

African American Students Need to Learn the Five Rs

By Bruce Poinsette
Of The Skanner News

Too often African American students lose interest in school because the curriculum is irrelevant to their lives. That was the thrust of the Teaching with Purpose Conference, hosted by Portland Public Schools teacher Karanja Crews and the Journey to Freedom Foundation.

Held at PCC's Cascade Campus, last Friday, Oct. 14, the conference aimed to help educators reduce the achievement gap, and build support for culturally relevant education, specifically for African American students.

Educators, parents, community members and even a politician attended the event, yet they amounted to just a dozen or so people, fewer than organizers had hoped to see. "As a parent I'm disappointed more people aren't here," commented one attendee.

The conference was separated into two parts. First was a presentation on the Journey to Freedom Project. After that, nationally renowned educator Augusta Mann, demonstrated her strategy of "Dancing Definitions." Mann is the former program manager for San Francisco State University's Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement, which specializes in culturally-centered education for African Americans.

Crews, the founder of Journey to Freedom and a teacher at Vernon Elementary School, spoke about his experiences teaching in two very different school districts. He revealed that before coming to Portland Public Schools, he worked in Beaverton for four years.

"I was there for a reason," said Crews. "They needed to see diversity."

Only one parent gave him grief for exposing his students to extensive African American history, Crews said. And students from his Beaverton classes still keep in touch with him and offer to volunteer with current educational projects.

Yet, when Crews transitioned to the Young Men's Academy at Jefferson High School, he found little parental support and fewer motivated students. In response he developed and copyrighted the game "Journey to Freedom: The Power to Read and Write," to expose the students to Black history.

The game has the students play the role of enslaved Africans who can only win their freedom through mastering reading skills. At the young men's academy, Crews says he even took away students' desks and supplies and had them eat grits to make the simulation more real.

To play Journey to Freedom, students draw cards that pose questions about Black history. Designed like the questions on the state reading test, they also teach phonics and

phonetic awareness.

The game doesn't end once a student masters reading personally. Students can only win once they go back and teach others to read, which is a concept borrowed from the Underground Railroad.

Crews goals for the game were:

To change students' perspectives on education,

Ritual, rhythm, recitation, repetition and relationships are vital for Black students

To inspire students to be great,

To expand students' reading skills, and

To prepare students to pass reading tests.

In order to simulate the game for conference attendees, Crews had them first read passages from "The Eagles That Thought They Were Chickens," and from "Nightjohn", a novel about a slave who returned to slavery in order to teach others like himself to read.

Crews also emphasized the need for students to learn about ancient African kingdoms, which are routinely ignored by traditional history lessons.

Augusta Mann's session showed how getting physical can help students learn. She used what she identified as the five

African and African American teaching and learning patterns, which are ritual, rhythm, recitation, repetition and relationships, to cement the text in attendees minds.

Mann would recite phrases rhythmically, emphasizing certain words and even making sound effects for punctuation.

"You don't learn stiff," said Mann. "Every time you turn on a TV, you see black people performing. The basis of our culture is spirit."

Organizing the audience like a class, she divided them into two groups which each performed skits of the story of Henry Box Brown, a man who literally shipped himself in a box to escape slavery.

Mann demonstrated her concept of "Dancing Definitions," by getting the group to memorize parts of the US Constitution, using the five learning patterns.

Like Crews, Mann emphasized that before she introduces US history she teaches what happened before slavery, specifically ancient African kingdoms.

"It's 2011 and many students' parents still don't know," said Mann.

Many of the attendees pledged to make sure there would be more participants next year, saying they felt the conference had been very valuable.

One teacher noted that it would be particularly helpful for the cultural competency aspect of teacher evaluations.

"I feel really prepared for my teacher evaluation next year now," she said.


**PCC Cascade Campus
Senator Margaret Carter Dedication
and 50th Anniversary Kickoff**



**Friday, October 21 at 2:00 p.m.
Cascade Campus Moriarty Auditorium
705 N. Killingsworth Street, Portland**

You are invited! Please join us for light refreshments as we dedicate the Senator Margaret Carter Technology Education Building, celebrate our 50th anniversary, and thank the community for a half-century of support.

For more information, call 971-722-5227

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Time	Activities	Location
8:30am-3:00am	FREE Health screenings	Ballroom
10:00am-10:30am	Opening Ceremonies Urban Arts Dance Company	Ballroom
10:30am-11:30am	Spice It Up Cooking Demonstration	Ballroom
12:00pm-1:00pm	Zumba Dance Instruction	Ballroom
1:00pm-2:00pm	Spice It Up Cooking Demonstration	Ballroom
2:00pm-2:45pm	Fashion Show	Ballroom
ALL DAY	Youth Activities	Marquam Room
ALL DAY	Adult Activities	Sellwood Room

Health Screenings
Flu Shots
Dental Screenings
Vision and Glaucoma
Hearing
Diabetes Foot Checks
Massage Therapy
Oriental Medicine
Cholesterol
Acupuncture
Basic Naturopathic Medicine
Sleep Apnea
Depression
Lupus
and more!

Activities & Prizes
Face Painting
Arts & Crafts Table
Minute to Win It!
Xbox 360 Kinect
Domino Competition
Hair, Fashion & Makeup Show
Race Against Time
Zumba Dance Lessons
Cooking Demo & Tastings
Bingo
Price is Right

10:30am-3:00pm - Face Painting
Make A Bunny Mask, Coloring Table
XBOX Kinect, Minute to Win It and more!

Dominoes, Price is Right
Bingo
Morrison Room