

Debra Watkins

**Executive Director, California Alliance of African American Educators
Founder, Dr. Frank S. Greene Scholars Program**

Debra Watkins was born in Los Angeles and raised in Pomona, California. After her high school graduation, she studied in France for one year and earned a baccalaureate that enabled her to attend college in the country free of charge. Instead, she returned to the United States and earned a B.A. in English with minors in French and Psychology from Pitzer College in 1976. She then entered Stanford University's Teacher Education Program and earned a Master's degree in Education as well as Life-time Teaching Credentials in English, French and Psychology in 1977. A second Master's degree in Counselor Education was granted in 1996. Debra had spent her entire career of 35 years in the East Side Union High School District (ESUHSD) of San Jose before retiring in May 2012. Debra taught high school English for 14 years, then helped start an alternative high school called Pegasus. After eight years at Pegasus, she coordinated Project WORD (**Working On Refining our Destiny**) - a culturally responsive intervention program for African American students. While on an unpaid leave of absence from the ESUHSD, Debra worked one year as Director of Silicon Valley Service for a school reform organization called Partners in School Innovation. She was responsible for coaching elementary school principals and teachers on how to close the opportunity gap for Black and Brown students.

After being away from the classroom for five years, Debra returned for three years and taught juniors and seniors. As of July 2007, she is the full-time Executive Director of the California Alliance of African American Educators (CAAAE), an organization she founded in 2001, as well as its president. Debra was also one of the founders of the Santa Clara County Alliance of Black Educators approximately 30 years ago and served as its president for seven years (1994-2001). In 2007, the CAAAE partnered with the ESUHSD and garnered a four-year, \$400,000 grant from the AT&T Foundation's Aspire program to fully implement Project WORD at Oak Grove High School. This grant was to ensure the on-time graduation of a cohort of African American freshmen. Project WORD was highly-successful and is a model for districts seeking to close the opportunity gap and reduce high school dropout rates. When Debra established the CAAAE in 2001, she also created the Dr. Frank S. Greene Scholars Program (GSP).