

Congressman Elijah Cummings, *Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb. 6, 2010

Honoring those who build our prosperity

For those of us who see the progress of African Americans as an ongoing historical movement, Black History Month 2010 comes at both the best and worst of times.

President Barack Obama's campaign and election reflected an unprecedented potential for progress in this country. Yet, we also must recognize that the promise inherent in this historical moment comes at a time of devastating economic trial.

The social and economic tensions arising from these competing forces make "economic empowerment," an especially timely theme for Black History Month this year.

It is essential that we learn the correct lessons from our past. As my parents taught me many years ago, we can only see where we must go in the future if we remember from whence we come.

We are reminded by those carrying on the legacy of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Black History Month's founder, that the history of Black Americans' economic struggles is fundamentally a chronicle of triumph in the face of adversity.

The entrepreneurship of our people has created the largest African American middle class in our history. We are making our mark in every professional calling; and Black workers are now a powerful and welcomed force in organized labor.

Central to our success has been our unshakable faith - in ourselves and in the power of education to lift us up in life.

My parents joined the Great Migration north during the 1940s. They were drawn to Baltimore from Clarendon County, South Carolina, by their determination to give their children a better future.

The opportunities represented by a good public education were the central force in my parent's dream - and despite years of struggle, they were able to see all seven of their children succeed.

That is why those who teach our young people have always been heroes and heroines to me, why I have fought for the funding our schools need, and why I have supported the right of educators to organize for better working conditions and better pay.

During Black History Month, we should remember (and applaud) the educators who gave us the power to succeed. Last Friday, for example, I had the privilege of personally thanking one of those heroines - a woman who exemplifies much of what we should be learning from our history.

Dr. Lorretta Johnson did not begin her work in Baltimore's public schools with a high-sounding title and a big salary. She began her mission to build a better community in 1966 as an elementary school teacher's aide.

The job in those days paid only \$2.25 an hour, making it almost impossible for Lorretta Johnson to make ends meet. Still, she loved the children, they loved her, and she decided to stay in her job.

If she had done nothing more, Lorretta Johnson would still have earned our lasting respect. However, she was also called to fight for the respect and compensation that all who teach our children deserve.

In order to improve the lives of other paraprofessionals like her, Lorretta Johnson organized them into the Baltimore Teachers Union; and in 1970, she negotiated the union's first contract.

Over the decades that followed, the BTU became a powerful force for our children and their schools in our state - and, today, Dr. Lorretta Johnson has the title and the national recognition that comes with being Executive Vice-President of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO.

Dr. Johnson never stops reminding us that the education of our children is the single most important force in building our future prosperity.

We ignore her lesson at our peril. Of the African Americans now living in the Baltimore Region today, nearly three out of every ten of us lack either a high school diploma or a G.E.D.

We all must do what we can to change this harsh equation. In hard times and better ones, no community can survive and prosper without the skills, training and vision that only a good education can provide.

That is why President Obama and we who serve in the Democratic leadership have made education funding a top priority.

Last year's **Recovery Act** (the "stimulus") provided tens of billions of dollars to help the states keep the teachers and paraprofessionals in our schools on the job (including more than \$1 billion in additional federal education funding to Maryland alone).

The **Jobs for Main Street Act** that we in the House passed and sent to the Senate after a hard-fought 217-212 victory last September includes funding for an **Education Jobs Fund** that will help states like Maryland pay for 250,000 education jobs during the next two years.

Here in Maryland, Governor O'Malley's budget includes record-level state funding for Maryland's public schools: \$5.7 billion.

We in government will continue to do our part. Still, in the final analysis, our future will be made by educators like Dr. Lorretta Johnson – by those who lift up our young people, one student at a time.

We should applaud them during Black History Month and every other month of the year. They are the architects of a better future for us all.

Congressman Elijah E. Cummings represents Maryland's Seventh Congressional District in the United States House of Representatives.