Obey Illinois law: Teach Black history in Chicago schools, says advocate

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CHICAGO (FinalCall.com) - The We Can Organization and founder Florence Cox are pushing for Chicago Public School executives to fulfill a 22 year old mandate that Black History and Black contributions made in America and Africa be taught in city schools.

The 1991 Black History mandate HB 2859, a law enacted by the state of Illinois, was presented by the late Chicago Democrat William Shaw on October 30, 1989. Mr. Shaw, who was a state representative passed away in 2009.

"Black history should not just start with civil rights history. We had a history before being brought here (to America). We hold a history before slavery, before we faced the Middle Passage. We were kings and queens before we were brought here and sold into a slavery system; which to this day has had an economic residual effect. We feel that this is where the teachings of Black history should start," said Ms. Cox, a former Chicago Public School CEO.

Dr. Barbara Byrd-Bennett, current CEO of the CPS, met last month with Mrs. Cox and We Can members to discuss HB-2859. According to Mrs. Cox, prior to the meeting with Dr. Bennett, there was little effort to expand instruction to include African history. In the meeting, Dr. Bennett said financial problems would prohibit a full-fledged African history curriculum, but expressed support for teaching African history, said Mrs. Cox.
Annette Gurley, chief of teaching and learning for Chicago Public Schools, told The Final Call, “The Office of Curriculum and Instruction is working to assure that the contributions of African Americans receive the attention it deserves in the classrooms across the district. CPS curriculum specialists, with the assistance of central office and network chiefs will partner with the DuSable Museum of African History, the History Makers, and Mello Sam to develop a course of study interwoven across the curriculum throughout the school year.”

According to Ms. Gurley, curriculum teams are developing a plan to integrate the work and contributions of people of African heritage in Science, Finance, Math, Art, and Technology. Mrs. Cox was unaware of CPS’s plans, but felt Dr. Byrd-Bennett will comply with the requirements to include African studies. But, she added, there is still a need for specifics and a detailed timeline for implementation. Mrs. Cox said she had not received any information from CPS about changing the curriculum.

She believes learning about African history will boost the self-esteem of Black children and enhance learning. “For children, this (the inclusion of African history) would give them an accurate knowledge from where their original roots are found and once they gain knowledge and begin to internalize it, there will be positive changes in them. They will start to see themselves in a different light and start to conduct themselves in a manner indicative of who they really are and where they came from,” she said.

“There is a residual kind of generational trauma in the Black community that has some of us believing that we can’t achieve because we are Black. Some of us are afraid to try because we are trapped in a zone of fear that we will somehow make others uncomfortable if we attempt to step out of the place to where we have become confined. There has always been a move in this country to prevent Black people from participating in the government of the people, by the people, for the people,” Mrs. Cox said.

African and Black history have often been controversial and the findings of Black scholars have been challenged by White historians. Ivan Van Sertima, a well-known Guyanese scholar in the Black community is known for his ground-breaking book, They Came Before Columbus, which proved African presence in the Americas before the coming of Christopher Columbus, an Italian who got lost and discovered a new world for Europeans. White scholars tried to discredit his work.

We Can has an online petition called Obey the Law, which calls for ensuring that African history is taught in Chicago public schools. To support the petition, logon to http://www.signon.org/sign/cpschoe-obey-the-law?source=s.fwd&r_by=756175.

(Safiyyah M. Muhammad is Final Call newspaper copy desk editor.)