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social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
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African Americans and the African world.

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[Contents of Issue](#)

[Click here](#)

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[Home](#)

**The Omission of Racism, Racism+Sexism,
In Planned, Educational Reforms
Women of Color
By Suzanne Brooks
BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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An Open Letter to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Department of Education Administrators

Dear Secretary Duncan and Department of Education Administrators:

This letter is written to address the omission of the most important role of teacher expectation in student achievement when teacher expectations are primarily and willfully shaped by racism, sexism, religious bigotry, homophobia, handicap-ism, and age-ism. Deputy Secretary Simon asserted this morning on television that the most important issue for teachers is their skill in their subject. This is incorrect. It is also incorrect to believe that anyone who masters a subject can teach it, without any education, practice and skill in teaching itself.

The increasingly punitive spirit of educational programs being proposed continues to reflect a classist, racist, sexist, homophobic, age-ist view that those who are not doing well in school are failing because they don't realize the benefits of education and so should be punished, forced into it and have it drilled into them night and day until they get it. This won't work because the proposals being put forward are based on erroneous, stereotypical views of people seen as inferior. It has long been know to many that educational systems like that in Japan or Korea can produce capable mathematicians but not independent thinkers. People who are dehumanized, whether by under education or by a stress on education which only values what makes money and does not encourage thoughtfulness does not lead to democratic societies. To the

contrary, both lead to acceptance of dictatorships. Is this what we are seeking? Children and adults need recreation too, just as they also need education. Making longer days and terms, without addressing the most fundamental problems of racism and racism plus sexism as experienced by women and girls of color has no chance at all of success. Yet attention to this issue is the only area which is refused mention, let alone attention.

The degree to which the US Department of Education goes to find educational gimmicks to assert the discovery of new teaching models and testing methods on which to pin the nation's hopes that real effort to improve the situation is being made, while students and employees--including teachers--are routinely discriminated against and ruthlessly retaliated against if they complain, is at the core of the problems of this country. When will this be addressed?

Your reputed description of some schools as "drop-out factories" ignores the disparate treatment of those schools which have always been under funded; inadequately staffed; publicly blamed for problems, like drugs and gangs which exist in "upper-class" schools and communities but are covered up and not subjected to police harassment; allow concepts like "reverse discrimination" to be undisputed when nearly every higher educational institution in the nation admits family and friends of the power elite, no matter how academically deficient or dangerously troublesome on the signature of college/university presidents, vice presidents, deans and department heads--a white male preference practice that virtually excludes minorities, many women--even white women, and people of the grassroots--with never a word about "unqualified."

It is hard to understand the selection process which puts so many people into positions of responsibility for education throughout the nation and yet there is no recognition or acknowledgement that educational institutions have been re-segregated. The new segregation allows students of color, for example, to be in the same building with white students, but does not give them the same education. Thus, I recall an Alabama high school in which there was only 1 Black student in Spanish and Geometry. Though there were many college prep courses, they were for White students. The Black students were/are enrolled in ROTC. Of course, that school was not unique. Like others, the school taught about the "good" slave owners in history and had school dances in which White students danced on one side of the gym and Black students danced on the other side. Mingling was not permitted. This practice continues today and has been in the news regarding high school proms. What is the role of the Dept. of Education in these situations? Isn't discriminatory academic environment recognized as discrimination?

Here are other practices around the nation which, if I and millions of others know about, so you should know about them too. If you are familiar with these issues why are they not mentioned and acted on?

1. The obstructionist responses of the US Dept. of Education Offices for Civil Rights (like EEOC and most state and municipal agencies) has created a chilly climate and fear among those who experience discrimination of all kinds. OCR, which was once extremely helpful and supportive of those seeking relief from discrimination, including the third party in sex discrimination cases--cases in which one person gets preferential treatment based on a sexual relationship with a person in power, and others who refuse such relationships are denied equitable access to recommendations, jobs, promotions, and educational opportunities. Current practice accommodates defendants and produces all manner of barriers to complainants, including nasty interpersonal behavior, refusing to give the same convenience in meeting places to complainants as are given to defendants, and long delays in responses, if any are given. Responses

received often require more and more investigative work and documentation by complainants, little if any investigation by OCR, and clear cordial acceptance of defendant explanations. Complaints are closed, even when defendant is guilty of discrimination, with no compensation for the complainant--not even apologies. Subsequent retaliation against complainants is ignored, even when complainant assert that it is expected. Does this not suggest complicity in the problems?

2. Racism and other forms of institutionalized discrimination are not isolated incidents or rare problems. The notion that handing out "good job" certificates to some schools as a means of encouraging others to do better is laughable. This method has been repeated by every administration, at least in the last 40 or 50 years. Most such awards are given to schools in more affluent neighborhoods, as you did in Pennsylvania. You gave an award to a school in Bala Cynwyd which is still predominantly rich and white and sits outside Philadelphia where the public school students are predominantly disadvantaged Black and Latino, with many poor Whites as well. I am a graduate of West Philadelphia High School where I was an A student but did not get any support or encouragement to go to college. I have been an A student since kindergarten; graduated Maxima Cum Laude from La Salle University, have earned multiple degrees and a wall full of awards, always as an outstanding student. I spent my freshman year at Cheyney State College, now University--an institution established by the American Friends (Quakers) for Black students. For more than 50 years, the state of Pennsylvania, even when a Title VI consent decree based on race discrimination against Blacks was in force, left Cheyney as it is today, grossly under funded, in horrible physical condition, led by someone's cronies. Those running the institution have been paid well to allow Cheyney to continue its downward slide so eventually there will be a rationale to have it taken over by a predominantly White institution for the "good" of the Black community. For years, Cheyney has supplied a major portion, if not the majority, of teachers in Philadelphia schools, yet the education given to those many of those teachers was substandard. Whose fault was/is that? When I tried to transfer from Cheyney to Swarthmore College, despite the fact that as a first year student I was among the top 25 academically in the college, Swarthmore was not supportive because I was not White. Such practices continue everywhere today. Why isn't the Dept. of Education engaged in massive numbers of compliance reviews to bring about real educational equity?

Why is it still that the higher the educational level, the more disparate the representation of women and people of color? Why is it that women of color administrators are disproportionately in positions related to women, minorities, affirmative action, diversity and remediation and more often in assistant dean, rather than dean positions, assistant to a vice president, not vice presidents, assistant department heads, and not department heads? The positions from which promotions are made are not assistant roles. Why are so many people of color, especially women of color, forced to choose between a reasonable (if lower than average) salary and faculty status or credit toward tenure? What woman of color in these roles created for minorities only ever became a college president or head of a major corporation? And if there is one, are there 20 or 100 or 1000? Why does the Dept. of Education accept tokenism as if it is achievement? How can you be unaware that conditions for students of color have worsened? The affluent always see things differently from those who live in social distress over which they have no voice.

3. The No Child Left Behind program is well known among grassroots and people of color as a vehicle by which mainly White people make money providing minimal, inferior services to children/youth of color. Evidence supporting this statement was pointed out to the US and California Dept. of Education when tutors in one of the

reading programs funded by NCLB discovered in an Arizona newspaper reports that the company providing the tutoring was owned by a man who had, along with his wife, been investigated for criminal activity, defrauding a US Dept. of Ed program in Arizona. The male owner testified against his wife who was convicted and sent to prison, while he--the husband--was allowed to operate his program in 5 states including California. His company is dominated by cronies--friends and relatives and staffed by exploited tutors. The company passes along unpaid administrative work to the tutors, and allowed tutors and students to work in unsafe environments, such as a single female tutor and a single elementary student being left alone at night in a school trailer used as a classroom while the school was closed with no security in a high crime area. Tutors were encouraged to drag out the lessons for any children who succeeded "too quickly." Groups of students were assembled for tutoring whose academic levels and educational problems varied so greatly that the lower achieving students felt embarrassed to have their peers see their problems. The owner's son, who lacked appropriate skills and education, supervised the California programs and came on site in an obviously intoxicated condition, witnessed by parents, though with no smell of alcoholic beverages. These and other problems were reported to the owner, to NCLB and other authorities. No response was ever received.

In some instances, students whose parents do not speak English, have had tutors who could communicate in the parent's language. Parents have begged tutors to help their children with homework in English and math because the parents cannot read the instructions and the children do not understand the instructions of the teachers in school. Many NCLB programs forbid tutors to help the students in this way. There is little to no concern for the achievement of the student only that the licensed company make its money.

When tutors identify potential problems which can interfere with student learning, such as dyslexia and hearing impairment, even if giving the parents documentation in English and another language to present to their child's school, the schools do not act on this information and the company for which the tutor works forbids such assistance. In one incident, a parent who presented evidence of hearing impairment and dyslexia was told, "we had the nurse check your child and she is fine." Of course, school nurses are not trained to make such decisions. But the parents are dismissed. The students are then subject to retaliation by teachers.

Often parents indicate that they have learning plans for their children in the schools but that the schools don't implement them, preferring instead to expel the students. Often there are what appear to be conflict of interest relationships between schools, school boards, police/sheriff departments and district attorney offices. Sometimes a school official is in multiple roles in these organizations and decides educational and prosecutorial outcomes. There are cases like this reported in West Sacramento/Yolo County and Elk Grove, California. Some have been reported in the media. Why isn't the Dept. of Education pro-active in these cases?

Similarly, why isn't the Dept. of Education assisting in resolving issues at D-Q University, the only Indian University in this same area? Had the Dept. of Education helped when there were early indicators of discriminatory hiring practices by non-Indians in positions of power and obvious outcomes of inadequate academic preparation of students as they left D-Q University and entered other institutions of higher education, things might not have deteriorated to the current level. Is the responsibility of the Department of Education only to handle the easy tasks and the children of the affluent, throwing away the rest of the nations children for whom there will never be private or charter schools, even if they were all successful--which they are

not. When does the US Dept. of Education become an advocate for educational justice and equity? When is the role of critical thinking going to replace rote memory activities as a Dept. of Education primary goal? Or is the goal simply to turn back the clock for the grassroots, for the disadvantaged, for the disabled, for people of color and the poor to the level of medieval serfs with no rights, privileges or access to justice?

4. More examples of what occurs daily in US Schools:

- a. Hispanic students ridiculed for speaking Spanish to each other, outside class time.
- b. Hispanic students told that their ancestors were barbarians.
- d. Students of color followed around in campus retail stores because, based on their appearances, they are judged to be shoplifters
- e. Sexist and racist materials sold in school/campus bookstores. Racism video games, ie, "killing Indians"
- f. A Black student who experiences a food service employee at a campus restaurant had food spat on by the employee. Nothing was ever done about it.
- g. The first Black student ever to study forensics at a certain university was exposed to a deadly drug by the faculty member who had tried to get the student to drop the class, but the student refused. When the incident was reported to the Dean of the College, who was Black, he refused to meet with the student. The offices of Student Services and President arranged for a Black Vice President from a neighboring university to meet with the student and tell him to stop making waves. The student reported the matter to DEA. The faculty member reportedly fled to another country and the matter was closed. Some employees who opposed the way this and other incidents were handled were retaliated against and either fired or subjected to harassment until they left.
- h. Even when making highly publicized "diversity" hires, educational institutions frequently underpay these employees, sometimes violating their own personnel policies.
- i. Students of color are routinely discouraged from aspiring to professional occupations like law and medicine. A Black high school student reported that when asked by her career counselor what career interested her, she replied law. The counselor then told her that was unrealistic, that she needed to pick something else.
- j. Students are routinely lied to about the preparations needed for their desired careers. A Black returning adult male with years of experience in the field of journalism was about to graduate with his bachelor's degree. Thinking about a graduate degree, he met with the department head, a white male, and asked about getting into the master's program. He was told not to go to graduate school because it would hinder him in the business of journalism where people with graduate degrees are disliked.
- k. It is widely known that educational institutions across the nation often hire people of color who are willing to be tokens and willing to denigrate others in their own ethnic groups. Students or employees who attempt to point this out are castigated. It is a common practice.
- l. Discrimination and cronyism in teacher credentialing commissions are ignored. These represent a tiny fraction of the problems. What is the Dept. of Education doing

about them?

5. There are hundreds, if not thousands of educated professionals who are respected by grassroots people because of their documented years of work advocating justice, equality, fairness and all the other things claimed in the mission of every educational institution and, I am certain, in the mission of the US Dept of Education. Yet, people like us are not consulted, let alone hired. At stake is not only the issue of integrity, which stands like an elephant in a room, but the fact that although the US remains at this time a country with a White majority population, that majority is declining, just as the representation of Europeans in the world is now miniscule. It will not forever be possible for a small group of people to control the masses. Now is the time that energies should go into building bridges, cooperation, collaboration and collegial spirit. Those that continue to deny the harsh realities of life with racism and racism plus sexism for women of color, are as much a part of the problems as those who openly promote hatred based of asserted differences.

There is no such thing as race, other than the human race. The ancestry of all human beings is African. That this is fact is no longer deniable. Why isn't the Dept. of Education exercising leadership on this point instead of looking backward, holding on to the failed strategies of the past. Although we are all humans, we have many cultures and traditions. The time has come to accept that Western traditions will no longer dominate the world. We need to educate our entire population in multiple languages, cultures and traditions on an ongoing basis, not allow hatred of Hispanic/Latino immigrants be an excuse to rob their communities of their language while discouraging others from its study by denigrating those for whom it is a first language with discouraging national policies. After all, we are not building a wall across Canada.

And, there needs to be a complete overhaul of prison education, which is too often taught by other prisoners or volunteers or others, most unqualified, though their motives may be good. The Dept. of Education should promote educational requirements as a condition of prisoner release, in which prisoners would leave with a minimum high school education with computer skills and have the opportunity to work in higher education. In addition, curricula should include courses in psychology, women's studies, domestic violence, men's studies, ethnic studies, family dysfunction, addiction, gangs and more to help prisoners understand their own behaviors and to set in place a system in which the way out is through education. This would undermine gangs and corrupt guard domination activities and prepare prisoners to pursue further education and responsible living upon release.

Because I lack faith in only appealing to the Dept. of Education as a citizen interested in the well-being of my country, whether a victim of discrimination or an advocate for justice, unless others are aware of my having written yet again, I will share this letter with others. I will encourage them to send you their information, experiences and reports to expand your knowledge. I will copy it to others working on these issues and include it in my online column, "Women of Color" in blackcommentator.com where all of you can also find many other writers and columns addressing issues which merit your attention. I also recommend the books (below) and their writers as the kind of reading in which you should be engaged and the kind of consultants you should hire if you have interest in improving education for all in the US. I encourage you to take advantage of these resources and to reach out to all of us at your own initiative.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Brooks
CEO, International Association for Women of Color Day

Dr. Sharon Parker:

Dr. Parker is currently Assistant Chancellor for Equity and Diversity at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT). She has enjoyed a thirty-year career in public administration addressing issues of social justice and equity as a diversity practitioner, researcher, and consultant. Prior to joining UWT, she served for six years as Principal Investigator with the Campus Diversity Initiative (CDI) Evaluation Resource Project based at Claremont Graduate University in southern California. Her service also has included work in higher education institutions where she led initiatives on diversity and social responsibility; non-profit advocacy organizations, such as the National Institute for Women of Color, the National Commission on Working Women, and the American Institute for Managing Diversity; and independent consulting. Dr. Parker is a USA citizen of Native American (Susquehama, Tslagi) and African American heritage.

Dr. Donald H. Smith:

Climbin' Up The Mountain Children: The Journey of an African American Educator, by Donald H. Smith, 2002 (Available from the author). A native of Chicago; attended Chicago Public Schools. Received his bachelor's degree from University of Illinois, masters from DePaul and PhD from University of Wisconsin. He has taught at all levels, K-12 through college, university and adult education programs. He has developed innumerable innovative educational programs and organizations, including Open Admissions at New York University; positions at Baruch College, City University of New York, Northeastern Illinois University and many others. He is the founding president of the NY Alliance of Black School Educators and numerous other important roles. His research and scholarship have produced many important reports and studies, including *Saving the African American Child*.

Dr. Charlestta Stalling:

Educational Consultant, Educator, Education Administrator; Reading Specialist; Master's Degree, Harvard University; PhD, UCLA. Develops cultural models and trains administrators.

Michele Wallace:

Feminist scholar / cultural worker / intellectual Michele Wallace has been furthering the difficult work of decolonization since her first brave and controversial book "Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman" appeared in 1979, when Wallace was twenty six. She was attacked, like Ntozake Shange, for her refusal to be reticent about the corrosive and painful effects of sexism and racism on Black women. As she commented in her interview in Marlon Riggs' "Black Is, Black Ain't", she is still, in many ways, being punished. Wallace's exemplary critical writing on visual art is cogently presented in such essays as "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture" and her afterward in the book *Black Popular Culture*. (based on a path breaking conference organized by Wallace at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1991), "Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture". Her attention to the invisibility and/or fetishization of Black women in the gallery and museum worlds has made possible new critical thinking around the intersection of race and gender in African-American visual and popular culture, particularly in what she has called "the gap around the psychoanalytic" in contemporary African-American critical discourse. Presently, Wallace teaches in the English Department at the Graduate Center of City University of New York (CUNY).

BlackCommentator.com Columnist Suzanne Brooks is the founder and CEO of International Association for [Women of Color Day](#) and CEO of Justice 4 All Includes Women of Color. Click [here](#) to contact Ms. Brooks.



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