

October 2017

Cooper, Anna J. to Wilkinson, Mr.

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Recommended Citation

"Cooper, Anna J. to Wilkinson, Mr." (2017). *Correspondence*. 101.
http://dh.howard.edu/ajc_corres/101

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201 T Street, N. W.
Washington, D. C.
May 24, 1928

Dear Mr. Wilkinson:

Once again I shall try (without offense I hope) to write you as a man rather than as an official.

The year 1927-1928 will mark my fortieth as a teacher in the High School of the District of Columbia, barring an interim of four years as college professor at Lincoln University. One year later (1928-9) I shall be retired automatically from the system by the age limit rule. I have therefore only about three years more of public school service before me, even if I am not excluded before that time by some unforeseen disability. My ratings by officials immediately concerned have been uniformly "excellent" and "excellent superior". There has never been, to my knowledge, any question of my efficiency as a teacher or of my spirit of willing cooperation in all the deepest concerns of our school population. Much of my aims, ideals and principles of action is personally well known to you and many of my achievements have been consciously aided, inspired and abetted by you. I believe I have had many evidences of the sincere esteem and appreciation with which my service is regarded by the humble laity whom I serve, and yet it must be admitted that official recognition still seems tardily and grudgingly accorded and pecuniary emoluments, so eagerly sought by most persons, is stubbornly withheld while every opportunity is seized in some quarters to excuse this material injury by detraction and misrepresentation.

Now I should utter no word of complaint for all this were it not my firm conviction that nothing vitiates the morale of any educational system more completely than a sense of unfairness in the distribution of rewards. Once let the conviction take root that merit does not count, that service, however long and faithful and efficient can be outstripped any day by sheer pull or flimflam, and no administration would be secure. The strength of the head rests on those loyal hearts that respond to a sense of justice and fairplay and on that support that goes out spontaneously always to unselfish devotion.

It may be that you can without jeopardising your own interests prevent the perpetuation of those studied attempts at persecution and humiliation which have been so patent in my case. I do not ask you to say or do one thing to embarrass yourself. But as it seems to me now and as it has seemed all along to a few very thoughtful friends of mine, it could only strengthen your hold on the community and give real significance to your position in the eyes of the country, if you would take a firm stand for justice and fair play in the bestowal of those favors that involve the taxpayers' burdens. You, if any one, can say that neither N. E. Weatherless nor Marion P. Shadd can convince one who has ever been a student under Anna J. Cooper that she does not know her subject. Surely the testimony of Oberlin and Columbia and La Sorbonne should not be allowed to be discredited by any factitious "board of Examiners" in the Washington Public Schools.

A report from Mr. Hine dated May 11, 1926 in re my appeal before the Committee on Complaints contains this paragraph: The Committee is impressed with Mrs. Cooper's attainments as a scholar and student and takes pride in the recognition which her work has lately received. But a "passing mark" on the written examination is required for promotion and as Mrs. Cooper at the hearing held before the Complaints and Appeals Committee did not claim that she should have been given a passing mark on the written examination it is therefore impossible for her appeal to be granted.

The whole ground of my complaint and appeal to the Board was from the first that several candidates were given the promotion over my head whose educational claims were admittedly below mine, altho their written examination papers by the first set of judges had been marked below the required passing mark, as had my own presumably. I have never raised a question of those markings. I think I could show if I were allowed to see my papers that I gave a fairly good account of myself. I have never in my life failed in a written test and I have taken on an average I am sure one at least for every year of my teaching experience. The quantity of work required in these Washington examinations is purely arbitrary and the questions themselves designed rather to "stump" the candidate than to test his ability to teach the subject. In this case the questions had been carelessly mimeographed or typed and were full of errors that had to be unravelled in order to give any sort of intelligent answer. The translation was wholly sight work and as I recall it the first question had five or six subheads for comments, mythological, historical, or interpretative, on certain lines of a poem that must first be scanned to mark the rhythm, show the caesura and classify the meter. There may have been ten or could have been fifty questions after this--I never knew. I think I answered something like two or three after the first which had consumed most of the forenoon. Then since as you know there is no hostelry near the Franklin where a colored person can procure a glass of milk, I had to walk all the way to the "Y" 9th and R. I. Ave. for lunch. Caught a cab coming back but was not so fortunate going. When I returned the others were already under way, but I put in the time remaining as best I could, on the afternoon work consisting of principles and methods, conduct of department, etc. etc. I mention these trifling details to show why I employed a lawyer to plead for the "merging" of the written and "oral" marks in giving the final standing. The law of Congress provides that "Teachers shall be promoted for superior work from Group A of Class 6 only after oral and written examinations by the Boards of Examiners upon recommendation of their respective principals thro and with the approval of the Superintendent of Schools and with the additional recommendation of the Colored Assistant Superintendent for the Colored Schools, and provided further that "No teacher shall be eligible to Group B who has not attained the maximum of Group A." Fixing the entire weight of eligibility exclusively on the written test papers is in the opinion of my lawyer wholly extra-legal. Indeed the law nowhere says that the written examination shall even be passed or any defined standard shall be met therein. The teacher is promoted for "superior work" only after oral and written examinations". Now the word oral as interpreted in practice by the Superintendent of Schools sums up the whole arc of personal efficiency in the work of the schools and should if anything be made the sine qua non of a

"superior" teacher's claims for promotion. Yet strangely enough I was excluded from consideration under this head until the Board of Education at the instance of my lawyer ordered first that the Oral be given me and later that the ratings be affixed to the several items. It was on this so-called oral test that my complaint rested and still rests. The law was clearly violated in promoting to group B a teacher who had not reached her maximum in Group A; it was violated only by implication in promoting those whose test papers in a written examination were rated below 210. Again all the more was it violated in my case in altogether disallowing the "oral examination", just as legally necessary as the other, and insisting, on an arbitrary standard of 210 on the written examination before any other claims could be considered. Now altho the Board at the instance of my attorney granted my plea for a rating on the oral involving the most important items of personal fitness, educational qualifications and general efficiency as a teacher these items largely demonstrable by documentary evidence that would be incontestable in any educational center of the civilized world were systematically discredited and given a mark below passing in each particular. My complaint then is solely against these ratings a copy of which is enclosed herewith. It will be noted that the items discredited are questions of fact open to mathematical proof. One item only (B under III) is given full credit and here personal judgment is fairly permissible and a "zero" mark could not have been gainsaid. One successful candidate had been in the system less than five years, had no degree whatever when taking the examination, took it then as a kindergartner and failed according to the first ratings received from competent judges of her test papers. The statement of my lawyer that he could not do any way to disrupt the proceedings and to extol his own magnanimity before the Board was literally true. It is well known that several were promoted in spite of the fact that they did not receive a passing mark on their written examination from the first judges who rated them that the longevity law which is very explicit was not always enforced. In "Education Preparation" and Educational Courses taken, in both of which I am rated below passing by the Chief Examiner, I think I can say without self-conceit or egotism that there is no one in the system producing a more extensive record by actual count and measurement. If Miss Shadd can say that my scholarship is not up to standard I have a right to inquire what is the standard and who the judge. This is just why I appeal from Miss Shadd to you, not only as First Assistant Superintendent in charge of colored schools but as one better qualified, in every way to pass judgment on the academic question involved. I expressed to the committee my dissatisfaction at your absence from the hearing as likewise my opposition to the presence there of the already discredited H. E. Nevertheless who presumed to criticize the previous action of the Board of Education in allowing any consideration whatever of the "Oral Examination" and had the hardihood to employ the expression "Speaking as a lawyer" when the committee knew the circumstances under which my own lawyer had been unjustly disbarred from appearing there.

The Superintendent's circular had estimated 300 points for written, 300 for oral and 400 Personal characteristics and Teaching Ability. My 700 superior points as elements of actual teaching service were discredited for the first 300, a purely arbitrary element of written examination.

I wish distinctly and unequivocally to disclaim responsibility for any disrespectful remarks concerning either the Superintendent of Schools or any member of the Board of Education made by David A. Pine who was employed to present my appeal to the Board. He may not have been tactful; he certainly was not successful in representing my own attitude of mind regarding the question at issue. But the Administration cannot be willing to play the role of persecuting a faithful servant who has from the beginning been innocent of any intention to offend.

And may I not at least hope, Mr. Wilkinson, that you with your usual judicial mind will see this somewhat from my point of view and that your natural love of justice and fairness will not rest till due consideration is given where it deserves.

Very respectfully yours,

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