

**AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY  
COVENANT WITH  
MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT #1**

Developed by:           The African American Mobilization for Education (AAME)

Submitted to:           Board of Education  
                              Minneapolis Public School District #1

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## **Preamble**

The African American Mobilization for Education (AAME) is proposing a covenant between the African American Community and the Board of Education of Minneapolis Public School District #1 (District). A covenant is an agreement between two equal parties, an agreement in which both parties pledge to commit to carrying their specific responsibilities to the other party and to define mutual responsibilities – all in the purpose of improving the educational outcomes for African American students. This Covenant represents a mutual commitment to improving the education of African American children and sets down responsibilities of both parties in bringing this about. This Covenant posits a shared sense of responsibility.

While the District has the statutory responsibility for public education, the African American community demands a significant role in the definition of education, its goals, its methods and processes, and its evaluation. The African American community has critical expertise on its children. We know the strengths, weaknesses, culture and history of our children and our people. We are the experts on our community, and we are experts in what our children need. MPS is continually asking for parental involvement and community engagement, but it does not really want it or does not know how to achieve it. As a result, as a community, we generally feel left out or shut out from important educational decisions. We must have a voice in our children's education.

This Covenant is an invitation for collaboration and cooperation. Education of African American children is not the sole responsibility of the District, and the District needs the cooperation and assistance of the African American community to improve.

Both AAME and the District will sign the Covenant. Signing the Covenant is an important step in asserting this new collaborative relationship, but merely a first step. For this Covenant to work, the signing must be followed by serious discussions and collaborations between the District and AAME to specify the details of implementation. The successful implementation of this Covenant depends upon the willingness of both parties to work together to live up to these responsibilities and to work out other solutions to specific issues. Both parties agree to meet regularly over the next three months to work out the specifics of a targeted strategy for successful educational outcomes for African American children. Most importantly, both parties to the Covenant must hold each other and themselves accountable for carrying out the Covenant.

## The Situation

Poor Educational Outcomes for African American Students: Education is the key to the healthy continuation and growth of any society. Historically, education was of utmost value in the African American community. African Americans have long fought to have their children receive education guaranteed by most state constitutions. Yet, the struggle persists with only limited success. In school districts around the country, and especially in metropolitan school districts, African American students continue to fail at rates higher than any other group. And, African American parents feel, for the most part, outside the governing and operations of the schools their children attend. The current system does the greatest amount of harm to African American students - and African American males in particular.

The situation is no different in Minneapolis School District #1, as the following statistics indicate:

- Sixty-nine percent of African American students failed to reach the 2006-07 Reading MCA II;
- Seventy-eight percent of African American students failed to reach the 2006-07 Math MCA II.
- Seventy-three percent of students suspended were African American students (African Americans comprise 39.6 % of the district's student population);
- Fifty-two percent of students in Special Education were African American;
- Minnesota had the second-largest gap between black and white scores for 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and the fourth-largest gap for reading (2003 NAEP);

The type and extent of educational failure among African American children that we witness today is unacceptable. The Minneapolis Public School District has been unable to meet its own mission for children, *“to ensure that all students learn. We support their growth into knowledgeable, skilled and confident citizens capable of succeeding in their work, personal and family lives into the 21st century.* We could go on with statistics describing the racial achievement gap, higher dropout rates, disproportionate suspension rates, poor attendance rates, etc. It is rather clear that our students are doing poorly in the Minneapolis Public Schools. We declare that it is a faulty leap of logic to thus conclude that, therefore, there must be something “wrong” with African American students and families. In order to reverse these inadequate educational outcomes, we know that all parties – School Board; District administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders, and students – have to change and change drastically.

MPS Neglect of the African American Community: It is not merely that our students are doing poorly in Minneapolis Public Schools. In addition, the Minneapolis Public School Board and the District administration has exhibited a pattern of neglect and disrespect toward the African American community and African American parents, as indicated by:

- Giving only token attention to voices from the African American community around the 2007 closing of four schools in North Minneapolis. At a community meeting held by the Board on April 10, 2007, more than 400 community members were in attendance. An overwhelming majority of attendees did not want the schools to close. Yet only two days later, the MPS board decided to close these schools. Key representatives of the African American community asked the board and the district to negotiate and consider revising their decision so two North side schools could remain open or to move two of the schools intact. This would have ensured that the successes that African American children were having at Lincoln and Jordan Park could be continued at the new schools to which children were sent. The school board ignored the community's request. The real issue is that the community was not really a part of the solution and the holding of the community meetings were just a ruse.
- MN Rule 3500.0550 requires that each school district establish an Inclusive Educational Program – adopting a written plan that employs a curriculum that is developed and delivered so that students and staff gain an understanding and appreciation of: (a) The cultural diversity of the United States. Special emphasis must be placed on American Indians/Alaskan natives, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, Black Americans, and Hispanic Americans. Black children are treated as a racial group with little regard for its distinct cultures or its importance. Dr. John Ogbu states that 'cultural discontinuity' (when a groups culture is not taken into consideration or included in the school, the values, beliefs, view of the world etc stops at the school door) is harmful to the group in school. Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds us that African Americans are usually thought of as a racial group, while denying their cultural roots - "One reason is the stubborn refusal in American education to recognize African Americans as a distinct cultural group. While it is recognized that African Americans make up a distinct *racial* group, the acknowledgement that this racial group has a distinct *culture* is still not recognized." (Dream keepers, 1997). In the summer of 2007, representatives of the African American community requested 10% of the MPS 2007-08 budget go to culturally specific programming for African American children. The School Board voted on the 2007-08 budgets without discussion on the possibility of including additional resources for culturally specific programming.

- In 2007-2008, MPS launched the North Side Initiative, again a plan devised mostly by District professionals who appeared more alarmed by the continued departure of students from North Side schools than they were by the poor educational outcomes for African American students and who developed this Initiative with very little input from the African American community or parents;
- In 2007, MPS released a Strategic Plan that did not include culture as an educational component nor did it address school disciplinary practices. More importantly, the African American community was not included in the strategic planning process until after the Strategic Plan was completed.

Overly Narrow Conception of Education: We also feel compelled to comment on the way in which overly narrow conceptions of “education” have a disproportionately negative impact on African American students. Partly because of No Child Left Behind, partly because of an increasingly “corporate” view of schooling, and partly because of professional educators’ emphasis on individual assessments, schooling has gotten narrower and narrower in its approach to teaching and learning. While this narrowing process has negative consequences for many students, we know that African American students are disproportionately hurt by the heavy emphasis on standardized curricula, Eurocentric assumptions, and high stakes testing that characterizes public school education today.

Lost in this factory-like approach to education is any consideration of varieties of learning styles, cultural differences, culturally specific approaches, holistic development of children and youth, and the importance of critical thinking. All children suffer from this narrow approach to schooling, but African American children, as the most vulnerable, suffer most – like the canary in the coal mine. There are a host of educational approaches – a shift from answer-driven pedagogy to inquiry-based pedagogy; collegial and collaborative teaching approaches; collaboration between schools and community; emphasis on dialogue and reflection rather than memorization and recall – that could create schools as learning organizations. And, we have reason to believe that African American students would benefit even more by these changes. A continued emphasis on achievement as measured by standardized tests and the resulting achievement gaps will lock schooling into the old paradigm. It is time to remember Einstein’s warning – it is a sign of insanity to do the same things over and over again and expect different outcomes.

The last two years dialogue in the African American Mobilization for Education has demonstrated that our community has many parents, teachers, and community leaders with extensive knowledge about our children and their strengths. However, we are seldom listened to, except to react to proposals developed from above. Our community has many individuals with long histories in education who understand our children and families and know what happens inside public schools. They have provided AAME with critical input and direction, as well as many new and innovative ideas for more effective educational approaches. It is now time for these wise persons to share their cultural wisdom with the public school system.

In the past, we have witnessed many efforts to change this situation. Too many of these efforts were token or ritualistic; too many relied on outside consultants to parachute into MPS with solutions that were poorly implemented or completely ignored; and too many failed to include the community in their design and/or implementation. African American Mobilization of Education, acting as part of the African American community, now demands that we get serious about change. A first and important step in real change is for MPS to listen to the African American community and to enter into partnership with our community in crafting authentic change.

### **African American Mobilization for Education**

The African American Mobilization for Education will represent the African American community in developing the Covenant, will partner with the Minneapolis School District #1 in negotiating the specific operating details of the Covenant, will monitor the implementation of the Covenant, and report on progress to the African American community. The African American Mobilization for Education began in 2006 with an initial grant from The Minneapolis Foundation. Its mission is: “to create policy from within the community to increase the academic success of African American students.” AAME has four basic goals:

- To establish an effective voice in educational policymaking that comes from the African American community and reflects issues important to it;
- To develop specific policy recommendations for changes in Minneapolis Public Schools policies and practices around suspensions of African American students;
- To mobilize community organizations and constituencies to work for the implementation of the recommended changes.

AAME believes that educational success for African American students is the responsibility of **both** the public school system and the African American community. Recognizing this, AAME has two overarching strategies to create meaningful educational change for African American students:

- To hold the system accountable: Parents, community leaders, and community groups will step forward and be a voice for the children and demand more from the public schools.
- Take responsibility for our own: Parents and community will take responsibility and ownership of the education of our children.

The ultimate goal is to rekindle the fire for education in the African American community. In the past and especially when African Americans were excluded from the education system, African American parents and children had a “fire for education.” Over time, the public school system has convinced the public that education is a professional issue best left to professionals. Rather than turning over our schools to professionals, it is time for parents and community representatives to reclaim their

schools. Hence, the choice of “re-igniting the fire” as the ultimate goal of the African American Mobilization for Education.

AAME has been coordinated by WE WIN Institute and the YWCA of Minneapolis. However, the real work of AAME is done by community members from the African American community who have been meeting for the past 2+ years and developing a knowledge base on educational issues that can be foundational for creating change in Minneapolis Public School District #1.

### **The Covenant**

The African American Mobilization for Education calls for a Covenant with the Minneapolis School Board.

If African American children are going to succeed academically, the African American community and the school district must work in a real partnership and re-evaluate how Black children are being taught. We must all be accountable for the success of African American children in education. We request that the Minneapolis Public Schools enter into a binding covenant with the African American community to bring about the systemic change which will ensure that African American and all children will be able to reach their fullest academic potential.

We propose to enter into this covenant as a means to take leadership in assisting MPS District #1 with the correction of the lack of quality education for African American students. We enter into this covenant with Minneapolis Public School District #1 because **together** both parties can be accountable, and both parties can be responsible for creating positive change and ensuring that the Minneapolis Public School District #1 provides quality education to all Black students. We enter into this covenant as a way of showing the high level of commitment that we together - the African American community and the Minneapolis Public School District #1 - have to shift the paradigm to one that educates African American students rather than one that under-educates or pushes them out.

If implemented seriously and effectively, we believe that the Covenant can positively contribute to the achievement of the following educational goals for African American children in MPS District #1:

- To teach African American students to think, problem- solve, calculate, write effectively, and be literate, as well as to care about others and to be productive citizens.
- To teach African American students about their culture and its contributions and about the cultures and contributions of Asians, Native Americans, and Latino students - the same as they learn about the various European ancestry cultures.
- To change the culture of the schools and classrooms from the current hierarchical arrangement where teachers talk to students (who supposedly listen) to a more horizontal arrangement that is collaborative and cooperative - where students are

- encouraged to talk to each other as well as with their teacher, where the emphasis is as much on getting the right question as getting the right answer, and where students help each other rather than compete for false prizes;
- To substantially reduce the achievement gaps between African American students and White students in reading and math, as measured by the accepted MPS standardized tests;
- To increase the number and percentage of African American students taking college preparatory tests (ACT and SAT), which includes a larger representation of African American students in the college preparatory classes, and to substantially increase scores of African American test takers;
- To reduce the over-representation of African American students in negative behaviors, as indicated by absences, suspensions, and truancies.
- To reduce the over-representation of African American students in Special Education classes.

The Covenant does not provide an exact road map to these goals, but it will establish a process whereby the achievement of these goals results from ongoing dialogue about goals and practices. As such, the Covenant facilitates the change from a top-down system to a collaborative arrangement where the school system and the community engage in dialogue, mutually set directions and policies, and create accountabilities to hold themselves and each other accountable.

What are the roles and accountabilities of AAME? The African American Mobilization for Education will:

- Inform the African American community about the Covenant and keep the African American community informed of progress in implementing the goals of the Covenant;
- Work with MPS in the creation of a 5-10 year strategic plan for improving the education of African American children;
- Partner with MPS to negotiate creative cultural programming, such as rights of passage and other culturally specific programming for African American students;
- Provide the district with multi-cultural resources, including serving as a clearing-house for professional contractors to work with teachers/staff/students in the schools around issues specific to the African American community;
- Create a Covenant Monitoring committee, composed of community representatives and chosen by the community signers, to monitor progress.

What are the roles and accountabilities of MPS: The Board of Education and/or District Administration will:

- Provide funding, and partner with AAME to develop a deliberate plan to improve the education of African American students and take primary responsibility for implementing its recommendations;
- Work with AAME to explore a variety of pedagogical approaches that reflect the variety of individual and culturally-based learning styles, to develop culturally-appropriate curricula, and to develop professional development for staff that emphasizes cultural responsiveness and cultural competence;
- Establish outcomes, assessment criteria, and timeline for outcome accomplishments;
- Produce annual written reports of progress, discuss with the Monitoring Committee, and distribute them to the community and the Board of Education.

Mutual Responsibilities: The African American Mobilization for Education and the Minneapolis Public School District #1 agree on the following mutual responsibilities:

- To enter into this Covenant in a spirit of optimism and hope that, together, AAME and MPS can overcome the usual obstacles and form an authentic partnership to achieve the shared improvement of qualitative educational experiences and outcomes for African American students in the Minneapolis Public Schools;
- To recognize that both parties have complementary expertise when it comes to the education of African American children;
- To acknowledge that signing the Covenant is merely the first step; what needs to follow are a series of conversations on the education of African American students and a hammering out of the details of a viable Deliberate Plan;
- To schedule and attend at least six meetings during the Summer of 2008 to work out the details of the Deliberate Plan and the implementation of the Covenant;
- To review this working relationship and Covenant annually. This Covenant may be amended at any time by mutual written agreement of the parties.

AGREED TO BY:

**Minneapolis Public School District #1**

\_\_\_\_\_ (Chair, Board of Education)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**The African American Mobilization for Education**

**Minneapolis Urban League**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Minneapolis, YWCA**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**African American Mobilization for Education** and the **Minneapolis Urban League** are the representatives of the African American community and will be the signers for the Black community. The **Minneapolis YWCA** will sign for the multi-cultural supporters of the Covenant. A detailed list is available upon request.