

Working together to bring back inner cities

A new breed of urban mayors appears to be bringing a new attitude and approach to revitalizing ailing inner cities and making the African-American community a bigger player in that process.

They're building upon the foundations laid to help minorities to gain educational, economic and political power — via affirmative action, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights act — and pushing the envelope with innovative ideas and assertiveness.

The National Urban League's 2006 conference last month featured a panel discussion regarding revitalization of the nation's inner cities. The session featured Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa, Baton Rouge Mayor Melvin "Kip" Holden and Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, three mayors from very different cities in very different regions of the country. Regardless, they've all got one mission in mind — to resurrect our ailing inner cities.

"We vote. We pay taxes. We are part of the economy — of the economic, political and social fabric of the cities. As such, we expect to be a part of the building and rebuilding process from beginning to end — from the planning boards to completion," said moderator John W. Mack, former president and CEO of the Los Angeles Urban League and current president of the Los Angeles Police Commission.

Essential to the urban renewal process must be a commitment to collaboration or as Villaraigosa phrased it — polling our strengths and not dividing our power.

"I'm here to say that we need to get together. I'm here to say we need to stay together. We need to lead together. We need to engage the fight on behalf of all disadvantaged families struggling in America today," said Villaraigosa, who rode a wave of multicultural support — a broad coalition of blacks, Latinos, Asians and whites — to become the city's first Latino mayor in 133 years.

"Some people would say I smuck into UCLA through the back door. But one thing's for sure: I got out through the front door. And I'm here today because the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act opened up our country. I'm here today because there was a labor movement to protect and sustain my community. I'm here because I had access to a good public education," he said.

Getting a strong public education these days is a serious challenge for inner-city minorities in Los Angeles, where nearly 60 percent of African-Americans drop out of school. That is why reforming the Los Angeles Unified School District is his administration's top priority.

"There may not be a governor blocking the schoolhouse door. We may not see the ranks of the National Guard lining the streets in riot gear. But the barriers to opportunity today are every bit as insidious as they were in Birmingham or Montgomery or Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., in 1957," he said. "We can't widen the circle or increase minority participation in the economic life of our cities or deliver the promise of opportunity, if we don't stand up and address the failure of our public schools in cities across the country."

This new breed of urban mayor is also trying to increase minority participation in economic development by lending more transparency to the city contracting process.

For years, the city of Baton Rouge, La., relied on the good-ole-boy network to get things done. That was until 2005, when Mayor Melvin "Kip" Holden took office. Holden immediately assessed the city's contracting practices and found minority representation to be seriously lacking.

Holden made fixes to the way contracts are granted, requiring many more to be approved by city council than in the past. The state's Association of General Contractors, which had been long opposed to efforts to send more business to minority firms, finally conceded. They realized that by not opening up the process to more minority firms in the area that would mean losing business to companies outside the region.

It makes sense that African Americans should play a major role in taking back our inner cities. We must, as St. Louis businessman Michael V. Roberts said, get out of the suburbs and mine economic opportunities under our own nose. We must make our neighborhoods symbols of pride and commerce not despair and poverty.

We must give our inner city youth hope that there's more out there for them than rapping and selling drugs. When they see successful black businesses in their neighborhoods, they feel compelled to aspire to greater things.

And we cannot depend on government and business alone to help take back our cities — we must trust each other and refrain from self-sabotage. Or as Holden described it — "the crawfish syndrome — where if they see you moving up to the top, they'll pull you back down in the bucket."

MARC H. MORIAL is president and CEO of the National Urban League.



MARC MORIAL

Stupid black men (and women, too)

Yeah, I knew that headline would get your attention. We all chuckled when Michael Moore wrote his book titled, "Stupid White Men." It was cute, made some people think, and he made a ton of money from it. I wonder how many of those stupid white men have changed anything in their lives when it comes to politics, education, injustice, or their economic status.

Was Moore really serious about them being stupid, or was it all said tongue-in-cheek? I don't know what his motivation was, whether it was sincere or whimsical, what I do know is that he made money and he received tremendous publicity for his rant.

Now, let's talk about stupid black men and the rising number of stupid black women, too, and see if we can generate some money from a change in our actions. The stupid ones I am talking about are those brothers and sisters who expose themselves to the criminal "injustice" system, the ones who are out there committing crimes only to end up at the "mercy" of a system that hates them; those who think they are slick and will never get caught, and those who literally have no understanding of this prison industrial complex and the economic role they play as prisoners or even as accused.

There is one word that I think describes a black person who knowingly puts himself in criminal jeopardy. There is one word for a black person who complains about how he or she is treated by "the man" and then commits acts that will ultimately subject him or her to the prejudices of "the man." There is one word that aptly describes the black person who would volunteer to be a slave in jail, creating wealth for a slave master, while sentencing himself to a life of poverty. There is one word for the black person who associates with folks who are doing things that may lead to contact with police officers, many of who are just itching to do bodily harm to a black person. One word. Stupid.

I understand that every black man or woman in jail should not be there. Some of them did nothing to deserve being incarcerated and should be set free. I still lament William Mayo's situation, as he literally rots away in a Georgia prison for a crime he did not commit. I went to one of his hearings down in Georgia and watched that white racist judge dismiss the whole situation like it was an annoyance rather than a criminal justice proceeding. I understand, as I watch brothers like Michael Austin in Baltimore, walk out of prison after serving decades for crimes they did not commit.

I definitely understand, and I am not talking about those who get profiled and wrongly accused simply because they are black. Stupid are the ones who actually commit the crimes, thus, volunteering to be fodder for a corrupt, greedy, and hateful system that has profit as its only motive. Why would anyone volunteer for that? Are material items that important to risk our lives for them? The answer is an obvious and resounding "yes."

If you know the history of this country you probably know why we commit some of the crimes we see so often, even the murder of our own brothers and sisters. If you know history, you know, as Amos Wilson says, that much of the violence we see today is "The psychodynamics of black self-annihilation in service of white domination." But many of our young people don't know history; they don't know who they are, they don't know about the legality of slavery in the prison system, and they don't know about the economic role they play in that system. I still say it's stupid to voluntarily do anything that you know will result in being locked down for years under a hateful slave master.

It's time we stop citing the numbers of black men and women in jail. It's time we start educating ourselves about this latest way to eliminate black people, or at least to use us economically. It's time we start to change our thinking and really get serious about the problem we face — not just the symptoms. It's time we stop being stuck on stupid. Why rail against the issue if you are unwilling to address it with action?

So here's the deal. Let's stop being stupid. No, I don't want to hear the excuses on why you "have to do whatever it takes" to get your. No more excuses about being poor and deprived. No more excuses about "the man" not giving you a break (What kind of a break do you think you are going to get when you get out of jail?) No more self-hating, self-deprecating responses to your unfortunate situation in life. This stupidity of filling up the jails and maintaining an economic windfall for white folks is, as Mike Tyson would say, "tudicrous." Yeah, Mike was stupid, too.

Aren't you sick and tired of knowing that in addition to black folks being the number one consumers of goods made by everyone else in this world, we are also volunteering in many cases to do even more to enrich other folks? I implore you, don't be stupid. Stay out of the line of fire, stay out of harm's way. It's easy enough to get picked up for not having committed a crime. Why volunteer for it? The only thing black folks have coming from this criminal injustice system is time.

Don't do anything that will cause you to be imprisoned. Get involved in the Boycott Prisons and Jails Campaign. Contact me, and I'll tell you how to do it.

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JAMES CLINGMAN

CMS budget shortchanges poorer schools

MECKLENBURG ACTS

Tuesday night, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education considered a major shift in the way teachers are allocated when school opens Aug. 25.

The figures in an April memo to the Board of Education show a proposed weighted funding formula that shifts teachers from high-poverty schools to schools with lower poverty. That means that class sizes will grow in a significant number of high-poverty schools. Principals and teachers at these schools already feel the impact.

Such a shift appears to fly in the face of CMS's documented need to improve academic achievement at high-poverty schools, since smaller class size is considered a key tool for raising the achievement levels of poor students (those receiving free/reduced price lunch).

Smaller class size is a major factor in attracting high quality teachers to struggling schools. Students in smaller classes are also more focused and better able to master subject matter.

Research also makes clear that a high concentration of poor students profoundly affects the ability of a school to properly educate poor children and deal with their special needs. A school with 80 percent poor students typically has a substantially different educational environment than one with only 20 percent poor students — an environment which increases the challenges those students and their teachers face. Small classes are especially important in these high poverty schools.

Even schools approaching the 50 percent poverty level need extra help.

Many professional educators say schools with a 40 percent poverty level perform better when class size is significantly reduced. Spending more on those schools would substantially improve achievement and prevent them from slipping to the more troublesome 50 percent-and-above poverty levels.

CMS several years ago instituted a policy that significantly lowered class sizes in elementary schools with at least 60 percent poverty levels and middle schools with at least 50 percent poverty levels.

Most would say these smaller classes contributed heavily to the student achievement gains the system has attained in recent years.

In contrast, under the new staffing plan schools get an identical funding boost for each poor child, with no consideration of a school's overall poverty percentage. Staffing is calculated by "weighting" each poor child at 1.3 times the "weight" given to a paid lunch child.

Employing a weighted student funding formula was recommended by the recent Citizens' Task Force on Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The new modified weighted funding formula was recommended in April's school budget proposal and appears to be part of the final spending plan the school board is slated to adopt Tuesday.

The new plan has the advantage of giving extra teaching positions to more schools with poor students. However, Mecklenburg ACTS is concerned that these extra positions appear to be coming primarily from schools with higher concentrations of poor children. The winners are typically schools that are already performing well, while struggling schools are losing teaching positions.

This is unconscionable at a time when significantly smaller class sizes in high poverty schools are needed to help close the racial and economic achievement gaps plaguing our community.

While adding additional teachers at schools with smaller numbers of poor students is perhaps a wise policy, doing so at the expense of schools with high concentrations of poor students is not.

Mecklenburg ACTS supports keeping extra teachers in schools with higher concentrations of poor students to maintain the small class sizes they so desperately need.

Mecklenburg ACTS is a grassroots organization of citizens concerned about the academic success and equitable treatment of all students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Visit their website at www.mecklenburgacts.org.

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