

BOTTOM LINE Crenshaw High choir director sentenced to

Teacher Jail

South Los Angeles students, parents, teachers and taxpayers are in an uproar again this week over the Star Chamber-esque treatment of a longtime and beloved African-American high school teacher who has been confined to the Los Angeles Unified School District's version of a gulag, which it calls "Teacher Jail."

In a school district which, based on frequent news reports, appears to be teeming with pedophiles, the LAUSD and its superintendent, John Deasy, have seen fit to remove the venerated Iris Stevenson from her Crenshaw High School classroom and put her in a room where she sits and twiddles her thumbs for eight hours every day. A room called Teacher Jail.

Why? Nobody knows for sure except Deasy and his school district and their only answer to the "why" question is:

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“It’s a personnel matter and we do not discuss personnel matters.”

Stevenson, who has been a virtual one-woman institution at Crenshaw High for 29 years (who happens to have a music wing of the school named after her), does not know why she has been incarcerated in the LAUSD’s Teacher Jail. She said no one at the district has told her the allegations against her, and yet, she has been out of her classroom and in Teacher Jail since the middle of December.

Now this is where the general taxpaying public, civil rights groups and their attached legal entities get fighting mad: Stevenson is getting paid her full teaching salary and benefits while she is doing nothing but sitting in that Teacher Jail room. She is being paid to teach and she is not doing it — hasn’t done it since mid-December and she has no idea when she’ll be allowed to actually work for her salary.

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“This is an unAmerican outrage and we are taking legal steps to stop it,” said the Rev. K.W. Tulloss, head of the National Action Network’s Western Region. “This school district has hundreds of teachers confined in Teacher Jail rooms all around the city where hundreds of teachers are sitting and taking home full pay and benefits without ever seeing students, let alone teaching them,” Tulloss said. “I’ve been told there are somewhere between 500 and 700 teachers being paid not to teach, and most of them are African-American and over 40. We’re not paying taxes for this and NAN is committed to putting a legal stop to it.”

Alex Caputo-Pearl, an education activist who lives in the Crenshaw area and who taught at Crenshaw High School for 12 years along side Stevenson, said the Teacher Jail was originally supposed to be a place where the district could hold the very, very few teachers who might have been a danger to students.

“But now, with hundreds in Teacher Jail across the district, it has become a place where the administration puts

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anyone with whom it has a problem — sometimes holding them for years in cubicles hoping they will quit,” said Caputo-Pearl, who is a member of the United Teachers of Los Angeles Board of Directors and is Stevenson’s UTLA representative in this matter.

“The inmates are far disproportionately made up of teachers and health/human service professionals over 40 years of age, who have comparatively higher salaries and permanent status,” Caputo-Pearl added. “LAUSD is aggressively attacking both of these — permanent status and educators who ‘cost more’ — in Deasy’s quest to cut costs and have a more compliant teaching core. Teacher Jail is one method among many that LAUSD is using to try to force these kinds of educators out,” he said.

And what kind of educator is Deasy trying to force out by putting Stevenson in Teachers Jail?

“Ms. Stevenson is not a danger to students — she is a lifeline for students, with her personality and her

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programs, which keep students in school,” Caputo-Pearl said.

For almost 30 years, Stevenson directed the Crenshaw High School Elite Choir and led the choir on globe-trotting performance trips around the world: to France, Austria, Belgium, Korea and Spain, as well as on award-winning competitions throughout the United States. The choir is noted for its members’ ability to sing in their host country’s language. The Crenshaw choir is famous.

The protesting public believes Stevenson may have run afoul of Deasy and them when she took the choir to perform in France and to the White House to sing for President Barack Obama a couple of months ago. “The only conjecture we have as to why Ms. Stevenson is in Teacher Jail is the rumor that the latest choir trip was not sanctioned by the district,” Caputo-Pearl said. “But we believe there has been some problem with the field trip paperwork slips because she has always, over the 29 years

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of field trips, gotten approval from parents, principals and the district.

“We believe it’s a misplaced paperwork issue, but we don’t really know because the district won’t say anything.”

The district’s press release states Stevenson has been suspended, with pay, pending an investigation. To which Rev. Tulloss responded: “This is America, not Stalinist Russia. You’re not supposed to get punished first and investigated later. Everything about this is wrong and we must correct it and make sure the school district adheres to the basic human rights on which this country was founded.”