

Public Education at Stake: The Battle for Crenshaw High in South Los Angeles

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Student activist Anita Parker speaks on behalf of the Crenshaw Cougar Coalition at a press conference protesting the school district's reconstitution plan, Jan. 28, 2013.

Photo: Karla Alegria

Crenshaw, an overwhelmingly Black and Latino high school in South Los Angeles, is on the front line in the national battle to preserve public education. The school was born out of the 1960s Civil Rights movement, when the community fought to get a public school in the neighborhood. Crenshaw is home to some of L.A.'s top academic awardees and athletes, as well as the first student-created cell phone app. Yet the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) calls the school a failure and is trying to destroy its community-based nature.

The District's divide-and-conquer tactics have separated many teachers and staff from the African American and Latina women who have defended Crenshaw for years. Principled collaboration between union workers and the community is desperately needed to save this vital community resource.

Killing a school to save it. Crenshaw has been starved of resources for years and rocked by constant upheaval — 33 administrator changes in seven years. Naturally, this neglect has caused graduation rates and test scores to drop. Despite this, the school began to claw its way back up, largely through collaboration between an innovative principal, teachers and the Crenshaw Cougar Coalition (CCC). The CCC is a grassroots group led mostly by women of color parents, and includes some staff, teachers and community organizations. Among the innovations were the Extended Learning Cultural Model and Social Justice Academy programs, which engaged students through culturally relevant, community-based education. Crenshaw won the 2012 Hoodie Award for Best High School, a national competition among

urban schools.

Suddenly last October, LAUSD Superintendent John Deasy announced plans to “reconstitute” the school into three arbitrarily selected magnet programs. Under reconstitution, existing staff and teachers are forced to reapply for their jobs, and many are displaced.

In December, the district held a meeting on the reconstitution. An outraged crowd of parents condemned the plan because it would further destabilize the school, remove popular teachers and eliminate successful programs like the popular gifted magnet. Students warned that the reconstitution process has not bettered academic achievement at other schools and has worsened conditions. Parents got no answers about the fate of special education and English language learner students.

Parents launch a fight. The CCC had stopped district assaults on the school before, like the threatened loss of accreditation and attempted forced transfer of a popular teacher. The newly revived coalition invited RW, FSP, and other groups to join, and met over the winter break and weekly during the school year to strategize.

Their demands included: resources for the Extended Learning Cultural Model; not forcing staff and teachers to reapply for their jobs; providing money for social services, college counseling, positive behavior support, and parent engagement; and ensuring access, retention, and equity at the new magnets for current and future students.

They raised the demands at press conferences, picket lines outside LAUSD headquarters and the district’s January board meeting. But despite compelling testimony against the plan from members of Crenshaw’s first graduating class of ’69, students, parents, teachers and groups like Radical Women and the Community Rights Campaign, the Board voted to reconstitute the school.

Fostering divisions. CCC-led protests had the potential to unite teachers, staff and parents. So the district worked to blunt their impact by announcing “Coffee with the Principal” meetings, promoted as opportunities to collaborate with the newly renamed “transformation.” LAUSD invited participation in teacher selection interview panels. This drew people into their game plan without power to change the outcome.

To make matters worse, the teachers union, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), scheduled and then cancelled a protest over the reconstitution. Intimidated teachers stopped attending CCC meetings. The district tossed out a Service Employees International Union (SEIU) representative called by staff who were being told they had to reapply for their jobs. The cops were called on a parent who tried to attend the same meeting.

The district had orchestrated a split between the teachers and parents and left the community divided among themselves. Public protest disappeared, replaced by indoor meetings where community concerns were sidelined. Some CCC members insisted the interview panels were mere window dressing, some grudgingly remained on them.

The Coalition was fragmented into three camps. Radicals and some parents wanted to fight publicly. Other parents, fearful of reprisals against their children, opted to “give the process a chance.” Some influential Black leaders advocated participating in the panels because this fight was “about the students, not teachers.” But the two are closely interconnected!

This truth was proved in April, when the district announced the results of the panels. Almost half the teachers were displaced. *Of 33 teachers rejected, 27 were teachers of color, 21 of them African American.* They averaged over 12 years of experience at the school. The Special Education Department, Extended Learning Cultural Model and Social Justice Academy were dismantled. LAUSD disregarded demands to re-open the library, hire a nurse, lower class sizes and provide therapists and more counselors.

Several CCC members and displaced teachers expressed outrage at the following “Coffee with the Principal.” Parent leader Angie Parker declared, “LAUSD is committing educational homicide.” But the coalition was split over whether to protest further.

Now what? Crenshaw’s situation is precarious. To get the fight back on track and boost morale, the Cougar Coalition needs to resume its demands and public protests and reunite with students and staff. It needs to take on destructive high-stakes testing used as an excuse to starve schools of resources, and demand taxing the rich and corporations to fully fund quality multi-cultural public education.

UTLA and SEIU members need to pressure their unions to *defend* their members and the school. If the coalition reclaims its proud history, it can still win positive changes. Nothing else can.

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