before, New Bedford has the opportunity to examine the city's conditions of civil rights in the realm of education with the federal and state support to best come up with its own solutions. Such steps are urgent and necessary in the areas of employment and housing as well.

This commission has already organized events this year and for 2012 to further promote and educate our community with both historical and contemporary resources to ensure equal chance and equal opportunity, irrelevant of our individual advantages and disadvantages. Civil rights urges all of us to take courageous and corrective actions in a consensual and communal manner.

We look forward to the community's participation in this grand and rightful effort.