

## **A covenant betrayed**

Written by the African American Mobilization for Education  
Thursday, 10 December 2009 16:27

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Change is difficult for most of us. So many are afraid of the unknown, of the consequences of decisions made; no control. It makes people and even school districts, do irrational and even irresponsible acts; all in the name of staying in control.

Three years ago, a group of African American parents, educators and community members came together and said they had had enough of failing African American children in the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). We proclaimed we would work together to hold ourselves and MPS accountable for truly educating Black children. We declared that it was no longer acceptable to over suspend, over medicate and under-educate our children. We called ourselves the African American Mobilization for Education (AAME). We articulated that the continued failure of the majority of African American children in the Minneapolis Public Schools was no longer acceptable. We wanted to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

After two years of struggling to get it right, AAME came up with a Covenant to present to the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). It was a radical document that represented a broad, cross-section of the African American community, which included intellectuals, business people, parents, educators, students, and those who just had a love for Black children. There were members of the African American community who had historically been adversaries who united behind the Covenant on behalf of Black children.

The Covenant developed by AAME included working with and educating teachers to assure they had a good understanding of African American culture and the mores of Black children. It included working with and educating parents on how to support their children and teach them what questions to ask school teachers and administrators to better support and assist in creating successes for their children. It was a Covenant that would educate African American students about their rich culture and the cultures of Asians, American Indian and Latino students; the same as the school system teaches them about the various European cultures.

It was a Covenant that would have the teachers working more collaboratively and cooperatively so that students would be encouraged to talk to each other as well as to their teachers. The emphasis was as much on developing the right question as getting the right answer. The Covenant was designed to increase the number of African American students taking college preparatory tests (ACT & SAT), and reduce the over-representation of African American students in negative behaviors, as demonstrated by the high number of absences, suspensions and trancies.; as well as the overwhelming number of Black students represented in Special Education classes (Minneapolis Public Schools are amongst the leaders in the country of African American students in Special Education Programs; primarily boys).

A ten-year plan was to be created that would include creative cultural programming Rites of Passage, a clearinghouse for professional contractors to work with teachers/students/staff and a monitoring committee composed of community representatives to observe and to hold both sides accountable. It gave AAME and the District joint responsibilities to assure the success of Black school children. AAME, on behalf of the community was responsible for assuring that the Minneapolis School Board and District administrators were doing their jobs on behalf of African American children. AAME would be held accountable for helping parents understand the importance of making sure their children were getting to school on time, for creating a special

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place in their homes for their children to do their homework and for helping their children give their best in school. The rallying cry for AAME was to “Reignite the Fire for Education in the African American Community.”

In June 2008, the Minneapolis Public School Board unanimously passed the Covenant. The African American community claimed victory! The Covenant received local and national attention. The Star Tribune proclaimed that it was about time there was a partnership between African Americans and the Minneapolis Public Schools. Education Week lauded the Covenant as an historic event. Unfortunately, it was short-lived.

The task of developing a plan that was mutually acceptable to both AAME and MPS was the next step. MPS created so many meetings that community members became discouraged and many dropped out; yet many stayed, believing that the District would negotiate in good faith. After one year of meetings, the community and MPS developed a plan that included a pilot project with a preschool, elementary, middle and high school program that had the support of MPS administrators and AAME. The program was based on a successful Rites of Passage program that had been in place throughout the District for the last 11 years that reduced suspensions and trancies, increased attendance and increased academic excellence. All community players and school officials were in place, and a budget was developed. The agreement was presented to the MPS school board and Superintendent Bill Green publically guaranteed dollars.

What seemed to be a win-win situation for the District and the community turned into something else. Rather than applauding the agreement, fear seemed to set in for some school officials. Not having complete control over the process, the MPS worked tirelessly to change it; through a takeover of the process. The MPS replaced those who had created the Covenant, AAME, with “their own” community members. AAME members were no longer invited to Covenant meetings. The meetings were dominated by 95 percent District personnel and 5 percent handpicked community members. What were to be three schools, as agreed upon as part of the Covenant, turned into one school, not a school agreed upon in Covenant meetings, but one handpicked by the District, that was never part of any of the discussions. Rather than expanding and incorporating the successful Rites of Passage model that had been in place for years, the District took it out of the schools completely. The ultimate say of the Covenant became a unilateral decision by the MPS with no input by AAME. AAME continually requested to receive copies of minutes of the meetings we were not invited to. We were informed that no minutes existed. AAME was told that the final say about dealings of the Covenant were in the hands of the Deputy Superintendent.

Rather than putting resources into the implementation of the Covenant which the Minneapolis School board signed in good faith, the District gave a \$20,000.00 contract to a consulting firm to “facilitate” the Covenant. Although the District did not put a single dime behind the implementation of the Covenant, they put the money into a consulting firm at the rate of \$700 an hour to facilitate a process that excluded AAME.

Fear is a terrible thing. It makes rational people act irrationally. Some have purported that if members of AAME let the larger community know what has happened with the Covenant that

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we would be undermining the Black leadership of MPS. Some would like to make the community believe that as long as the leadership is Black that it doesn't matter if African American children are failing.

Members of the African American Mobilization for Education (AAME) will work to create the best education for Black children and we will struggle against anyone that develops policies that undermine their success, whether they are Black, White, Purple or Green. AAME believes that the Minneapolis Public School Board is in breach of a Covenant that they signed in good faith with AAME on behalf of the African American community.

AAME is calling on the Minneapolis Public School Board to honor the Covenant. We call for the MPS to implement the Covenant by bringing AAME back to the table as equal partners. We call for the District to honor the work that was done by so many hard working AAME and MPS members by implementing the plan we put in place. It includes:

- The development of the pilot Rites of Passage programs at LeCreche Early Childhood Program, Bethune Elementary, Olson Middle School and South High School.
- The development of a summer program that focuses on both the academic and social development for African American youth
- The development of an initiative to work with agreed upon experts in the African American community, the Minneapolis Teachers Union and AAME that gives teachers knowledge of African American culture & learning styles.
- The development of a clearinghouse for community members, teachers and administrators.
- The development of a monitoring committee that assures that both the community and MPS are being accountable and implementing the Covenant.
- The development of an evaluation process that analyses and reports on the Covenant.

African American Mobilization for Education (AAME) is calling on all community members from all cultural backgrounds to mobilize and call for the Minneapolis Public School Board to honor the African American Covenant. Honoring the Covenant will create policies and put initiatives in place that will truly benefit African American children. It is in the interest of every member of the community to rally in favor of this agreed upon Covenant. If the Minneapolis Public Schools cannot be trusted to honor an agreement with and for African American children, how can we trust what they say about any of our children?