

a life of commitment

For this work, Oberlin awarded Cooper a master's and its president recommended her for a teaching post in Washington, D.C., at the respected M Street Preparatory School (later, Dunbar High), one of the nation's few black schools at the time—and also fertile ground for the coming clash of two competing, nationally important educational philosophies.

When she arrived at M Street, Tuskegee Institute in Alabama was emerging as "the model" for black education. Founded by Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee stressed vocational and industrial training as a step to improve the lives of black people and relations with whites as the Reconstruction era gave way to discrimination and segregation.

Simply put, Washington urged his fellow Negroes to forget about

term she was at odds with the white-dominated board, which insisted on the vocational approach, believing, Hutchinson writes, that blacks were "mentally inferior" and that such an approach was therefore "appropriate." The angered board charged that under Cooper's direction school standards had slipped and that the faculty was neglecting student discipline. All the while, however, M Street students for the first time were being admitted—many with scholarships—to Harvard, Brown and other Ivy League colleges.

In 1906, the board fired Cooper. Writing of her dismissal, she said: "The dominant forces of our country are not yet tolerant of the higher steps for colored youth."

Cooper's background and principles also put her squarely in the mid-

teaching to continue her lifelong quest for education, this time pursuing a doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris. Ironically, the former slave girl's dissertation, written in French, explored the Gallic nation's attitude toward slavery.

In 1930, when she was about 72, Cooper at last retires, but soon she was again involved in an effort to broaden the educational horizons of black people, now as president of Frelinghuysen University, a black institution in the nation's capital.

The university, established to educate poor, working class blacks from the South, had no real campus of its own and met in homes and other makeshift educational centers.

But the school's morale and very life was threatened when the D.C. Board of Education terminated its right to confer degrees, thrusting Cooper into yet another battle over the issue of educational opportunity for blacks. Rejecting the concept that the school could effectively continue as a non-degree-conferring institution, she appealed for reconsideration, writing the superintendent of schools: "I am unwilling to preside at a farce."

She lost the battle, and she suffered another blow when her niece and namesake, whom she had hoped would carry on the vital work, died in 1939.

Anna Cooper lived for another quarter century, quietly but without losing her life's philosophy. A few years before she died in 1964, she wrote how she wished to be remembered:

No flowers pleas, just a smile of sweet understanding
The knowing look that sees beyond and says gently and kindly
Somebody's teacher on Vacation now—Resting for the Fall Opening.

In 1780 New Jersey became the first state to pass a law requiring the compulsory education of slaves.

The first schoolhouse for Blacks was built in Washington, D.C., in 1807 by three former slaves.

politics and a college education and to learn how to be better farmers and artisans. Cooper also favored industrial training; yet she found herself far more closely aligned with the black scholar and author W.E.B. DuBois who advocated classical instruction for his race. "The object was black survival," says Hutchinson, noting that Cooper and others felt that, without the academic programs, there would be little hope of getting black students into college and ultimately the professions. "These students, then, would become the bootstraps by which the entire race would be uplifted," Hutchinson concludes.

die of the emerging black women's club movement. The clubs grew among women dissatisfied with being case aside as "colored" units of white clubs and angered by racial intolerance throughout American society, even among religious groups. Cooper believed "the struggle for human rights might be waged more effectively with the perspective and balance of intelligent black women," Hutchinson says. Always one to back polemics with action, Cooper became a delegate to the First National Conference of Afro-American Women in Boston in 1895.

A quarter century later, Cooper, now in her 60s and back in the D.C. school system, took time off from

Cooper became principal of M Street in 1902, but by the 1904-05

REAL KIDS AREN'T ROBOTS



■ If students were robots, education would be simple. Robot's needs are all the same.

However, in the real world, education is not that simple. Real students have their own individual gifts and their own limitations. They all need to know that they are valued by their schools, their communities and their nation. They need to know that they are not fodder for test machinery, pawns in a publicity chess game, or throwaways in the stampede to prove "who's best." Real students need assurance that America is still a country where each person is valued for his or her unique potential and where their schools plan realistically to meet their individual needs."

Excerpted from *Together We Can Turn the Wheel of Excellence - The Teachers' Viewpoint*, published by OEA.

Working for excellence and equity in education

OREGON EDUCATION ASSOCIATION SALUTES

Black History Month



Salutes



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