

Federal Way schools refuse to guess student ethnicities, Federal WayMirror, 2010

By KYRA LOW
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The Federal Way School District will not follow a new state requirement for collecting data on students' ethnic backgrounds.

Starting this fall, parents of Federal Way students will have 57 race and/or ethnicities to choose from when filling out their enrollment and registration card.

However, for students who do not fill out the card, the school district has been ordered to do so on behalf of those students — and guess their ethnicity.

Race refers to the biological aspects of a person, being their skin color, eye color, hair color, etc. Examples include black, white and Asian. Ethnicity, however, refers to the classification within a specific race. Examples in the Hispanic and Latin American communities include distinguishing between Cuban or Puerto Rican. For Native Americans, it means identifying a particular tribe such as Puyallup or Nisqually.

While having students or parents fill out an ethnicity question is nothing new, the depth of this year's requirement is new — as is the requirement that schools fill in the card for any student who does not.

Now for each student, families must complete a section for these questions: "Is your student of Hispanic or Latin origin?" and "What race or races do you consider your student?"

For the first question, there is the option of "not Hispanic/Latino," along with nine other options of various Hispanic/Latin ethnicities.

For the second question there are several options for race, and dozens of ethnicity options within the races. Parents can check multiple categories.

In the past, there have only been about seven categories, along with an option of "no answer." In these new forms, the "no answer" has been eliminated.

Some of the changes have come from the federal government, while others have been brought about by the state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

The changes have brought some difficulty for the Federal Way School District.

First, anytime the school district changes input forms, there is a change of software cost to the district. Superintendent Tom Murphy said in a letter to OSPI's Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) that he has received no additional funding from either the Legislature, U.S. Department of Education or OSPI to cover the expenses.

The real issue that has gotten the school district's attention is that schools are now required to guess at the race and ethnicity of the students if the parents do not fill out the forms.

"Perhaps you or someone else at OSPI or (U.S. Department of Education) could help me understand how I train my staff to visually recognize the differences between a Hmong or Vietnamese, or between a Fijian and a Samoan, or between a Lummi and Makah," Murphy wrote in a letter. "In the era when all school districts are struggling mightily to make our organizations open and welcoming to the vast variety of immigrants entering each year, we are now required to simply guess at who they are, what they are, from whence they came. There may be no more insulting an act that we could perform for incoming families."

The district will be making every attempt to allow parents or students to fill out the cards. The district has already sent both a letter and a survey last month to get a head start on obtaining the information from current students. Incoming students will receive the form to fill out when they enroll.

However, Murphy informed CEDARS that the district will make every attempt to have every student's card filled, but that district staff has been instructed not to guess at race or ethnicity — and, if that section is not filled out, the district will leave it blank. Murphy has told CEDARS to expect to have a number of students for which they have no race or ethnicity data.

Behind the changes

The reason for the change, according to OSPI, is the dramatically changing demographics of society. The changes will allow parents to describe their children more accurately. Ethnic and race data are used to evaluate instructional needs. The federal government requires all states and school districts to use new categories for reporting ethnicity and race. Districts report this information for funding and evaluation, as well as for civil rights compliance.

The new categories for ethnicity and race are consistent with data collected by the U.S. Census. Also, members of different ethnic and racial groups want to know how students in different groups are performing academically, and in which programs and courses of study they are enrolled.

[Click here to read more about the requirement.](#)

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