



**CRAFTING SUCCESS AT CRENSHAW HIGH:
COOPERATIVELY ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

It is a revealing measure of the meaning and importance that our ancestors in the classical African civilization of ancient Egypt placed on knowledge, teaching and learning that they called their educational institutions, *per-ankh*, the house of life. Indeed this emphasis on education as indispensable to life is reaffirmed, augmented and extended in their name for human beings, i.e., *rekhyt*, which means wise and knowing beings. This definition of human beings carries within it also a moral understanding. For it conceives of humans, not only as wise and knowing beings, but also as moral agents who have an ethical obligation to know in order to realize their full potential, and in the interest of themselves and the world, apply their wisdom in life-affirming and life-enhancing ways.

So, it is within this ethical and social understanding of education that we of the African American Cultural Center (Us) joined LAUSD Board Member, Marguerite LaMotte, a number of other community leaders, institutions and organizations, educators, parents, students, teachers, administrators, alumni, activists, and UTLA leaders in a standing-room only gathering to support and participate in the leadership transition of the Greater Crenshaw Educational Partnership (GCEP). The Center has had a relationship with Crenshaw High since the 1960s and has had in that time engaged there in teaching, tutoring, mentoring, conflict resolution, advising and cultural tours at the Center. So the meeting was for us of added value.

It was first a meeting to recognize and thank Blair Taylor, President/CEO of the Urban League and outgoing chair of GCEP, for his crucial leadership in a critical time, and other members of the GCEP Board; Dr. Sylvia Rousseau, for her committed, consistent and stellar performance as principal in this time of

challenge and change, and who now is leaving also; and the teachers, staff, students, parents and community partners and supporters whose consistent and cooperative efforts have been indispensable to Crenshaw High's beginning turn around toward sustained educational excellence and achievement in critical areas of *academic* and *social* assessment.

The meeting began with a progress report from Dr. Rousseau who gave a report on gains made at Crenshaw, including academic improvements in math proficiency, overall student graduation, test scores for special education of English learners and decrease in the failure rate of core subject areas. Moreover, she cited the change in the culture of the school: increased sense and conditions of security; improved teacher morale; increased attendance; decrease in suspension; greater support from families and community; greater participation of students in creating the good school they want and deserve to learn and develop in; and a positive understanding of themselves as students, intellectuals and future professional leaders and servants of the people. Finally, other achievements of this partnership include regaining accreditation, increased services, facilitation of college enrollment, international travel, leadership and social justice training, summer jobs, and teacher research grants for improved teaching.

Dr. Rousseau conceded that although much had been achieved, there was much still to be done, especially in the area of increased test scores. But she asked that the good work continue, that we measure progress not only by where we are, but also by where we've come from and the awesome obstacles the students, teachers and school had to overcome. Thus, she reported on the challenging conditions students face which

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most impact their performance including: 46% of students in foster care; 63% of the students' caregivers are single mothers; and only 12% who qualify as average income earners; concerns of safety; and a condition of post-traumatic stress disorder among children of South Central L.A. higher than those of children of similar age in Baghdad, Iraq. Dr. Rousseau noted that "none of these data are excuses for failing to educate all our children, but they reveal the challenges and therefore, the way schooling has to be organized to meet these challenges." Still, there is evidence of resilience and resourcefulness and we must strengthen our efforts to support the students, parents, teachers and administrators in extending this good beginning of turnaround.

The meeting was also to welcome the new board members of GCEP, elect a new president of GCEP and recommit ourselves to *increased and consistent* support for Crenshaw High and its righteous strivings and struggle for both *educational excellence and the conditions conducive to it*. The election of Dr. Lewis King, Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at UCLA's Medical School, as chair, augurs well for continuity and sustainability. For he brings a record of excellent service as vice chair of GCEP, and a long history of meritorious professional and volunteer service to the community in education, health and scholarship.

Moreover, Dr. King realizes the importance of this precedence established through the initiative of the Urban League and with the support and cooperation of GCEP and all involved, i.e., the first and only Black community organization administration of a school approved by LAUSD. It, thus, has historical value as well as current relevance in our long struggles for community educational self-determination, and *an educational*

excellence beyond simple skillful taking of tests in school to successfully meeting tests and challenges in life.

At this meeting, Dr. John Deasy, the LAUSD Superintendent, stated he would honor the agreement with GCEP to allow it to complete the last year of its contract and afterwards extend it, if significant progress is made concerning test scores in critical areas. But as we said, key to all efforts and the success we all work for is adequate and effective capacity-building and resources from LAUSD. Also, the District must be held accountable too and be responsible and courageous enough to question and assess its own self in terms of its support for success at Crenshaw.

Furthermore, the District must recognize the gains made and respect the model achieved and also commit itself to continuity and sustainability thru capacity-building, resources, transparency and commitment to shared planning, decision-making and collaborative work with Crenshaw High's administrators, teachers, parents, students, community partners, and GCEP. Also, the new principal, Dr. L. Remon Corley needs strong support from the district including two strong, experienced vice-principals, a stable faculty and continuing links with and mentoring from Dr. Rousseau and resource support from Mr. Taylor.

This is the most appropriate, sound and effective road to recovery and success and to a new horizon of possibility for Crenshaw High, our students, and community. So, let us go forth, remembering and acting on the instructions of our ancestors in the *Husia* to "strive for excellence in all we do" and be mindful that in this striving, "every day is a donation to eternity and every hour a contribution to the future."

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