NJ ASSOCIATION OF BLACK EDUCATORS
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My favorite descriptor of a doctorate degree holder is someone who knows a great deal about a very little. I think it important for me to establish very early that the very little I know a great deal about does not include public education. It is, therefore, important for you to understand that I don't come before you this morning representing myself as an expert in an area where many of you in the audience far exceed me in both training and experience when it comes to K through 12. Indeed it is my expectation that I am probably going to learn a great deal more from you today than I can probably offer you. So, the comments and thoughts I'd like to share are more from that of a parent and participant observer in an almost 30 year struggle to achieve quality education for our children.

I first became engaged in this question as a senior at Hirsh High School on the south side of Chicago when I joined with many fellow students in helping to organize what I believed was the first, and certainly most successful, citywide shutdown of a big city urban school system. The principle target of our activity was Benjamin Willis, Superintendent of Schools in Chicago at the time. And, while he was a worthy target for our discontent, the real villian was the second largest public school system in America which, at the time, had not a single principal, assistant principal, district superintendent, or administrator of color anywhere in the city. The schools that our children attended were racially, economically, and geographically isolated. My high school, which was built for 1300 students, had over twice that many enrolled. 70% of the teachers did not hold permanent teaching certificates. And while over 2500 students were enrolled in the school, my graduating class had a little over 200 seniors when I got my diploma in June of 1964. The objective of our protest was quality education for our people. The means we sought was the acquisition of African-American leadership within public education in Chicago.

Some other interesting things happened a couple of years later. Many of you in this room know Milton Brown, the current President of Malcolm X Community College in Chicago. You should know something about the history of that institution, because it is central to the point I'm trying to make this morning. Malcolm X used to be known as Crane Junior College. It received its current name when Charles Hurst, President at the time, literally went out onto the steps of the institution and proclaimed the renaming of the college on behalf of the community this "community college" was to serve. The systemwide City College Governing Board had a fit. The community around that institution rallied to Charles Hurst's defense and demanded support for an educator the community perceived as committing himself on their behalf. Following a flurry of furious activity, the City College Board of Chicago ended up ratifying the decision that was made by the community on behalf of the community.

Shortly thereafter, the community college faculty in Chicago organized into a union and called the first citywide faculty strike -- a strike that was largely successful throughout the city of Chicago except for Malcolm X Community College. At this institution, the faculty called a press conference and announced that it had no intention of striking against the community to whom they were pledged to serve. And while a few of the faculty struck, most did not, although some faculty forfeited their paychecks during the period in sympathy with the union's position. These African-American educators made a public statement that their commitment and accountability was first to their community and their people before other considerations.

Several weeks ago I rented the movie Glory. I missed it when it passed through the theaters, and I wanted to see it. For any of you who have not seen it, I recommend it highly. My interest in the movie, however, went far beyond an interest in seeing a movie about a part of our history. My interest came from hearing about the 54th Massachusetts Regiment from remarks I saw by General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. General Powell, in addressing a large and distinguished group of retired African-American servicemen, talked about the great sense of obligation he felt to conduct affairs of his high office in an exemplary manner, not just because he held the highest military office in the nation, but because, as he put it. "I stand before you on the shoulders of those who sacrificed and died to give me this opportunity to serve." General Powell further went on to talk about black military pioneers who, through the history of this country, served with dignity while themselves being subjected to indignity. He talked about the 54th Massachusetts Regiment of the Civil War. He talked about the Tuskegee airmen of World War II. He talked about Chappy James and other officers who sacrificed and struggled and paved the way for his opportunity. And, he concluded by describing both the tremendous sense of opportunity he felt but, more importantly, the obligation he carried because he stood on the shoulders of those who had sacrificed and died for his circumstance.

I had the opportunity to revisit Chicago several years ago to address a group of public school educators; and, unlike 25 years ago, everyone in the room was Black. There were two district superintendents, several principals and assistant principals, counselors, and central office administrators. I revisited my old high school and chatted with faculty, all of whom were certified. I reviewed measures of academic performance that suggested that the students were in worse shape now than they were in 1963 when we shut the school system down.

The year before last, I ran into Milton Brown at a meeting in Chicago, and I must tell you in all candor that the Malcolm X College President Brown is trying to reform bears little resemblance to the Malcolm X that conducted the bold embrace of its community 20 years before. If the union in Chicago were to call a strike today, they would run over Milton getting out of the building.

The means we sought in 1963 have been effective. The achievement of the educational outcomes for our children that ends were to produce has failed. It is my observation in New Jersey that our experience here is not unlike the experience of Chicago or Cleveland or Detroit or New York or Boston or any urban center where the majority of our people still struggle for the yet illusive objective of a quality education.

Am I blaming us for all of the circumstances that have caused the collapse of public urban education? Of course not. Urban environments are extremely complicated social, political, and economic ecosystems, and it would be eminently unfair to blame minority educators for all of the complicated pathologies that have gnawed at our cities and their institutions. Nor do I stand here cloaked in self-rightousness lecturing you about what's required of you. What I am saying, however, is that a great deal more is required of us. For whereas the blame for the destruction of public education is not ours, the responsibility for saving it is.

It won't be easy. It requires marshalling sources and resources far beyond those that we control. But then, no one made us do what we now do. We have great responsibility you and I, because we stand on the shoulders of those who sacrificed and died so that we might have the opportunity to lead on behalf of our people. We, therefore, carry a much higher order of obligation to perform and to produce than do those in society who come to office within a different context.

Several years ago, Saul Cooperman came forward with an initiative requiring the state to fulfill its constitutional obligation to our children by taking over failed systems. That initiative was translated into statute, and the State of New Jersey is now operating the public schools in Jersey City. There were a lot of responses to Dr. Cooperman's proposal. Many criticized Cooperman's stand. He was described as condescending, arrogant, paternalistic. Some pointed to his lack of experience in urban education and the lack of expertise within his organization to effectively implement such an initiative. Others talked about political intrusion by the state into the affairs of local governments. But no one came forth with an alternative agenda for the educational liberation of our children.

And, in a kind of eerie sense of deja vu, I heard people of color making the same arguments to defend their political turf against the state that states' rights activists in the south used to defend their political turf against the federal government's intrusion on behalf of civil rights. But I heard no other voices coming forth to champion the cause of kids.

Indeed, I attended two events that clearly defined my concern on this score. First, I hosted a meeting sponsored by this organization with a group of African-American public school superintendents. As I look around, I see some of you here who were in attendance at that meeting. Some of these leaders expressed an heroic view of the systems they were trying to build, and expressed their frustration at the formidity of the obstacles arrayed against them. Self-serving unions, politicized school boards, indifferent political leadership, the erosion of family infrastructure. And then there was the group, and, unfortunately, the largest portion of those present, who were genuinely defeated and worn out. One individual made a comment that given the future that awaited the kids from his community, it didn't really matter if they didn't know math.

Now I must tell you, at that point I became outraged. If the superintendent had such perverted expectations for the children in his community, those poor children didn't have a chance. Since that day my outrage at this gentleman's comment has turned more to pity, for I believe what I saw was someone who was expressing utter surrender. A man who was completely defeated, burned out, and had given up. There is no question, however, that it had long since come time for this gentleman to step aside.

The second event, shortly thereafter, was a meeting hosted by Richard Roper at the Woodrow Wilson School attended by a variety of leadership figures from around the state discussing implications of the takeover initiative. I was particularly impressed by the presentation of an extremely bright young attorney who expressed concern that the takeover initiative had the potential of reversing years of political gain achieved by the African-American community. I was impressed by her comment that the takeover plan carried with it too high a political price for our communities. What struck me most, however, was the predominant preoccupation the participant made with the protection of turf and not the education of our kids.

What I became distressed about was that the means of the civil rights agenda, i.e., the seizure of the political apparatus of government by representatives of the African-American community, had become an end unto itself and that we were defending this self-serving agenda at the direct expense of its original purpose -- the education and liberation of our children.

Our communities are proud of us. They brag about us. They support us. And, most of all, they trust us. And to them we owe a higher order obligation, for we stand on the shoulders of people who sacrificed and died for the opportunities we have.

When our politicians make our communities choose between them and our children, then our children must come first. When we as educators make our communities choose between us and our children, then they must put their children first. When those of us who owe our responsibility to our communities make our communities choose between us and the welfare of our communities, then we forfeit the right to the support of our communities.

The problems we face in public education today were decades in their creation, and certainly they will not be corrected overnight. Nor have these problems persisted because Black educators and Black politicians have abandoned our communities. The dynamics are complicated and seductive. In many cases we've taken over the train, but we haven't moved the track.

So, I come before you this morning not to blame us, but to remind us that from time to time we must be rededicated to those things that are ultimately important. I come here this morning not because I am angry at us, but because I care about us, and I care about you. I care about you enough that I am even willing to risk some of your anger at some of the things I've said this morning. But we stand at an historic moment in the history of the education of our people in this state.

The current majority of our children live in communities that will be greatly assisted by the educational reform known as QEA. As did his predecessor, Commissioner Ellis is championing the education of our children. I want to support his agenda if it is a good agenda. It is my preference, however, to support your agenda. I'd like to repeat a comment I made earlier. While it is true we didn't break it, it is up to us to provide the leadership to fix it.

It is not my intent to lecture us. It is certainly not my purpose to offend us. I hope that I have challenged us. What I expect is for you to lead us, for we stand on the shoulders of those who died to give us this opportunity. The challenge is for leadership. If not you, then who? If not now, then when?