

## **REPORT**

NEA Joint Conference on Minorities and Women  
June 29-30, 2015

This year the Joint Conference was an inspiring event. The speakers were stimulating and effective, and the 3-hour panel on the second day, which could have been deadly, was instead thought-provoking and life-changing.

### **Session 1: “Building Community Partnerships to Engage and Mobilize Support of Public Schools.”**

This was a report from three NEA community grant recipients: San Diego Education Association and the New Jersey Education Association. San Diego’s priorities were building outreach to non-union charter school employees, to non-members at their bargaining units, and parent engagement in conjunction with the districts and community partners. They designed a “Union Summer,” in which they reached out to provide many services to community parents, including help with signing up children for pre-school and providing help on financial aid for college students.

New Jersey’s focus was on the campaign for upgrading their school facilities. The legislature had appropriated \$2.9 billion dollars in 2008 for repairing and renovating school buildings. Surprisingly, 50% of the buildings were over 50 years old and one third of the students were living in “sick buildings,” resulting in dramatically increased rates of asthma and other environmentally-related illnesses, based on school nurse data. Then Chris Christie got elected, and in 2010 he halted all construction. NJEA mobilized parents and the press to expose not only the dilapidated buildings, but also the differential funding in adjacent poor and rich communities. They created a side-by-side photographic essay that showed schools of similar age from adjacent communities in very different condition. They also wrote a handbook with pictures for the union members, parents and the press. Brian Williams of NBC did an in-depth report on NBC Evening News which showed toilets leaking from second floor bathrooms into first floor classrooms along with other shocking conditions. They changed the dialogue on the buildings and the legislature supported increased funding for buildings and for education in general. With the advent of a new head of the School Development Authority who was more open to dialogue, the community, union, districts and parents formed a coalition that is working on increasing funding for facilities.

A group who spoke about their experience during discussion was from Miami, where they developed a program to reach younger people and figure out how to get them into teaching and keep them there. They found through discussion with them, using one-on-ones and telling stories and bringing community groups into a coalition, that what they wanted from their union was a commitment to social justice. Given that we need more teachers who look like our students, this is critical information for us as we work on member engagement and increasing diversity in the teaching profession. CTA has incorporated Social Justice into our Strategic Plan and we need to take this aspect of our mission on the road to bring younger teachers into the profession.

## **Session 2: “Faculty Involvement in Community Efforts to Diversify the Teaching Profession”**

This session was led by members of the California Faculty Association Maria Elena Cruz and Theresa Montaño. It dealt with an NEA grant which funded a collaborative effort between College of the Canyons, a community college in Santa Clarita, and California State University, Northridge. Acknowledging that the majority of California’s higher education students are students of color, this union-led initiative attempts to create a cadre of 35 prospective teachers of diversity.

Theresa Montaño presented a theoretical background about teachers of color and the qualities of culturally responsive teachers:

1. They value personal relationships.
2. They listen to cultural stories.
3. They wait for students to respond.
4. They use interactive strategies.
5. They search students’ lives for insights.
6. They relate to students’ personal cultural knowledge.

She also talked about Andy Hargreaves’ work on various types of capital.

María Elena gave us information on “It Takes a Barrio,” the program created by the two institutions. Students in this union-led program participate in community partnerships, service learning and honest cross-cultural dialogue. They are given internships and benefit from mentors. The program leaders also reach out to entire families, students from a K-12 academy and their siblings, parents and teachers in many ways, such as holding a picnic with speeches on a Saturday. Their work with students is based on the CFA student internship program, SQE, and Student CTA. They learn union values and participate in events such as the Degrees not Debt press conference and LAUSD School Board meetings. In academics, students learn how to do classroom research and how to incorporate labor values into their teaching. Out of the 10 students who have graduated so far, 2 are student teachers, 1 is in a credential program at UCLA and 1 has been accepted into a Ph.D. program in Arizona.

### **Lunch speech: Kevin Kumashiro**

This former NEA employee, now a professor at the University of San Francisco, spoke about teaching and diversity. He wrote a book entitled *Bad Teachers*, in which he talked about the use of talking points about teachers by the education “deformers” (my term, since I don’t like the use of “reformers” for people who are against public education). His topic in this speech was “common sense.” By this he meant accepted views, such as those on African Americans which justified slavery and American apartheid in Jim Crow laws. He asked us to advocate for those who make us most uncomfortable and not to accept the common sense of today for which subsequent generations will blame us.

### **Session 3: “Positive School Disciplinary Alternatives: Creating the School-to-Career Pipeline”**

I attended this session because I was assured that it would deal with the second part of the title – the school-to-career pipeline. This was important to me because I have been involved with College and Career Readiness in CTA and with CTE in the work on Adult Education. I could see how focusing on career readiness as well as college would help those students who might have had disciplinary problems in high school. Unfortunately, the entire presentation concerned discipline. I had to ask about the school-to-career pipeline during the question period and the speakers tried to answer the question, but the title should have reflected the actual workshop content.

Despite my disappointment about careers, I still learned a lot about restorative justice. I was shocked to learn that in 2009-2010, there were over 400,000 out of school suspensions, 40% of which were for “willful defiance.” [The presenters referred to the “dropout epidemic,” which I am dubious about since I understand that, at least in California, the dropout rate has gone down drastically from a few years ago. If I am right, NEA needs to vet the facts presented at its sessions. ] There was also valuable information about the factors that have been shown to protect students:

- a feeling of belonging and safety
- a connection to caring adults
- high expectations

They also discussed the discipline system PBIS, which is widely prescribed in California. It is meant to counter “zero tolerance” systems resulting in suspension which just give students a vacation from school, disempower teachers and give these students no academic help. They summarized other successful techniques.

Speakers from United Teachers of Dade in Florida spoke about their community work on reaching out to students and parents. They received MCOP grants from NEA to work with two middle schools and instituted the following to motivate students: art therapy, guided college tours, life skills and mentoring. They established an “Achievers’ Program.” They relied on the community to do the work and get involved. They did site visits, participated in Boys and Men of Color, took students to see the entire Dodgers’ operation (every job), had professional people of color as guest speakers, met with parents and teachers, monitored students’ progress and asked students to think critically about their past and future. They emphasized to the students that more time of class meant more need for remediation.

#### **Film Night: “Inocente”**

This is an award-winning short documentary on a DACA student who is a talented artist. It dealt with her joy in her work and with her family and personal struggles. The artist spoke and answered questions after the film. I strongly recommend this film to CTA.

## **Tuesday Morning Plenary: Panel led by Kevin Kumashiro Bettina Love, Sumi Cho and Isabel Nuñez**

The discussion at lunch included some critical human rights issues, mostly having to do with race. It began with a reference to the civil rights thinker, Ella Baker, who believed that ordinary people understand things and can change their lives. Concerns were expressed about the various forms of domestic terrorism – the killing and incarceration of young Black and Latino men, the militarization of the police, and the privatization of the prisons (the prison industrial complex). The fact that now 51% of public school students qualify for free or reduced lunch is significant change in public schools. After *Brown v. Board of Education*, when public schools were seen as providing education for democracy, we saw “massive resistance” -- flight to private schools, magnet schools, vouchers, and anti-busing movements. Then came “A Nation at Risk,” which provided the model for the rhetoric of “failing schools.” [What is often forgotten is that there was a common denominator between “A Nation at Risk” and the California State Standards – Nobel prize-winning chemist Glenn Seaborg, who saw his work with Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education and the California State Standards Commission as his educational legacy. Margaret Spellings saw this work as “a call to arms.”]

The members of this panel advocated for resistance to various forms of institutional racism. Examples they used were the contrast in the media reports after Katrina about African Americans “looting” and European Americans “finding food.” The story about Rosa Parks is taught as “Rosa Parks got tired one day” instead of that Rosa Parks was a civil rights activist. They were particularly concerned that there are no models of resistance for new teachers. They wanted the audience to think about educating teachers that we should have a political system where no one is disposable. Teachers need to be open to being uncomfortable as issues of race are discussed in the classroom.

Finally, the speakers advocated for a political system of the 99% where everyone can be a leader – “strong people don’t need strong leaders.” This lines up with CTA’s Strategic Plan, where we look to the grassroots for leadership. Their views were summed up by the following:

- Collectivity is strength.
- Honor our elders
- Experience love and pleasure in our work.
- See joy and creativity in young people.

### **Lunch Speaker: Stacey Abrams, Georgia House Minority Leader**

Rep. Abrams gave teachers three imperatives:

“Speak Up, Stand Up, Show Up”

This really excellent speaker encouraged us to talk to people who don’t look like us and agree with us. We should educate legislators about what they have done wrong and demand more. And we need to show up in the capital and on election day. She

confronted the views from many that if you want an education, you should be able to pay for it and if you can't pay for it, then you probably don't need it. She discussed "Opportunity School Districts" in Georgia, which are meant to help students from low income backgrounds to have the privileges that many of us, including Rep. Abrams, got from our parents and communities.