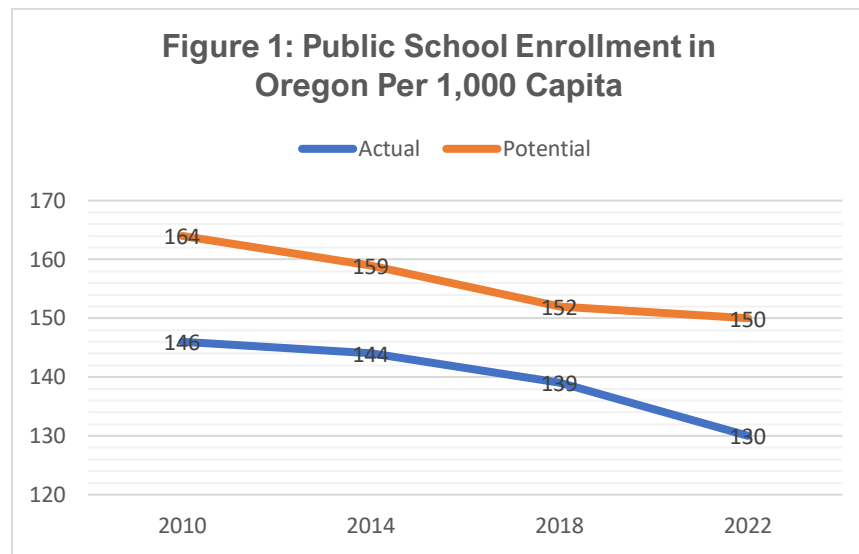


Issue Brief #11 (July 2023)

Reject Charlene Williams for Director of Oregon's Department of Education

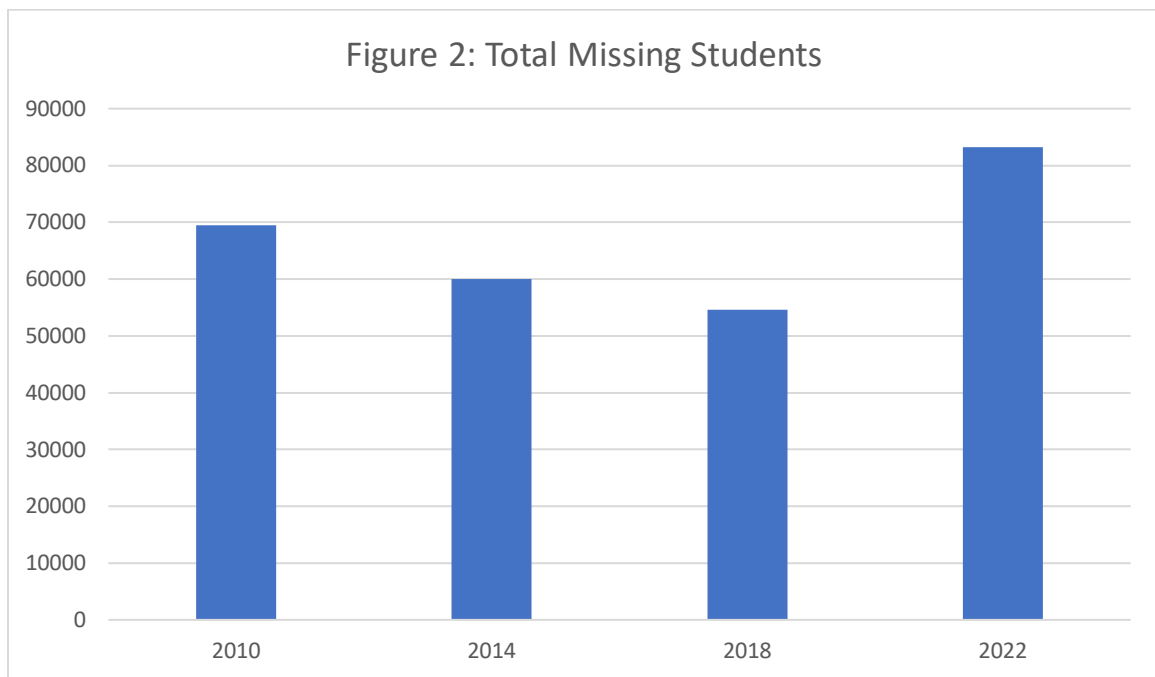
Oregon governor Tina Kotek on June 27 [appointed](#) Charlene Williams as the interim director of the Oregon Department of Education beginning July 10, pending Senate approval. Williams is patently unprepared for and ill-suited to the challenges of public education in Oregon. Her track record and published remarks indicate a candidate more interested in stirring racial division and maligning white students than in making Oregon public education a national leader. The Oregon Association of Scholars urges the Senate to reject her nomination when it convenes in September.

Williams is a black woman from North Carolina who was apparently appointed because of her race rather than her educational credentials or record. At a time when Oregon's public education system is suffering from declining enrollment and achievements, hiring a diversity candidate whose stated aims are to eliminate merit and excellence could not be more ill-timed.



Sources for All Figures: Oregon Department of Education; U.S. Census Bureau

For the last two decades, Oregon public education has been in relative decline. While much has been written about standardized test scores and reading skills, the broadest indicator of public school success is the extent to which parents leave their children’s education to the public system. The data shows that Oregon parents have been fleeing the public system in record numbers (see Figure 1). On a per capita basis, the gap between the number of school aged (5 to 17) children in the state and the actually enrolled number of students in public schools has grown to a record level. The gap in 2022 represented more than 83,000 school-aged children in the state who are not enrolled in Oregon public schools (see Figure 2).



In a state where a shrinking (now less than 2%) proportion of the public student population is black, appointing Williams as Department of Education director was clearly aimed at the state’s majority white students. If Kotek intended to focus on the needs of students with greater educational deficits, then an educator with a focus and expertise on the state’s rapidly growing Hispanic population would have made more sense (see Figure 3).

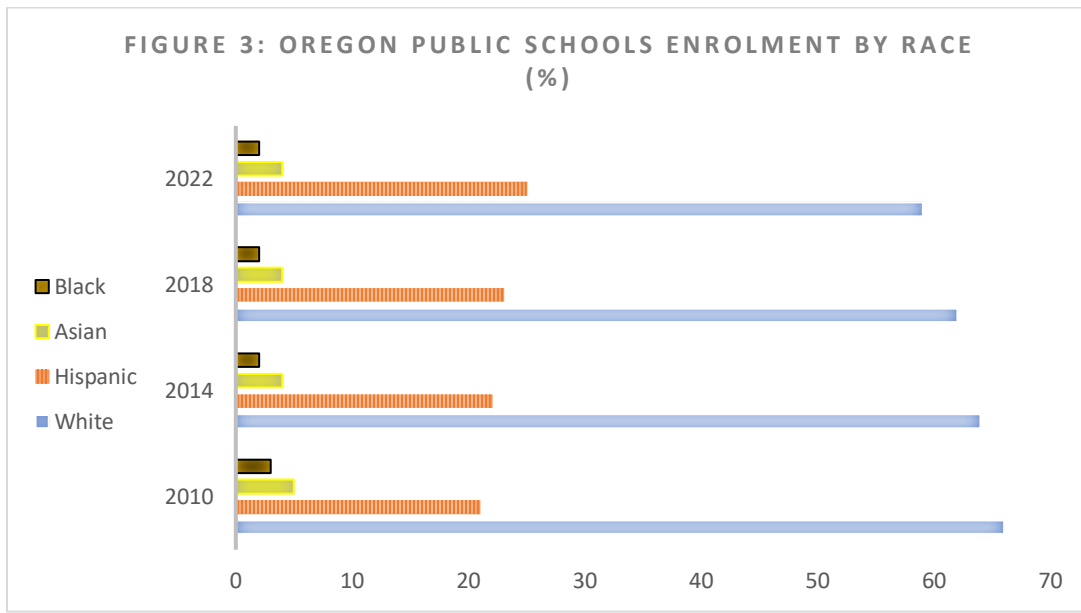
Williams has built her career not on being an educator but on being a “racial justice” agitator obsessed with a “white-black” dichotomy worldview. Her 2015 [dissertation](#) from the School of Education at Lewis & Clark College was entitled “*On Me*”: How African American Male Students in an “Urban” High School Describe High Teacher Expectations. The research, for which she was awarded a Ph.D., involved interviewing 12 black students at Roosevelt High School in Portland (where she was

principal at the time). Based on Critical Race Theory, the dissertation asserts that all educators must believe that racism is omnipresent and inescapable in American society. “By subscribing to the neutral, colorblind notions proposed in meritocratic thinking, teachers hinder students’ opportunity to affect change for themselves and their community,” she wrote. She urged the creation of classrooms that do “not reflect White middle class norms (i.e., quiet, compliant, turn-taking, hand-raising, etc.)” The dissertation’s “literature review” does not include any references to research that disconfirms CRT ideology – a fundamental principle of graduate research. Meanwhile her interview analysis method is a version of the long discredited “grounded theory” in which the researcher uses free-form thinking to create categories out of thin air that are then said to be “validated” by forcing all the contents of the interviews into them.



Williams shown in an article in The Columbian about her teacher seminars on the book White Fragility, June 9, 2019

The dissertation is also chalk full of meaningless word salad phrases, such as: “Educators must be willing to be vulnerable and critically explore the underlying paradigms impacting their practice” and educators need “nuanced, complex and holistic notions.” In short, Williams’ dissertation is biased, unscientific, and rife with clichés.

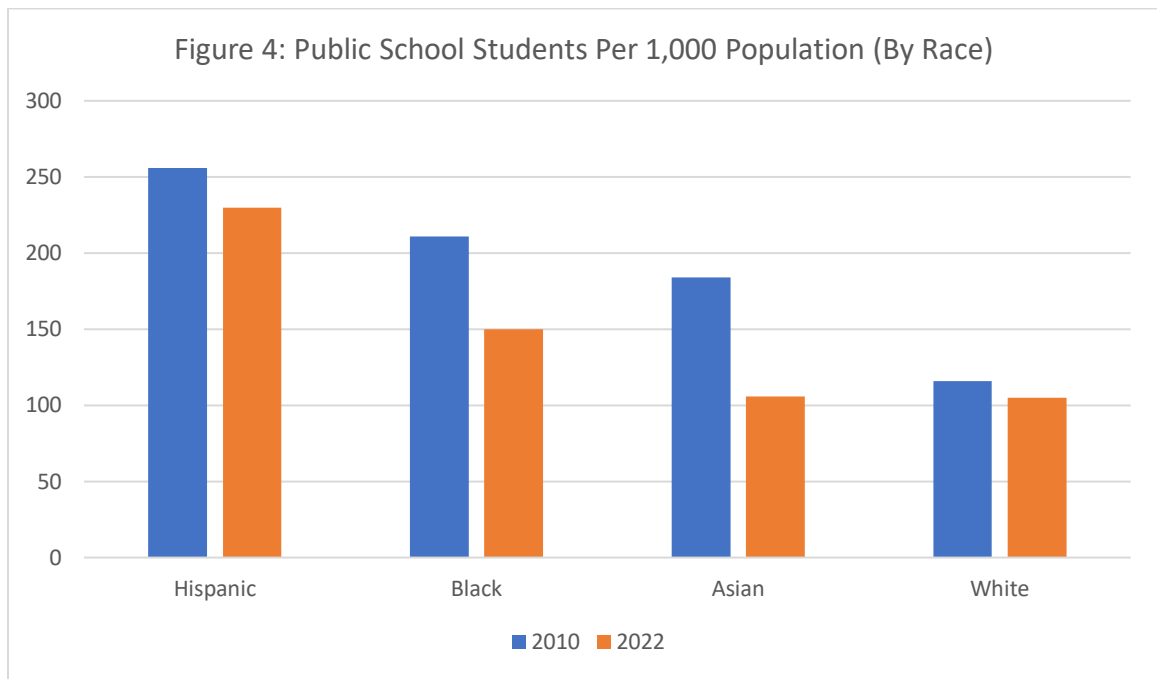


In a recorded [TEDeX Talk](#) of 2020, Williams denounces “America’s meritocratic theology” and calls on public schools to eliminate “outcome disparity.” In other words, Williams sees her goal as ensuring that white (and Asian) students in Oregon public schools are prevented from making educational attainments that on average are greater

than those attained by black and Hispanic students. She [describes](#) her goal as an educator to “reimagine and reinvent” public education.

While in the Camas School District, Williams [held trainings](#) for elementary school teachers on Robin DiAngelo’s notorious book *White Fragility*, which instructs white people to think of themselves as inherently racist and to treat black people as ineluctable victims caught in a web of white culture. A teacher at the sessions said: “We’re trying to get kids to take stock of whiteness and what that means....They need to understand whiteness and white privilege.”

The top priority of the Department of Education and its incoming chief should be to rebuild the confidence of Oregon parents to send their children to Oregon public schools. Everything that is known about Williams points to a candidate who is woefully unprepared for, indeed is a manifest threat to, that need.



It is instructive to note that black students have been exiting the public school system at roughly the same accelerating rate as white, Asian, and Hispanic students (see Figure 4). Household size, income level, and preference for alternative education is the main determinant of each group’s absolute enrollment level. However as Figure 4 shows, assuming these factors were little changed from 2010 to 2022, it is notable that all groups exited the public system at a higher rate, with Asian students showing the most dramatic flight from Oregon public education.

The next Director of the Department of Education faces a crisis situation in which public education faces a potential death spiral. Flight by white and Asian students has already caused a loss of educational quality since these students tend on average to be

better academically. Rather than redouble efforts to improve education with better teaching, higher standards, and rigorous and disciplined school environments, Governor Kotek seems bent on sending Oregon public education into a worse situation.

Charlene Williams is a patently unqualified and unprepared candidate to take over at this critical time. Senators from both major parties should push back on this ideologically-driven appointment and insist on doing what is right for Oregon children.

Recommended Actions

- Oregon Senators should urge Kotek to withdraw the Williams nomination and terminate her employment with the state.
- Failing that, Senators should reject her confirmation in September.
- Governor Kotek should re-open the search for Director and find a candidate chosen for their proven educational excellence and commitment to a positive attitude to all of Oregon's students.

About

The Oregon Association of Scholars is the Oregon affiliate of the National Association of Scholars, a network of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education. Membership in NAS is open to all who share a commitment to these broad principles. NAS publishes a journal and has state and regional affiliates. Visit NAS at www.nas.org, and OAS at www.oregonscholars.org. Contact: Dr. Bruce Gilley, OAS President, info@oregonscholars.org