

## KEYNOTE SPEECH

### *London Schools and the Black Child Conference (VI) February 2009*

*Rosemary Campbell-Stephens*



Rosemary Campbell-Stephens is a consultant trainer for leadership, race equality and succession planning with over 25 years experience, nationally and internationally, in the field of education. In her role as consultant to the University

of London, Institute of Education, she developed and leads a groundbreaking leadership programme for aspiring Black and global majority senior managers in London secondary schools. The Investing in Diversity (IiD) Leadership Programme, which is accredited by the University of London, has registered over 1000 teachers since its inception.

Rosemary has been a consultant to the DfES (now DCSF) as part of the team that developed and delivered the Aiming High strategy. Rosemary is currently one of two consultants leading on the diversity strand of the National College for School Leadership's succession planning strategy. She has combined public speaking and community activism with supporting local authorities, schools, colleges and universities in developing their leadership capacity to meet their responsibilities under the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000). Within the broad field of race equality, social justice and leadership, her particular strengths and interests

lie in not only diversifying the face of educational leadership, but enabling a new cadre of leaders to lead radically differently. Rosemary's expertise is based on her experience, as a teacher, former secondary head teacher, OFSTED inspector and local authority adviser.

#### **Summary**

**London Schools and the Black Child: Conference VI** was held at the Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre, Westminster, London on Saturday 7th February 2009. Its theme was 'Educational Opportunity For All – Without Exclusion'. Rosemary joins President Barack Hussein Obama in urging parents, educators and campaigners to move forward with a 'yes, we can' attitude, but argues very forcefully that there is a need first to look back to gather the best of what the past has to teach. She says: 'Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can and must be reclaimed, revised, preserved and perpetuated.'

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Greetings. It is an honour to be invited back to address the sixth London Schools and the Black Child Conference and respect is due to Diane Abbott MP for organising these conferences annually.

This conference, unique and important as it is in bringing together educators with the parents, students and communities that it is our privilege to serve, has taken on an even more symbolic role, in that it chronicles the journey of the Black child through the British schooling system, at this juncture of the 21st century. The conference, not unlike the mythical Afrikan bird Sankofa must therefore at one and the same time look back as well as look forward.

Look back, so that we can gather the best of what our past has to teach us, thereby enabling us to achieve our full potential and take our rightful place in this society, as we move forward.

Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can and must be reclaimed, revised, preserved and perpetuated.

President Barack Hussein Obama's historic victory, reminded us of many things, among them the importance of honouring legacy, recognizing that the space that he now occupies has been hard won by those who have gone on before and reminding us, as he looks back and forward, about the continued importance of grassroots organising, struggle and resistance.

If this conference is to be more than the ritual annual gathering of the faithful, it too must remind us of the following, as it looks back and forward:

- Efforts to diversify the school workforce and its leadership are to be welcomed, but beg several questions, among them leadership for what purpose and in whose interests? If we as educators cannot say 'yes, we can make a difference' and mean it, then who will? I lead the Investing in Diversity Programme at the University of London, Institute of Education. It is a programme designed to develop a new cadre of Black and global majority leaders for London schools. But I am not interested in seeing more Black leaders in London schools who do not have the capacity, efficacy or moral purpose to make a difference to our communities.
- The conference must remind us that, in the spirit of unity with an agenda for change, teachers organised with parents

and students in this country to spearhead the anti-racist movement in education, with black teachers leading the charge. The time has come for us to take the lead again, on issues of equity and justice within the schooling system.

- The conference must remind us that (now archived) research points to teacher expectation and teacher/pupil relationships as among the key determiners of student achievement. So why are so many of the interventions, forensic or otherwise, purporting to be about raising levels of attainment, focused on the students and prefaced on deficit models of them and their families and not on the teachers and the dismantling of destructive and inequitable school processes?
- The conference reminds us, that there is a direct correlation between inequity in attainment, exclusion from school, 'graduation' to the gang, a heavy jail sentence or an early grave. It is a tragedy of epic proportions. Looking back we saw it coming. A system that defined the majority of secondary aged African Caribbean boys as educationally subnormal in the 1960s and 1970s is now bearing its bitter and ugly fruit. Given that context, continued exclusions on the scale that government figures describe, amounts to nothing short of ethnic cleansing within a morally bankrupt education system. We have to look back in order to look forward.
- If this conference is to be more than the annual gathering of the faithful, it will remind our communities of our responsibility to raise and educate our children and grandchildren in these serious times.
- It will remind us of the crucial role that our supplementary schools have played in this country in this purpose. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of we can and must reclaim, revive, preserve and perpetuate.

**Let no parent**, who is serious about their child being educated free from the threat of exclusion leave this conference today without finding an organisation to which they can contribute and from which they can seek support when needed. The Community Education Network, led by elders such as Gerry German and Gus John have worked tirelessly, often without recognition or due respect, in the interests of our community for decades.

**Let no educator**, who is serious about their role in taking back the agenda of truly educating the Black child leave here today without passing by the London Centre for Leadership in Learning Institute of Education stand and joining the London Black Teacher Network. Be part of the legacy of Black educators who have organised and caused changes in policy on issues to do with our children, in the interests of all children.

**Reach Role Models**,\* I beg you, take back the agenda, with integrity and humility. Look back and understand the set of circumstances that have led to you being chosen, while other attempts to change the direction of travel have not. With respect, look forward, and do not allow a simplistic, almost derisory response to such a critical situation as the one facing our youth, their parents and our communities, to be reduced to the simplest common denominator. We know and trust that being of us, you are all brighter and better than this.

**To the young people**, on behalf of this conference and the adults in this hall, we promise that what we have lost, forgotten or have had stripped from us we can and must reclaim, revive, preserve and perpetuate, for you, our future.

I join President Barack Hussein Obama in indeed saying, '**yes, we can**' but only if we are prepared to look back, before moving forward.

In peace and hope.

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\* Visit <http://campaigns.direct.gov.uk/reach/>