

Opinion: How the Black female head of a top D.C. school was ‘punished for leading’

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Educator and civil rights activist Anna Julia Cooper, sometime between February 1901 and December 1903. (C.M. Bell/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

In January 1902, Anna Julia Cooper, one of the most highly educated Black women in the country, was appointed the seventh principal of Northwest D.C.’s famed M Street High School, the first and most prestigious public high school for Black education. Black people from around the country aspired to send their children to M Street, and its roster of teachers and graduates read like a Who’s Who of Washington’s Black educational and cultural elite. Under Cooper’s leadership, M Street students won scholarships and gained admissions to top colleges and universities — including Harvard, Brown, Yale and Dartmouth.

But just four years into Cooper’s tenure, days before the start of a new school year, the White director of Washington high schools persuaded the D.C. Board of Education not to reappoint M Street’s acclaimed principal. When Cooper arrived for the first day of school, the janitor barred her from entering the building. Police officers observed from across the street. They were ordered to arrest Cooper if they deemed she was creating a disturbance. With her students watching from the windows, Cooper — always a model of dignity and decorum — exited the school grounds.

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Cooper’s story, now largely forgotten, was part of a wider movement to control the direction of Black public education in the early 20th century. Then, like now, battles over education — and especially the question of who was permitted to lead elite institutions, training the next generation to excel — were proxies in the larger culture wars. Today, with female and minority leaders of universities facing resistance from people who assume they have not earned the right to hold their positions, Cooper’s story is an illuminating one. What happened to her illustrates not only how the tactics around removing such leaders have persisted for more than a century, but also what was at stake — and still is — in the battles over educational access and leadership.

Born enslaved in Raleigh, N.C., in 1858, Cooper began her fight for an equal education early in life. As a student at St. Augustine’s Normal School and Collegiate Institute, she successfully petitioned for the right to take what were designated as “boys” classes, including courses in Greek, Latin, French, science and math. She went on to Oberlin College in Ohio, where she again protested for access to the full curriculum. She graduated from Oberlin with a BA and MA in mathematics and began writing, teaching and lecturing around the country on Black civil rights and gender equality. In 1892, she published a book that garnered international acclaim, “A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South,” arguing for Black women’s unique role in the struggles for racial and gender equality.

In 1887, Cooper was recruited to join the faculty at the famed M Street High School. She taught there for 14 years and served one year as vice principal before agreeing to serve as the school’s principal. She did so, however, at precisely the moment when the sovereignty of Black public schools — M Street, in particular — was under attack.



M Street High School (Colored), Washington, D. C.

An early-1910s postcard of the celebrated M Street High School, just off New York Avenue near North Capitol Street. (Courtesy of John DeFerrari)

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For decades, the public school system in D.C. was looked to as a shining example of what was possible for Black education. Since 1868, M Street had operated under a Black superintendent, and through a combination of Black political influence, community support, committed teachers and congressional appropriations, the Black community managed to secure the resources and maintain relative autonomy to create a model public school system for Black students in the District.

By the end of the 19th century, however, with the backlash over Reconstruction gains in Black civil and political rights and the national ascendancy of Jim Crow segregation, Black control over Black schools came under attack. In 1900, Congress restructured school oversight in the District so that the Black superintendent — now reassigned to be an assistant superintendent — no longer oversaw M Street High School directly, instead placing it under the supervision of the White director of public high schools, Percy M. Hughes. As Hughes took his post, Cooper took hers.

Within months of Cooper’s appointment, rumors began that she allowed an atmosphere of truancy and lax discipline. Allegations were taken to Hughes, and complaints filed, but Cooper persisted, and her students continued to excel. According to her early biographer, Louise Hutchinson, Cooper’s students outscored White students on citywide tests and exams, and Cooper continued to send her students to top colleges and universities throughout the country. Despite these successes, Hughes insisted that M Street adopt an inferior “colored curriculum” more suited to the Black students’ presumed abilities.

Cooper refused. She saw attempts to regulate M Street’s curriculum as part of a larger effort to limit her students’ access to higher education and channel them into trade jobs and vocational training. She underscored her commitment to a classical liberal arts education by inviting Harvard-educated W.E.B. Du Bois, a famed advocate of social and political equality and Black higher education, to address her students at M Street.



An undated photo of the M Street High School band in D.C. (Scurlock Studio Records/Archives Center/NMAH/Smithsonian Institution)

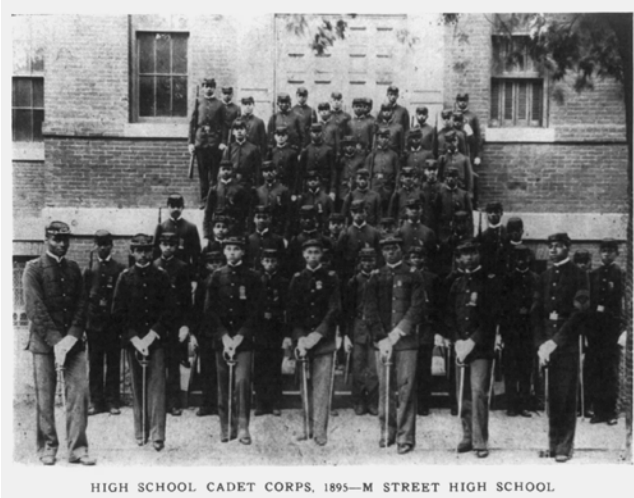
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In 1904, Hughes took formal charges against Cooper to the D.C. Board of Education, initiating a series of extremely public and vitriolic hearings over whether to remove Cooper from her post. Throughout the fall of 1905, the “M Street controversy,” as it came to be known, played out night after night at board meetings and day after day in the local press.

The tactics used to discredit Cooper followed a recognizable pattern: public shaming, presumed incompetence, questioning her professional judgment and other innuendoes used to cast doubt on her fitness to lead. Even though Cooper was one of the most respected educators in the country, Hughes, along with T.S. Leisenring, a White representative of “taxpaying citizens” who had no children in either the White or Black public schools, questioned Cooper’s fitness as an educator and her ability to uphold academic standards. They alleged that Cooper’s “sympathetic methods” allowed undeserving students to advance and asserted that M Street students were not prepared to pursue the same curriculum as students in the White high schools.

Then there were the rumors about Cooper’s alleged relationship with a fellow teacher and former boarder 10 years her junior, John Love. Because married women were barred from teaching and single women were under constant scrutiny, Cooper’s status as a widow allowed her to remain a teacher but left her vulnerable to attacks about her status and personal affairs. Though not part of the formal “charges,” the rumors allowed her accusers to impugn Cooper’s character, question her propriety and ultimately attempt to shame her into silence.

Hughes also took aim at Cooper’s ability to lead, calling her judgment into question and insinuating that her gender made her too soft on students. After an allegation that one of her M Street students was found to be “intoxicated” and that others smoked cigarettes near school grounds, undercover police were brought in to surveil the students for two weeks, looking for possible infractions. When none were found, Cooper closed the issue, but Hughes and his allies would continue to assert that Cooper was unable to maintain the strict discipline necessary to operate the Black high school effectively.



The High School Cadet Corps at M Street High School in 1895. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

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Finally, in perhaps the most honest allegation, Hughes charged Cooper with insubordination. He found Cooper unwilling to teach the curriculum he had assigned or to hold back or deny graduation to students he deemed had not met the requirements. In sum, he found her headstrong and beyond his efforts to control.

In many ways, Hughes was correct in this final assessment. Cooper was committed to the belief that Black people were entitled to the same learning opportunities as anyone else. She refused to have her right to make decisions about the operation of her school undermined. She believed in and fought for her students, and she would not let someone so unfamiliar with and hostile to them overstep her authority.

Seeing the beloved principal of their esteemed school under assault, members of the Black community rallied. They understood what was at stake, not just for Cooper but also in determining who exercised control over Black education in the District.

Willis T. Menard, son of the first Black man elected to Congress (though he was blocked from taking his seat), summed up the sentiment of the Black community in a Sept. 1, 1905, letter to *The Post*: “Mrs. Anna J. Cooper ... is very popular with the colored patrons of her school, and has done more for the advancement of colored youth than the combined efforts of her predecessors.”

Night after night, parents, students, teachers and local leaders fought in her support. They matched the disparaging remarks of those testifying against her with rallies, petitions and editorials. They fought for Cooper, and they fought to maintain autonomy over M Street.

On Oct. 30, they scored a temporary victory. More than a year after the first allegations were brought against her, the D.C. Board of Education announced that the charges against Cooper would be dismissed. She would be retained as principal of M Street.

Infuriated that the board would not fall in line, Hughes took his case to a congressional committee. As Alison Stewart explains in [“First Class: The Legacy of Dunbar, America’s First Black Public High School,”](#) Hughes charged the board with “insubordination,” and had it reorganized. Just weeks before the start of the school year in 1906, the reorganized board reviewed all the teachers in the D.C. public school system. It determined that four members of M Street would not be reappointed: Love, a history and English teacher and Cooper’s rumored romantic interest; C.J.B. Clarke, the assistant principal of Black schools who had been accused of abetting Cooper in her efforts to graduate “undeserving” students; Mary Nalle, a teacher and one of the first four students of the original M Street school; and Cooper herself.

Hughes had finally succeeded in deposing the principal who had refused to relinquish control over M Street. But he did not undo the school’s curriculum. The board, perhaps having received too much scrutiny over Cooper’s ousting, left M Street’s classical curriculum intact. “Our course of study was saved, but my head was lost in the fray,” Cooper [would later write.](#)

Cooper’s rise, and her well-engineered fall, represent a historic case of a Black woman “punished for leading.” Her removal was about wresting control for Black education out of the hands of the Black community and trying to limit access to higher education for

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Black students. But it was also more than that. Cooper was a highly visible leader charged with stewarding a prestigious academic institution, during a moment of intense political and social backlash against racial advancement and gender equality. She was recruited to lead at a moment when the position for which she was hired was most vulnerable.

As we face another moment of such backlash, with efforts at diversity and inclusion in the crosshairs and schools again becoming a battleground for the culture wars, it’s worth revisiting Cooper’s case as other women, people of color and their allies are punished for leading along similar lines. It’s also worth noting what happened, in the end, to both Cooper and her school.



Anna J. Cooper in her garden at her home in D.C., circa 1930. (Scurlock Studio Records/Archives Center/NMAH/Smithsonian Institution)

After being deposed from her position at M Street, Cooper taught for four years at a school in Missouri. But by 1910, the winds shifted, and she was called back to M Street, where she would teach at the school (renamed Dunbar in 1916) for the next two decades. After retiring from M Street, she continued to work well into her 90s, serving as the president and then registrar of Frelinghuysen University and advocating for educational opportunities for Black students and working-class residents of D.C. In 1925, she earned her doctorate from the Sorbonne in Paris, becoming only the fourth Black American woman to hold a PhD.

And Cooper’s courageous stand and visionary leadership helped preserve liberal arts education for an entire generation of Black leaders. Educators Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander and Eva Dykes, author and poet Jean Toomer, surgeon Charles Drew and civil rights lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston all went on to graduate from the high school. They, and in turn the people they served, were all beneficiaries of Cooper’s long fight to preserve advanced education at M Street.