

# RETHINKING SCHOOLS

An Urban Educational Journal

## Souls or Dollars?

*How Wisconsin's Voc-Ed Program Will Change Our Schools*

By David Levine

On July 3, 1991, with not a whisper of controversy, the Wisconsin Legislature approved a new vocational program that, if implemented as planned, will fundamentally alter the curriculum and structure of the state's high schools.

Boosted by substantial federal grants, the blessings of the governor, and the prestige of corporate supporters, this "Tech-Prep" program puts Wisconsin in the forefront of a nationwide trend to foster vocational education as the key answer to both individual and national economic problems.

Tech-Prep enthusiasts claim it will improve education for non-college bound students, meet critical skilled-labor shortages, and increase educational equity. While these goals are laudable, Tech-Prep is highly unlikely to fulfill such hopes. Instead, it will almost surely bolster — albeit with a more elaborate rationalization — the class and racial tracking which characterizes nearly all schools.

Just as disturbing, Tech-Prep tends to narrow the purpose of education to merely meeting the workforce needs of the economy. Under a Tech-Prep approach, educators are encouraged to reduce school to a sophisticated form of industrial training. Learning for its own sake, or to prepare students to critically participate in a democratic society, takes a back seat. Yet as African-American scholar W.E.B. DuBois noted almost a century ago: "The ideals of education, whether men are taught to teach or to plow, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink to a sordid utilitarianism."

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Credit: Rick Reinhard

*Tech-prep debate raises the question: what is the purpose of schools?*

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## Tales From An Untracked Class

By Linda Christensen

It's teacher "work" day — two days before students arrive — and I'm trying to reconstruct my classroom between faculty, department, and union meetings. Mallory leans over my desk, her dancer's body rounding in the third month of pregnancy. "I need to transfer to your 5th period class because the parenting class is only offered 6th. I hope this class is all mixed up like last year's."

Mallory reads over my temporary student enrollment list, telling me about the students I don't already know. "Oh, he's bad, Ms. Christensen. He talked all the time in math last year. I don't think he's passed a class yet. Oh, the Turner brothers are in here. They are the smartest kids in our class. I

swear they've never gotten less than an A the whole time they've been in school."

The class is starting to sound good. Hopefully, Barbara Ward and Annie Huginnie, the two senior counselors have given me "mixed up" classes of students again: failures and successes, neighborhood and magnet students, performers and non-performers, "advanced," and "remedial."

**Unhooking One Class**

I untracked my English classes several years ago. I knew tracking was unjust, and I didn't want to perpetuate the myths about academic ability that tracking imparts. I also wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to teach a wide range of students in one class, to present a model for our school. After ten years of teaching remedial English, I also knew I couldn't stand teaching one more low tracked class. Even if my seniority allowed me the privilege of teaching advanced classes, morally, I couldn't teach them any longer.

Tracking helps create, then legitimates, a social hierarchy within a school based on perceived differences in student ability. Students in higher tracks have access to college preparatory classes: Algebra, Geometry, Calculus, Chemistry, Physics. But even in the traditional subjects — English and Social Studies — students participate in different educational experiences. Even the titles of classes are

telling: Global Issues for college bound students, Geography Skills for the vocationally tracked. Students in advanced classes read whole books, write papers,

**Tracking helps create, then legitimates, a social hierarchy within a school.**

complete library research which prepares them for college, while students in lower track classes typically read light bites of literature and history — short stories or adolescent novels. Their writing, if they write, tends to remain in the narrative, personal story telling mode rather than moving to the analytical.

Beyond the lack of preparation for academic tasks, the larger problem I witness as a teacher is the embedded beliefs students leave these classrooms with. Students in advanced classes come to believe they earned a privilege that is often given them based on race, class, or gender, continued on page 19

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## WHO WE ARE

*Rethinking Schools* is an independent educational journal published by Milwaukee-area classroom teachers and educators. We are dedicated to helping parents, teachers, and students solve the many problems that exist in our schools. As teachers and community members, we want to promote thoughtful discussion and debate on educational issues and help unite the many groups currently working to make our schools better. Discussion of educational issues is often dominated by administrators and educational consultants. We hope that *Rethinking Schools* gives teachers, parents, and students an effective voice in determining the future of our schools.

We encourage our readers to join us in our discussion and debate on educational issues, including the following:

- 1) How can parents, teachers, and students gain more powerful roles in determining school policies and practices?
- 2) What must be done to overcome the significant racial, gender, and class inequities that prevent many students from receiving an equal and effective education?
- 3) What specific approaches can teachers use to empower students within the classroom and community? How can we make meaningful, community-based work experience an integral part of each child's education?
- 4) What can we do to insure that multicultural and anti-racist education takes place?
- 5) What specific teaching techniques and materials have proven successful in our efforts to encourage students to transform both their lives and the world around them?

We encourage readers to send us articles, letters, and graphics, as well as writing and drawings by young people. Those interested in submitting an article should send a SASE requesting our guidelines.

You can also help by subscribing to our journal or by volunteering to become a distributor at your school, workplace, or PTA.

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## EDITORIALS

# Vote "Yes" on the Feb. 16th MPS Building Referendum

On Feb. 16, as few as 20,000 people might vote in a referendum that is one of the cornerstones of reform for the Milwaukee Public Schools. It is crucial that teachers, parents, and concerned community residents not only vote "yes" on the referendum, but encourage their friends, families, and co-workers to do likewise.

The referendum is to approve a bond that will finance \$366 million of a 10-year, \$474 million construction plan for MPS. It is the first time in almost a quarter century that Milwaukee voters have been asked to approve a comprehensive building plan for our schools (see story page 3).

The most common complaint about the referendum is that it will unreasonably raise property taxes. Yes, property taxes will rise, an average of 8% over the 10-year life of the plan. And no, no one likes to see rising property taxes.

But focusing merely on property taxes ignores two essential questions. First, what is the alternative? To do nothing and let children remain in overcrowded and inadequate classrooms — or to have no classroom space available at all, as is the case for nearly one-third of the eligible kindergartners in Milwaukee — is an untenable position. And while we must surely fight for increased state and federal monies for our public schools, those are long-term reforms that do not address the immediate crisis.

Second, why aren't questions of property taxes and public monies used to derail city and county building projects? Why was there no hue and cry about the O'Donnell Park fiasco at the lakefront? Why no second thoughts about the public money that will be funnelled into the proposed Brewer Stadium project? Why no protests over the multi-billion dollar deep tunnel sewer project? Why no mayoral alternatives to the new County Jail?

Controversy has also surrounded the facilities plan's proposal to contract out a growing number of seats in early childhood education to community groups. It is important, however, to remember that the referendum deals strictly with money to build and renovate schools and does not in any way earmark funds for contracting out. The confusion stems from the fact that the facilities plan, while separate from the referendum, was the basis for deciding how many schools to build and therefore how much money to request in the referendum.

We too are troubled by the contracting out proposals in the facilities plan. Will there be mechanisms to ensure accountability? What about the low wages often paid to



Credit: Huck/Konopacki Labor Cartoons

the staff in such schools?

But the reality is that contracting out is likely to increase if the referendum fails. Without the new schools, MPS won't have the space to educate all the city's eligible children and will be forced to rely even more on community-based groups.

The specifics of the contracting out are vague and must be clarified. It is a struggle that needs to be fought — but after the referendum. This issue will come up again before the school board, whose very composition may be changed after the elections next spring.

Still other people are leery of the amount of money that will be used to build a new vocational technical high school and to revamp vocational education facilities in all middle and high schools. We also have serious questions about these aspects of the plan. In particular, we are concerned about the historical link between voc-ed and tracking, and question whether this issue has been thoroughly thought out at the district level. At the same time, there is no question but that Milwaukee Technical High School is an inadequate physical facility.

In the final analysis, the above reservations are outweighed by the education reforms that will be possible if the referendum is approved.

Those reforms are rarely mentioned by opponents of the referendum. Tactically, that is smart on their part. Who can be opposed to smaller class sizes and music, art, library, and computer facilities? Who could reasonably argue that Milwaukee children don't deserve such resources even though they are found in abundance in suburban schools?

There is never any "pure" issue. Yet, despite its limitations, the facilities referendum comes about as close as any other faced by Milwaukee voters in recent years. In a very real sense, the future of our city rests on our schools and our children. Our position can be summed up in five words: "Vote 'yes' on Feb. 16." □

### Volunteer to help pass the MPS referendum!

People are needed to help with mailings, phone calling, typing, literature distribution, and much more. Call The Children First Coalition c/o Progressive Milwaukee, 734 N. 26th St., Milwaukee, WI 53233. Tel. 344-0382.

## We'd Like Your Ideas!

*Rethinking Schools* is working on two special projects. We'd like your suggestions.

The first project is an issue later this school year on parental involvement in schools.

The second project is a special edition, *Rethinking the Classroom*, patterned after the highly acclaimed *Rethinking Columbus*.

If you are interested in submitting ideas, articles, resources, or photographs for these projects we ask that you contact us as soon as possible.

## 'Tis The Season ...

If you're like most teachers, you are eagerly awaiting the holiday season so you can take a break from homework assignments, lunch duty, reprimanding kids for eating in class, and all the related headaches that come with teaching. And, like many teachers, you will use the holiday break to catch up on all your personal record-keeping, from mail to book orders to tax receipts.

As you go through that record-keeping, we have a favor to ask. Please consider making a tax-deductible contribution to *Rethinking Schools*. We are a small operation that keeps financially afloat on subscriptions, donations, and a few small grants.

We know that you receive scores of worthwhile requests for money. There are

advantages to donating to *Rethinking Schools*, however. First, you can see directly where your money goes — into the newspaper. Second, because we operate on a shoe-string budget, we are extremely frugal. Every dollar counts. A \$50 or \$100 donation might not make a big difference to some non-profit groups. For us, it's like manna from heaven.

In particular, we invite you to become a *Rethinking Schools* Sustainer. Sustainers, who pledge a minimum of \$100 a year, receive a free subscription and a free *Rethinking Schools* t-shirt.

*Rethinking Schools* started seven years ago as little more than a dream to provide a voice for teachers and parents interested in school reform. Please help us keep that dream alive. □



Credit: Susan Lina Ruggles

Language minority students working in former storage closet at Story Elementary School.

# Lack of Space Crowds Out Learning

If anyone doubts the overcrowding at many public elementary schools in Milwaukee, they should visit Story School. Ask to visit the Chapter 1 math program, the social worker, or the speech/language professional.

Someone might euphemistically tell you to visit the "annex," where those programs are located. What they mean is the trailer.

"It's not an annex, it's a trailer, pure and simple," notes principal Kathleen Code Gomez.

The trailer looks like those found at construction sites, down to the concrete blocks that act as a temporary foundation — only in this case the trailer has been at Story School for 15 years or so.

That students attend classes in a trailer is only half the problem. To get to the trailer, they must go to the basement, through the boiler room, up a short flight of stairs, out a back door, and then across the parking lot — and hope it isn't raining or snowing.

Those who merely drive past Story, a kindergarten through 8th grade school at 3815 W. Kilbourn Ave., might scoff at the idea that the building is overcrowded. From the outside, the structure looks magnificent. Built in the 1930s with the craftsmanship common in Milwaukee at the time, it has beautiful stained glass in the entranceways and wooden floors and trim throughout the school.

"The building is fine," Gomez says, pausing for emphasis before she adds: "As long as you don't have programs like ESL [English as a Second Language], Writing to Read, bilingual education, exceptional-education, social workers, Chapter 1, psychologists, speech or language, or counselors."

What about music or art or computer rooms? Gomez laughs. The thought of finding space for these specialties is unthinkable. Every imaginable closet is already being used as an office or classroom.

"There's an unbelievable claustrophobic feeling when you work with 10-12 students in rooms like that," Gomez says. "But that's what the city apparently figures is good enough for our kids."

The overcrowding at Story, unfortunately, is not unlike that found in other MPS elementary schools. For example:

- More than 6,000 four- and five-year-olds, almost one-third of those eligible, can't attend kindergarten because MPS doesn't have enough space.
- Some 35% of elementary schools use lunch rooms for teaching, 52% hold classes in storage rooms, 41% hold classes in the corridors, and 25% hold classes in coat rooms.
- Of the 111 elementary schools in MPS, 54% do not have classroom space set aside for computer training, 63% have inadequate libraries, 75% do not have space set aside for music, and 55% do not have art rooms.
- Some 27 MPS elementary schools were built before World War I, and 29 were built before World War II. There are 1,035 repair projects at MPS schools that have been postponed due to lack of money.

Superintendent Howard Fuller has recognized that the bond would significantly affect property taxes. "When I committed to develop this plan, I knew it would be a difficult challenge and that it would not necessarily be popular," he explained in a speech before Milwaukee businessmen in late November. "But there is no acceptable alternative. The neglected needs that have accumulated during the last two decades must be addressed. We cannot wait any longer to take a comprehensive facility plan to the voters." □



## Public Hearings on the Referendum

A series of public hearings will be held on the referendum in coming months. They are:

- Tuesday, Jan. 5, 7 p.m., at Milwaukee Tech High School, 319 W. Virginia St.
- Thursday, Jan. 7, 7:30 p.m., Humboldt Park Elementary, 3230 S. Adams.
- Tuesday, Jan. 12, 7 p.m. Riverside High School, 1615 E. Locust St.
- Tuesday, Jan. 19, 7 p.m., 35th Street Elementary, 3517 W. Courtland.
- Thursday, Jan. 21, 7 p.m., Hamilton High School, 6215 W. Warnimont.
- Tuesday, Jan. 26, 7 p.m., 65th St. Elementary, 6600 W. Melvina.
- Tuesday, Feb. 2, 7 p.m., Palmer Elementary, 1900 N. 1st St.
- Thursday, Feb. 4, 7 p.m., Carleton Elementary, 4116 W. Silver Spring.

**As of early December, the only significant public opposition had come from the office of Mayor John Norquist.**

# Public Support Builds for MPS Referendum

On Feb. 16, 1993, Milwaukee voters will face one of the most crucial referenda in the last quarter century. They must decide: do they want to give their children a fighting chance to equal opportunity? Or do they want to shackle them with inferior and over-crowded schools and facilities?

The Milwaukee Public Schools has not asked voters to approve a comprehensive construction plan since 1970. As a result, children are being taught in storage closets, and many schools are dangerously in need of repair (see story, this page.) Thousands of kindergartners cannot attend MPS because there isn't room.

The referendum is to approve a bond that will finance \$366 million of a 10-year, \$474 million construction plan. The plan has two main parts: to make sure there are enough schools for the number of children who will attend MPS in future decades, and to give the children of Milwaukee the same quality of facilities that is commonly found in suburban schools.

Turnouts at February elections are notoriously low, and as few as 20,000 voters could determine the fate of the referendum. Thus the issue is likely to be decided not on its merits, but on whether supporters or opponents are most successful at getting out the vote.

As of early December, the only significant public opposition had come from the office of Mayor John Norquist. The mayor had proposed a scaled-down, alternative plan earlier in the fall, citing concern over property taxes. Although the School Board rejected the plan as too little, too late, the mayor's office has kept its alternative alive. The plan, according to David Webster, Norquist's chief of staff, is that if the referendum is defeated, "our plan will still be there."

Progressive Milwaukee — an organization of community and labor groups and individuals formed in 1991 —

has formed a grass-roots, citywide coalition to organize support for the referendum. Some 45 activists, including many representatives from various unions, community groups and religious organizations, attended an organizing meeting for the coalition in mid-November. Some of the many groups represented included Interfaith Conference of Milwaukee, the Amalgamated Transit Workers Union, the Administrators Council of MPS, Sherman Park Community Organization, ESHAC, the Milwaukee Alliance of Black School Educators, AFSCME, and a broad range of teachers and parents.

"We view passage of the referendum as an essential precondition for a vibrant future for Milwaukee," Bruce Colburn, secretary treasurer of the AFL-CIO labor council in Milwaukee, said on behalf of Progressive Milwaukee. "We cannot ignore the children of the city, for they are our future."

(The coalition has organized as "The Children First Coalition" and can be contacted at 344-0382 or 645-8418.)

A key question is whether the business community will support or oppose the referendum. As of early December, all indications were that leading business people would essentially remain neutral. Some, such as Bill Randall, a retired top executive at First Bank Milwaukee who was a founder of the Greater Milwaukee Education Trust, have said they are supporting the referendum.

According to several sources, many white businesspeople are reluctant to enter the debate because they live in the suburbs; they do not want to be seen as denying the children of Milwaukee, the majority of whom are children of color, the facilities commonly enjoyed by suburban children.

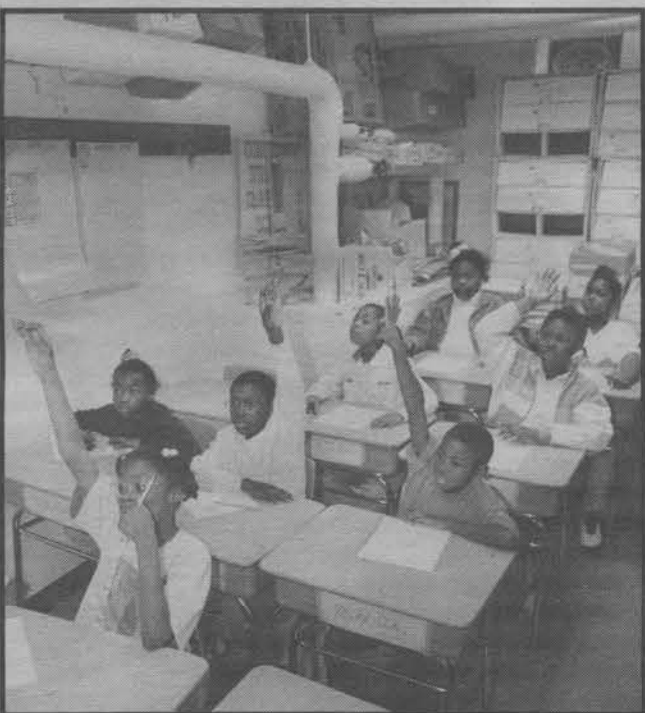
"They are in a bind," noted one political observer who did not want to be identified. "For fiscal reasons they might like to oppose the referendum, especially since taxes for businesses will rise if the referendum passes, but they don't want to be seen as uncaring, rich whites."

Superintendent Howard Fuller, meanwhile, has been speaking to community, business, and church groups throughout the city to explain the need for the referendum.

MPS officials are putting their main emphasis on a \$200,000 campaign emphasizing direct mail literature — with information being sent to every Milwaukee household, radio and television talk show appearances, and newspaper ads. There has also been talk of a half-hour documentary showing the need for more building space for MPS.

MPS is legally restricted to providing information on

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Credit: Susan Lina Ruggles

Children crammed into a basement classroom at Clarke Street Elementary School.

# Report From a National 'Pro-Voucher' Conference

## Privately Funded Vouchers Proliferate

By Barbara Miner

INDIANAPOLIS— If you live in New York, Boston, San Francisco, Denver, St. Louis or Minneapolis, your area is one of 25 cities targeted by conservative forces who hope to establish a network of privately funded school voucher plans as part of efforts to make private school "choice" the dominant school reform in this country.

At a pro-voucher national conference in Indianapolis Nov. 13-14, organizers laid out a sophisticated strategy of how people can build public and corporate support for privately funded vouchers.

The first such program was started in Indianapolis in August 1991 by J. Patrick Rooney, chairman of the board of the Golden Rule Insurance Company. Funded by corporate donations, the program provides half the tuition, with a maximum voucher of \$800, to low-income parents to attend a private or parochial school.

Such plans, bolstered by support from conservative think tanks and foundations, have now spread to Milwaukee, San Antonio, Texas, and Atlanta. By the fall of 1994, organizers hope to establish 25 privately funded voucher plans in order "to provide the requisite momentum to a national debate on educational choice," according to an organizing manual distributed at the conference.

Privately funded programs may, on the surface, seem only peripherally connected with efforts to institute publicly funded "choice" plans that substitute the marketplace for our system of public schools. However, key players in the private voucher network stressed that these private plans are an invaluable tactic in their strategic battle to institute universal "choice" plans that use public tax dollars to fund religious and non-sectarian private schools.

Matt Glavin, president of the conservative Georgia Public Policy Foundation which has organized a privately funded voucher system in Atlanta, explained it this way at the Indianapolis conference: "The Georgia Public Policy Foundation has an agenda, and it's not hidden.... It would be a dream of mine personally, and a goal of mine, to have the Georgia foundation shut down in four years because the legislature has adopted a voucher program."

The conference was billed as a "how to" get-together for organizers. It was sponsored by The Educational Choice Charitable Trust, which administers the Indianapolis program, in cooperation with three conservative groups: the State Policy Network, the Philanthropy Roundtable, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation. More than 100 people from across the country attended, including major players in the "choice" movement such as organizers of the California and Colorado referenda for universal vouchers, the head of the U.S. Department of Education's Center on Choice, representatives of right-wing think tanks and foundations, business representatives, and local organizers hoping to start private voucher plans in their cities.

While the conference concentrated on private vouchers, it provided an intriguing glimpse into the internal workings of the broader "choice" movement. It also underscored important lessons for defenders of a public system of schools. While the "choice" movement is dominated by conservative, free-market ideologues, it would be foolish to deny that the movement feeds on legitimate, grass-roots discontent with public schools, particularly among people of color in urban areas. If opponents of private school "choice" are to be successful, they must intensify their efforts to develop a broad-based movement that goes beyond unions and includes parents and community people and that addresses the specific problems of urban schools. There's nothing the right-wing loves more



Credit: MRS

**As students get their "choice" of schools, schools will get their "choice" of students. What will happen to those not chosen?**

than discrediting opposition to choice as the self-interest of the unions and the "educational establishment," and dismissing calls to increase resources for urban schools as mere requests for more of the taxpayers' hard-earned money.

The conference took place just a little over a week after the election of Bill Clinton, who has opposed public money for private schools, and after the defeat of a Colorado referendum that would have provided from \$2,100 to \$2,500 in taxpayer money to parents who wanted to send their children to a private or parochial school or to educate them at home. As a result, the elections were a key topic.

Conference organizers appeared

### **Privately funded vouchers emerge as a key strategy in the conservatives' battle to institute private school "choice."**

undaunted by the defeat of George Bush, who strongly supported private school "choice," or by the defeat of the Colorado referendum. Regarding the Colorado referendum, the dominant view at the conference was disappointment tempered by patient confidence. Several people said they expected there would be a number of failed referenda before one finally succeeds and ushers in an era of proliferating voucher plans.

"It's not a question of if we'll have choice, it's a question of when," said Jack Whelan, president and chief executive officer of Golden Rule in a view echoed by a number of people.

Regarding Bush, participants countered that Bush had been stymied in his educational initiatives and that, in any case, the key battles take place on the state level because federal involvement in public schools has always been limited.

"I'm not all that worried, on this issue [of school choice], of the effect of the presidential elections," David Boaz,

executive vice president of the conservative CATO Institute in Washington, D.C., told the conference. "Ultimately," he added, "education is a state and local issue.... If anything, this may galvanize local supporters to understand that the leadership is not going to come from Washington and that if they're going to do anything about this it's going to have to be done on the state and local level."

Kevin Teasley, director of a California voucher initiative set for the June 1994 ballot, said that California voucher supporters expect Clinton to waffle on the "choice" issue and stay out of the California debate on the grounds that it is a state, not federal, issue. Teasley said voucher supporters were already working on key Clinton advisors to convince them that the president-elect should soften his opposition to private school "choice." The California initiative is similar to the Colorado referendum and is considered the next big test for supporters of publicly funded vouchers for private and religious schools.

### **The Private Voucher Movement**

The private school "choice" movement has several different emphases. One focus is pressuring state legislatures to pass publicly funded voucher programs — attempts which are proliferating but still meeting with limited success. There are also statewide referenda, the two most notable being the Colorado initiative that lost at the polls this November, and the California vote set for June 1994. Some "choice" advocates, such as Clint Bolick of the conservative Institute for Justice, are filing lawsuits calling for private-school tuition vouchers on the grounds that failing public schools violate state constitutional guarantees to educational opportunity.

There are also for-profit schemes such as the Edison Project started by Whittle Communications and headed by former Yale President Benno Schmidt. Rodney Ferguson of the Edison Project told the Indianapolis conference that while the Edison project has no official position on choice, it is convinced that "choice" initiatives will only increase and, sooner or later, become a reality across the country. "The genius of our project is that the principals [i.e., key investors] were able to see this trend more clearly," Ferguson said. Teasley, meanwhile, noted that Chris Whittle of Whittle Communications is

doing "what any smart businessman would do." He is staying out of the political debate, putting his money into research and development, and creating a base "so when choice comes down the pike, he's got a choice to offer."

Privately funded voucher plans, however, have become the most successful tactic of the school "choice" movement.

The Indianapolis program, considered the standard by which private voucher programs are measured, was started some 16 months ago by Golden Rule with a \$1.2 million donation after the Indiana legislature defeated a voucher bill. Under the program, a child whose family qualifies for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program may receive half of the tuition of a private or parochial school, up to \$800. The program was announced two weeks before the start of the 1991-92 school year and organizers were immediately swamped with applications. By November, 1992, some 925 children were receiving vouchers and 395 were on the waiting list.

The program was the brainchild of Rooney, a contradictory "maverick" who is both a staunch Republican and a member of the Indiana Civil Liberties Union. A devout Catholic who attends a predominantly African-American parish, Rooney also has a long-standing concern with discrimination. Rooney, for example, had Golden Rule sue the Educational Testing Service and the Illinois Department of Insurance in 1976, accusing them of using culturally biased tests to exclude minorities, older people and non-college educated people from entering the insurance business. Golden Rule won the suit and used the money to help form FairTest, a group in Cambridge, Mass. that is a leading advocate for reforming educational testing in this country.

Rooney stresses that his private voucher plan has one main goal: to help low-income kids have the same choice in schools that middle-class and white kids have.

While Rooney has stated in media reports that he has no intention of undercutting the public school system, his speech to the conference had a different emphasis. He said he had concluded over the years that "the problems are not fixable in the urban [school] systems" and he criticized efforts that focused on the public schools and the "perpetuation of a system that is not working."

Rooney also emphasized the enormous public relations strength of the privately

funded voucher program, saying it had done more good in terms of the company image than anything Golden Rule had ever done. "We could not have anticipated ahead of time the positive public relations benefit..." he said. "I can tell you, the public relations benefits of this are immense."

The evolution of the privately funded voucher program is a fascinating look at how seasoned organizers can spot a politically useful movement — and move in to try to take control. The Indianapolis program remains identified with Rooney, who seems sincerely concerned with discrimination and the education of children of color. But conservative, ideologically entrenched think tanks and foundations now dominate the private voucher movement.

The three other main private voucher programs are all closely identified with conservative foundations or think tanks. In Milwaukee, the prominent and conservative Bradley Foundation — headed by free-market ideologue Michael Joyce — is donating \$1.5 million to get a local program going. In San Antonio, the program was initiated by the Texas Public Policy Foundation and in Atlanta it was initiated by the Georgia Public Policy Foundation. (In all cases, separate non-profit groups have been set up to run the program, in part because this allows corporations to make tax-deductible contributions. If the voucher were given directly to the parents, it would not be tax deductible.)

Teasley, of the California voucher initiative, was one of several people who explicitly linked the success of privately funded vouchers to hopes for a universal system of publicly funded vouchers for private schools. Perhaps most important, the private voucher system, in which applicants have exceeded the number of vouchers, can be used to argue that the public is clamoring for "choice."

"When you see the number of children lining up for the financial opportunity to choose a different school, that's a very powerful message ...," Teasley told the conference. "That message cannot be shot down rather easily by our opponents. It's worth its weight in gold."

Teasley also argued that despite its success, a private voucher program is limited by its reliance on corporate largesse. The long-term strategy, Teasley said, must focus on publicly funded, universal voucher systems.

Teasley said "choice" advocates in California hope to institute private voucher plans in both Southern and Northern California and to use the response to argue that true choice can only be implemented through publicly supported vouchers.

Tom Tancredo, a U.S. Department of Education official who helped organize the failed Colorado initiative, also said he planned to go back to Denver to start a private voucher plan. Like Teasley, he saw it as a tactic to build support for publicly funded vouchers. Referring to Golden Rule type initiatives he said, "All they are, really, are simply pump primers."

### Differences and Problems

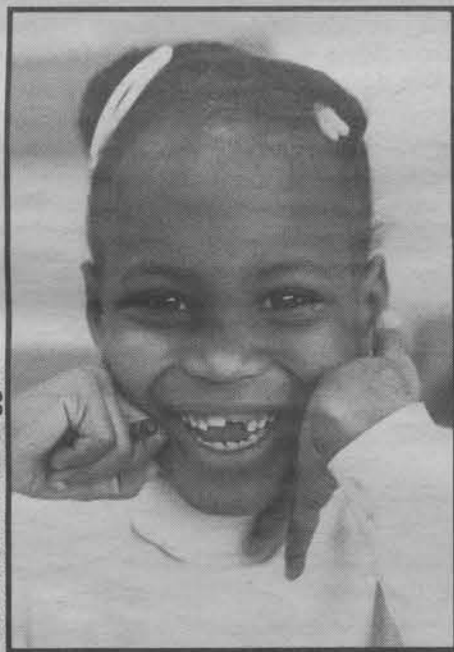
Several differences emerged at the conference. Should voucher plans be limited to low-income children or would that alienate middle-class supporters who might wonder, "What's in it for me?" Should public schools be included in private voucher plans, as they are in San Antonio and Atlanta? How explicitly should organizers describe their program?

One of the dilemmas facing the conference involved race. While many of those taking part in the private voucher plans are children of color — and many of the programs are explicitly presented as a chance to give minority and low-income kids the same opportunities as middle-class whites — the movement is dominated by conservative whites associated with the right wing. At the Indianapolis conference,

the only identifiable person of color, except for invited speakers, was a African-American man from Indianapolis who showed up for a few hours on Saturday.

Several participants admitted they weren't quite sure how to resolve this problem. Many prominent African-Americans have been vocal in their opposition to "choice," in part because the movement historically has been associated with segregation forces, in part because they fear that a successful "choice" movement would mean that large numbers of minority children would be trapped in even worse public schools than is now the case, in part because African-Americans are for the first time gaining positions of authority in many public school districts only to find that many private school "choice" supporters don't even support the concept of a public school system, and in part because the private "choice" movement is run primarily by white Republicans. As one conference participant from the conservative Indiana Policy Institute said privately, "You've got to get white Republicans out of this debate, and get the Polly Williamses and recognizable liberal Democrats in." Williams, an African-American representative in the Wisconsin legislature who sponsored the bill instituting Milwaukee's publicly funded "choice" experiment, has become the darling of the conservative speaker circuit. She spoke at the conference and underscored her importance to the "choice" movement. As a Black single mother, she said, "I can do and say a lot of things that you can't."

"Choice" organizers also face the problem that many white suburbanites, while they might not admit it publicly, are opposed to "choice" because they don't want inner-city children of color coming to their schools. Tancredo said this was one of the problems in the Colorado referen-



Credit: Susan Lina Ruggles

### What policies will ensure equality?

dum, although it never was discussed openly because people did not want to be branded as racist. Glavin of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation said some of the people he found hardest to convince were the middle and upper middle class whites in the suburbs. "I had one senior executive, with one of the largest corporations in Atlanta, say to me: 'Now look Matt, do you really want those kids going to school with your kids?'," Glavin said.

David Boaz of the conservative CATO Institute, was the most explicit in terms of one possible way of dealing with this problem. The opposition of suburbanites, he said, "may be an argument to try a choice plan that only applies within the confines of cities over one million, or something like that. So that if you're doing it [a publicly funded voucher plan] in Michigan, it only applies within Detroit and the voucher can only be cashed in at a

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# Complex Web of Conservatives Fosters Movement

The privately funded voucher movement may seem just one more example of corporate philanthropy, similar to the scholarships and tutoring programs that businesses have always sponsored to try to prove their civic-mindedness.

But integrally linked to this movement is a complex web of right-wing think tanks and foundations led by unabashedly conservative ideologues such as Michael Joyce, president of the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee.

The Indianapolis conference (see story, page 4) was sponsored in cooperation with three prominent conservative groups: the Philanthropy Roundtable, the State Policy Network, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

It would be impossible to outline all the interrelationships between these and similar groups around the country. But even a brief look reveals a well-funded network of like-minded people who believe that the problems in the United States stem from government programs and can only be solved by an unbridled marketplace. The groups routinely target not only the "monopoly" of public

schools, but environmental regulation, the "myth" of growing poverty, national health care proposals, and civil rights legislation. One of their main strategic goals is privatization, not just of education but of basic government services such as roads and airports.

The Philanthropy Roundtable was founded in 1987 as a way for conservative grantmakers to coordinate their efforts. The chairman of the board is Michael Joyce of the Bradley Foundation. Other directors include representatives from well-known conservative foundations such as the John M. Olin Foundation in New York and the JM Foundation in New York. Members of the Roundtable have been active in funding national, state and local conservative think tanks.

Prior to 1984, conservative foundations concentrated on investing in national think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, the CATO Institute, and the Heritage Foundation. The founding of the Chicago-based Heartland Institute in 1984 was the start of efforts to also develop state and local conservative think tanks that focus on a free-market approach to social issues.

## The voucher movement is integrally linked to a complex web of right-wing think tanks and foundations.

The state think tank movement took a step forward this year with the founding of the State Policy Network, which provides coordination and resources for the conservative state think tanks. Its president is Matt Glavin of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, which started the privately funded voucher initiative in Atlanta, and its executive director is Byron Lamm, who was one of the organizers and moderators at the Indianapolis school "choice" conference. Other board members include representatives from the JM Foundation (also represented on the board of directors of the Philanthropy Roundtable), the Heartland Institute, and the Adolph Coors Foundation.

The Philanthropy Roundtable newsletter carried a front-page story this fall on the State Policy Network. Entitled *The State Policy Movement: A New Frontier*, it lists 31 conservative state and local think tanks. The September 1992

newsletter of the Heartland Institute has a state-by-state list of 101 organizations that conduct and disseminate "market-oriented research and commentary on state and local public policy issues." Most of them are less than three years old, and almost all have neutral-sounding names such as the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, or the Resource Institute of Oklahoma, or the Iowa Public Policy Group.

While both the Philanthropy Roundtable and the State Policy Network often describe their missions in vague-sounding language such as promoting "private initiative," "individual responsibility," and fostering a "vibrant private sector," their politics are often far more raw.

Take Michael Joyce. Joyce is head of the Bradley Foundation, one of the largest foundations in the country and a key source of funding for conservative thinkers. With an estimated \$26 million in annual grants, the Bradley Foundation carries significant clout that it directs toward conservative causes. To cite just three examples of its involvement in the "choice" movement in Milwaukee alone: the foundation was the principal financial

supporter of the Milwaukee private voucher initiative, provided the money this past year for the Virgil C. Blum Center for the Parental Freedom in Education at Marquette University, and helped found the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, which routinely provides "research" and articles critiquing the public schools and promoting private school "choice."

In an opinion article in *The Milwaukee Journal* on June 21, 1992, Joyce explained the private voucher initiative in terms that went far beyond providing money for low-income parents. Launching a broadside against public education, Joyce charged that public school curriculum reflects "everything from environmental extremism, to virulent feminism, to racial separatism, to a radical skepticism about moral and spiritual truths..."

The State Policy Network is also prone to promoting similarly blunt ideological broadsides. A new phenomenon, the State Policy Network has a limited number of initiatives. Its first project was a book, *Gridlock in Government: How to Break the Stagnation in America*, that is being distributed through its state affiliates. Following are two representative views from the book:

- A chapter on "Resegregating America" begins: "The Los Angeles riots in 1992 were not just a protest over the failure to convict the police who beat Rodney King; they were a sign of the social sickness and criminals that are endemic in low-income minority communities."
- The chapter later criticizes "wasteful, silly ideas" such as providing birth control information and devices to teenagers. It complains: "The problem of sickly babies — who are cared for at great expense by the taxpayers — does not come from a lack of free medical care. It comes from a lack of caring by irresponsible mothers."

If a private voucher movement comes to your city, its likely connections to groups with such views will purposefully be kept obscure. But that doesn't mean that the connections aren't there. You'll just have to do a little investigation. □

Barbara Miner

## An Interview with Howard Zinn

# Why Students Should Study History

The following is condensed from an interview with Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States*. He was interviewed by Barbara Miner of Rethinking Schools.

### Why should students study history?

I started studying history with one view in mind: to look for answers to the issues and problems I saw in the world about me. By the time I went to college I had worked in a shipyard, had been in the Air Force, had been in a war. I came to history asking questions about war and peace, about wealth and poverty, about racial division.

Sure, there's a certain interest in inspecting the past and it can be fun, sort of like a detective story. I can make an argument for knowledge for its own sake as something that can add to your life. But while that's good, it is small in relation to the very large objective of trying to understand and do something about the issues that face us in the world today.

Students should be encouraged to go into history in order to come out of it, and should be discouraged from going into history and getting lost in it, as some historians do.

### What do you see as some of the major problems in how U.S. history has been taught in this country?

One major problem has been the intense focus on US history in isolation from the world. This is a problem that all nations have, their nationalistic focus on their own history, and it goes to absurd lengths. Some states in this country even require a year-long course in the history of that state.

But even if you are willing to see the United States in relation to world history, you face the problem that we have not looked at the world in an equitable way. We have concentrated on the Western world, in fact on Western Europe. I remember coming into my first class in Spelman College in Atlanta in 1956 and finding that there was no required course in black history, or Asian or African history, but there was a required course in the history of England. And there on the board was this

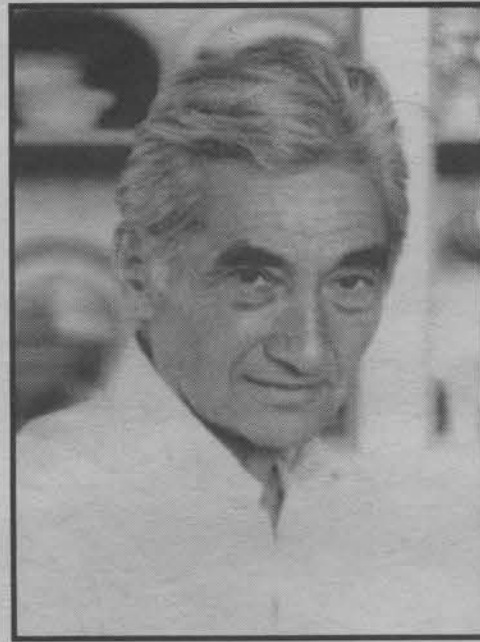


chart of the Tudors and the Stuarts, the dynasties of England.

For the United States, emphasis has been particularly glaring in terms of Latin America, which is that part of the world closest to us and with which we've had the most to do economically and politically.

Another glaring problem has been the emphasis in teaching American history through the eyes of the important and powerful people, through the Presidents, the Congress, the Supreme Court, the generals, the industrialists. History textbooks don't say, "We are going to tell the story of the Mexican War from the standpoint of the generals," but when they tell us it was a great military victory, that's exactly what they are doing.

### Taking that as an example, if one were to have a more inclusive view of the war with Mexico, what would be some of the themes and perspectives one would include?

The Mexican War is an example of how one event raises so many issues. You'd have to see the war first of all as more than a military action. So often the history of war is dominated by the story of battles, and this

is a way of diverting attention from the political factors behind a war. It's possible to concentrate upon the battles of the Mexican War and just to talk about the triumphant march into Mexico City, and not talk about the relationship of the Mexican War to slavery and to the acquisition of territories which might possibly be slave territories.

Another thing that is neglected in the Mexican War is the viewpoint of the ordinary soldiers. The soldiers who had volunteered for the Mexican War — you didn't need a draft because so many people in the working classes were so destitute that they would join the military on the promise of a little bit of pay and mustering out money and a little bit of prestige — the volunteers went into it not really knowing the bloodshed it would involve. And then so many of them deserted. For example, seven regiments of General Winfield Scott deserted on the road to Mexico City.

You should tell the story of the Massachusetts volunteers who went into the Mexican War. Half of them died, and the half who returned were invited to a homecoming party and when a commanding officer got up to address the gathering, they booed him off the platform.

I think it's a good idea also to do something which isn't done anywhere so far as I know in histories in any country, and that is: tell the story of the war from the standpoint of the other side, of "the enemy." To tell the story of the Mexican War from the standpoint of the Mexicans means to ask: How did they feel about having 40% of their territory taken away from them as a result of the war? How did they view the incident that President Polk used as a reason for the beginning of the war? Did it look real or manufactured to them?

You'd also have to talk about the people in the United States who protested against the war. That would be the time to bring up Henry Thoreau and his essay, *Civil Disobedience*.

You'd have to look at Congress and how it behaved. You'd have to look at Abraham Lincoln, who was in the House of Representatives in the Mexican War. You'd

learn a lot about politicians and politics because you'd see that Abraham Lincoln on the one hand spoke up against the war, but on the other hand voted to give money to finance the war. This is so important because this is something that is repeated again and again in American history: the feeble opposition in Congress to presidential wars, and then the voting of funds for whatever war the President has initiated.

### How do you prevent history lessons from becoming a recitation of dates and battles and Congresspersons and Presidents?

You can take any incident in American history and enrich it and find parallels with today. One important thing is not to concentrate on chronological order, but to go back and forth and find similarities and analogies.

You should ask students if anything in a particular historical event reminds them of something they read in the newspapers or see on television about the world today. When you press students to make connections, to abstract from the uniqueness of a particular historical event and find something it has in common with another event — then history becomes alive, not just past but present.

And, of course, you must raise the controversial questions and ask students, "Was it right for us to take Mexican territory? Should we be proud of that, should we celebrate that?" History teachers often think they must avoid judgements of right and wrong because, after all, those are matters of subjective opinions, those are issues on which students will disagree and teachers will disagree.

But it's the areas of disagreement that are the most important. Questions of right and wrong and justice are exactly the questions that should be raised all the time. When students are asked, "Is this right, is this wrong?" then it becomes interesting, then they can have a debate — especially if they learn that there's no simple, absolute, agreed-upon, universal answer. It's not like giving them multiple choice questions where they are right or wrong. I think that's a tremendous advance in their understanding of what education is.

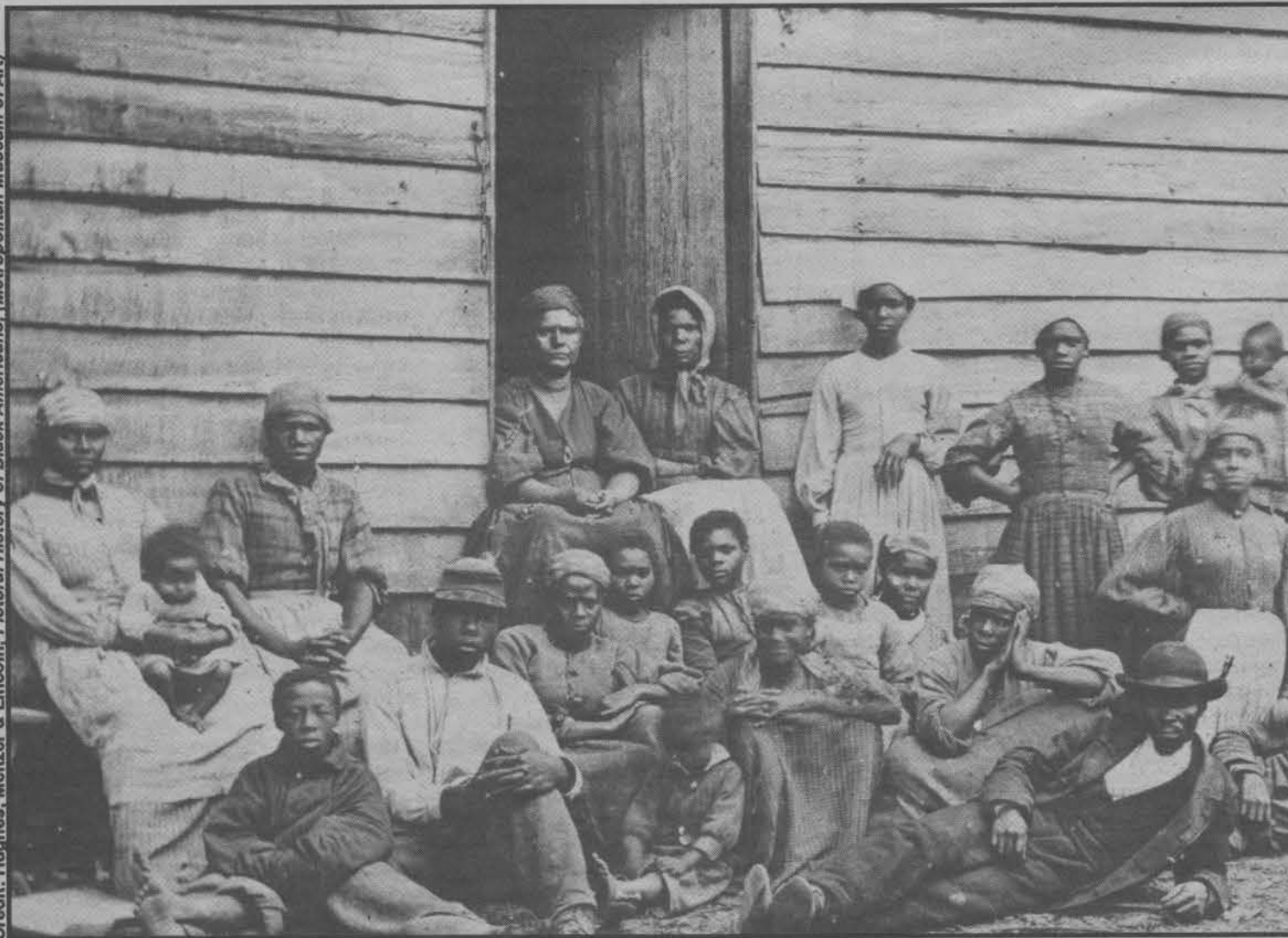
Teachers must also address the problem that people have been mis-educated to become dependent on government, to think that their supreme act as citizens is to go to the polls and vote every two years or four years. That's where the history of social movements comes in. Teachers should dwell on Shay's Rebellion, on colonial rebellions, on the abolitionist movement, on the populist movement, on the labor movement, and so on, and make sure these social movements don't get lost in the overall story of presidents and Congresses and Supreme Courts. Emphasizing social and protest movements in the making of history gives students a feeling that they as citizens are the most important actors in history.

Students, for example, should learn that during the Depression there were strikes and demonstrations all over the country. And it was that turmoil and protest that created the atmosphere in which Roosevelt and Congress passed Social Security and unemployment insurance and housing subsidies and so on.

### How can teachers foster critical thinking so that students don't merely memorize a new, albeit more progressive, set of facts?

Substituting one indoctrination for another is a danger and it's very hard to deal with. After all, the teacher, no matter how hard she or he tries, is the dominant figure in the classroom and has the power of authority and of grades. It's easy for the teacher to fall into the trap of bullying

Credit: Hughes, Meltzer & Lincoln, *Pictorial History of Black Americans*, (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Slaves abandoned by South Carolina plantation owner, 1862.

students into accepting one set of facts or ideas. It takes hard work and delicate dealings with students to overcome that.

The way I've tried to deal with that problem is to make it clear to the students that when we study history we are dealing with controversial issues with no one, absolute, god-like answer. And that I, as a teacher, have my opinion and they can have their opinions, and that I, as a teacher, will try to present as much information as I can but that I may leave out information. I try to make them understand that while there are experts on facts, on little things, on the big issues, on the controversies and the issues of right and wrong and justice, there are no experts and their opinion is as good as mine.

**But how do you then foster a sense of justice and avoid the trap of relativity that, "Well, some people say this and some people say that?"**

I find such relativity especially true on the college level, where there's a great tendency to indecisiveness. People are unwilling to take a stand on a moral issue because, well, there's this side and there's that side.

I deal with this by example. I never simply present both sides and leave it at that. I take a stand. If I'm dealing with Columbus, I say, look, there are these people who say that we shouldn't judge Columbus by the standards of the 20th century. But my view is that basic moral standards are not different for the 20th century or the 15th century.

I don't simply lay history out on a platter and say, "I don't care what you chose, they're both valid." I let them know, "No, I care what you chose; I don't think they're both valid. But you don't have to agree with me." I want them to know that if people don't take a stand the world will remain unchanged, and who wants that?

**Are there specific ways that teachers can foster an anti-racist perspective?**

To a great extent, this moral objective is not considered in teaching history. I think people have to be given the facts of slavery, the facts of racial segregation, the facts of government complicity in racial segregation, the facts of the fight for equality. But that is not enough.

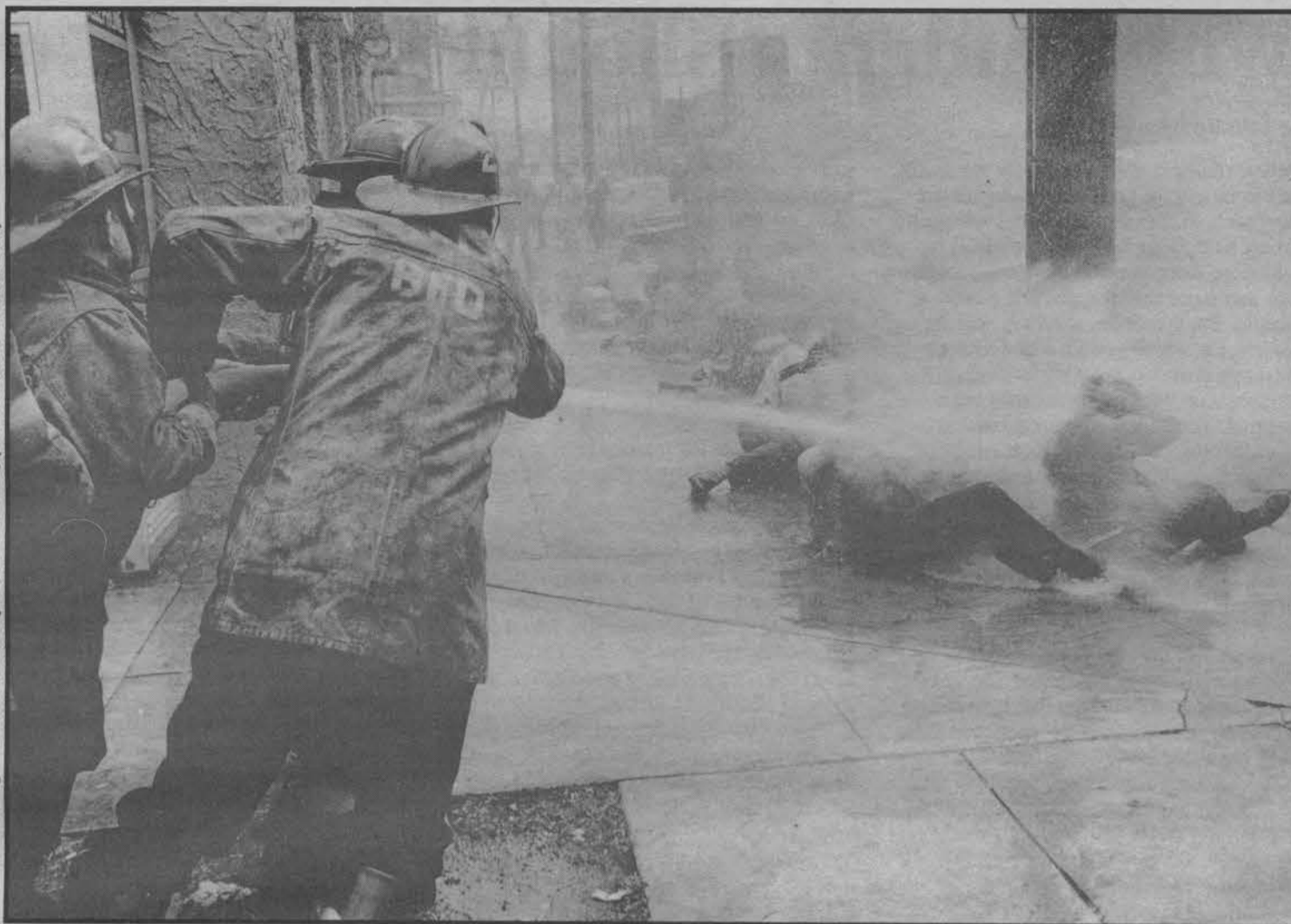
I think students need to be aroused emotionally on the issue of equality. They have to try to feel what it was like, to be a slave, to be jammed into slave ships, to be separated from your family. Novels, poems, autobiographies, memoirs, the reminiscences of ex-slaves, the letters that slaves wrote, the writings of Frederick Douglass — I think they have to be introduced as much as possible. Students should learn the words of people themselves, to feel their anger, their indignation.

In general, I don't think there has been enough use of literature in history. People should read Richard Wright's *Black Boy*; they should read the poems of Countee Cullen; they should read the novels of Alice Walker, the poems of Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansbury's *A Raisin in the Sun*. These writings have an emotional impact that can't be found in an ordinary recitation of history.

It is especially important that students learn about the relationship of the United States government to slavery and race.

It's very easy to fall into the view that slavery and racial segregation were a southern problem. The federal government is very often exempted from responsibility for the problem, and is presented as a benign force helping black people on the road to equality. In our time, students are taught how Eisenhower sent his troops to Little Rock, Ark., and Kennedy sent troops to Oxford, Miss., and Congress passed civil rights laws.

Yet the federal government is very often



Credit: Civil Rights Education Project, Free at Last, (Charles Moore/Black Star)

**Birmingham, AL, 1963: Demonstrators attacked by the force of water powerful enough to rip bark from trees.**

an obstacle to resolving those problems of race, and when it enters it comes in late in the picture. Abraham Lincoln was not the initiator of the movement against slavery but a follower of a movement that had developed for 30 years by the time he became president in 1860; it was the anti-slavery movement that was the major force creating the atmosphere in which emancipation took place following the Civil War. And it was the President and Congress and the Supreme Court that ignored the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments after they were passed. In the 1960s it wasn't Johnson and Kennedy who were the leaders and initiators of the movement for race equality, but it was black people.

**In addition to focusing on social movements and having a more consciously anti-racist perspective, what are some other thematic ways in which the teaching of history must change?**

I think the issue of class and class conflict needs to be addressed more honestly because it is ignored in traditional nationalist history. This is true not just of the United States but of other countries. Nationhood is a cover for extreme conflicts among classes in society, in our country, from its founding, from the making of the Constitution. Too often, there's a tendency to overlook these conflicts, and concentrate on the creation of a national identity.

**How does a teacher deal with the intersection of race, class, and gender in terms of U.S. history, in particular that the white working-class has often been complicit, consciously or unconsciously, in some very unforgivable actions?**

The complicity of poor white people in racism, the complicity of males in sexism, is a very important issue. It seems to me that complicity can't be understood without showing the intense hardships that poor white people faced in this country, making it easier for them to look for scapegoats for their condition. You have to recognize the problems of white working people in order to understand why they turn racist, because they aren't born racist.

When discussing the Civil War, teachers should point out that only a small percentage of the white population of the South owned slaves. The rest of the white population was poor and they were driven to support slavery and to be racist by the messages of those who controlled society — that they would be better off if the Negroes were put in a lower position, and

that those calling for black equality were threatening the lives of these ordinary white people.

In the history of labor struggles, you should show how blacks and whites were used against one another, how white workers would go out on strike and then black people, desperate themselves for jobs, would be brought in to replace the white workers, how all-white craft unions excluded black workers, and how all this creates murderously intense racial antagonisms. So the class and race issues are very much intertwined, as is the gender issue.

**History teachers often think they must avoid judgements of right and wrong because those are matters of subjective opinions. But questions of right and wrong and justice are exactly the questions that should be raised all the time.**

One of the ways of giving some satisfaction to men who are themselves exploited is to make them masters in their own household. So they may be humiliated on the job, but they come back home and humiliate their wives and their children. There's a wonderful short story by a black woman writer, Ann Petry, "Like a Winding Sheet" that should be required reading in school. It's about a black man who is humiliated on the job and comes home and, on the flimsiest of reasons, beats his wife. The story is told in such a way as to make you really understand the pent up anger that explodes inside a family as a result of what happens out in the world. In all these instances of racial and sexual mistreatment,

it is important for students to understand that the roots of such hostility are social, environmental, situational, and are not an inevitability of human nature. It is also important to show how these antagonisms so divide people from one another as to make it difficult for them to solve their common problems in united action.

**How can we explain the roots of this complicity in racism and sexism by white working class people without falling into the trap of condoning it?**

That's always a problem: how do you explain something without justifying it? That issue, as a theoretical issue, needs to be explained because it's a common confusion. You need to make the point again and again that trying to understand why people do something is not the same as justifying it. And you need to give specific historical examples of that problem, or, as I suggested, literary examples.

**How can you teach white students to take an anti-racist perspective that isn't based merely on guilt over the things that white people have done to people of color?**

If such a perspective is based only on guilt, it doesn't have a secure foundation. It has to be based on empathy and on self-interest, on an understanding that the divisions between black and white have not just resulted in the exploitation of black people, even though they've been the greatest victims, but have prevented whites and blacks from getting together to bring about the social change that would benefit them all. Showing the self-interest is also important in order to avoid the patronizing view of feeling sorry for someone, of giving somebody equality because you feel guilty about what has been done to them.

At the same time, to approach the issue merely on the basis of self-interest would be wrong, because people should learn to empathize with other people even where there is no visible, immediate self-interest.

**In response to concerns about multiculturalism, there's more lip service to include events and perspectives affecting women and people of color. But often it's presented as more facts and people to learn, without any fundamental change in perspective. What would be the approach of a truly anti-racist, multicultural perspective in US history?**

I've noticed this problem in some of the

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# Why Students Should Study History

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new textbooks, which obviously are trying to respond to the need for a multicultural approach. What I find is a bland eclecticism where everything has equal weight. You add more facts, you add more continents, you add more cultures, you add more people. But then it becomes a confusing melange in which you've added a lot of different elements but without any real emphasis on what had previously been omitted. You're left with a kind of unemotional, cold combination salad.

You need the equivalent of affirmative action in education. What affirmative action does is to say, look, things have been slanted one way for a long time. We're going to pay special attention to this person or to this group of people because they have been left out for so long.

People ask me why in my book, *A People's History of the United States*, I did not simply take the things that I put in and add them to the orthodox approaches so, as they put it, the book would be better balanced. But there's a way in which this

so-called balance leaves people nowhere, with no moral sensibility, no firm convictions, no outrage, no indignation, no energy to go anywhere.

I think it is important to pay special attention to the history of black people, of Indians, of women, in a way that highlights not only the facts but the emotional intensity of such issues.

**Is it possible for history to be objective?**

Objectivity is neither possible nor desirable.

It's not possible because all history is subjective, all history represents a point of view. History is always a selection from an infinite number of facts and everybody makes the selection differently, based on their values and what they think is important. Since it's not possible to be objective, you should be honest about that.

Objectivity is not desirable because if we want to have an effect on the world, we need to emphasize those things which will make

students more active citizens and more moral people.

**One of the problems for high school history teachers is they may have five periods and 30 kids in each class, and before you know it they're dealing with 150 students. What types of projects and approaches can they use?**

The most important thing is to get students to do independent reading and research. Tell the students, "Pick something that interests you, pick out a person that interests you." Your job as teacher is to present them with a wide spectrum of events and people, and not just the usual heroes of history but all sorts of people or incidents that they may never have heard of but that might intrigue them. I find that when students have a research project of their own they can get excited about it — especially if they are allowed to choose from a complex set of possibilities.

**How can a progressive teacher promote a radical perspective within a bureaucratic, conservative institution? Teachers sometimes either push the limits so far that they alienate their colleagues or get fired, or they're so afraid that they tone down what they really think. How can a teacher resolve this dilemma?**

The problem certainly exists on the college and university level — people want to get tenure, they want to keep teaching, they want to get promoted, they want to get salary raises, and so there are all these economic punishments if they do something that looks outlandish and radical and different. But I've always believed that the main problem with college and university teachers has been self-censorship. I suspect that the same thing is true in the high schools, although you have to be more sympathetic with high school teachers because they operate in a much more repressive atmosphere. I've seen again and again where college and university teachers don't really have a problem in, for instance, using my *People's History* in their classrooms, but high school teachers always have a problem. They can't get it officially adopted, they have to get permission, they have to photocopy parts of it themselves in order to pass it out to the students, they have to worry about parents complaining,

about what the head of the department or the principal or the school superintendent will say.

But I still believe, based on a lot of contact with high school teachers over the past few years, that while there's a danger of becoming overly assertive and insensitive to how others might view you, the most common behavior is timidity. Teachers withdraw and use the real fact of outside control as an excuse for teaching in the orthodox way.

Teachers need to take risks. The problem is how to minimize those risks. One important way is to make sure that you present material in class making it clear that it is subjective, that it is controversial, that you are not laying down the law for students. Another important thing is to be extremely tolerant of students who disagree with your views, or students who express racist or sexist ideas. I don't mean tolerant in the sense of not challenging such ideas, but tolerant in the sense of treating them as human beings. It's important to develop a reputation that you don't give kids poor grades on the basis of their disagreements with you. You need to create an atmosphere of freedom in the classroom.

It's also important to talk with other teachers to gain support and encouragement, to organize. Where there are teachers unions, those are logical places for teachers to support and defend one another. Where there are not teachers unions, teachers should always think how they can organize and create a collective strength.

**Teachers don't always know where to get those other perspectives. Do you have any tips?**

The orthodox perspective is easy to get. But once teachers begin to look for other perspectives, once they start out on that road, they will quickly be led from one thing to another to another.

**So it's not as daunting as people might think?**

No. It's all there. It's in the library. □

*Howard Zinn has taught history and political science at Spelman College in Atlanta and at Boston University. He is the author of A People's History of the United States, The Politics of History, Declarations of Independence and other works.*



Credit: Jordan, Greenblatt, Bowes, The Americans

**A rebel farmer attacks a government supporter during Shay's Rebellion of 1786.**

## Resources For Teaching U.S. History

By Howard Zinn

Following is an annotated list of 15 books that teachers will find useful as resources in teaching American history. It is by no means the list, just one possible list to help enrich a teacher's factual knowledge and provide some provocative points of view.

Aptheker, Herbert (editor) (1990). *A Documentary History of the Negro People of the United States, Vols. 1-4*: Citadel Press. An extremely valuable, I am tempted to say indispensable, collection, not at all dry, as are some documentaries.

Brown, Dee (editor) (1971). *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. A moving collection of statements and recollections by American Indians which gives you their point of view in a vivid, passionate way.

Chomsky, Noam (1992). *Year 501*. South End Press. Here, the

nation's most distinguished intellectual rebel gives us huge amounts of information about recent American foreign policy, and puts it into historical perspective, going back to the Columbus era.

Drinnon, Richard (1990). *Facing West*. Schocken. A brilliantly written account of imperial expansion by the United States, not just on the American continent against the Indians, but overseas in the Philippines and in Vietnam.

Foner, Eric (1988). *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*. Harper & Row. A rich, vivid, epic-like narrative of those extraordinary years 1863 to 1877, by one of the leading "new historians".

Hampton, Henry, Steve Fayer, with Sarah Flynn (editor) (1990). *Voices of Freedom*. Bantam. An oral history of the black movement for civil rights, from the 1950s to the 1980s, much of its

material coming out of the research done for the TV documentary, *Eyes on the Prize*.

Hofstadter, Richard (1974). *The American Political Tradition*. Vintage. A classic of American history, beautifully written, an iconoclastic view of American political leaders, including Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson, and the two Roosevelts, suggesting more consensus than difference at the top of the political hierarchy.

Hope Franklin, John (1974). *From Slavery to Freedom*. Knopf. The classic overview of Afro-American history by the nation's leading black historian.

Lerner, Gerda (editor) (1977). *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*. Random House. A rare glimpse into the lives, the minds, the spirits of that doubly oppressed group, ranging from slavery to our time, a wonderful sourcebook.

Lerner, Gerda (editor) (1977). *The Female Experience: An American Documentary*. Bobbs-Merrill. A marvelous collection of the writings of women throughout U.S. history, dealing with childhood, marriage, housework, old age, education, industrial work, politics and sexual freedom.

Lynd, Staughton (editor) (1966). *Nonviolence in America*. Bobbs-Merrill. A valuable examination of the ideas, in their own words, of early Quaker dissidents, abolitionists, anarchists, progressives, conscientious objectors, trade unionists, civil rights workers and pacifists, from the colonial period to the 1960s.

Martinez, Elizabeth (editor) (1991). *500 Anos del Pueblo Chicano: 500 Years of Chicano History*. Albuquerque: Southwest Organizing Project. Full of marvelous photos but also an exciting, bilingual text loaded with valuable history.

Nash, Gary (1970). *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America*. Prentice Hall. A pioneering work of "multi-culturalism" dealing with racial interactions in the colonial period.

Takaki, Ronald (1989). *Strangers from a Distant Shore*. Penguin. Gives us what has been glaringly missing from our traditional histories, the story of Asian-Americans, from the early years of the republic through the dramatic and tragic experiences of Chinese and Japanese immigrants, to the recent arrival of refugees from Southeast Asia.

Yellen, Samuel (1974). *American Labor Struggles*. Pathfinder. This brings to life the great labor conflicts of American history, from the railroad strikes of 1877 to the San Francisco general strike of 1934.

*Editors note: Don't forget Zinn's A People's History of the United States (1981), Harper and Row. □*



# RETHINKING THE CLASSROOM



## U.S. Constitution Not Engraved In Stone

By Bill Bigelow

I began hearing about "The Test" when I was a fifth-grader in California. It was whispered about, like a dirty joke. But no one laughed. We all knew that the student who failed the eighth-grade Constitution test would be the student who failed to enter high school the following year.

When eighth grade arrived, my Constitution mentor was Mr. Duffy, a stocky ex-Marine who droned on about checks and balances and curious little phrases like habeas corpus. But Mr. Duffy was in love with the document. For him, it was a thing of beauty to be examined dutifully and then simply to be admired. Mr. Duffy chose to ignore that the Constitution, when written, was tremendously controversial and intensely criticized; all that he required of students was that we parrot his adoring interpretations.

Later, when I became a social studies teacher, I discovered that the Mr. Duffys of the world live on in U.S. history textbooks. Most of those books present the Constitution as a secular Ten Commandments: James Madison brought the document from the mountain and it was good. The books helpfully point out that not everyone agreed on the best plan for government, but through debate and compromise "Right" triumphed.

What makes this treatment of the Constitution so pernicious is the effect on students. Removed from its social context, cast as an inevitability, the document is elevated to an almost holy status, above analysis and critique. Students become receptacles to be filled with constitutional wisdom or memorizers: "We the people, in order to form. . ."

In my classes at Jefferson High School, students and I travel back to 1787, to the Constitutional Convention — but with a twist. In our convention, we imagine that instead of only lawyers, moneylenders and plantation owners in attendance, there are also poor farmers, workers and enslaved African-Americans. Students take on these roles as they argue heatedly and build

alliances toward their respective visions of the good society. We don't attempt a full rewrite of the Constitution, but choose several subjects that were controversial — in the country as a whole, if not in the actual convention.

For example, students in their various roles consider whether the slave trade should be continued, whether Northerners should be forced to turn over escaped slaves and crucially, whether slavery should remain legal.

In our more representative convention, an interesting thing generally happens. Despite eloquent pleas from plantation owners — often supported by other wealthy social groups — an alliance of slaves, workers and farmers abolishes slavery.

"So what really happened?" students demand. They make an interesting discovery: The Constitution does not even contain the word "slave." Instead, slaves appear euphemistically throughout the text as in Article 4, Section 2: "No person held in service or labor in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due." Students learn from this nasty little clause how the constitution they created differs from the real thing.

Elsewhere in the document, students learn that for purposes of congressional representation an enslaved individual is to count as three-fifths of a person. Our textbook, "People and Our Country" (Holt, Rinehart and Winston) refers to this as a compromise. "What compromise?" my students in the role of slaves ask. "We don't care how we're counted, we want to be free!"

Thus, the word "compromise," so often and so casually sprinkled into discussions about the Constitution, comes into sharper focus for students. A compromise between privileged elites can be seen to maintain an indefinite purgatory for those at the bottom.

My student Founding Fathers and Mothers also debate questions of economic justice. The struggle between debtors and

lenders raged in the 1780s. A Revolutionary War captain, Daniel Shays, with a thousand farmers in western Massachusetts, shut the courts to prevent the poverty-stricken — many of whom were former soldiers — from being jailed for their debts. Shays' rebellion cast a shadow over the constitutional proceedings in Philadelphia held the following year. My students consider whether states should allow farmers to pay debts in kind, with produce, to ease their financial burdens.

**What makes most treatment of the Constitution so pernicious is the effect on students. Removed from its social context, the document is elevated to an almost holy status, above analysis and critique.**

Again the alliance of the poor — slaves, farmers, and workers — usually prevails, and students search through the actual document to find what Madison, Hamilton, Jay, et al. decided. A seemingly innocuous phrase in Article I provides the answer: "No payment in kind was to be tolerated. Nor would states be allowed to issue currency to ease farmers' economic plight."

What students begin to realize is that the framers, meeting in 1787, made very definite choices; the Constitution took sides.

But why these particular sides? Inevitably, students want to learn who wrote the Constitution and what social groups they represented.

This is another thorny question sidestepped by the textbooks. For example, one widely used high school text ("A Proud Nation," McDougall, Littell) describes the Constitution's framers as "brilliant, dedicated leaders" but skims over their social status. In contrast, my students and I take the direct approach — we look at where the writers lived, and what they did for a living.

Nearly 40 percent owned slaves, often on more than one plantation. Many were wealthy lawyers, others successful merchants. Not a single "brilliant, dedicated leader" was a common farmer or worker. All were white; all were male.

"What is your instructional objective in this lesson?," vice principals are fond of asking. The goal, of course, is neither to condemn nor praise the Constitution and its authors. Rather, treating the Constitution as a product of social conflict and written by partisans in that conflict — brilliance and dedication notwithstanding — implicitly gives students permission to become thinkers. No longer intimidated by the document's holy status, they can analyze and make judgments. Students also learn that they can be social actors, that they can participate in determining characteristics of a good society.

Critiquing sacred cows and empowering young people: I'm afraid Mr. Duffy would be disappointed. □

Bill Bigelow is a Rethinking Schools editorial associate and teaches social studies at Jefferson High School in Portland, OR. This article was written in 1987 for The Portland Oregonian, as part of a series commemorating the bicentennial of the Constitution.

### Good-bye Columbus, Hello Classroom

With this issue, *Rethinking Schools* retires the column *Rethinking Columbus*, and introduces a new column, *Rethinking the Classroom*.

We'd like to thank Bill Bigelow for his invaluable work contributions to the Columbus column. Along with editorial associate Linda Christensen, Bigelow will oversee the new column.

The column is designed to provide ideas that teachers can use in their classroom. It will focus on fostering an anti-racist, multicultural curriculum that encourages students to better understand and change the world.

We encourage teachers to submit ideas for *Rethinking the Classroom*. Please send submissions to: *Rethinking Schools*, *Rethinking the Classroom*, 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212. 414-964-9646.

## Questions About the Constitution

By June Jordan

Certain questions about this country's history must be asked by every American child. I propose the following analysis of the Constitution of the United States as a non-negotiable component of compulsory public education:

1. Who were the different peoples alive on this continent when the Constitution was written?
2. What was the comparative size of each group? What economic and civil liberties

did each group have?

3. What kinds and amounts of armed force did each group possess and maintain?
4. What were the territorial habits and objectives of these different peoples?
5. How many of each of these different peoples participated in the design and/or enactment of the United States Constitution?
6. How did each Article of the U.S. Constitution benefit, exclude, or punish each of the different peoples of the United States?
7. Why were the Amendments (the Bill of

Rights) necessary?

8. Who were the beneficiaries of the Amendments?
9. What would you propose as a New Bill of Rights?
10. Who would benefit?
11. Why would you propose these changes? Fit your answer into a detailed vision of America as a democratic state. □

The above is adapted from a brief essay in the quarterly book review, *The Hungry Mind Review*, 1648 Grand Ave., St. Paul, MN 55015. Subscriptions are \$12 a year.

# When Slavery is a "Life-style," What Happens to Mexicans? How Calif. Texts Portray Latinos

By Elizabeth Martinez

When we read a social studies text for 5th graders which refers to slavery as a "life-style," we might think it's some book from the 1940s or 50s. Alas, such descriptions can be found in the glossy new series published by Houghton Mifflin and adopted for California schools in 1990-91. Even worse, this series was supposed to mark a major break with the longtime Eurocentric textbook tradition.

California had invited publishers to submit new histories for grades K-8 as part of an overall effort to upgrade its instructional materials and methods. Houghton Mifflin was the only house that submitted books for all those grades. It also was the only house that prepared books specifically intended to fit into a new history and social studies "framework," or curriculum, that California had adopted.

The framework called for pupils to study history much earlier and more extensively than in the past. Recognizing that the majority of California's 3.7 million elementary and junior high pupils are now young people of color, the framework also required that textbooks "accurately portray the cultural and racial diversity of our society." (Nevertheless, the framework, written by conservative historian Diane Ravitch, by no means advocated equality between peoples.) The main author of the Houghton Mifflin series is Gary Nash, a UCLA professor with a reputation for advocating multiculturalism.

California's Board of Education adopted the Houghton Mifflin series and an additional 8th-grade history from Holt, Rinehart & Winston despite protests from thousands of people in virtually every racial and ethnic sector (including Muslims, who had been the first to object) as well as gays, lesbians, and the disabled. Since local school districts are not legally obliged to buy the state-approved books in California, the struggle continued.

Eventually most local school boards adopted the approved texts, sometimes with supplemental readings. In Oakland, where students are almost 92% of color, both the Houghton Mifflin series and the Holt, Rinehart & Winston title were rejected. (The task of finding satisfactory substitutes has yet to be resolved.) In San Francisco, where 83% of the student population are of color, the new books were finally adopted on the condition that supplemental readings be used. However, the school district placed just one copy of each supplemental title in each school.

Behind all the highly publicized debate one can assume some heavy-duty politicking. Houghton Mifflin calculated that the California market alone could yield \$52.9 million in sales of the textbook series. With so much at stake, Houghton Mifflin hired a public relations firm for the first time in its history to help win state approval.

Those defending the Houghton Mifflin titles claimed that they were a vast improvement over the past, with much more information about people of color and their perspectives. "We have 80 pages on African history for 12-year olds," Gary Nash pointed out. But a numerical increase in textual references or images doesn't promote multiculturalism if the content leaves a fundamentally Eurocentric worldview in place. The occasional inclusion of dissenting views from people of color may give some balance to isolated passages; it does not alter the dominant perspective.

The worldview put forth in these texts rests on defining the United States as "a nation of immigrants." This view sees Native Americans as the first "immigrants," based on their having come across the Bering Strait from Asia (but this theory is rejected by many Indians, a disagreement not mentioned in the series). After Indians come Africans (but weren't they brought here in chains?) and then Mexicans (but wasn't their homeland seized by Anglo force?). Europeans and Asians round out the list of so-called immigrants.

The immigrant model has usually included the "melting pot" metaphor; the Houghton Mifflin series rejects that now tarnished image in favor of the "salad bowl," which allows different peoples to retain their ethnic identity and culture inside one big unified society. But how different is the bowl from the pot?

Both ignore issues of power and domination, such as which groups in society have power and which don't, or which groups dominate and which are dominated. Both are molded by a national identity firmly rooted in an Anglo-American culture and perspective. As critics of the textbooks pointed out, the norm to which so-called immigrants are supposed to relate is white, Anglo-Saxon, and usually Protestant — in short, WASP, and the Mexican-American, for example, is not a "real" American. The Houghton Mifflin texts hammer home the power and authority of this norm with an extraordinary quantity of U.S. flags (in the K-5 book alone, 29 depictions compared to zero flags from other nations).

The Eurocentric viewpoint of the series

can be found in its treatment of all U.S. peoples of color, exemplified by one sentence in a literature selection in the Grade 5 textbook: "She had blue eyes and white skin, like an angel" (which reduces us darkies to being devils, I assume). Scores of inaccuracies, distortions, sanitizations, omissions, and outright racist accounts pepper these books. Here we'll take a look at how the Houghton Mifflin books depict Mexican-Americans and other Latinos in the U.S. (Having limited space, we'll defer a review of how Mexico and other parts of Latin America are portrayed, although this certainly affects the image and self-image of Latinos living in the U.S. Also, not every error will be noted.)

Five major problems appear, then, ranging from general perspective to the handling of key events involving people of

## The new textbook series in California is dominated by a Eurocentric perspective camouflaged by claims of "multiculturalism."

Mexican origin. The first general question is: do we even exist?

### 1. Invisibilization

Increasing the quantity of references to a people doesn't multiculturalize a textbook, as we said; at the same time, invisibility definitely hurts. The Houghton Mifflin series gives very shabby treatment to Latinos in this respect.

By the third grade it would seem reasonable to expect real awareness of Mexicans in the U.S., especially when the textbook *From Sea to Shining Sea* has a 60-page unit called "Settling the Land." But no. In the whole book, Mexican Americans appear only as farmworkers, and even then their historic role in producing vast agricultural wealth is not recognized (nor is that of Filipinos). A single photo shows an orchard with a rain of almonds being shaken out of some trees — by machine, not people. Nowhere does the text say that agriculture was made possible in the Southwest by an art that Mexicans and

Indians taught to Anglos: irrigation.

The fourth grade book, *Oh California*, offers lots of Latinos but they are almost all "explorers" and "settlers," missionaries, or upper-class ranchers. Nowhere can we find the lower-class Mexicans, nowhere the many Mexicans who were violently repressed and driven off the land, often even lynched, from the Gold Rush days to the 1930s, nowhere the massive strikes by Mexican workers in the 1930s or the deportation of thousands who were actually citizens. Chicanos and Mexicans vanish totally from California in pp.157-259. Then we find a paragraph on East Los Angeles which includes Mexicans in a listing of all immigrant groups; it doesn't say that they formed the original population of L.A. and have continued to be a strong presence for over 200 years.

*Oh California* briefly describes the United Farm Workers led by Cesar Chavez, in the series' only account of Chicano/Mexicano struggle for U.S. social change. We find nothing about how the courageous farmworkers stood up to mass arrests, beatings and harassment by the growers and their goons. Nothing about Dolores Huerta — one of the best known women activists for social change in the U.S. today — who headed the union along with Chavez. Nothing about the ongoing struggle against pesticides. And nothing about other movements of California Chicanos such as the walkouts by thousands of high school students in 1968 and the anti-Vietnam war march of some 20,000 people on that day in 1970 when police tear-gassed hundreds at a peaceful rally, including this writer, and caused three Chicanos to die. A picture of one "Chicano Power" mural is apparently supposed to suffice for all those years of mass activism.

In *America Will Be*, a basic 5th grade U.S. history book, Latinos as a people do not exist beyond immigration statistics and other lists with the exception of a single immigrant family presented totally out of context. Even Latinos as governmental representatives vanish after 3 pages on Juan de Oñate, who invaded New Mexico for Spain in 1598. From p.128 to 370, no references at all.

If it is hard to find Mexicans in this series, other Latinos are even less visible. After profiling the great baseball player and humanitarian Roberto Clemente in the Grade 2 text, the series abandons Puerto Ricans. For the millions of Central Americans resident in the U.S., Houghton Mifflin includes a single nameless young woman who came from Guatemala for unspecified reasons and lives an undescribed life here (Grade 3 text). In grades 4 and 5 we get one and two sentences respectively referring to refugees from Cuba and Central America — with no explanation of why they had fled.

### 2. That Old White Magic: Eurocentrism and Its Values

The books for kindergarten, *The World I See*, and Grade 1, *I Know a Place*, lay the foundation for Eurocentrism. Both include a thematic photo with several pupils of color, including a probable Latino, and the K volume has one story about Mexico. But the drawings in the "Long Ago" pages of the K book are overwhelmingly populated by whites; one image shows 31 persons out of 35 as white, another makes all 20 people white, and so forth. In the Grade 1 book also, everyone from the past is white, e.g., a unit called "Grandma's Album" and another called "I go with my family to grandma's." The message comes across loud and clear: the foundations of our country are EuroAmerican (or perhaps people of color don't have grannies). Yet Mexican people settled in what is now the United States from 1598 on.

*Some People I Know* (Grade 2) introduces Teresa Sanchez of East L.A. The text puts a



Mining crew in Metcalf, Arizona. After Arizona was taken from Mexico, Mexican-Americans created vast amounts of wealth for US corporations.

healthy stress on the merits of being bilingual and bicultural like Teresa, but why did they make her a totally Anglo-looking girl? Any Latina — like this writer — who has grown up longing for blonde hair and light-colored eyes will know what a bad message this conveys, especially when everyone else in Teresa's family is dark. (Perhaps she can be one of those angels?)

A special form of the Eurocentric perspective, Hispanicism, flows through the Houghton Mifflin series. Again and again the "customs" and "culture" and "traditions" of the Mexican people in the U.S. are described as originating in Spain — a European country. Indian or mestizo roots go unnoticed. This would be laughable (how many people in Madrid eat tortillas and beans?) if it were not so racist.

The Houghton Mifflin authors actually discuss Eurocentrism (Grade 8), defining it as "the notion that Europe is the center of the world." They then, however, affirm that viewpoint by stating, "And for a long period of time it seemed to be. From the 1500s to the 1900s, European countries controlled a large part of the world." End of explanation, leaving readers with a very Eurocentric view of Eurocentrism. The same book tells us that "U.S. citizens...tended to look on Mexico as a backward nation, an attitude that has continued to this day." No comment; no criticism or alternatives to this view are suggested.

If one of the goals of Eurocentrism is to make U.S. history a more comfortable abode for white people, the 5th grade textbook shows how. The teachers edition suggests an exercise in which students are asked to think about what it is like to move into a new neighborhood or even a new country: what are the neighbors like? Is it scary? It then says, "Lead them to understand that the colonists in America shared many of the same experiences and feelings." What a novel way to imagine taking over someone's land! Other examples of sanitized treatment abound. For example, the often deadly racism practiced against Mexicans in the Southwest is described as "considerable discrimination" (Grade 4) and "prejudice" (Grade 5).

The series is riddled with a Eurocentric vocabulary: "discoveries," "the new World," "the Age of Exploration," and "Moving West." It also manipulates the reader with self-justifying types of word usage. Again and again Anglo-Americans' "belief" in the rightness of their actions is used to justify how Mexican people and Native Americans have been treated historically. One text (Grade 4) even describes as "idealistic" the U.S. belief that westward expansion would help "bring freedom" to the "less fortunate" Indians and Mexicans.

The use of "dreams" serves a similar purpose, as in statements like, "The forty-niners had dreams of becoming very wealthy." (Grade 4, teachers edition, my italics). Such descriptions tend to make young readers identify with men who in fact often robbed, raped, and murdered people of color. The text goes on to say of the forty-niners that "They did not feel they had to share those dreams with Indians..." a remarkably mild way of describing their actual deeds.

Eurocentric usage of "beliefs" and "idealism" and "dreams" — all concepts which many youth embrace — can work wonders. We see this in the series' treatment of three historical periods: westward expansion and the take-over of Texas; the U.S. war on Mexico; the Gold Rush and Mexican resistance to the U.S. take-over.

### 3. Westward Expansion and Taking Texas

"United States expansion in the West was inevitable," says the 4th-grade text. A section on "Texas and the Struggle with

Mexico" (Grade 5) describes how Anglos obtained land and settled in Texas with Mexico's permission on certain conditions, including no slaves and being Catholic. When they broke their promises and Mexico tried to tighten its control, the Americans in Texas "were upset...Mexican rule...had become too strict." Being "upset" — a variation on "belief" — apparently legitimizes the Anglo move to take Texas.

The Battle of the Alamo at San Antonio, Texas in 1836 is the one event involving Mexicans that appeared in every publisher's textbooks submitted for consideration in California. This Mexican military victory, in which all Anglo fighters died defending the fort — or, some scholars say, were executed — sparked a legendary desire for revenge. The Grade 5 teachers edition emphasizes that students should see the Battle of the Alamo as "an important symbol of freedom and liberty" where "heroes" fought for Texas independence. From a different perspective, it was a symbol of U.S. landgrabbing in which the "heroes" featured an escaped murderer (William Travis), a slave-runner (James Bowie), and a gunfighting adventurer (Davey Crockett). But that perspective doesn't appear.

In a unique account of the Texas take-over, Holt, Rinehardt & Winston's 8th-grade book — which was adopted with the Houghton Mifflin series — tells how the U.S. surprise-attacked Mexico at San Jacinto after the Alamo battle. Confronted by the revenge-hungry Anglos, the Mexican troops "fearfully" called out: "Me no Alamo!" supposedly in hopes of being spared. "...in fact," the book says, "these were the very same men who had slaughtered the defenders of the mission." Thus Holt encourages the stereotypes of Mexicans as cowardly, murderous, sneaky, lying buffoons — who cannot, of course, outwit the righteous Anglo.

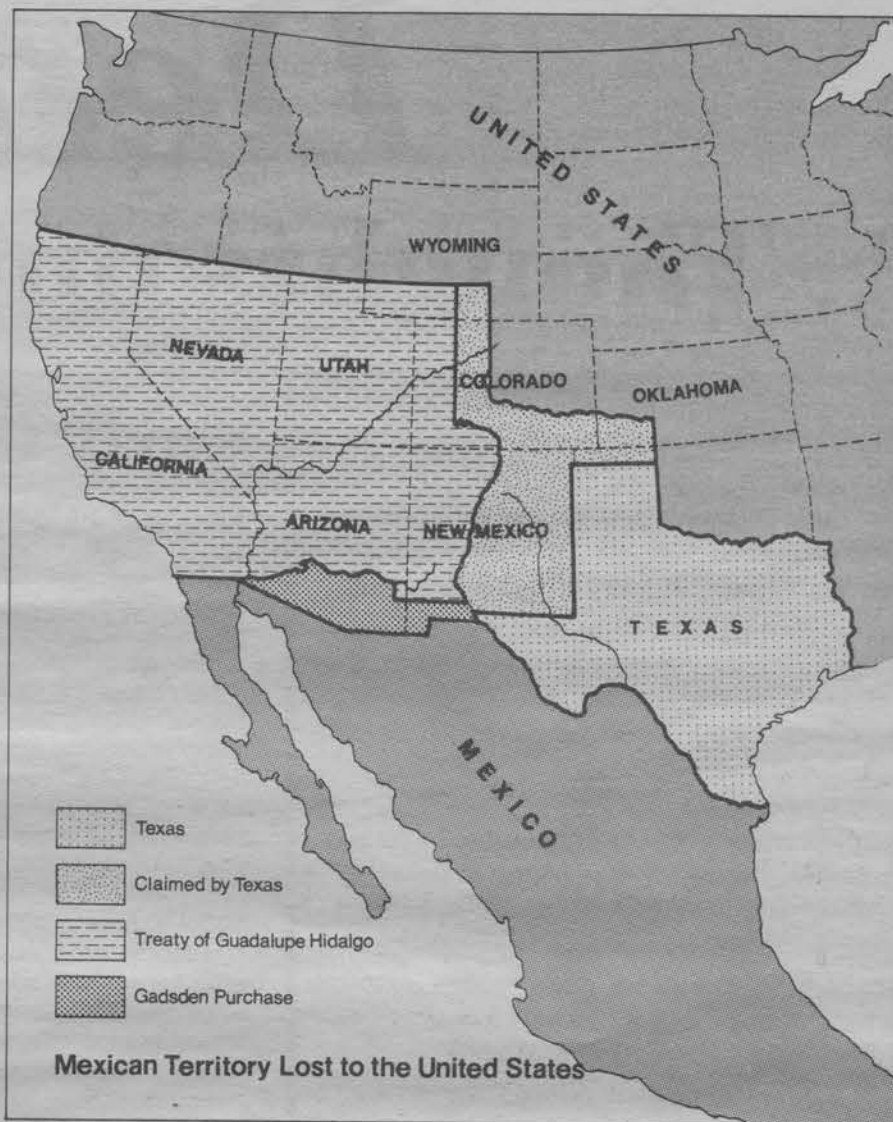
### 4. The 1846-48 U.S. War on Mexico and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

These two events must rank among the most inaccurately depicted history in U.S. schoolbooks. "Belief" strikes again in the Grade 4 text from Houghton Mifflin, which bluntly states: "In the 1840s many [U.S.] people believed that their nation should rule all the land between the East and West coasts. Mexico owned much of this land. So the United States decided to go to war with Mexico to try to win this land."

More detail comes in the next grade: "Mexican officials refused to talk" (that word "talk" — which sounds like little enough to ask — actually meant negotiating with the U.S. over its demands for more Mexican land). So, "President Polk ordered American forces to move down to the Rio Grande. They were now in territory that the Mexican government said was theirs. In April 1846 Mexican troops fought with an American scouting party, leaving 16 dead or wounded. The United States and Mexico were now at war." A teachers edition section on Critical Thinking says: "No one really wanted the Mexican War. How could it have been avoided?"

This is a disingenuous, indeed deceptive version of what even Anglo historians have identified as Polk's deliberate provocation of war with a view to seizing half of Mexico. Polk declared his intent in his own diary, but the text remains silent on that. We also find not a word about the atrocities committed by U.S. invading forces during the war or the fact that General Ulysses S. Grant and other Americans denounced the war. In some apparent gesture to objectivity the Grade 4 text says about the war in California: "In these battles [Mexican] soldiers fought brilliantly. Stephen W. Kearney, a general in the United States Army, admired their horseback riding." Given the failure to identify this war as naked expansionism, such compliments are

Credit: Samora and Simon, *A History of the Mexican-American People*.



patronizing trivia.

The war officially ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which, the text states, provided that "As citizens, the Californios would have the same rights as other United States citizens." There's no mention that this treaty was grossly violated. The civil rights of Mexicans were not respected as promised by the U.S. The landholding rights guaranteed in a Statement of Protocol accompanying the treaty at the Mexican government's insistence were ignored.

By Grade 8 the textbook does say that Polk deliberately 'provoked' the war, and that the treaty was "often not enforced." But at this late date a few facts about what the U.S. actually did are unlikely to reverse years of conditioning to identify with this nation's policies, no matter how unsavory.

### 5. The Gold Rush and the U.S. Occupation

The Houghton Mifflin series sanitizes some of these events and demonizes others. Its treatment of the Gold Rush is wondrous: "Beside the gold they found, what did the forty-niners contribute to California?" The teachers' edition answer: "They contributed the skills, energy, and population increase that would help California grow." One wants to add: not to mention driving out or killing Mexicans and Indians so that California had a white instead of Mexican majority and could become a state. And what about the crucial skills, beginning with mining technology, that were taken over from the indigenous populations?

Resistance to the U.S. occupation is transformed into sheer criminality: "'Joaquin!' they gasped. No one felt safe...Who was this Mexican bandit?" Actually Anglo miners drove Murieta (like other Latino miners) out of the goldfields after raping his wife; as a result he began a guerrilla-type movement which enjoyed widespread support. Many Mexican people saw him as a resistance hero. The Holt, Rinehardt & Winston book also calls the resistance heroes "bandits."

Confronted by textbooks like these, some California teachers are making special efforts to present the Mexican-American or Latino perspective with other materials. One San Francisco teacher in a largely Latino neighborhood has created a special curriculum around the theme of Manifest Destiny and another at her school makes minimal use of the adopted textbook. Let's

hope many more can make such corrective efforts.

But what is the larger, long-range solution? During the textbook battle Dr. Sylvia Wynter, a Stanford University professor of African and Afro-American Studies as well as of Spanish and Portuguese, circulated a lengthy, forceful paper rejecting the immigrant-America concept. It's not just a matter of recognizing our cultural diversity or pluralism, she argues, but of redefining what she refers to as our "native model" and what is often referred to popularly as the "American character."

The textbooks present a dual problem, Wynter observes. First, they are dominated by a Eurocentric perspective. Second, to paraphrase Wynter's view, this Eurocentric perspective is not acknowledged but is camouflaged by a "multiculturalist alternative." Yet this alternative remains entrapped by its assumption that the U.S. is integrated as a nation on the basis of a single, EuroAmerican culture. Thus this "multiculturalist alternative" seeks to "save" the EuroAmerican nation model by multiculturalizing it. The real solution, however, is to de-imagine the United States as a nation and then re-imagine it as a "world": a community of communities relating on the basis of mutual respect and integrity.

It goes without saying that achieving such a goal would require a massive shift in power relations throughout U.S. society. Still, defining one's goals — no matter how distant they may seem — matters. With the help of Wynter's re-imagining, perhaps we can also imagine new textbooks that will make real sense out of American history. □

*[My deep thanks to Communities United Against Racism in Education in Berkeley for research assistance. CURE issued an 85-page study of how the K-5 Houghton Mifflin books treat people of color in general; it is especially strong on Native Americans and includes examples of alternate wordings to avoid Eurocentrism. The study can be obtained for \$10.00 from: CURE, c/o Oyate, 2702 Mathews St., Berkeley, CA 94702.*

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# Dear President

## Thoughts on an Education Agenda

For too long, educators have been on the defensive. Twelve years ago, the Reagan Administration proposed eliminating the Department of Education, setting the tone for federal education policies that were a devastating mix of neglect and cutbacks. When the Reagan/Bush regime decided to take an offensive posture toward education issues, it did so primarily by launching an attack on the very concept of public education and promoting plans for publicly funded vouchers for private schools.

Coupled with severe budget cutbacks on the state and local level, these federal policies forced progressive educators to adopt a defensive stance. We were forced to neglect our vision of what should be, and to focus instead on what might be salvaged from the conservative onslaught.

With a new Democratic administration about to take power, progressive educators are once

### Rethinking Schools Analysis

again nurturing the hope that we can not merely defend, but move forward. We asked several educators to briefly explain what they think should be the educational priorities of the Clinton Administration. We offer these statements, and our own developing analysis, as a modest beginning of what should be a long discussion on an agenda for change.

The task is daunting. And the danger, we fear, is not that progressive educators will put forward unrealistic plans for reform, but that we will take the safe route and timidly propose measures that will only chip away at the crisis in education in this country.

We are not under any illusion that education policy will be the Clinton administration's top priority in its first few months. Clinton has already made clear that he will emphasize economic initiatives. For educators, the positive side of this reality is that it provides breathing space to re-energize our imaginations and develop far-reaching — dare we use the word "brehtaking?" — proposals that can forge a new vision of education reform. Our task is not merely to develop specific policies and legislation, although that is sorely needed, but to change the very confines of the debate and mold a new consensus on how, and with what resources, we want to educate all our children.

In looking at the many issues in education, it is our opinion that the new administration's overriding concern must be equity. This is the focus that must guide all policy decisions, the yardstick by which to gauge success or failure.

It's not that our society doesn't know how to teach or raise children well, but that we do so unequally. Some children go to fully equipped, modern schools, with small class sizes and big expectations of success. They also have the advantages of private lessons

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## Early Childhood Programs are Key

By Norm Fruchter

*The following is condensed from a conversation with Norm Fruchter, president of one of New York City's 32 school boards and program advisor for education at the Aaron Diamond Foundation in New York City.*

I'm assuming that President-elect Clinton will move toward full funding of federal programs such as Head Start and Chapter One. He should also strengthen other early childhood programs essential to helping kids start school without a disadvantage.

Programs across the country should focus on working with the parents of very young children on optimal child development and how parents can work with their kids at home. On a federal level, Clinton should support and expand such programs.

He also needs to expand the experimental Head Start transition program trying to improve what happens to kids when they move from Head Start into public schools, to provide links between Head Start teachers, kindergarten teachers, and parents. One of the strengths of Head Start is that it emphasizes parental involvement — but that involvement often is discouraged when the kids get to school.

Clinton needs to transform the nature of Chapter One to make it a school improvement program. Reduce the disincentives; relative success now means losing those Chapter One funds. In too many settings Chapter One is targeted on kids rather than on schools. Use the money for school improvement, rather than for remediation.

Clinton should also consider two other areas not usually seen as a federal responsibility.

First, schools should be full-service community institutions. They need to provide all the various supports and services that kids and families need, including basic health care. The federal government could do a demonstration program of such full-service schools in a range of sites, urban and rural. I think the results would be powerful enough that it would be hard to argue against schools providing such services.

Second, another area where the the federal government is currently not involved is equalizing funding of schools. The federal government should use incentives to get states

to reduce financial disparities among school districts. One way would be to structure incentive grants to states that demonstrate they are reducing such disparities. Another way might utilize the existing equity requirements of Chapter One, combined with incentive grants from Chapter One funding, to reduce disparities. The bottom line argument is that the federal government should be the ultimate guarantor of equitable resources for public schooling. □

## Comprehensive Plan Essential

By Deborah M. McGriff

In *The Mis-education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson warned us that opportunities and problems of great importance cannot be resolved in a day with simple solutions. We need a comprehensive plan. We need a timetable and we need to keep it.

Accordingly, I would recommend that President-elect Clinton take the following steps during his first 100 days.

First, President-elect Clinton should clarify his vision and mission for education, especially for preschool through grade 12. He must specify whether or not he will continue to Support "American 2000" in its current form. If it's to be modified, he must specify the changes he will pursue, e.g., will he support private school choice with public funding and vouchers, will standards and assessment policies be implemented without regard to equity?

Second, the President-elect should appoint a secretary of education who shares his vision and has the knowledge, skills, and passion needed to inspire and implement a national campaign which will substantially change education for all children: rich, poor, black, white, brown, male, and female.

To accomplish task two, President-elect Clinton should acknowledge that money matters. He should find the political will to end savage funding inequalities, especially for preschool through grade-12 education, "by any means necessary."

Finally, if President-elect Clinton is to be the Education President, he must always acknowledge the inextricable link between education and other social policy initiatives. He must ensure that all policies nurture families, build communities, stimulate the economy, and improve the quality of life for children, youth, and adults.

What should be the goals of these policy initiatives? That our high school graduates:

- Enter college without needing remedial classes.
- Enter the world of work with the skills needed to acquire jobs that pay above the poverty level and offer career advancement.
- Develop the entrepreneurial spirit to create new business opportunities, all the while demonstrating exemplary levels of social responsibility and actualizing the practice of freedom.

Our children and youth deserve no less. □  
Deborah M. McGriff is Superintendent of Detroit Public Schools

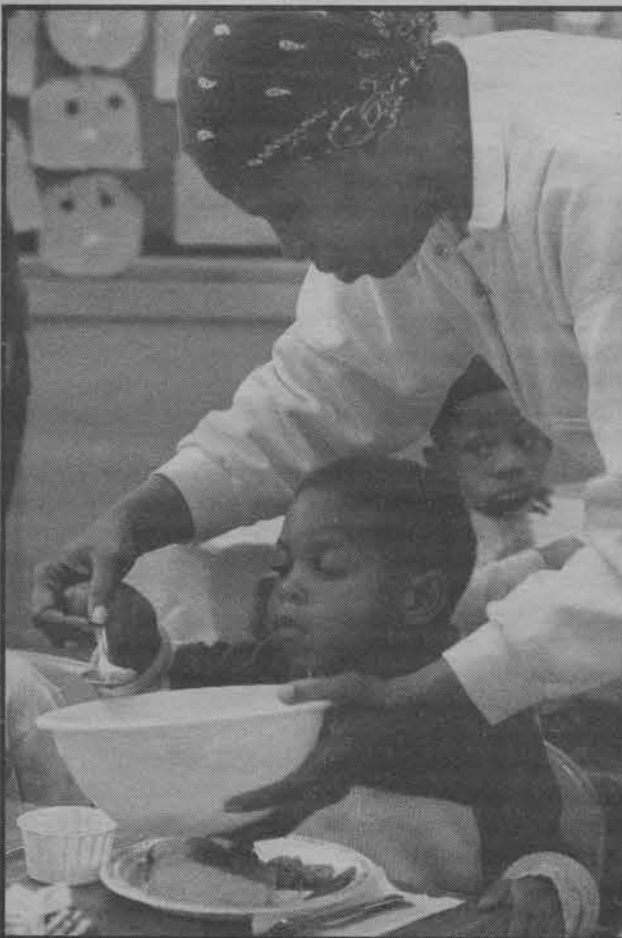
## Eradicate Illiteracy

By Tony Baez

Since the early 1970s, many educators have been calling for a national initiative to eradicate the incredibly high — and still growing — incidence of adult functional illiteracy. Tens of millions of adults in this country cannot perform basic academic or technological tasks.

Even though First Lady Barbara Bush made illiteracy one of her pet projects, the Bush administration never increased funding for the Adult Education Act.

What troubles me most is that when we discuss the need



Credit: MPS

Early childhood education: a key priority.

# President Clinton... Linda for the new Administration

for educational reform, rarely do we make the case for establishing quality adult education programs for the parents of school-age children.

Few organized educational advocacy groups make adult education an integral part of the educational reform movement in our major cities. Few are willing to be as passionate in demanding more resources for adult education as they are in advocating for better schools, better buildings, and more public school funding.

It is critical that the new presidential administration take the lead in rejecting this society's negative perceptions of adult learners. President-elect Clinton must also end the senseless fragmentation in federal adult education programs, and he must dismantle federal initiatives that are punitive and based upon "deficit" theories of learning that blame the students for their failures and that don't recognize and build upon the strengths of the students and their families.

President-elect Clinton must also turn over the lead for adult education policy to those who teach and take part in such programs. Together, they must launch a new adult education and literacy initiative that approaches adult education with the same energy we give to public school reform.

As part of this initiative, the President should establish experimental, adult, pre-college preparatory schools in collaboration with local governments, the public schools, and community-based advocacy groups. The initiative must also focus on increasing the number of people of color who teach and manage adult education programs in our cities.

The President should set clear goals for literacy and adult education and develop a plan to implement them. My hope is that, by the year 2000, we can boast about the eradication of illiteracy and the successful education of all people in America. □

*Tony Baez is on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Urban/Community Development.*

## End American Apartheid

By Jonathan Kozol

*The following is condensed from a conversation with Jonathan Kozol, author of Savage Inequalities and other books on education.*

To a large degree, during the Reagan and Bush years our imaginations atrophied because we were waging a defensive action. It is sometimes difficult after such a period to even remember what a significant goal would be. Yet now is the time to be bold in our suggestions, and to be bold immediately. I suspect the die will be cast during the next 12 months.

If President-elect Clinton invited me to the White House, I wouldn't even waste my time talking about full funding for Head Start, because I think that's going to happen anyway. But I would say, "If you really want to heal this nation's wounds, you ought to reopen the issue of American apartheid."

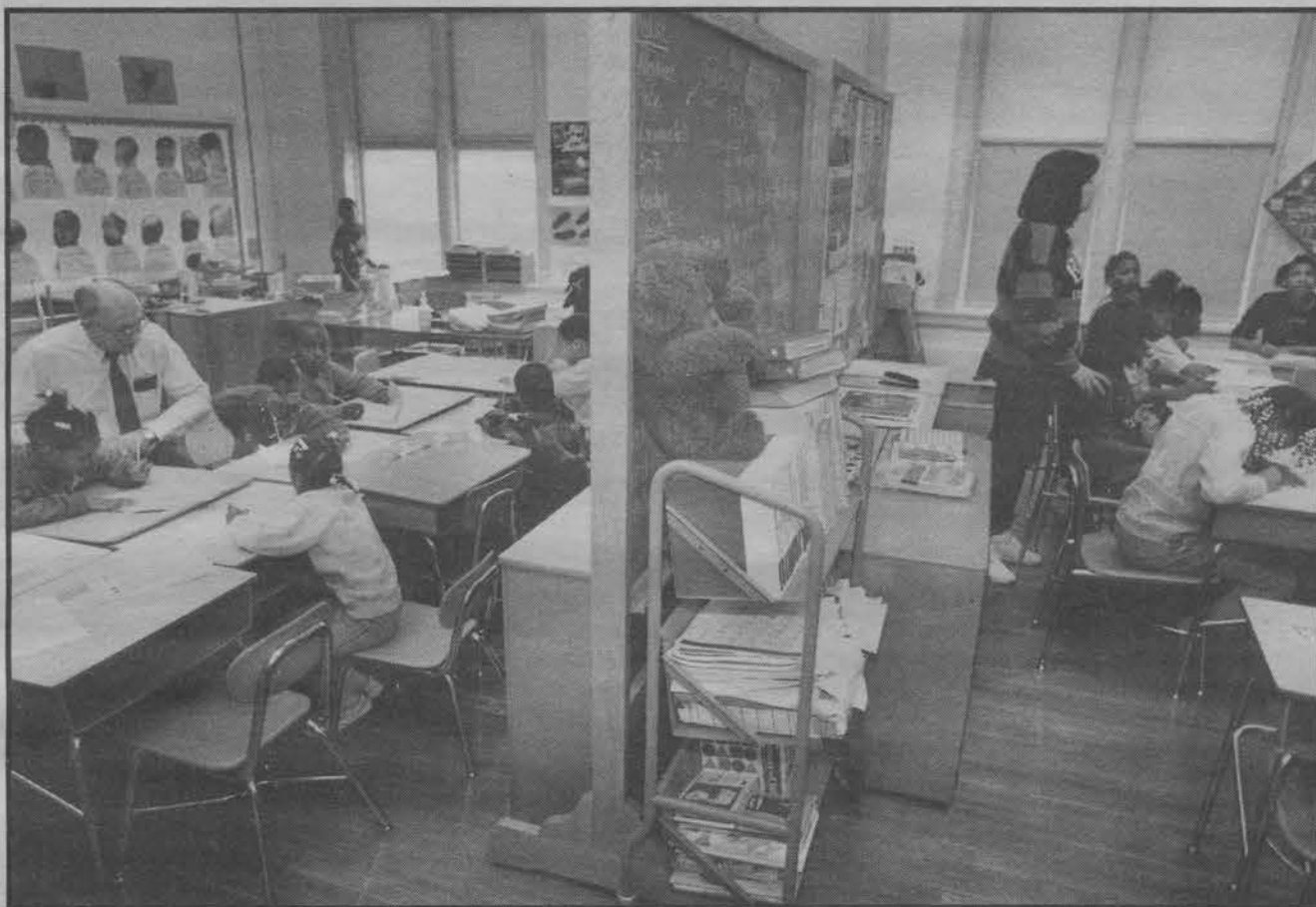
Nobody in America talks about racial segregation anymore. To say that the nation has become insensitive to racial injustice would be a terrible understatement.

I go into inner-city schools where every kid is Black, where you don't see a White face, where racial integration means mixing Latinos with Blacks or a few Cambodians. And I'll look at the principal around 11 in the morning, a Black principal, and I'll say, "Would you call this a segregated school?" And he'll just smile and say, "You know, Jonathan, no one has even asked that question for a decade. Of course it is. This is American apartheid. This is accepted. We don't even question it anymore."

Is it realistic that Clinton would take a political chance and open up the forbidden question of whether we are really going to remain two societies? Probably not at first. Might he ultimately? Maybe.

I would also hope that President-elect Clinton has the courage to address the inequitable funding of our public schools.

I'd like him to go beyond the terms that most of us have been forced to deal with, which is inequities within a given state. I'd like to see Clinton address the obligation of the



Credit: Susan Lina Ruggles

**Federal funds could build new schools and ease overcrowding, such as in these Milwaukee classrooms separated by a blackboard.**

nation itself to educate all American children, with resources that reflect the national wealth.

In the past 10 years we've received this rather cleverly contradictory message that because of our schools, the nation is at risk — but that the solution is going to come from the village elders in New Hampshire, or the school board in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Realistically, there is no way this problem of inequitable funding will ever be solved at the state level. Some states are just too poor. We are stuck with a 19th Century system of school finance as we are about to enter the 21st Century. □

## Don't Forget Teachers

By Linda Darling-Hammond

If President-elect Clinton truly wants to restructure America's schools so they can teach all students to perform at high levels, he must ensure that all schools have well-prepared and well-supported teachers.

Three areas must be addressed: recruiting teachers, better preparing teachers, and sharply reducing the number of teachers who leave the profession after their first few years.

Teacher shortages are acute in key areas such as mathematics and science, foreign languages, special education and bilingual education. These shortages particularly affect urban schools. The reason for these shortages is no mystery. Teacher salaries, for instance, remain about 25% below the salaries of other college-educated workers. Moreover, in 1981 President Reagan eliminated a number of special programs for those hoping to teach, such as the Urban Teacher Corps program. In addition, few teachers are prepared to teach all children effectively. To succeed, they need to deeply understand students' multiple learning styles and needs as well as the subjects they teach.

Given that fully half of the teachers who will be teaching in the year 2000 will be hired over the next decade, we must immediately address these problems — unless we want to continue the all-too-common practice of hiring underprepared teachers who are typically assigned to teach low-income and minority students in central city schools. Many children in central city schools, in fact, are taught by a parade of short-term substitute teachers, inexperienced teachers who leave before their first year is up, and beginners without training.

Building a well-prepared teaching force will require

legislation like that enacted during the teacher shortages of the 1960s (the National Defense and Education Act grants and loans and the Teacher Corps). We will need as well a more sustained and serious attempt to strengthen professional education and recruitment. Federal initiatives should seek to:

- Recruit new teachers, especially in shortage fields and in shortage locations (particularly central cities) through scholarships and forgivable loans.
- Strengthen teachers' preparation through improvement incentive grants to schools of education.
- Increase teacher retention and effectiveness by improving their clinical training and support during the beginning teaching stage when 30-50% drop out. This would include funding internship programs for new teachers during which they would receive mentoring from experienced teachers. □

*Linda Darling-Hammond is professor of education at Teacher's College, Columbia University, and co-director of the National Center for Restructuring Education.*

## Distribute Resources Equitably

By William Ayers

Now that the "Education President" is riding off into a Texas sunset, it is time to get serious about improving schools.

Among Clinton's earliest actions as President should be a series of investigative visits to schools where initiative, creativity, and a willingness to take matters into one's own hands are paying off for kids. He could search out those places where folks are defying the odds, succeeding where they were expected to fail — Central Park East in Spanish Harlem comes to mind, as does La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, the Foundations School in Chicago, and Forks-of-Salmon School in rural California. The point would not be to impose a favorite slogan ("choice," "standards") on a dynamic situation, but to seek real counsel from those youngsters, parents, and teachers who actually are making progress with school reform. The people with the problems are also most likely to be the people with the solutions.

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# Souls or Dollars?

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Education must keep broad ideals before it, and never forget that it is dealing with Souls and not with Dollars."

Although there has been little debate on the merits of Tech-Prep — and the history of vocational education in this country has been all but synonymous with rigid tracking — key educational bureaucracies in Wisconsin are moving to implement the legislation. The state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Wisconsin Board of Vocational, Technical and Adult Education (WBVTAE) are nourishing Tech-Prep through an elaborate web of committees, pilot programs, state-wide conferences, and curriculum development projects. According to DPI officials, by fall of 1995 these major elements will be in place:

1. At the end of tenth grade, all Wisconsin students will take a "Gateway Assessment" exam which will include sections on math, science, and communication skills.
2. Aided by the results of this exam, students and their parents will choose

**Tech-Prep will almost surely bolster — albeit with a more elaborate rationalization — the class and racial tracking which characterizes nearly all schools.**

between a traditional college prep track, a new Tech-Prep track, and a new Youth Apprenticeship track. General education tracks will no longer exist.

3. Students who have elected the Tech-Prep track will encounter a new curriculum of "applied academics" in math, science, and communication skills, and re-furnished vocational courses in a number of career areas. The goal of the Tech-Prep track will be to prepare students to enter specific career programs in technical colleges.

4. Students who choose the Youth Apprenticeship track will be provided with general and technical education and on-the-job training designed to help them begin mastering a trade.

## The Roots of Tech-Prep

A number of states are developing Tech-Prep plans, at least 20 of them with the guidance of the prestigious Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (whose co-chairs include Hillary Clinton and Clinton economic adviser Ira Magaziner). Proponents say that Tech-Prep is designed to redress the historic neglect of students who are not in a college prep track. During the past several years, they claim, this neglect has helped engender an economic crisis. As the economy has demanded increasingly sophisticated skills, many employers claim they have had difficulty finding qualified young people. Tech Prep advocates further argue that, even if our education system were meeting the needs of today's employers, more sophisticated technical training is essential to prepare a workforce that can compete in the 21st century.

In his book *The Neglected Majority*, prominent Tech-Prep advocate Dale Parnell explains that our society produces "an increasing number of individuals who are uneducated, unskilled, and unable to cope

with...technological changes." The results of this educational failure, it is maintained, include increased vulnerability of the U.S. economy to foreign competition, inefficient workers bewildered by sophisticated technology, and high school graduates whose poor education keeps them locked out of rewarding careers.

The solution offered by Tech-Prep is better high school training for technical careers. According to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Herbert Grover, "80% of all future jobs will require more than high school education but less than a (four year) college degree." Wisconsin's Tech-Prep seeks to prepare an increased proportion of high school students for these jobs by replacing the general education track with a Tech-Prep track and a Youth Apprenticeship track which both have highly focused career goals. A Wisconsin DPI publication entitled *Technical Preparation* notes that only a minority of young people graduate from four-year colleges and states, "Just as preparation for college provides motivation and sense of purpose for some students, other equally viable pathways need to be created for other students who are wandering aimlessly through high school."

## Why Isn't This a Great Idea?

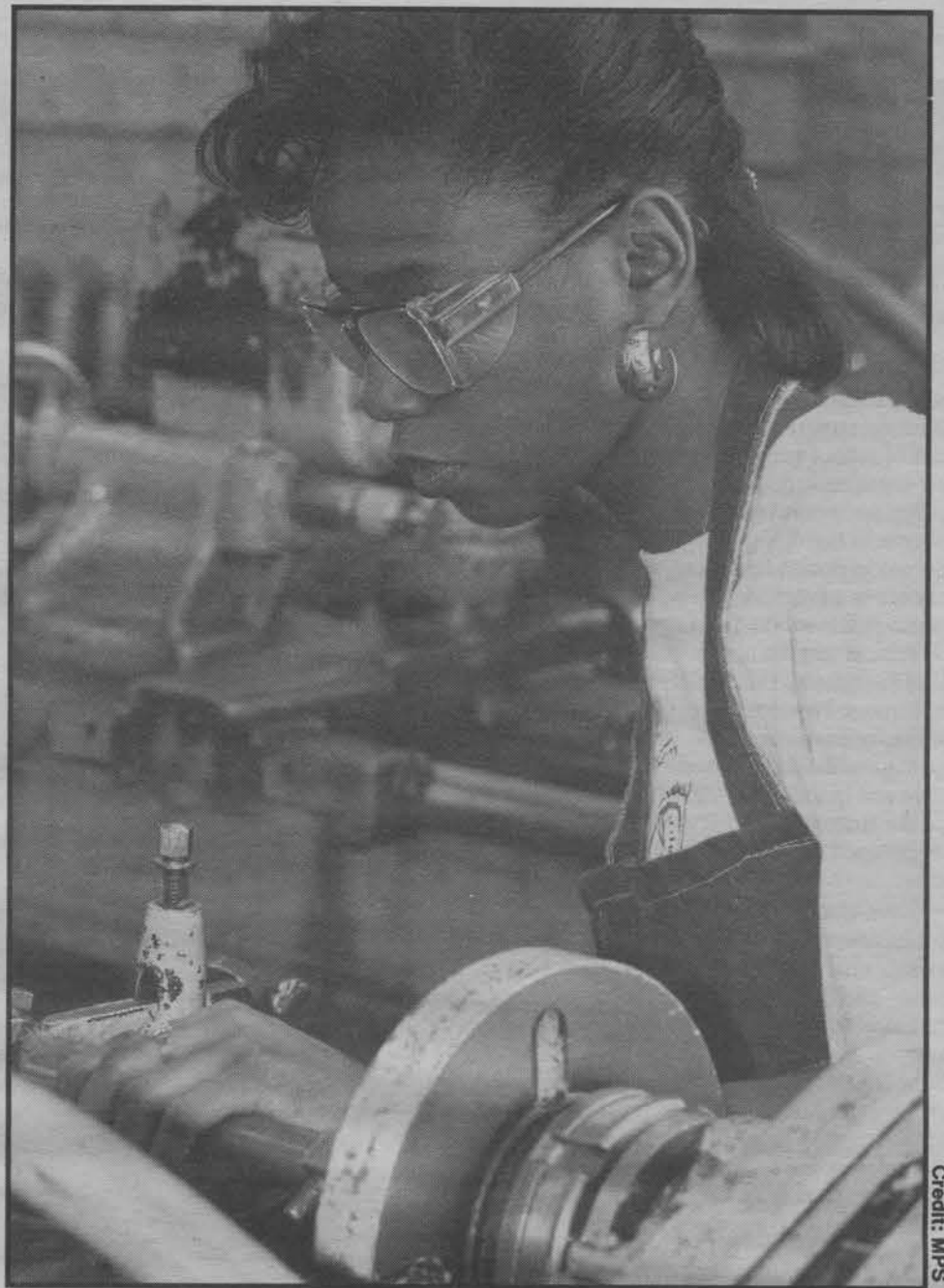
At first glance, the Tech-Prep approach has some plausibility. Scholars such as Jeannie Oakes, an expert on tracking, offer convincing evidence that students in college prep tracks often reap the rewards of class and race privilege. Students succeeding in college prep programs are gaining a high status ticket which can lead to a comfortable and rewarding future. Students in a "general" track are prone to drift among less desirable options, dazed prisoners of the shopping mall high school. Tech-Prep supporters, meanwhile, contend that a properly implemented Tech-Prep offers "the neglected majority" a program just as rigorous as the best college prep programs. Their arguments are buttressed by the specter of international competition and the inability of traditional academics to engage many students.

Because Tech-Prep is a relatively new phenomenon, it is difficult to evaluate its potential efficacy. We can, however, assess its assumptions. A good place to start is the assertion that poor schooling has helped incubate a critical skills shortage.

On this point the evidence is far from clear. Although some experts and employers cite skilled worker shortages, a number of researchers have challenged the generalization that we are on the brink of an expertise meltdown. For example, an influential report entitled *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* conducted a survey in 1990 in which only 5% of the employers polled cited the scarcity of skilled workers as a problem. Similarly, a 1991 report by the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, entitled, *The Myth of the Coming Labor Shortage*, says: "Far from an explosive growth of job-skill requirements, the effect of occupational upgrading on job skills is actually projected to slow down in the future to one-third to one-fourth of its rate in the recent past."

In Milwaukee County, which lost 32,000 manufacturing jobs between 1979 and 1987, not only do new jobs tend to be grouped in low-paying occupations, but there is a growing gap between the number of unemployed and available jobs. According to a new report by Milwaukee's Social Development Commission, there are an estimated 12 potential workers for every available job. Two years ago, there were only nine potential workers for every job. The new report "confirms what many people looking for work already know — job prospects are bleak," said Robert Odom, executive director of the commission. "So even if a person wants to work, the jobs are not there."

Although secondary education needs to



Credit: MPS

Will Tech-Prep reduce students' future options in life?

be improved, Tech-Prep proponents also err when they blame U.S. economic woes primarily on schools. Some social scientists who favor technical education, such as the University of Wisconsin's Joel Rogers, insist that educational reform won't bring prosperity unless the business sector restructures itself to create more high skill, high wage jobs. Other analysts contend that corporate inefficiency, rather than poor schooling, is the source of many corporate problems. Stanford University economics professor Henry Levin, an expert on workforce skill needs, has argued that top corporate executives often use schools as a scapegoat. In a recent *Washington Post* article he is quoted as saying: "The easiest way to take pressure off themselves for producing a lousy product with too many middle managers, too high executive salaries and too little creativity is to say, 'How can we do it? We have a lousy work force, this is basically a (rotten) excuse for a lousy management process.'"

Tech-Prep also assumes that its "applied academics" or its improved relationships with technical colleges will help students get jobs. But such claims are not backed up by convincing evidence. Throughout its history, vocational education has had an unimpressive track record in linking school to future employment. Oakes cites several studies which indicate that vocational courses of study have had negligible impact on employability. Similarly, Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson argue in their article, "Education and the Labor Market: Recycling the Youth Problem," that the multitude of vocational programs generated in the 1960s and 1970s had "small impact" on youth unemployment. Yet supporters of Tech-Prep have not really explained why their program will be any more successful in terms of helping students get jobs.

## Tech-Prep as Reform

Tech-Prep intermingles ideas that hold some promise with proposals which are recipes for inequality. Most teachers would agree that "hands on" learning, career exploration, and a meaningful sequence of technical courses can benefit students.

Unfortunately, Tech-Prep wedges these features to a system of three tracks which is likely to result in:

- the perpetuation within schools of inequality based on class and race;
- the narrowing of a student's aspirations and self-concept;
- the segregation of students in a way which hinders learning.

It's worthwhile to take a closer look at these likely results.

**The perpetuation of inequality based on class and race.** Because tracking is an explosive topic, some Tech-Prep champions attempt to avoid trouble by using verbal camouflage. In the DPI document *Wisconsin Tech Prep*, the three tracks which are scheduled to be in place by 1995 are labeled "student options (pathways or concentrations)." In Oregon, where a pioneering program has students choosing between a college and a vocational track at the beginning of 11th grade, state Department of Vocational Education official Richard Schmidt says, "It [the Oregon Tech-Prep program] isn't tracking. Students are choosing some very distinct paths. They are working at the business of being what they want to become." Officials at Wisconsin's voc-ed governing body, the WBVTAE, claim: "Tech-Prep does not close off options for students the way a rigid tracking system would."

Another response has been that students will be able to switch tracks between Tech-Prep and college prep. This reassurance will provide cold comfort to any parent who realizes how rarely students presently change from a lower to a higher track.

On occasion, DPI head Herbert Grover and others have handled the tracking question in a more honest fashion. They have admitted that Tech-Prep is tracking, and then have argued that present practices track non-baccalaureate students into dead end programs and Tech-Prep offers them a good track which puts them on the road to a good career.

Although this tack has the virtue of honesty, it does not address the likelihood that Tech-Prep will simply perpetuate the

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# Souls or Dollars?

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class and racial stratification of high schools, albeit within a new set of curricular shells. Given the history of high stakes testing and tracking, it is highly likely that the "Gateway Assessment" in 10th grade and the counseling which accompanies it will produce college bound tracks which are predominantly white and middle class, and Tech-Prep tracks composed mostly of working class and/or students of color.

But the heart of the problem is not the fairness of the proposed Gateway Assessment. It lies within the whole set of assumptions which allow policy makers to argue that it is a good idea to divide high school students into three separate tracks. These assumptions place Tech-Prep solidly within a historical tradition which, under the guise of meeting the needs of students as individuals, structures schools to perpetuate the class and racial hierarchies of the larger society.

Statements made by some Tech-Prep advocates, in fact, are hauntingly similar to statements made in previous generations to justify why some students are encouraged to choose voc-ed programs.

In 1908, for example, the superintendent of Boston's public schools said: "Until recently [the schools] have offered equal opportunity for all to receive *one kind* (italics in original) of education, but what

will make them democratic is to provide opportunity for all to receive education as will fit them *equally well* (italics in original) for their particular life work."

Parnell, a contemporary supporter of Tech-Prep, argues: "One of the pressing dilemmas for educators is how to meet the great range of individual differences among students while seeking the best in all people, whether rich or poor, able or disabled, *destined* [my italics] for the university, community college, apprenticeship, military, or a specific job, including homemaking."

Though separated by 84 years, these two statements express a common conviction that students start high school already predestined for a specific role in life.

This theme of predestination is evident when the Center for Occupational Research and Design (CORD), producer of the most widely disseminated "applied academics" textbooks, defines the "target population" for applied academics as students "in the middle two quartiles of the average high school population" Given the enthusiasm manifested by educational policy makers in Wisconsin for the CORD approach, it is easy to imagine a re-configuration of state high schools which deposits the top 25% of students in traditional college prep, the middle 50% in Tech-Prep, and the bottom



Credit: MPS

Job "training" may disappoint students if promised jobs aren't there.

25% in Youth Apprenticeship programs.

The narrowing of a student's aspirations and self-concepts. A carefully designed sequence of technical electives or a challenging work experience can be helpful components of a student's junior and senior years. If the Tech-Prep planning process produces new variants of these kinds of experiences, they deserve to be judged on their own merits. However, the Tech-Prep plan will do more than update

vocational and academic curricula. Under the new approach, students and parents (presumably with the help of a guidance counselor) will evaluate the student's performance on the 10th grade Gateway Assessment and then choose the college prep, Tech-Prep, or Youth Apprenticeship track. It is possible that students from different tracks will have some courses in common. It is more likely, however that the

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# Distribute Resources Fairly

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Clinton could listen to their accomplishments, their aspirations, their larger goals, and their perspectives on the obstacles that stand in the way. He would surely learn something, and it would cost him nothing.

If from there he hopes to seriously challenge educational failure, he must find ways to fight for generous educational funding and the fair distribution of education resources. One step could be to support the Hawkins Bill (or some similar measure) that could cut federal funds to any state that fails to create an equitable funding formula. This costs nothing. Another would be to creatively blend the concept of categorical and general federal funding by targeting, for example, large sums of federal aid that could be used in any way that states

or districts deem appropriate, as long as spending directly decreases inequities at the school level — and not one cent for bureaucracy. It's a categorical grant for equity, but it's spent as if it were general money. He should note that school failure is highly selective, and that for the valued and privileged, success is all but guaranteed. The heavy weight of racism — the most pervasive, debilitating, and destructive feature of our social fabric — must be fought in schools as elsewhere.

Let's not get giddy about Clinton's prospects. But let's not barricade ourselves in dogmatic purity, either, and take personally Clinton's failures of courage, imagination, and initiative.

It would be a major mistake to expect that

a Clinton Administration will be able to do what's never been done—guarantee full access to an outstanding educational experience in a public school for all youngsters, and hopeful outcomes for each. This ideal will be won only as a result of massive action from below—in fact the best result from the Clinton election victory may be the stirring up of that action, the re-energizing of the popular movements for change, including the struggle of students, parents, citizens, and teachers to dream bigger, reach higher, and fight harder for justice, fairness, and educational excellence. We can, for example, acknowledge that full funding for Head Start was never a radical (or even adequate) solution.

At the same time, Clinton's victory is significant. Moving the reactionary education cabal led by Lamar Alexander, Chester Finn, and Chris Whittle away from the center of federal power is an important

setback for the forces attempting to privatize the public schools. And we should seize the opportunity that that provides to push the new administration to grapple with bottom-line problems like inequity, command-style bureaucracy, and predictably disastrous outcomes for some students.

Now is not the time for the movement for change to relax. On the contrary, now more than ever we need to articulate our goals more clearly, develop our agenda more fully, reach out more massively, and build for the struggle ahead. We could wait forever for Clinton to get it right, or we could build our own work now. Power concedes nothing without a demand... □

William Ayers is an associate professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and author of the forthcoming *Teaching: The Journey of a Teacher* (Teachers College Press).

# Equality for All Children

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and clubs, full health insurance, and fine housing. Unfortunately, millions of other children are not so lucky. They attend under-funded, poorly equipped schools with big classes and small expectations of success. Their parents often can not afford private lessons or clubs, have no health insurance, and live in inadequate housing.

Schools, rather than helping low-income children rise above these realities, instead tend to reinforce the economic and social inequalities in society. If schools are to fulfill their democratic mission, they must forcefully address the issue of inequity. By equity we mean:

• **Equity in school finances and resources.**

One of the most serious ways school inequity manifests itself is in unequal funding. The federal government should not only increase funding for federal education programs, but must enter the as-yet-uncharted territory of ensuring funding equity for public schools throughout the country. It must target federal money to poor schools in urban and rural areas, and also pressure states to equalize funding of school districts within their borders.

• **Equity in school facilities/community centers.**

The actual school buildings in many urban areas are dilapidated. They're old, overcrowded, out-dated and often unsafe. Two things need to be done. First, the federal government should launch a multi-billion dollar initiative to build new schools across the country as part of the Clinton administration's promise to focus on infrastructure needs. Such a program would begin to provide necessary space for smaller class sizes and specialty rooms to give students in poorer districts facilities more comparable to suburban ones. Second, a national school construction initiative should ensure that these new schools be part of a broader effort to revitalize impoverished urban and rural areas and be built as combination learning and community centers. These school/community centers would be focal points of the neighborhood, providing everything from recreation and cultural activities, to social welfare services, to education for young and old alike.

• **Equity in jobs.**

The unemployment rates in many communities, particularly those of color, are intolerably high. It is no wonder that adolescents might turn to drug dealing and violence, when the job market offers them so little hope. The federal government

should immediately initiate a massive federal jobs program with life-sustainable salaries and meaningful work that can help rebuild our communities. In particular, the Clinton administration should be judged by its ability to reduce unemployment among people of color to the level of their white counterparts.

• **Equity in each school and classroom.**

The Department of Education should provide leadership to, and fund, local initiatives by teachers and parents that aim to replace outmoded forms of curriculum with those that build on students' strengths and cultures, while challenging students to think critically about solving our nation's problems. Tracking must be replaced with approaches in which well-trained teachers teach students in more heterogeneous groupings. The racist attitudes of educators, who explicitly or implicitly hold that children of color or poor children can't learn, must be challenged. Money should also be provided for staff retraining for these necessary initiatives.

• **Equity in teacher training and retention.**

The federal government should provide financial scholarships to dramatically increase the number of teachers of color in our public schools and teacher training institutions. Further, it should develop programs to help with on-the-job training so that fewer teachers leave the field after their first few years.

• **Equity in health, housing and social services.**

If all children are going to have an "equal" chance in our society, then we must improve health, housing, and other social needs for the millions of children who live in poverty. In addition to the federal jobs program mentioned above, the new Administration should move quickly to institute a national health care program, and to pump money into the low-income housing programs that were neglected or abolished during the Reagan/Bush era.

**Conclusion: Change from Below**

Will Clinton be up to the task? Will he establish an atmosphere of change that will benefit not only the middle class and the affluent but the millions of people who have grown up on the short side of equality?

The answer ultimately rests not with Clinton alone, but with educators, parents, and policymakers across the country. Clinton might be up to the task — but only if he is supported by a massive movement for change that can both pressure him to develop needed policies and defend him from likely attack from conservatives should he move forcefully.

It is past time for governmental leaders to recognize the severity of the crisis faced by the young people of America, in particular low-income children and children of color. We need, what this nation promised so many generations ago and has yet to deliver, liberty and justice for all. □

# Why Better Schools Won't Necessarily Lead to Better Jobs Education and the Economy

By Paul Weckstein

The failures of our schools are receiving well-deserved attention, fueled by the view that an uneducated workforce has serious economic and social consequences. However, the focus on education too often becomes a substitute for looking at the economy. The failure of our schools is part of a larger failure of our economic structures to create high-skill, high-wage jobs. By ignoring this economic reality, we encourage the mistaken view that such jobs are out there, if only people got a better education.

Heightened concern about our schools results from a couple of factors. First, there is a widespread belief that the economic imperatives of a high-tech, internationalized economy are forcing the restructuring of jobs in ways that demand high skill levels from virtually all workers. Second, a declining youth population, together with a growing minority share of that youth population, means that employers will no longer have the luxury of picking those who appear most qualified or acceptable and rejecting the rest.

Together, these factors have created a concern that schools provide higher levels of educational skills to all students, including those whose talents were previously viewed as either absent or unneeded.

Thus, our education system is very properly receiving attention for its wasteful failure to develop the full range of creative capacities of our youth — particularly those youth, now labeled "at-risk" youth, who have traditionally fared least well in our schools, as in other institutions. While the dropout rate has steadily declined over the last 50 years (to about 14%), dropout rates above 40% are common in many of our largest cities. While virtually all high school students have successfully mastered basic or rudimentary skills, most have sizeable deficits in higher-order skills requiring more advanced levels of comprehension, analysis, problem solving, and decision making — skills increasingly being touted as critical to our economic future.

Like many other institutions, the schools serve low-income families less well than others. The more obvious examples include lower quality curriculum, staff, and facilities; lower expectations; assignment to lower "ability groups" or tracks where academic content is watered down; less responsiveness to student, parent, and community input; and harsher discipline.

Yet the current focus on "at-risk-youth" too often becomes a vehicle for harmful labeling of children, ungrounded assumptions about individual, familial, or cultural pathology, and new forms of segregation. Locating the problem in youth diverts attention from fundamental problems in the structures of both the schools and the economy which put these youth "at risk."

## Problems in the Economy

We cannot assume that the problem is just a failure of our educational system to develop the full creative capacities of all our youth. It is also a failure of our economic system to use those capacities.

When low-income youth look at their communities, they do not see high-skill, high-wage jobs waiting, if only they stay in school long enough to qualify. Instead, they see high levels of youth unemployment. For those youths who can find work, the jobs are most often low-skill and low-wage.

This is not a misperception on their part. For example, despite the fact that many of the "fastest growing occupations" in terms of percentage growth are relatively high-skill and high-wage, they still provide very small numbers of jobs, while the fastest growing occupations in terms of sheer

numbers are mostly of a different sort, with much lower wages and skill levels. Of the 10 most rapidly growing occupations only one — food preparation and service workers/fast food restaurants — is among the 10 where the largest number of new jobs will be (along with janitors, nurses aides and orderlies, sales clerks, cashiers, waiters/waitresses, clerks, nurses, secretaries, and truck drivers.)

This is consistent with other data indicating that almost three-fifths of the net gain in new jobs generated in the 1980s comprised jobs paying under \$11,104 in 1986 dollars — i.e., less than half the median income that full-time employees earned in 1973.

Those who argue that better education will lead to better jobs for youths also tend to ignore the effects of discrimination on one's job prospects. If education by itself could explain people's economic fortunes, we would expect to see the income gap between men and women disappear as the education gap closed. Men and women now have similar average levels of educational attainment (12.8 years), high school completion, college attendance, and cognitive skill levels, yet the income gap remains. In fact, as of 1986, among full-time workers 25 years old and older, female college graduates earned 10% less than males with only high school diplomas. Female high school graduates earned 16% less than males with only 8 years of elementary school education.

Further, the unemployment rate for African-American high school graduates is actually 20% higher than the rate for white high school dropouts, according to a report by the William T. Grant Foundation.

## An Economy Out of Sync

These statistics are in turn confirmed by a closer analysis of data used to describe "at-risk" youth. Being born into a black, Latino, or a single-parent family is not a "problem" in and of itself. It becomes so only because our society is structured so that having these characteristics increases one's chances of being poor. For example, once you control for economic status, being from a single-parent home (a popular "at-risk" category) or having a working mother is not associated with falling behind in school.

There is something odd about industry's concern with "at-risk" students. Children are poor because their parents don't have jobs that pay above-poverty-level wages. If companies are not providing the parents with jobs that pay living wages, then where are the high-skill, high-wage jobs for the children?

Thus, rather than an educational system out of sync with an economy that is generating jobs requiring high skills which the schools are failing to impart, the educational system and the employment system are both out of sync with our real social and economic needs. We have both an educational system which fails to develop and an economy which fails to demand and utilize the full set of capabilities of our youth.

In fact, in the absence of such a demand from the economy, it becomes harder to get the schools to provide high-quality education in the first place.

In education, there are two facets to this issue. First, a high-wage economy is needed in order to generate the revenues to pay for high-quality education. But the issue goes deeper — it depends upon whether the nature of jobs and the organization of work generate the need for higher education skills. Even the most recalcitrant of current problems in education would become immeasurably more resolvable if the local economy were being restructured to assure that good jobs, providing good income and demanding the full use of each person's creative capacities were available for all — thereby creating a real, not just rhetorical, demand for schools to help students develop those capabilities and a real, not just rhetorical, reason for youths to feel that they and their education were valued.

## Political and Economic Choices

Whether we move to a high-skill, high-wage economy is not a question to be answered with projections or predictions about the labor market of the future. It is primarily a question of economic and political choice.

First, the answer is not dictated by technology itself — high tech can be used to expand and enrich jobs, or it can be used to further routinize them. In both

manufacturing and the service sector, there are plenty of examples (such as food service) where companies have found ways to take complexity and thinking skills out of the jobs and put them into the computers — "fool-proof" technology.

Second, the answer cannot be based on assuming that our economy will automatically move in the healthiest direction. Our long-term economic interests do lie in a high-skill, high-wage economy. Yet short-term economic interests often tempt firms to go the low-skill route: if technology can be used to routinize work, then (1) it is easier for companies to control the work process, (2) lower skill levels command lower wages because a larger share of the labor pool is eligible, and (3) companies have less need to be concerned about workers' technical and academic preparation and have less need to pay for worker retraining themselves.

Third, we should not assume that we will be able to move toward a high-skill, high-wage economy simply by producing highly educated workers, when even now the economy is not able to accommodate the skilled students that do come out of our far-from-perfect education system. Sole reliance on such a "supply-side" approach will not work — any more than we could have expected supply-side economics to work when we simply provided corporations with additional capital in the form of big tax breaks so that they would use it to build new productive capacity, when their existing plant capacities were underutilized.

In both cases, supply-side increases — whether of human potential or financial capital — cannot substitute for increased demand. We must ensure that we have an economy which is there to demand and use that potential. □

Paul Weckstein is Co-Director of the Washington office of the Center for Law and Education. This article is adapted from a longer piece, which has appeared elsewhere in different forms, offering a comprehensive alternative to current policies, including suggestions for education reform which are consistent with this economic analysis. The Center for Law and Education has a national project to implement key elements of the 1990 federal vocational education act which were designed to address these problems.



Credit: Rick Reinhard

**Focusing solely on schools ignores crucial questions of why our economy doesn't produce high-skill jobs.**



# SHORTS

## Schools To Drop Racist Mascots

The Native American mascots that are common at Wisconsin schools may soon be a relic of the past.

Following an opinion by the state Attorney General's office that the mascots likely violate anti-discrimination laws, the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association announced in mid November that some school districts will voluntarily abandon use of the Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames.

Attorney General James Doyle wrote a legal opinion in mid October that the use of the Native American mascots "could cause an American Indian harm by enforcing a stereotype and/or creating an intimidating or offensive environment, thus perpetuating past discrimination."

Native American mascots are common in Wisconsin schools. There are 11 teams, for example, with the name "Warriors," 17 with the name "Indians," and nine called the "Blackhawks."

## Reports Recommends Inclusive Classrooms

A strongly worded report has recommended that disabled children be fully included in general education classes.

The National Association for State Boards of Education recommends that

boards create fully inclusive classrooms for disabled children rather than rely on "mainstreaming" practices under which disabled children spend only part of the school day in general education classrooms.

"There should be no mistake about the implications of this vision: The [report] is calling for a fundamental shift in the delivery of education," according to the document.

## Rethinking Our Classrooms Institute

A week-long series of workshops for teachers and parents will be held in Washington in July around the theme Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Social and Economic Justice.

This second annual institute for K-12 teachers and parents will be from July 25-28 in Washington, D.C., just prior to the national conference of the National Coalition of Education Activists. For more information write the Network of Educators on the Americas, 1118 22nd St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037. 202-429-0137.

## NASDC Fundraising Put on Hold

Fundraising apparently is on hold for the National American Schools Development Corp. (NASDC) project spawned by the Bush Administration, as corporations wait to see whether President-elect Clinton will support the program.

The project, initiated with private funds by the New American Schools Development Corp. (NASDC), is a spin-off of Bush's America 2000 education plan. Last July NASDC announced 11 winners of grants designed to create "break-the-mold" schools. The winners received initial one-year funding from \$1 to \$3 million each. However, those initial grants have used up most of the funds raised so far by NASDC, according to a report in the Dec. 1 *School Board News*, publication of the National School Boards Association.

The "break-the-mold" projects were designed for five years, and are to receive up to \$20 million each over that period.

NASDC fundraising, however, "is in suspension now," according to Joan Ganz Cooney, a member of the NASDC Board of Directors and head of Children's Television Workshop. "Raising money has been very difficult for several weeks, in part because of the economy and because some businesses want to make sure the new secretary of education under Clinton will be endorsing it."

## NCEA Conference July 29-Aug. 1

The National Coalition of Education Activists (NCEA) will hold its annual convention from Thursday, July 29 through Sunday, Aug. 1, in Washington D.C. The conference theme will be "Building Bridges," and workshops and discussions will address anti-racist education, who should run schools, new ways of teaching, and national policy issues. For ore information contact NCEA, PO Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472. 914-658-8115.

## Educators Tour to Mexico

The Network of Educators on the Americas and its San Diego affiliate are sponsoring a bilingual/multicultural education tour to Mexico from Aug. 1-16. The tour will explore cultural/social, economic, and political issues in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the migration of Mexicans to the United States. For more information contact NECA, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20037. 202-429-0137.

## Sojourners Publishes Racism Study Guide

A new study Guide on combating racism has been published by Sojourners Resource Center, a religiously oriented justice group in Washington, D.C.

The 180-page resource is divided into nine sections, each with study questions. It is designed for use not only by schools, but also church and community groups. Articles are written by a range of activists, from Manning Marable to C.T. Vivian, to Anne Braden.

The guide, *America's Original Sin, A Study Guide to White Racism*, is available for \$10 each for single copies. Bulk order prices are also available. Contact Sojourners Resource Center, Box 29272, Washington, D.C. 20017. 202-636-3637.

## Conference on North American Education

A conference will be held in the state of Washington at the end of January to discuss the effects of the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement on public education in Canada, the United

States, and Mexico.

The conference will be held from Friday, Jan. 29 through Sunday, Jan. 31 at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. It is sponsored by the Evergreen State College Labor Education and Research Center and the Association for Higher Education in Washington State. Registration fee is \$65. For more information contact the Labor Center, TESC, Olympia, WA 98505. 206-866-6000.

## Express Yourself!

A new interactive computer program on First Amendment rights has been developed by the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California.

The program, "Express Yourself," is aimed at middle and high school students. Using dynamic graphics and sound effects, it features a racially diverse group of students exploring the history and interpretation of freedoms of speech, assembly, association, press, and religion. Special emphasis is placed on school-related issues such as dress codes, prom dates, and student-led protests.

The program comes on a Macintosh compatible diskette and is available for students and teachers (\$10.00 for others) from ACLU-NC, 1663 Mission St., Suite 460, San Francisco, CA 94103. 415-621-2493.

## Math and Science Tests Flunk

Standardized math and science tests used to evaluate most students in this country neglect key subjects, inadequately stress thinking, and distort the teaching of math and science, according to a scathing critique of the tests issued by the National Science Foundation.

The report looked at the six most common standardized tests used in fourth and eighth grade and in high schools, and at the tests given every few weeks as part of math and science textbooks.

"It is a depressing picture," said George Madaus, one of the co-authors of the report. "If we are going to realize the hopes of educational reformers in math and science, we are going to have to reform these materials and bring them up to date."

The study was funded by the National Science Foundation and conducted by the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy at Boston College.

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# Tales from an Untracked Class

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while students in remedial classes learn they are incapable of completing more difficult work.

But I wonder what other messages my students learn when they see a majority of white students or magnet students in advanced classes. Do they believe that white students are smarter than students of color? That students who don't live in our neighborhood know more than neighborhood students? When we allow tracking, especially tracking which privileges one race, one class or one gender over another, we may unwittingly allow students to walk away with these assumptions.

When I decided to untrack, I asked the counselors to place a variety of students in my classes. And they do. I typically teach four classes a day: Literature in American History, a two period block class that I co-teach with Bill Bigelow, and two sections of Contemporary Literature and Society, a senior level course. (This is not a full load; I work as director of the Portland Writing Project for part of my day.) Each of these classes fulfills the requirement for junior and senior level English classes. The English department and the administration approved both courses as variations in the regular curriculum. Depending on the time my classes are offered, they are more or less diverse.

### Myths and Misunderstandings

After teaching untracked classes for several years, I've come to believe that the notion of great differences in student ability is false. Many of the students who come from "remedial" classes are quite bright. But the abilities they bring to class often go unrecognized because they aren't the skills traditional education has prized. Anyone who has taught low skilled classes knows this. During my first years of teaching, I couldn't keep up with the verbal sparring in my Title I (now Chapter I) reading classes. Students beat me quite handily in verbal battles about going to the bathroom, eating food, and chewing gum in class.

Because of the difference in students' education histories, they come with different sets of skills, but not necessarily different sets of intellectual capabilities. The students who typically perform well in class have better reading, writing, geographic, and math skills. They have better work habits. They know how to study. They are often voracious readers. They have written more essays and know how to put together a well organized paper. They are confident of their ability as students. Whereas, many "remedial" students still have problems with the basics in punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, and grammar. They don't know where to begin or end a sentence much less a paragraph or an essay. Many have never read a complete book by their junior or senior year in high school. Many never do homework. They are often intimidated when it comes to traditional class work, or they have made a choice to slide by.

But often the most creative students in my mixed ability classes are the students who have not succeeded in school. Previously in my low skilled English classes, this creative energy funnelled into "stinging" each other, insults. Now, it finds outlets in poetry, dialogues, oral work. (This is not to say my classroom is perfect; I battle side talk daily.) In my experience, many previously low tracked students have a great ear for dialogue because their listening and speaking skills are more finely honed. These students tend to be playful, talkative, adept at role plays, debates, and class discussions. They are risk takers.

Steven, for example, literally jumps into the middle of a debate. Once, in a unit on the politics of gender, he strode to the center of our circle and acted out how he believes women have a shopping mall approach to men. Steven pretended he was a woman



Credit: Susan Lina Ruggles

Students bring different skills, but certainly not differing abilities, to the classroom.

inspecting each man as if he were a piece of merchandise, then tossing him aside when someone better came along. Although he had difficulty writing an essay on the topic, his spontaneous "presentation" during discussion was well argued and gave students a metaphoric framework for many of their debates on the topic.

Each group of students (as well as each individual student) presents their own problems. While most of the "advanced" students complete their class work and homework on time, too often they write "safe" papers. Chris, a potential valedictorian, summed it up when he asked, "What do I have to do to get an A?" Not

grouping is that "low" students automatically benefit while advanced students automatically languish. Some folks think that top students end up playing teacher to their not so bright peers in an untracked class — and unfortunately this is sometimes true. Adam, a senior, writes of his experience in this role:

I was always the one the teacher looked at when someone else needed help. "Oh, Adam can help you." It's not the usual form of discrimination, but I realize now how much it bothered me when I was in grade school. "Well, so and so isn't a good student, he needs extra help, we'll make him partners with Adam. Adam

improvisation on gender issues, Jessica's dialogue, Tony's metaphoric analysis of the politics of language, Adam's ability to punctuate, Tivon's synthesis of political issues into concrete images, Curtina's images in her poetry, Joe's insight into how social politics reverberate in the 'hood.

Students also teach each other by telling the stories of their lives or debating issues from diverse perspectives. Scott thought that racism had disappeared after the '60s. When Millshane told about her brother's death at the hands of a white man who was never punished for the crime, when she described the cross burning in front of her house, when Suntory wrote about the hour it took for 911 to respond after a round of gun shots were fired into his house, Scott's education about race relations became real.

As Jessica noted in her class evaluation: This is the first English class in three years where I have been around different students. All of us have been tracked into separate little migrating groups forever stuck with each other. I think that having so many different thinking minds made it rich. All the experiences we shared were exciting and new. It made us debate things because most often we didn't agree with each other. But we listened and we all think a little bit differently now. Don't you wish the whole world could be like our class?

Of course this notion of students as teachers implies a major shift in the structure, content, and methodology of the class.

### Changing the Curriculum

I was moved to untrack my classes because of the injustice I saw in students' education. But I continue to teach untracked courses because they make better classes — for teachers and students.

Now instead of constructing my curriculum around a novel in my English classes, I teach thematic units that emphasize the social/political underpinnings of my students' lives: the politics of language, men and women in society and literature, the politics of cartoons and mass media. The point is not to teach a certain novel or a set of facts about literature, but to engage

**After teaching untracked classes for several years, I've come to believe that the notion of great differences in student ability is false.**

what tools must I be capable of using, not what knowledge will I need to understand about literature, writing, society, history, but what must I get done. My goal is to shake them out of their safety, to create a desire to write, instead of a desire to complete the work, to awaken some passion for learning, to stop them from slurping up education without examining it. I want them to walk around with note pads, ready for their next poem, story, or essay, but I also want them to question themselves and the world: in fact, I want them to question the privilege that placed them into advanced or honors classes. I want the same for my low skilled students, but additionally, I am challenged to harness their verbal dexterity onto paper and motivate them to work outside of class. But I also want to provoke them to examine the inequalities that landed many of them in low skilled classes in the first place.

### Who Benefits?

Another myth about ending ability

won't mind spending his extra time explaining things to so and so."

This problem tends to erupt when a class is untracked but the curriculum and methodology remain the same. It's the worst case scenario that proponents of tracking use to scare us into maintaining the status quo. They assume that top students master the material quickly and must either tap their toes or play teacher while remedial students struggle. This situation places students who arrive feeling one down educationally at a further disadvantage, but it also takes time away from advanced students who should be working at the edge of their ability instead of repeating what they already know.

But if we turn the practice of students as teachers around and look at it differently, if we shift perceptions about who teaches in a classroom, then we acknowledge that all students can be teachers. When there is real diversity in the class, students teach each other by sharing their strengths: Steven's

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# Tales from an Untracked Class

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students in a dialogue, to teach them to find connections between their lives, literature, and society. And most importantly, to teach them to question what is too often accepted. The same is true in my Literature in American History course. We no longer march through the year chronologically. "Essential" questions provide the focus for each unit.

In the politics of language section of my Contemporary Literature and Society class, I ask, "Is language political?" There is no one text that answers the question. A variety of readings — novels, plays, essays, short stories, poems — as well as role plays, discussions, improvisations, writing from our lives, all serve as "texts." Think of it as a symphony or a choir. Each text, each student's life, adds an instrument or voice to the discussion. The texts are interwoven, but the recurring refrain is made up of the students' stories and analysis — their voices, either in discussion or in read-arounds of their own pieces, hold the song together.

For example, instead of teaching students Standard Written Edited English as if it were the only way to speak and write, as if it were the language agreed upon as the best choice, I ask them to question that policy. Because many of the seniors are either preparing for or avoiding the SAT's, I begin the unit by giving them a sample test, then exploring how they felt about it. Most felt humiliated. We explore why a test for college admissions should make them feel like that. We ask why there should be tests to keep some people in and some people out of college. Statistics from FairTest that break down SAT scores by race, class, and gender provide students another perspective. They try to analyze what these data mean. Are women less intelligent than men? Are rich people smarter than poor people? If not, how can we explain the difference in scores? What other explanations can we

find?

"The Cult of Mental Measurement," a chapter from David Owens' book *None of the Above*, gives historical background to their analysis. Then we look at how language affects different groups. We read George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and look at the intersection of class and language. Through "The Achievement of Desire," a chapter from Richard Rodriguez's book, *Hunger for Memory*, students examine how people whose first language is not English change when they assimilate. We also read parts of *Talkin' and Testifyin'* by Geneva Smitherman. For many students, African-American and European-American, this is the first time they've studied the historical roots of the African-American language. For some, this is an affirmation of their home language, a winning back of pride in themselves and their families; for others, it is an opportunity to explore misconceptions about language.

The change in content to thematic units with a focus on essential questions shifts the educational domain from memorizing the rules to questioning the rules. This is sometimes uncomfortable. There are no easy-to-answer, machine-scorable tests at the end of the unit. There is no "getting it done." Sometimes, there isn't even agreement. The shift in terrain from consumption of knowledge to the questioning and examining of assumptions moves students of diverse abilities away from the lock-step nature of a skills approach while at the same time challenging them with a rigorous, accessible curriculum.

Our explicit focus on the politics of language and education plays an additional key role in untracking my classes. Because tracking has to one degree or another shaped students' academic self-conception, especially low-tracked students, taking a critical look at this process helps them rethink their potential. As my teaching

partner, Bill Bigelow, writes in an article on untracking the social studies classroom:

...[t]he unequal system of education, of which tracking is an important part, needs a critical classroom examination so that students can expose and expell the voices of self-blame, and can overcome whatever doubts they have about their capacity for academic achievement.

## Changing Strategies

It's hard to parse out techniques. They don't easily divide into reading, writing, Social Studies, English. Is writing interior

## Students also teach each other by telling the stories of their lives or debating issues from diverse perspectives

monologues and poetry about a historical novel a reading strategy, a writing strategy, or a way to deepen students' understanding of history or literature? When students begin writing poetry, drama, essays, fiction, their reading of those genres change. They read with a new kind of awareness — they look at blocking, dialogue, imagery, use of evidence instead of reading for answers. When students begin making a social analysis of a text, where does English end and Social Studies begin? Just as untracking makes us question the notion of "good" kids and "bad" kids, changing classroom practice blurs borders between content areas and strategies. Nothing is quite so tidy.

Some of the readings discussed above are quite difficult — for all students. And this provides a roadblock or a dilemma for those of us who want to untrack classes. How do we continue to read challenging literature when not all of our students are capable of reading it? Do we "dummy down" the curriculum and deny capable students access to a rigorous curriculum or do we give different assignments to students based on their reading levels? Although I've done both in the past, as well as providing students a choice of novels within a theme, I grew uncomfortable with those options.

Improvisations, dialogue journals, poetry, and interior monologues as well as other strategies teach students in any class to question rather than read for answers. But in an untracked class, these methods equalize access to reading as well as push students to discuss content. Not every student in my class completes the readings by the due date, but they can still be involved in the discussion. Often the class talk entices them to read and provides a meaningful context for them to understand the text.

## Improvisations

Now I use a variety of strategies to give students access to the readings. For example, with *Pygmalion* I use improvisations. I divide the students into small groups, give each group a provocative scene and ask them to create an improvisation which will help the class understand what took place in that particular section of the play. As a small group they discuss the scene and make meaning. As I circulate from group to group, I catch snatches of questions: What is going on? Who is Freddie? And then moving to higher level discussions: Why does Eliza throw the slipper at Higgins? Why doesn't she fight back when he calls her a "squashed cabbage leaf?" Doesn't

this remind you of...?

The groups provide access to the entire class as they reread, reinterpret, and act out the text. Goldie and Antonia rewrote the script in modern Jefferson language. Steffanie and Licy worked with the original script on the bath scene. Students stay in character on "stage" as the class questions them. Disagreements about the interpretation of a scene lead to engaged dialogue about character motivation, author's intent, and society. Often, we're sent back to the original text to "prove" our point to the class. Although I usually begin by modeling the kinds of questions I want students to ask, they quickly take over. This year in my second period class, Mark's statement, "Henry didn't love Eliza, he considered her a professional equal," kept the class debating for an hour. In sixth period, Licy questioned whether Eliza's life improved with her new knowledge or brought her misery. As Licy's questions suggest, the improv permits all students access to important issues about the politics of language.

The improv is not an end; they are means to provoke meaningful discussion about literature or history in a way that enables all students to participate, no matter what their reading level.

## Dialogue Journals

Improvisations are neither appropriate nor valuable for all texts. The method I most frequently use to equalize access to articles, essays, stories and novels is the dialogue journal (otherwise known as double entry journal, talk back journal, note taking/note making). The purpose of the journal is to teach students to read closely, to encourage them to ask questions of the author, but also to find out what confuses them in the piece. I try to get students to question, to make connections with other readings or life experiences, instead of reading to consume.

In the dialogue journal, students become the authors of their own questions about readings. Sometimes at the beginning of class, I ask students to read over their dialogue journals and circle questions or comments they want to discuss. After they've assembled their contributions, I divide students into small groups and ask them to talk with each other using their questions/comments as a starting point. I tell each group to bring one or two questions or statements to the whole class for discussion. Here's a sample from my junior Literature in American History class discussion about the novel *River Song* by Craig Lesley:

*Group #1 returns to full class discussion with the following question: Is Craig Lesley racist, sexist, homophobic when he makes the Mexican jokes, etc. or is he just trying to develop Danny's character?*

Angela: I think he's just trying to show what Danny is like.

Aaron: Okay, but then why does he have to keep bringing [racist remarks] up? Couldn't he just have him make those jokes during the first few chapters, then leave it alone? When he keeps doing it, it's an overkill. It seems like with the Native American issues there is so much to cover, why spend time making jokes about Mexicans or male nurses?

Janice: Wouldn't he have to keep doing it if it's a characteristic? I mean he couldn't just do it for a few chapters then stop or else his character wouldn't be consistent.

Aaron: Yeah. I hadn't thought of that.

Sarah: I think he's trying to make a point about the Native American culture — that since they are consistently being put down — alcoholism, lazy — that they put other people down, other racial groups.

Aiden: I think he's just trying to make it realistic. That's how people talk; they make fun of others.

Jim: Maybe he's trying to make us think

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## False Choices

### Why School Vouchers Threaten Our Children's Future

"Choice" has become the hottest controversy in education. *Rethinking Schools*, which published the highly acclaimed *Rethinking Columbus*, has just published a special 32-page magazine on this key debate.

Contributors to *False Choices* range from Jonathan Kozol, to Herbert Kohl, Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), Linda Darling-Hammond, Anthony Alvarado, and Robert Lowe.

"False Choices is a terrific package of ammunition in the fight to ward off private vouchers and the right-wing 'choice' agenda. 'Questions and Answers about School Choice' by the editors of *Rethinking Schools* is particularly important."

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# Tales from an Untracked Class

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about the racism, that's why he puts in so many — and against so many groups.

Aaron: But couldn't he do that and then have someone make a comment about it — like Pudge? When Danny makes a joke, couldn't she say, "Hey, that's not funny. Think about how people talk about Indians?"

Janice: Yeah. Because people do that in real life too — stop someone when they're telling a racist joke.

The class becomes more democratic. This questioning method puts students in charge of the discussion rather than the teacher. It validates their questions. Sometimes in large group discussions when the teacher talks about symbolism or a well-read student discusses the imagery in a passage, some students are too intimidated to ask the simple questions. Students have an opportunity to try out ideas on this small group before taking the point to a large group.

Again, students learn from each other, by challenging each other's assumptions and listening to someone else's opinion. Claire wrote, "I got ideas I wouldn't have thought of, interpretations I would not have considered. When I really thought about all of it, I acquired some new skills from [my classmates]."

While writing dialogue journals, students stand outside of the text and ask questions or make comments, whereas the writing of interior monologues and poems from the literary or historical character's point of view encourages students to examine why characters act the way they do. These tactics put students inside the literature and history. They breathe life into content that can seem dry, factual and distant from students' lives. For example, in the following poem, "To Die Without Weeping: The Atomic Bomb on Japan," Cresta borrows language from the book *Hiroshima* and writes about the bombing of Hiroshima:

Near the center  
it was as hot as the sun  
and people became nothing.  
Windless.  
Their heads bowed in expressionless  
silence,  
butterflied patterns of kimonos  
scarring shoulders and backs.  
Cries for water echo off destroyed lives,  
moans of pain haunt the shadows of men,  
as if their spirits left  
so that we do not forget too quickly  
our people buried together.



Credit: Susan Una Ruggles

Students learn from each other, challenging assumptions and listening to others' opinions.

As black rain falls  
plants flourish wildly in the wreckage.  
A city of death blanketed in flowers,  
morning glories twist around lifeless  
bodies,  
regenerating towards the sky,  
ignoring those who have died without  
weeping.

Her poem puts us inside Japan. We no longer count bodies from a distance. Instead we feel the pain and see the destruction close up. We talk about the personal toll of the bombing. Historic decisions become embedded in real people's lives — lives that students, at least momentarily, have touched.

Interior monologues also help erase the distance between people separated by time, race, nationality, and gender. In this form, students get inside a character's head and write thoughts and feelings about a situation from that person's perspective. Typically,

students read pieces of literature or history or view slides, videos, or paintings in class as prompts and then imagine the character's thoughts. Heather wrote from the point of view of an enslaved woman raped by her "master;" George wrote from the mind of a soldier who watched his friend die. Erika's interior monologue came from a Japanese-American girl's point of view as she burned all of her Japanese toys and books before the Japanese internment. By getting in touch with their own pain and loss, students learn to empathize with others. This deepens their reading. Instead of reading words, they read lives.

There is no right answer in these exercises. As I tell students, "The only way you can do this wrong is to not do it." I begin by sharing examples from previous years so students will understand what I want. The student pieces advance classroom knowledge and dialogue about content, in these cases history, but also about reading

and writing. One of the points I try to make is that neither history nor literature is inevitable. People made choices.

Filtering reading through improvisations, dialogue journals, interior monologues, poetry, and class discussions slows the class down. We don't "cover" as many novels, as much history, as we did before. But students learn more. They discover how to dig beneath the surface, how to make connections between texts and their own lives. Last year, in class evaluations students let me know in no uncertain terms that the units they enjoyed and learned the most from were the units we spent months on; the units they enjoyed the least were the ones where I "bombarded [them] with readings" which I didn't give them time to digest.

I remind myself that taking time to carefully teach students how to "talk back" to text pays off throughout the year because

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## One Student's Experience

# The Difficulty of Changing Tracks

Once students are pigeon-holed in a lower track, they are rarely able to switch to a higher track. When they do, it is often because of extraordinary circumstances — sheer persistence, or connections at the school, for example. One of my students, Christen Richard, wrote the following about her experience with this system:

On my first day of high school, my English teacher greeted us with a test. "Class, we are going to take a test to see if you should remain in this class. If you test low, we'll move you down to the intermediate level, English B. You may start."

I opened up to what you might call a book of riddles: "Blue is to sky as \_\_\_\_\_ is to \_\_\_\_\_." The words seemed foreign to me, words I couldn't pronounce, words that didn't carry any meaning for me. They challenged my ability to comprehend a sentence.

After searching to find a prefix or suffix

I learned in middle school, I dropped my number two pencil in disgust. Unfortunately, the war wasn't over.

"In the next section, you must find the errors in these sentences."

The next day I entered my classroom at 8:25 and waited for the tardy bell to ring so I would know if I belonged in English A. "Jerry Maze, Rhoda Peterson...Christen Richard..." I hadn't passed the test. I had failed.

But don't think I left it at that. I ignored the teacher's idiotic speech and started planning. I made an appointment to see my counselor. As I walked down the hall, I felt the walls were trying to close in on me. I knew the odds were against me. I was only a freshman. What could I do? I felt like an outsider, a piece that didn't fit part of the puzzle. But whether I belonged or not, I was determined to carve my way to fit.

I made it through freshman English A and came out with a "C" grade. I really don't know my teacher's feelings about me

staying in her class, and to be frank with you, I don't care. She never spoke to me much at all.

But my battle didn't end. When I returned at the beginning of my sophomore year, I discovered I was once again in English B. I was devastated. I knew I shouldn't be in this intermediate class. I never had any homework. I finished it during class in about 15 minutes. "Class," my teacher would say, "I'm going to give you the word 'Christmas.' I want you to find as many words as you can in 20 minutes." I was going off my rocker in two weeks.

I pleaded with the head of the English department, telling her why I wanted to leave my class. "The work is too easy. I'm not learning anything by finding words out of other words, and I'm tired of it." She knew what I was talking about. Then came the test. As mad as I was, I think I could have passed the SAT. Should a multiple choice test determine what I know? Should it determine what I want to learn?

"You were low on the multiple-choice section, but high on your essay skills. I don't know if I should let you go to advanced placement, but I'm going to let you try. I want you to do your best, and show me that you belong in an advanced class."

I felt like a winner. I got up out of my seat and shook her hand. I said, "Thank you very much." I left with my head up and ten pounds more of pride.

Christen's determination proves that it is possible to change tracks. But Christen's grandmother worked at the school, so she had an ally, a trusted adult within the school to help her. Most students I know in low skilled classes would not have persevered as Christen had. Most would have felt defeated by the test, humiliated by the move. □

Linda Christensen

# Tales from an Untracked Class

continued from page 21

these practices teach students to read and respond critically. In her class evaluation Lily wrote, "I look at the world as a question now. When I read the newspaper, I don't know if I can believe what it is saying. I always read more than one history book, and definitely question what CNN is saying. The press has a way of changing stories to make them sound good so that the paper will sell. I think the historians did the same thing."

These techniques also allow students from different literacy backgrounds a way to join in the conversation. There's no one way, no right way to talk about literature and history.

## Changing Writing Strategies

Few students, regardless of their ability, see themselves as writers. So my first challenge is to change students' perceptions about writing and their ability. I tell them: Don't worry about grammar, punctuation, or spelling on the first drafts, just write, then revise. I try to get them to kick the editor out of their heads.

The threshold for success should be low enough for all students to cross over. The climate should be welcoming enough for everyone to want to try. Whatever we write, wherever we begin should be cause for celebration. I know this sounds like some kind of fairy tale magic — "just believe enough and your dream will come true."

## Race and class can become tender wounds where student and teacher either learn from one another or create inseparable gulfs.

But, corny as it sounds, it's true. Maybe part of it is that if teachers believe in a student's capacity to learn, they will. But I think part of it is rewriting the student mind set, replacing the belief, "I don't know how to write or read or discuss," with the belief that they can.

The read-around is where the fairy dust that converts nonwriters to writers happens. The circle is necessary so everyone is a part of the class. (This also cuts down on discipline problems because all students are visible and accountable.) As students and I read our pieces, classmates take notes and give positive feedback to the writer. I talk about three kinds of feedback: content, style, and "me too." They can respond to the content of the piece — what did they like about the arguments, the ideas of the writing. They can respond to the style of the piece. I ask them to be specific. What line, what phrase did they like? Did they like the imagery, the repetition? Instead of working on a deficit model — what's wrong with this piece, we work on a positive model — what's right with this piece. What can we learn from it? They can also respond, after they've given the writer feedback, with a "me too" story which tells how the writer's experience stimulated a memory. As Pete noted in his class evaluation:

The way you have us make comments (what did you like about [the piece of writing]) has helped me deal with people. My skin is thick enough to take a lot of abuse just because I've always had a fairly high opinion of some of the things I can do. I didn't realize a lot of other people don't have that advantage. After a while I found out positive criticism helped me more than negative too.

Students learn from each other. They

provide each other with accessible models. I encourage them to listen for what "works" in the writing of their peers, and then steal those techniques and use them in their own pieces. In their portfolio evaluations, they write about what they learn from each other's writing as a way of discussing the changes in their writing.

Erika wrote in her portfolio:

My classmates played a huge role in improving my writing. Without them I wouldn't be able to write at all. When listening to people's pieces I find things to use in my own work. When I hear Jessica or Courtney read a piece I listen to their "attitude" and try to bring it into my own writing. When I hear Amianne and Rose's description I then try to reach deeper into my own vocabulary. And when I hear Rachel's and Adam's true life stories, I search back in time to find something that happened in my life worth writing about.

In an untracked class, the fear is that advanced students will read and students who have been placed in low-tracked classes will be silenced. But that has not proven true. I begin with low threat assignments: write about your name; write about an event in your life; write from the point of view of a character. At the beginning of the year, I ask students to write a compliment to each of their classmates about their piece. The message is: anyone who reads will receive positive feedback. No one will be thrown to the wolves. We do critique writings later, but always the initial feedback is what works. All students are fearful when they share. They feel exposed and vulnerable. Their hands shake, their voices quaver, clearly, they are nervous. Although Sharon was afraid to read for the first quarter of the year, she eventually read:

"One thing I need to learn is to read my pieces out loud because I might think my piece is scum but it might be just dandy to another. I think it was good that we had read-arounds because you got a chance to hear what people thought about our pieces and that leads to rewrites."

Heather wrote:

When I listen to other people's writing, I hear things I love or wish I'd written myself. Most of the time that's where I get my inspiration. Sometimes I catch myself saying, "I wish I could write like so-and-so." Then I think, "What was it about his/her piece that I liked?" When I figure that out, I'm that much closer to being a better writer. I use their papers as examples. I steal their kernels of ideas and try to incorporate it into my own writing. For example, I love how Ki uses her personal history in her writing, so I try that out for myself. I like Lisa's use of unusual metaphors, so I try as hard as I can to steer clear of the generic type I've been known to use in the past.

As with the reading, not all students in an untracked class arrive on the due date with a paper in hand. To be sure, some students haven't taken the time to do the work, but others can't find a way to enter the work; they either don't know where to start or feel incapable of beginning. Even my pep talks about "bending the assignment to find your passion" or "just write for thirty minutes; I'll accept whatever you come up with as a first draft" don't entice these students. That's why I'm not a stickler about deadlines. During read-arounds the students who wrote papers will spawn ideas for those who either couldn't write or who haven't learned homework patterns yet. They will teach them how to find a way to enter the assignment. Sometimes students write a weak "just to get it done" paper, then hear a student's piece that sends them back home to write.

## Conflict and Consciousness

As we solve problems, we create them. Untracking raised issues I haven't had to



One of the challenges in an untracked classroom is learning how to channel students' creative energy.

deal with before. At Jefferson, ability grouping tends to divide down race and class lines, so there is less tension over these issues in homogeneously grouped classes — usually because one group feels too marginalized to speak out. This is not true in a "mixed up class" — especially when the curriculum I teach explicitly examines and challenges race, class, and gender inequities. Students who have been privileged feel the weight and sometimes the guilt of that privilege. While other students feel outrage when they understand that "their prison decorated with modern illusion is still a prison," as my student Tivon wrote. Put these two emotions, guilt and outrage, together in fifty-five minute periods and the result is conflict.

Race and class can become tender wounds where students and teacher either learn from one another or create inseparable gulfs. A student I'll call Paul wrote, "This is the first time in my history as a student where I would cry because of a class...I cried because I was a white male who had been through the scholars program, oblivious to tracking."

Some turned that shame into anger. European-Americans didn't want to feel guilty about the past or the present. In one class after the Rodney King verdict, almost every topic turned into a discussion on race, and the discussion always left someone feeling anxious, at the very least. As one student wrote in her evaluation, "I found myself contributing less to the class than I normally do. I had always thought of this class as a place where I could be free to express my ideas and have those ideas be respected, even if everyone doesn't agree with them, but instead a lot of the time I found it to be a place where I had to watch my tongue for fear of being labeled a racist." Later she added, "I know hearing what a lot of people had to say made me feel uncomfortable, but it changed some of my perceptions about the world, and our class."

Sekou, an African-American male, provided an alternative perception to the same class:

It gets almost scary when we begin to touch on controversial racial issues or uncover other sheets that seemed to be intentionally pulled over our eyes. Everyone feels the seriousness in the room, but for some it turned them away. They became disgruntled with the class. "This always happens," some said. But to me, it is beautiful. It makes me look forward to discussions, and I look forward to taking part. I think about the issues on my own outside of class. That never happened to me before. Class had

always been separate from the real world. Finally, there is a connection.

Unfortunately, there is no quick exercise that makes inequality go away. This conflict and the discomfort have become more pronounced since the uprising in Los Angeles. It's more acute in the senior year when students are competing for scholarships and entry into colleges.

I try to structure my Literature in American History class around movements where people worked together for change. I talk about constructing alternative moral ancestors — people we want in our family/racial history because they worked to end oppression. As Johanna wrote, "I'm glad we studied the abolitionists; they restored my faith in my race. I learned not to feel guilty for what my ancestors did. I am free to choose my own moral ancestors, and I have."

I take Bill Bigelow's idea of looking at the use of pronouns — who is the "we" students identify with? For example, when Leah said, "How did the Nez Perce feel when we took their land?" the class looked at the "we." Did we identify with the settlers or with the people who were trying to keep land for the Nez Perce? Licy, a Mexican-American senior, told Joachim, a foreign exchange student from Germany, "You don't have to feel guilty unless you identify with the part of the system that denies people their rights."

Is there an alternative to this conflict? Change is sometimes painful. I don't want my students feeling tongue-tied, but protecting them from reality is not a trade off I'm willing to make.

## Conclusion

We can't just wish tracking away. There are too many barriers and too much resistant on too many levels. The evidence against tracking is mounting. Parents, teachers, administrators, and students need to be convinced that we can deliver a rigorous, challenging education for everyone in untracked classes. In addition to making a case against the injustice of tracking, we need to create a vision of education that serves all children. I am hopeful that change is possible. Teachers in my school and around the district are questioning practices that before were taken for granted. Now is the time for the education community to prove that justice and quality education are possible. □

Linda Christensen is a Rethinking Schools editorial associate and teaches English at Jefferson High School in Portland, OR.

# Privately Funded Vouchers Proliferate

Continued from page 5

school within the city limits of Detroit, public or private." Private voucher plans automatically provide a way to undercut the potential position of well-to-do whites. By limiting maximum scholarship and by forcing low-income parents to pay half the tuition, plans prevent low-income kids from attending the more elite private schools. For example, say a family has two children attending a school with a tuition of \$2,000, and the voucher pays a maximum of \$800. That means the parent must find \$2,400 to pay the rest of the tuition — a hefty sum for a three-person family that can have a maximum weekly income of \$397 in order to qualify for the program. In Milwaukee, suburbanite fears are eased because children in the program must attend a school in the city of Milwaukee. The geographical limit targets money to those religious schools with the most financial difficulties.

**Lack of Accountability**  
To its credit, the Milwaukee program is the only one which explicitly calls upon participating schools to "educate students from diverse cultural backgrounds" and to have "open enrollment and non-discriminatory policies" — although this does not necessarily include children with special physical or learning needs. Nor is it clear that there is any follow-up in Milwaukee to ensure that schools meet these minimal standards. In general, advocates of privately funded vouchers have required little to no accountability from participating schools. Timothy Ehrigott of the Indianapolis program proudly stated: "Our involvement stops at the school door."

All conference participants in Indianapolis received a 181-page manual on how to organize a private voucher plan. Produced by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, the manual includes everything from sample press releases, to tips on organizing, to articles of incorporation, to a software program for a database to administer the vouchers.

The most interesting parts of the manual provided organizing tips. One key piece of advice is, secrecy above all.

"Every program would do well to conduct its entire developmental stage in total secrecy," the manual cautions. "The importance of this can not be over-stressed. It would be quite unfortunate for word to get out into the community prior to your being ready for public announcement. Should this happen you will find the 'anti-choice' forces quickly at work to create an environment that would make it most difficult — if not impossible — to function and to enlist financial and other support."

The manual also argues that the key to a successful program is to present it in such a way that it undercuts any potential opposition. It notes that the similarities between the four main existing programs "are no accident."

The Indianapolis, Milwaukee, San Antonio and Atlanta privately funded voucher programs, for instance, emphasize that the program is designed to help moderate and low income families offset the cost of tuition at the private school of their choice. The statements consciously do not talk about the broader "choice" debate or problems in the public schools, or taxes, or unions, or test scores or any other issues

that might arouse the least bit of controversy.

As Rooney told the conference, "The way we always position it is, we're trying to help the children. Sure it is inherently a criticism of the public school system, but we don't define it that way."

The key marketing strategy, however, rests on an exploitation of worthwhile concepts such as of freedom of "choice" and parental rights.

"Sometimes, I think the way to do this is to simply stand up and say, parents should have the right to choose the schools their children will attend because parents should have the right to choose schools their children will attend. Thank you and good night," said Boaz of the CATO Institute. "I'm not really sure why there needs to be more argument than that."

## Schools and Democracy

Absent from the "choice" movement's discussion is any talk of the role of public schools in a democracy, beyond ensuring a minimally skilled workforce. Indeed, it was never suggested at the Indianapolis conference that the larger society has an inherent interest in education issues. The argument was that parents have the right to do what they think is best for their child, and that's that. Of course, another dominant theme was the unchallenged assumption that a market approach will magically improve our nation's schools. Throughout the conference, this argument was tinged with not-so-subtle anti-communist references to the breakup of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and calls to break the government's "monopoly" on education.

As Timothy Ehrigott, administrator of the Indianapolis voucher program, said in the final words spoken at the conference: "Let's go out and give some of the same choices to our children that they have in Warsaw, Poland and Russia now."

(For a more complete discussion of the role of schools in a democracy and the dangers of a marketplace approach to education, see *False Choices*, a special issue of *Rethinking Schools*.)

While it's too soon to tell whether conference organizers will succeed in instituting privately funded voucher programs in the 25 cities targeted, the power of the movement is already clear. Most important, the organizers know what they want and have the support and backing of well-funded foundations and think tanks. Feeding on legitimate discontent and wrapping their program in the mantle of all-American values such as "choice," they have clearly seized the initiative. As in so many other political campaigns, victory can all too easily go to those who offer simplistic solutions to complex problems.

In this regard, the Indianapolis conference was not only a call to arms for those who want to institute private school "choice" supported by public tax dollars. It was a warning to those who truly care about the future of public education in this country: focusing reform efforts exclusively on calls for more funding and refusing to acknowledge the many serious, non-financial problems in our nation's urban schools is a recipe for defeat. □

Barbara Miner is Managing Editor of *Rethinking Schools*.

# Facilities

Continued from page 3

referendum and cannot openly advocate a "yes" vote. The public relations campaign being handled by Carl Mueller of the Oppos-Remsik-Mueller firm.

Few people have disagreed with the merits of the referendum but instead question its price-tag. Fuller has emphasized his frequent speeches that one reason the issue is so high is that MPS hasn't sought approval for a comprehensive building plan in 22 years. Unlike other taxing entities such as the city, county or sewerage district, MPS must first get voter approval for major capital projects such as constructing new buildings.

In a talk before several hundred businessmen in late November, sponsored by the Public Policy Forum, Fuller outlined several

figures to put the referendum in perspective.

The MPS \$474 building plan calls for expenditures in the next 10 years of slightly less than \$50 million a year. By comparison, he noted:

- The deep tunnel project cost more than \$2 billion.
- Capital spending by Milwaukee County has been \$700 million since 1980, including the recently opened \$106 million jail. The county figure is about 40% more than the school facility plan.
- Since 1980, capital spending by the City of Milwaukee has been \$783 million, or more than 50% greater than the facility plan.
- The Wisconsin Department of Transportation will spend \$100 million to rebuild

the Marquette interchange, and \$163 million to rebuild I-94 to Waukesha. Combined with money spent on freeway repair since 1983, the total is more than \$400 million.

Fuller noted that if one adds capital spending by these entities since 1980 with projected expenditures, the total is \$4.7 billion between 1980 and the mid-1990s.

"That's \$10 for every one dollar in the MPS plan," Fuller said. "If we can afford \$4.7 billion for freeway, jails, sewers, and police and fire stations, I don't think it's 'excessive' or 'staggering' to invest 10% of that amount to let all children go to kindergarten, to begin to reduce busing, to provide computer training and allow children to explore music and the arts, to maintain existing schools, to lower class size, and to provide technical education facilities that address the workplace needs of the 21st Century."

Key parts of the construction/facilities plan are to:

- Build 12 new elementary and two new middle schools in neighborhoods where there are not enough schools for children in the area.
- Build a new technical high school to replace Milwaukee Trade and Technical High School.
- Expand 14 existing elementary schools.
- Make needed repairs and maintenance on older schools.
- Implement universal kindergarten for 4-year-olds for a half-day, and all-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds.
- Lower class size to 19 students in kindergarten through second grade.
- Expand libraries, providing adequate lunchrooms, and providing space for computer, art, and music classrooms. □

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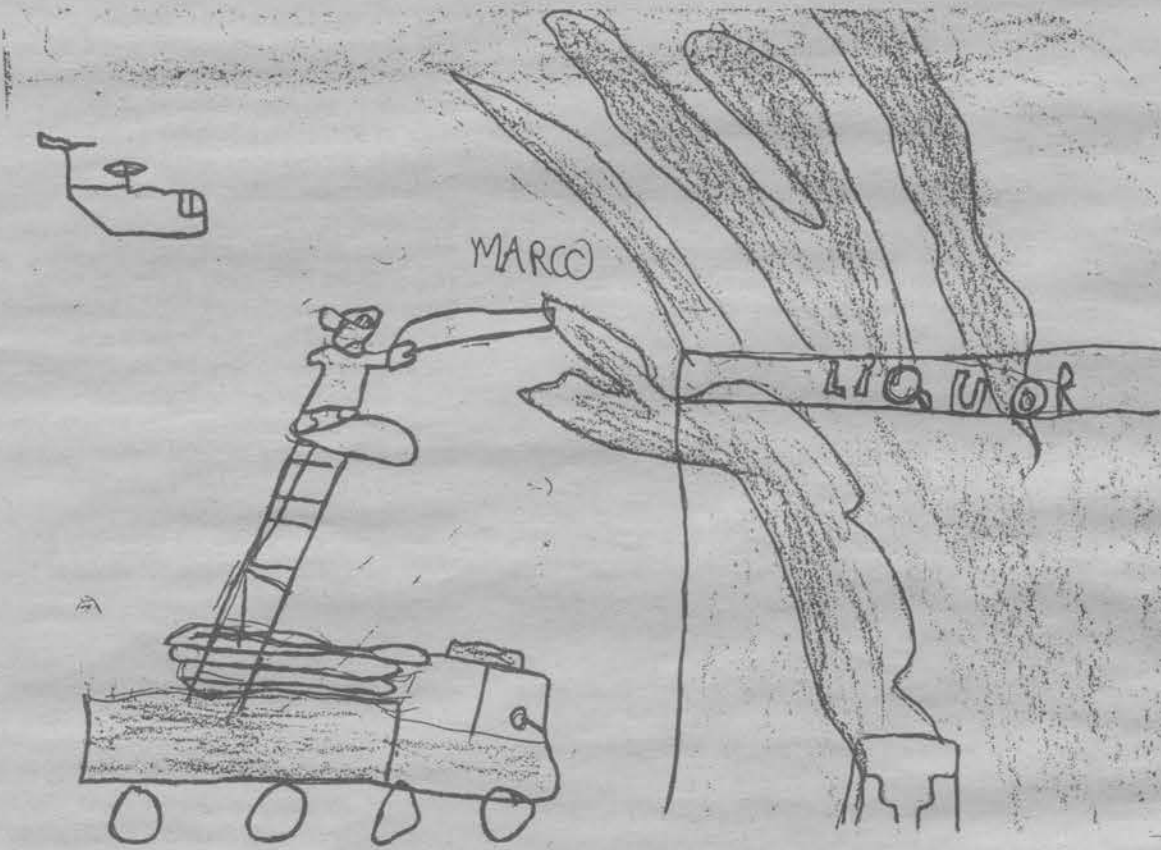
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# Student Page

In this issue we are highlighting the work of last spring's third graders from the Hoover Street Elementary School in Los Angeles, California. In the words of their teacher Marjorie Orellana, these stories and poems were written "in response to the 'L.A. Riots'. These students are mostly Central American and Mexican immigrants. Many of them fled poverty and war in El Salvador only to find more poverty and war here."



El jueves se quemó un liquor del otro lado de la calle del edificio donde vivo. El fuego estaba llegando al edificio, pero mi tío y otros hombres se subieron hasta arriba del edificio y agarraron una manguera. Estaban apagando el fuego, y luego llegaron los bomberos y lo apagaron.

On Thursday the liquor store on the other side of the street near my house where I live got burnt. The fire almost reached our building, but my uncle and some other men got up on top of the building and grabbed a hose. They started putting the fire out, and later the firefighters came and put it out.

**Marco Meneses**

Yo oí balazos,  
También gritos.  
Ví muertos.  
Ví cosas quemadas.  
Tristeza  
Vidrios quebrados.  
Yo me sentí muy mal, y me da tristeza.  
Se quema gente  
muertos, chuchos, perros, y gentes.

I heard shots,  
Also shouts.  
I saw dead people.  
I saw burnt things.  
Sadness  
Broken windows  
I felt bad, I felt sad.  
The people burn

## We Need Paz

Sirenas, gritos, llantos, disparos.  
Ví gente corriendo y gente muerta.

Mucha gente tenía miedo  
y lloraban mucho.

Sirens, shouts, cries, shots.  
I saw people running and  
dead people.

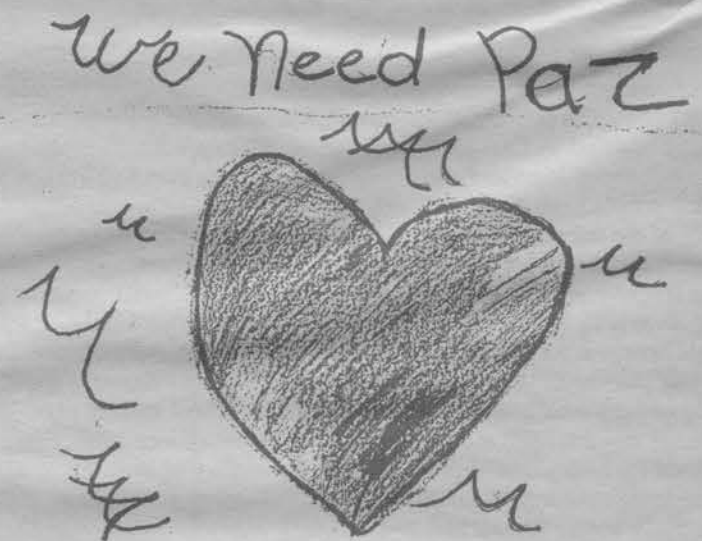
People were scared  
and they cried a lot.

**Laura Reyes**

Matanzas, gritos, sirenas,  
ambulancias.  
Ahora espero que den trabajo  
para mi papá  
y toda la gente,  
y que paren las cosas malas.

Dead people, dogs and people.  
Killings, shouting,  
ambulances.  
Now I hope they give my father  
and all people jobs,  
and that they stop the bad things.

**Patricia Pérez**



Muertos, destrucción,  
robando  
Pasó porque  
los policias  
le pegaron a Rodney King  
y porque el jurado  
sacó libres a los policias.

Matanzas y  
dolor y  
miedo.

Death, destruction,  
stealing  
It happened because  
the police  
beat Rodney King  
and because the jury  
let the police go free.

Esperanzas y  
dolor y  
miedo.

Llantos y  
muertos y destrucción.

**José Alemán**



Killings and  
pain and  
fear.

Hopes and  
pain and  
fear.

Cries and  
death and  
destruction.

**Mayda Cabrera**

Yo oí balazos, sirenas y explosiones.  
También ví tiendas quemadas. Yo ví el  
trabajo de mi mamá, solo se quebrado los  
vidrios y le pusieron tabla dura. Ví pistolas,  
ametalladoras, balazos, bombas.

I heard shots, sirens and explosions. I also  
saw stores get burnt. I saw my mother's  
work, only the windows got broken and they  
put up some strong wood. I saw pistols,  
machine guns, bullets, bombs.

**Louis Sandoval**

## Students! Teachers! Parents!

Please send us poetry, prose, and  
artwork of young people.  
We prefer drawings in pencil or black ink.  
Enclose full name, age, school, and phone number.  
Send to:  
Rethinking Schools, 1001 E. Keefe Ave.,  
Milwaukee, WI 53212

# RETHINKING SCHOOLS

An Urban Educational Journal

## Parent Involvement in the 1990's

# Beyond Pizza Sales

### INSIDE

*Rethinking Schools* is proud to present an expanded edition focusing on parents and schools. Some of the many articles and essays include:

#### Building Bridges with Books

Washington, D.C. project puts parents in classrooms Page 3

#### "All Children Must Be Our Children"

An interview with parent activist Lola Glover from Toledo, Ohio Page 4

#### Parents Kick Up a Storm in Windy City

Local school councils shake up Chicago Public Schools Page 6

#### Trouble over the Rainbow

Stan Karp reports on attacks on multicultural curriculum in New York City Page 8

#### Parents Asking the Right Question

Boston project trains parents to question school authorities Page 13

#### Getting Children Off the Track

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#### Parents, the Law, and Education

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Credit: John Bunting/Impact Visuals

Scratch the surface of parent involvement in schools and there's no telling what you'll find. In some schools it's little more than rhetoric, with involvement frozen at the level of pizza sales. In Chicago it's parents having the authority to hire principals. In some cities

### A Rethinking Schools Analysis

it's parents organizing against science courses that teach evolution.

As with many popular buzzwords in education, parent involvement can mean just about anything. *Rethinking Schools* has a particular perspective. We view parent involvement as a way to help ensure that parents act as advocates and decision-makers in the schools, that they be seen as key resources working not only to improve their own children's education but the schooling of all children.

Many traditional parent involvement projects focus on the home. They try to help parents improve their parenting skills so that children come to school better behaved and prepared. While not dismissing the critical importance of parenting, we believe such an emphasis misses the broader significance of parent involvement.

All too often we hear statements like,

"Schools don't need more money, what they need are better parents so kids come to school ready to learn." This mentality blames the victims and does not deal with many of the underlying causes of social and familial problems. Poverty, unemployment, racial and class inequality, and inadequate healthcare and housing are the real culprits at which people should aim their anger and their legislative solutions.

We believe parents have something important to offer and can help the school be a better school. In this view, parents are a strength, not a weakness. They are vital resources, not detriments, to school reform. (While we tend to use the term "parent" we realize the term's limitations in today's world. We use "parent" as an inclusive term for any adult family members working on behalf of their children in schools.)

In this expanded issue focusing on parent/family involvement, *Rethinking Schools*

reports on specific parent projects in Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Toledo, and includes essays by parent activists from around the country. In addition, we have extensive coverage of the curriculum controversy in the New York City Schools as well as a report on the growing influence of religious fundamentalist groups in education. We have background articles on four key issues facing parents: tracking, standardized testing, multicultural education, and school "choice." Finally, we have information on parent legal rights and a listing of parental involvement resources.

#### Why Parent Involvement?

Parent involvement in public schools is particularly important in today's world. Clearly, our society will only reluctantly provide the resources needed to solve the

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## Interview with Parent Lola Glover

# 'We Must Act as if All the Children are Ours'

The following is condensed from an interview with Lola Glover, head of the parent and community-based Coalition for Quality Education in Toledo, Ohio. Glover is also co-chair of the National Coalition of Education Activists, and co-director of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students. She was interviewed by Barbara Miner of Rethinking Schools.

### How did you get involved in education?

I'm the mother of nine children and I started the way most parents do. And that's the PTA, Mothers' Club, room mother, chaperone, chairperson for the bake sales, that kind of thing. This was 30 to 35 years ago.

Because I was at school a lot, I began to notice things that I felt were not conducive to the educational or emotional well-being of students. I began to realize there was a pattern to certain things, instead of something I observed for one day. I began to question those actions, or the lack thereof, and to talk more to my own children about school. It was then that I started to get involved in my children's actual schooling and in academic issues.

I always made sure, however, that I was active in such a way that all the students in that particular classroom or school would benefit, not just my child. When I advocated only for my child, not a lot changed. The teachers and administrators would just make sure that when I was on the scene or when they dealt with my child, they would do things different.

I don't believe that we will ever get all of the parents involved in the ways that we would hope. I believe that those of us who have made a commitment to get involved must act as if all the children are our children.

### Do you sense that some teachers are reluctant to have parents involved in more than homework or bake sales, a fear that parents are treading on the teachers' turf if they do so?

Absolutely. And I don't think much of that has changed over the years.

Let's say I'm a teacher, and I come in and do whatever I do in my own way, in my own time, and nobody holds me accountable in any way for providing a classroom environment conducive to learning, or for student achievement. I get pretty set in my ways — and defensive with people who might question what I do.

I've found the teachers who are reluctant to have parents involved are those who know they are not doing the best they can for their students.

Then there are some teachers whose degree gave them a "new attitude" and who question these folks who didn't graduate from high school, and surely didn't go to college. Such teachers question what these parents are doing in their classrooms. It doesn't matter that they are the parents of their students.

I also have found some really great teachers in our district. They don't have any reservations or problems about parents getting involved in their classroom or school. In fact, they welcome and encourage parent involvement.

### Many parents don't necessarily have time to sit in on their child's classes or visit the school on a weekly basis. How can such parents make sure their kids are getting a decent education?

Not all schools have parent organizations at their schools. But usually you find a few

active parents who are great advocates for children. If you know you don't have the time and energy to be actively involved, touch base with those parents that are involved. Build an alliance with them, get on the phone with them and when you can, meet with them and talk about your concerns. Help in any way you can to assist in developing an organized parent group in your school.

You don't need all the parents in the school to be involved. Sometimes it just takes five or ten dedicated parents who care about kids, and not just their kids, to make a positive difference in what goes on in our schools.

### What advice do you have for parents who want to get involved?

First of all, you have to understand that as a parent, it is your right and your responsibility to be involved. You should let the school know that you would like to work together in a constructive and collaborative way if possible, but if not, you're still going to be there.

ters, visit kids' homes, and have parent committees, but I barely have time to prepare lessons every day." How would you respond?

Parents have to do more than be involved in their school or district. They also have to respond to elected officials. And if more money is needed for education, let your thoughts be known. Everybody claims to be either the Education Mayor, or the Education Governor, or the Education Somebody. Parents need to lobby and fight for those funds.

Another area of concerns is class sizes. With the kinds of problems kids bring to school today, either the classes need to be smaller or there needs to be teacher aides in the classroom. And these aides should be parents or people from that school community. This allows some additional time and a resource for teachers.

### How can teachers and principals make parents feel more welcome?

The district or each school should have a parent outreach program. One of the biggest mistakes that teachers make is not being in



The Coalition for Quality Education, organized in 1978, is the only grass-roots organization in Toledo whose main focus is on educational issues in the public schools.

Its main current project involves organizing around high school proficient testing mandated for all public high school students in Ohio. The proficiency tests, which were introduced statewide in the 1990-91 school year, are a key factor in whether high school graduates will be given a Diploma of Basic Competency or a Diploma of Merit.

The coalition has called for a statewide blue ribbon panel that would investigate whether the tests will help students or the education system improve; provide data that the tests are bias-free and able to measure the competence of all students; institute due-process protection for test-takers and parents, including disclosure requirements and the right to challenge questionable test results.

The coalition is composed of parents, community activists, legal advocates, clergy and educators. It is a project of the religiously based Toledo Metropolitan Mission.

In addition to lobbying with elected officials around issues such as the proficiency tests, some of the group's activities include:

- Advocating on behalf of parents and students in public education.
- Conducting workshops and training for parents and community residents on educational issues.
- Monitoring the policies, practices and programs of the Toledo Public Schools to help ensure equal educational opportunities — and taking legal action when necessary. □

For the address of CQE see p. 29.

**For the sake of our children,  
public education and our future,  
we can ill afford not to work  
together. Make the first move.**

I would also find out if any parent groups exist in the school. I would try to determine whether the group is really involved in making a difference for kids, or whether it's just a rubber stamp with no voice. You also have to decide whether you want to be involved in decision-making, or in things like fund-raising.

If you want to get involved in school policies, you must first know the rules. If you are interested in suspensions or expulsions, for example, you must ask for a copy of the discipline policy for the district, not just the school. Then you must find out if there is an individual school policy or practice that goes beyond the district policy.

Then you must sit down with the principal and say, "I understand that this is your policy on discipline, but this has been your practice in this building for x number of years, and these are some of the areas I'm concerned about."

It's also essential that you always try to get a neighbor or a friend or another parent to go with you when you talk to the principal or teacher. My experience has taught me, do not go alone.

### Why?

Words get twisted, views get changed. People in schools are no different than anyone else. They will say, "Oh, that's not exactly what I said," or, "I didn't mean it that way." If there's another person with you, they tend not to try to get away with that kind of stuff because they know more than one person will hear what they are saying.

Some schools face severe budget cuts, and teachers have larger classes and are asked to do more and more. What if the teachers and administrators say, "Parent involvement is great, and I would love to have more meetings, do parent newslet-

touch with parents until there's a problem. And most parents don't want to hear the problem. They would like to think that little Johnny or Mary is doing fine all the time, and if not, they don't want to hear you putting their kid down. If you start off that way with a parent, it will take some real doing to get on the right foot with them again.

It's not going to be easy to build an alliance with 30 parents, so start with one or two. Get those parents to be your liaisons. Let them know how much you care and what you are trying to accomplish in the classroom. Give them the names and addresses of parents of the kids in your classroom, and ask, "Would you help me contact these parents and explain to them that I would really like to talk to all of them personally." Find out when will be a good time for everyone to meet, and set a date.

### Why is it so important to foster mutual respect between parents and teachers?

I am convinced that if students begin to see parents and people in their community and their schools working together, a lot of things would change. First of all, the kids' attitudes would change. Right now, kids' attitudes have not changed about school because they don't see any connection between home and school. They do not see any real efforts being made by either side to come together for the purpose of improving their schools or educational outcomes.

I don't think any of us have the answers to solve these problems. But I do believe that if we come together out of mutual respect and concern, we will make a difference in what happens in our schools and our communities. I know we'll never find the answer if we keep this division between us. For the sake of our children, public education, and our future, we can ill afford not to work together. Make the first move. □

# Beyond Pizza Sales

continued from page 1

crisis facing our public schools, particularly urban schools attended mainly by children of color. Unless we draw on the strengths and power of parents and community members, school reform will, at best, be limited to superficial efforts designed to cover up rather than resolve the crisis in education, particularly the crisis of inequality.

Parental involvement holds many promises. It can help improve the curriculum, teaching, and learning in individual schools. It can help bridge the division between many teachers and communities they serve — a division that has tended to grow, given the overwhelmingly white composition of the teaching force and the overwhelmingly non-white composition of urban student bodies. Parent involvement can also help build necessary political coalitions. If teachers and parents cannot work together at their individual schools, they will be unable to forge the city and state-wide organizations necessary to counter the slash and burn mentality that dominates many school budget decisions.

Unfortunately, some of the most successful parent organizing projects are led by arch-conservatives with an agenda that runs counter to values of multiculturalism, equality, tolerance, and respect for children as people capable of learning to think critically and make their own decisions. The success of right-wing parent organizing is a chilling reminder that there is nothing inherently progressive about parental involvement.

It was parents, for example, who threw stones at buses carrying African-American children in the mid-1970s in Boston as those children tried to exercise their right to attend integrated schools. It is parents who hide behind Bibles and shout the most un-Christian epithets as they try to prevent sex education, tolerance for gays and lesbians, and measures to counter the AIDS/HIV epidemic among adolescents in many urban areas. It is parents who often are the most virulent opponents of multicultural education and who are quick to try to ban books such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Bridge to Terabithia*.

## What is to be Done?

We believe that schools should work to increase parental involvement in four areas: 1) governance and decision-making; 2) organizing for equity and quality; 3) curriculum and its implementation in the classroom; 4) home educational support. Following are some preliminary thoughts, designed to spur discussion rather than provide answers to complex issues.

### Governance

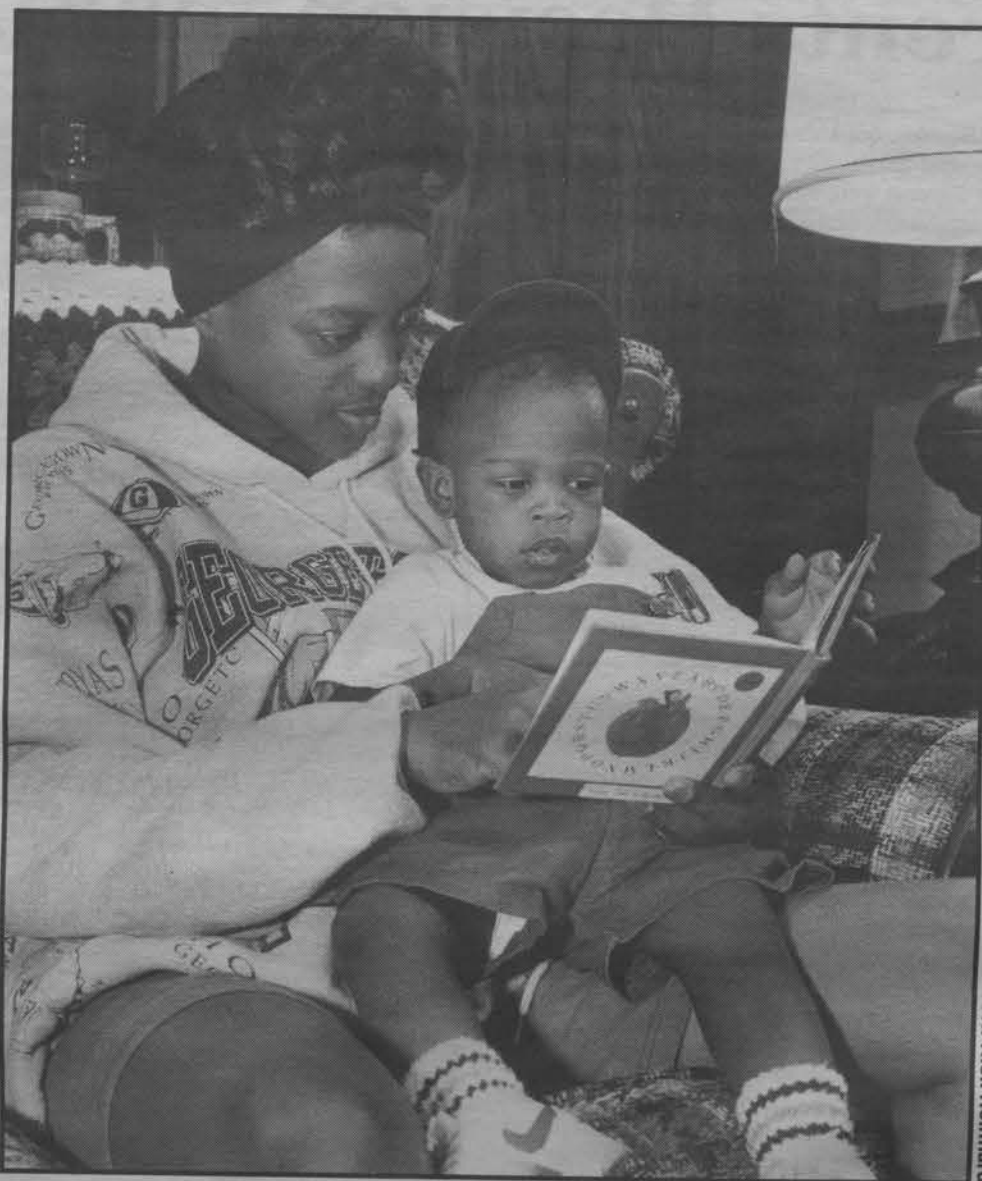
Parents should be viewed as decision-makers, whether through formal or informal arrangements such as school-based councils or parent committees where their input is listened to and respected.

Key questions are: Who should serve on school councils? What should be the ratio of staff to parents to community people? How should members be selected? How can you ensure that representatives on the school council truly represent their constituents? What powers should they have? What is the relationship between school-based decisions and district-wide policies and contracts? These are complex issues that need thorough discussion.

### Organizing/Advocacy

Organized into groups, parents can advocate for children and can educate educators. This is particularly important of parents of color, who may see inequality or insensitivity from even the most well-intentioned white teachers.

Such parent groups can take various forms, from city-wide advocacy organizations to ad hoc committees at individual schools. In Albany, N.Y., for example, parents and community activists challenged a racist tracking system (see article on p.



Parents' involvement in their children's education takes many forms.

Credit: Rick Reinhard

15). In Boston, parents are being trained to advocate for children in their individual schools (see article on p. 13).

These organizing efforts are often short-lived, hampered by funding and the many time demands on parents, especially working parents. The struggle to sustain parent advocacy groups is difficult. If such groups start receiving money from school systems, their politics might become compromised. But without funding, these efforts may die out and valuable training and experience are lost, only to be reinvented again by other parents when the next crisis erupts.

By perseverance and strong leadership, however, some organizations have managed to get funding yet not compromise their politics (see interview, p. 4). Another approach is to have community-based organizations make parent organizing a

priority and to use their resources to sustain such efforts. A third approach is to demand that local school districts, perhaps funded by state legislatures, hire parent organizers at each school.

### Curriculum and the Classroom

Particularly as schools try to institute multicultural curricula, parents are a valuable resource. Parents can have positive effects on curriculum, especially if their participation is organized and supported by the local school (see article p. 3). A key step is to have the school agree on an orientation toward parental involvement, in the process overcoming negative attitudes in either group. Some parents may have to overcome a legacy of negative personal experiences with schools, while some teachers need to develop greater respect for parents.

### Educating at Home

We recognize that parents can significantly help their children at home. Many do, and some do not. Schools can encourage positive interactions between parents and children by helping the school serve as a center where parents can help one another. Support groups, parenting classes, and literacy classes can be very popular, especially when organized by or with the consultation of parents. Lending libraries of learning games, hands-on math activities, books, and tapes also help enhance education in the home.

Sometimes parents educate their children about the history and contributions of their cultures and communities — filling in gaps schools too often leave.

### Teacher Training

Teachers need to be sensitized to the importance of parental involvement. At a district level this should include staff inservice. But most important, state mandates should force teacher training institutions to adequately prepare new teachers in knowing how to work with parent volunteers, conduct parent/teacher conferences, maintain on-going communication, and overcome possible racial, class, and gender biases.

### Parent's Rights

Parents have more rights than they might imagine. They have not only legal rights, but ethical rights: the right to have notes and newsletters from school come home in their native language; the right to be treated with respect by school staff, whether the secretary, principal, or teacher.

People who work first shift often have difficulty getting involved. Educators, labor leaders, and businesses would do good to follow the Cleveland example, initiated by the Cleveland Federation of Teachers, whereby parents are allowed to take time off with pay to attend special Parent/Family Days (see article this page).

### Justice and Equality

It is in the long-term interests of everyone in society that schools are based on values of justice and equality. There is no way to legislate such values. In the long run, the only insurance rests with the parents and teachers who uphold these values to organize and work together.

No one has a stronger, more direct interest in good education than a parent. Educators who fail to recognize this, seeing parents instead as irrelevant, inadequate, or even obstructionist can never fully succeed in educating young people. □

## Parent Involvement in Cleveland

By Michael Charney

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Thousands of Cleveland parents no longer have to fear they will be reprimanded if they leave work to visit their child's school. In fact, they are paid to do so.

Under an innovative program developed by the Cleveland Teachers Union, more than 100 area employers have agreed to give parents and family members paid time off once a year to attend Parent/Family Day—a special day when the Cleveland Public Schools invite parents, grandparents, and guardians to visit and see what happens on a normal school day, and work with parents on home and school issues.

The union initiated the concept of Parent/Family Day as a concrete way to resolve a problem facing many working parents, especially those who are paid by the hour and often do not have the flexibility of salaried employees. For many working

parents, leaving work to visit their child's school created problems on the job. In some cases, parents even feared they might be fired if they left work to take part in school activities.

The union argued that parent involvement is similar to jury duty, in that parents have a right and responsibility to be involved in their child's education, and that an employer has an obligation to allow parents to carry out those duties.

The first Parent/Family Day was held in May 1992 under the theme, "Teamwork Makes the Dream Work." An estimated 14,000 parents, grandparents and guardians attended, and more than 50 area employers allowed workers to leave their jobs for the day. Most of those attending Parent/Family Day were family members who worked at home during the day or were salaried employees with more flexible work schedules. The second Parent/Family Day, held the following September, attracted 18,000 parents; more than 100 area employers

allowed paid time off.

Because of the success of the Parent/Family Days, the schools have decided to make them an annual event. The next one is scheduled for the fall of 1993.

The union started working on the idea of paid time off to visit schools in 1989. The first stumbling block was the Cleveland Board of Education, which was reluctant to allow even their own employees paid time off. By working with parents and community groups, the union was able to ultimately convince both the Cleveland Public Schools and area employers that the Parent/Family Days were a way to move beyond hopes for parental involvement to institutionalizing concrete ways of making those hopes a reality. □

Michael Charney teaches at Lincoln Intermediate School and developed the idea of Parent/Family Day for the Cleveland Teachers Union.

# Chicago School Reform: Giving Parents Decision-making Power

By Barbara Miner

CHICAGO — Parent Denise Ferguson remembers the day in the spring of 1990 when the Local School Council at Hefferan Elementary School met with the principal to talk about the next year's budget. The Local School Council was only months old, part of a citywide reform effort that set up councils in each school composed of a majority of parents and given powers such as the authority to hire and fire principals. The parents, unused to having real decision-making in the school, didn't know what to expect.

The principal suggested that discretionary school monies be used to hire a half-time choir director to teach gospel music and a full-time truant officer, according to Ferguson.

"And this was in a school that had great attendance rates, yet had maps from 1945 that still had Rhodesia, and only four operating computers," Ferguson recalls.

"Besides, our kids don't need to learn gospel music, they get that on weekends."

Parents were upset at the principal's suggestions and let him know it. "The day he passed those suggestions around and the parents said 'Oh no,' that's when I realized things were about to change," Ferguson said.

The council polled the teachers on their views and decided to spend the money in other ways, such as by hiring a new teacher for a computer lab, and new books and maps. They also made another crucial decision: to hire a new principal who would take charge at the end of the school year.

Parents having the power to make such decisions may seem a dream to many parent activists who struggle to get administrators to listen to their advice, let alone take it seriously. But such parental power is the norm in Chicago.

While some school reforms focus on changes in curriculum or teacher training, the Chicago effort targets what is generally called "governance" — the issue of who makes the decisions in schools. The reforms, considered the most ambitious of any major urban school district in the country, were mandated by state law in 1988 and were the result of widespread, long-term community organizing to improve the Chicago public schools. One major goal was to cut the powers of the Central Office, which in Chicago had earned national notoriety for its entrenched bureaucratic practices, and turn over as much decision-making as possible to the local school.

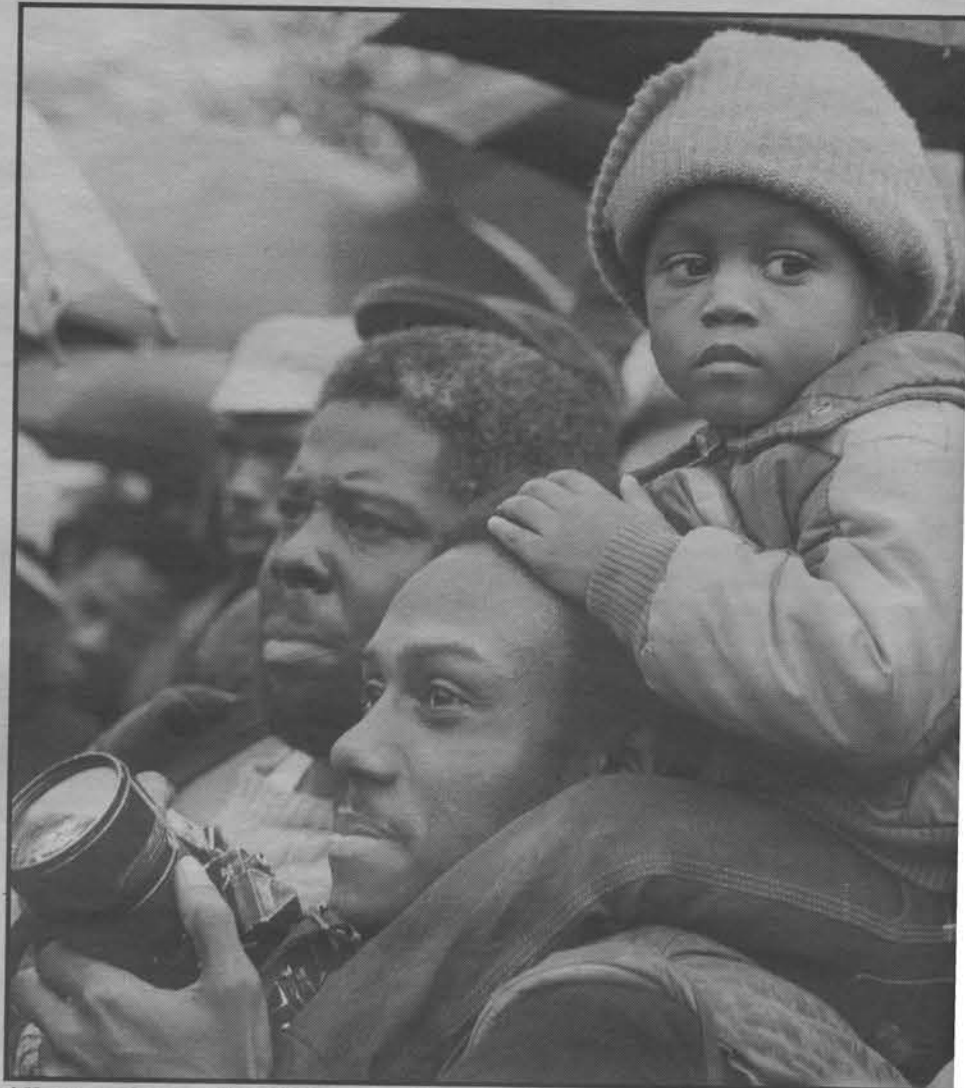
The heart of the Chicago reform is the establishment of elected Local School Councils in each of the city's almost 600 schools. Each council has six parents, two community representatives, two teachers, the principal and, in the high schools, a student. The parents and community reps are elected by parents and community residents. The student and teacher representatives are appointed by the Board of Education following advisory elections by their peers at each school.

The verdict is still out on whether this ambitious reform effort will succeed in its ultimate goal: improving the educational performance of the approximately 440,000 students in Chicago's public schools, roughly 90% of whom are students of color. Yet no one denies the importance of the reform or its uniqueness — that parents are the majority on a school-based council that goes beyond advising the principal and is given actual powers. Not only do the councils have the authority to hire or fire the principal, but they approve the school's budget and school-improvement plan that outlines changes in curriculum and teaching practices.

It would be impossible in this short article to outline the many complexities and contradictions involved in the Chicago reform process, or to describe the many political players and their perspectives (see *Rethinking Schools* Vol. 4, #s 1 & 4). Clearly, the reform process raises as many questions as it answers. What follows is a look at how the reform has affected one school, where the council appears to have worked particularly well, and how some of the parents there view the reform.

Hefferan, a kindergarten through eighth grade elementary school, is located on the city's West Side in a neighborhood whose appearance reflects the stereotype of a troubled inner city. Boarded up apartment buildings are common; trash and broken bottles litter the streets; groups of men who in a more humane society would be employed are huddled together at street corners passing the time.

One indication of the neighborhood's problems: Hefferan Principal Patricia Harvey doesn't allow outdoor recess



All eyes are on the Chicago reform's attempts to involve parents.

because she cannot guarantee the children's safety, given the number of drug dealers and alcoholics who hang out near the school.

All but one of Hefferan's 676 students are African American, and 90% of the students are eligible for the free- or reduced-price federal lunch program.

One of the first major decisions of the Local School Council was in the spring of 1990 when it hired Harvey. A former teacher, assistant principal, and Central Office administrator, Harvey has clearly played a key role in changes at Hefferan. She instituted academic changes such as abolishing tracking systems, and worked with the staff so there could be more time for planning. For example, Harvey said that one day a week students attend special courses such as art, music, and gym so that classroom teachers have a full day for inservice training, planning, or attending workshops.

Perhaps most important, Harvey worked to establish a spirit of teamwork that emphasizes parents, community members, and school staff working together. Asked what she felt was the most important lesson learned during the almost four years that the Local School Council has been at work at Hefferan, Harvey said: "You can't build a house of shared decision-making without a foundation of trust, acceptance, and real teamwork."

Parents active at the school credit Harvey with helping to establish a new atmosphere. "No one can do everything by themselves, and the principal here decided that instead of leadership and followers, it would be everybody together," said parent Cheryl Harris, who has a third and eighth grader at the school. "Ever since I've been here, I've never seen her office door closed."

## Pros and Cons

Denise Ferguson, who was president of Hefferan council for three years and who now is a staff member working on parent involvement and student services, said the council's main benefit was that it gave parents a new role.

"Before the LSC [Local School Council], parents had no voice," she said. "Parents

were told they were welcome at the school but were given very menial tasks....After the reform, not only could we make decisions we could help choose the leadership."

Ferguson said she knows from first-hand experience, however, that many Local School Councils do not run as smoothly as Hefferan's. She has also served on a high school council and said of the experience: "It was a nightmare. It ended up holding that school hostage." Council members didn't respect each other, some were on personal power trips, and others had political agendas they were trying to push.

She also felt that the original legislation mandating the councils was flawed because, for example, it didn't mandate adequate monies to train council members or give councils a specific budget, "not even for stamps." She also believes that council members should be paid because of the immense time commitment, and that councils must address the larger political issue of declining school budgets. "If you have 500 things to do and no budget," she said, "it's like having a horse you shoot in the starting gate and then say, 'Run!'"

The council at Hefferan also faces the same nagging problem that has plagued other less-notable councils: parent burnout and vacancies on the council. At Hefferan for example, two of the six parent seats were unfilled in late February.

Mildred Wiley, the current president of the Local School Council at Hefferan, values the councils but fears that business and political leaders may be losing patience and may demand results faster than the councils can produce. The state law mandating the reform, for example, called for significant achievements in school performance after five years — with a threat from some forces that more drastic measures might otherwise ensue, such as institution of private school voucher plan to replace the system of public education. "I'm just scared the state will just come in and take over," Wiley said. "This school has undergone a distinct change, from the outside [appearance] to the curriculum in the classroom. I would hate to see an end to all the good things that we have planned."

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# A Look at the Secretary of Education Richard Riley and School Reform

By Douglas D. Noble

Former South Carolina Governor Richard Riley has received near unanimous praise since President Clinton selected him as the new Secretary of Education. Both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, for example, have celebrated him as a visionary reformer.

If one were to summarize the most common descriptions of Riley, it might read like this: a tenacious, political astute champion of public schools who sincerely supports school reform, cares about equity, opposes private school voucher plans, and advocates increased spending on education.

But a look at Riley's school reforms in South Carolina reveals two emphases that are potential causes for concern. One is the dominating role that business interests have played in South Carolina's school reform. The other is the reform's reliance on standardized teaching and testing.

When people refer to Riley's school reform efforts, they mean the Education Improvement Act (EIA) passed by the South Carolina legislature in 1984 while Riley was governor. The legislation raised teachers' salaries to regional averages, increased the use of standardized teaching materials and standardized tests, and called for uniform accountability measures throughout the state. These accountability measures, which included student test scores and attendance rates of both students and teachers, were to determine "merit pay" for schools and teachers. The reforms were financed by a penny sales tax.

Business was heavily involved both in the drafting and carrying out of the legislation. In fact, the legislation institutionalizes business involvement in public schools beyond that of measures passed in any other state, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Riley himself wrote in 1986 that he considered this new, legally mandated public/private sector partnership in the public schools to be "our major contribution to improving public education in South Carolina." He insisted that "educators must learn how to work with and how to appreciate the private sector," and that they "must begin to embrace business concepts [such as] productivity, efficiency, cost

benefits, and incentive pay programs."

Riley, through the EIA, granted oversight of public school reforms to business. The act established a Division of Public Accountability in the state education department, headed by a deputy superintendent selected by business leaders. The legislation dictated that key business-led committees were to receive an annual assessment of the act, and were to approve "all products developed by the Division of Public Accountability: the assessment report, incentive pay programs, quality assessment criteria, regulations and other products."

is key to their involvement in schools, along with potential profits and an often exaggerated concern for workforce preparation. Focusing on school reform also takes the spotlight off corporate responsibility for this country's economic problems.

Business solutions to school problems typically have foisted inappropriate efficiency and productivity models into schools. Much of what is wrong with schools today, after all, is the consequence of nearly a century of such business practices misapplied. With a few enlightened exceptions, business solutions

standardized basic skills instruction and testing does not lead to an improved education and exacerbates educational inequity (see story on p. 20). Such standardized approaches stand in contrast to more holistic, heterogeneous, and cooperative approaches that consider the needs, interests, and intellectual potential of diverse groups of children. There is considerable consensus, too, that alternative forms of assessment that evaluate actual performance are far more informative and educationally useful than standardized tests. The standardization of education is also at odds with recent democratic reforms emphasizing school management by committees of parents and teachers.

Not surprisingly, a state evaluation five years after the reforms were passed found that they did not produce the expected results. While there were slight gains for poor and minority students in the early years, those have levelled off and begun to decline. There was no change in student dropout rate or conduct, and only slight increases in attendance and students' achievement of basic skills. Teacher salaries were substantially raised, but provisions for merit pay proved unfeasible and were dropped. One clear change: business partnerships with schools increased 800%.

Two provisions of the act were never implemented due to lack of funds — improvement of facilities and reduced class size.

Riley's education reform in South Carolina was perhaps an honorable attempt, long overdue, to improve one of the poorest and more regressive education systems in the country. It was also the product of considerable compromise. Thus it is unclear how one might predict Riley's agenda for federal education policy based on his South Carolina reforms.

What is clear, however, is that Riley has shown himself willing to rely heavily on business and standardized approaches to education. The public will need to pay close attention to the role of business in federal policy and will also need to educate the new secretary about more progressive approaches to educational equity and school reform. □

*Douglas D. Noble teaches education at National-Louis University.*

## A look at Riley's school reforms in South Carolina reveals two potential reasons for concern. One is the dominating role that business interests played in the school reform. The other is the reform's reliance on standardized teaching and testing.

### Business Involvement

There has been an unusually explicit business presence in the inception, day-to-day operation, and oversight of South Carolina's school reform. Is this bad?

Surely, business involvement in education in recent years has helped highlight the need for school reform, and business has lent its expertise, especially in mathematics, science, and technology. Still, there is reason for concern.

Most important, business does not represent other necessary players in education reform, whether they be parents, community groups, teachers, or school boards. Yet in South Carolina business interests alone are privileged.

Mandated "partnerships" between schools and businesses also unduly privilege business expertise over that of educators. Yet there is little evidence that business understands the complexities of educating children or has much to contribute to school management. Surveys of business executives show clearly that public relations

to complex school problems have been characterized by a simplistic emphasis on accountability, productivity, standardized performance, differential rewards, and presumed workforce needs.

### Standardized Schools

The South Carolina legislation established a statewide system of basic skills diagnosis, testing and instruction, a statewide student conduct system, and a statewide incentive system for teachers, schools, and districts. The legislation requires ongoing documentation of each student's progress along a continuum of rigid skill requirements for each grade level. To ease the tremendous paperwork this causes, the state has piloted a computerized "classroom management system" that monitors student progress and coordinates student skill levels with preselected lessons and curricular materials. By one account, South Carolina is the first state to standardize and coordinate a management system for all teachers within the state.

Research has shown that emphasizing

# A Parent's Perspective Bonding Parents and Schools

By Lilly Lopez

Schools have to become open places where parents can feel that they are respected, welcome, and valued. For the most part, schools don't give that message.

When a parent goes to a school, it's usually because of something that has happened with their child. And what happens when they show up? Often, there's a sign that says visitors are only allowed during particular hours, and all visitors must report first to the principal's office. It's like you're being summoned by the principal. Many parents have really negative memories about public schools, and going back into the school makes them relive those memories.

It's more than just signs. Most important, it's how parents are treated. Often, they aren't spoken to in a respectful manner. Or they are greeted by a nasty secretary or a nasty administrator. Or they are ignored.

Some teachers and administrators force parents to make an appointment. Yet parents usually come to the school only if something is urgent. They need to talk to someone right away, not be told, "Come back in a week."

It's an attitude problem. And the attitude is basically that parents are worthless, parents are of no value. It's an attitude that says, "Just give us your kids, we'll try to remediate the damage you have done so far, and hopefully your kids will be able to graduate from school in spite of your interference."

There are other ways that teachers make parents feel unwelcome. For example, teachers usually only communicate with a parent directly when that parent's child has broken a rule or misbehaved. It's always a negative call. Rarely do teachers call up parents to say how well their child has done. If teachers were to do more of that, there would be better communication going on.

Teachers also need to let parents know

that parents can come talk to them, whether it's before school starts or during prep time. Parents don't know these things, because schools don't tell them.

The easiest way to get parents into a school is through a social event. I encourage all schools to have a welcome-back-to-school activity at the beginning of the school year. A social event gives the message to parents that we welcome you, we want you here, we want you to be a part of your child's education. And it tells the teachers that parents are a big part of their children's lives and you can't separate school and home and successfully teach a child.

There has to be a collaborative connection, a bonding, between home and schools. What seems to be a purely social event has the important political benefit of establishing open communication between teachers and parents, where they can meet each other as equals, as human beings.

At any activity, there should also be a

welcoming statement by the staff and the parent association. There might be a discussion of the different committees at the school, what they will be doing that year, and a sign-up list.

It's important that schools don't treat parents as mere fundraisers. Parents have been abused over and over again by being forced to do candy sales, bake sales, flower day sales, and picture sales. Many parent organizations aren't advocacy groups because the message that they get from the schools is, "We need money, and you're the parents, so go out and make some money for us." Parents need to be involved in decision-making and advocacy, not just bake sales. □

*Lilly Lopez is a parent in Brooklyn, N.Y. A member of the District 15 School Board, she is also on the steering committee of the National Coalition of Education Activists.*

# Controversy Engulfs NYC's Multicultural Curriculum Trouble Over the Rainbow

By Stan Karp

In a sudden end to his three years as head of the nation's largest school system, New York City School's Chancellor Joseph Fernandez found a pink slip instead of a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Following a powerful and at times ugly mobilization against the multicultural guide *Children of the Rainbow*, which urged "respect for the diversity of families" including gay and lesbian parents, the Central Board voted 4-3 in February not to renew Fernandez's contract when it expires in June.

While the dismissal threw the city's schools into further turmoil, its implications extend beyond New York. The controversy over the Rainbow curriculum raised crucial questions about the meaning of "multicultural education" and about how schools should address explosive issues of prejudice in an increasingly diverse and divided society. It also posed questions about what role parents will play in efforts to remake a public school system that remains in crisis in many parts of the country.

The fierce fight over *Children of the Rainbow* took many by surprise. The guide was compiled to implement mandates from the Central Board, which in 1989 had called for measures to counteract discrimination against students, parents, or school personnel on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, gender, age, sexual orientation and/or handicapping condition. An Office of Multicultural Education was created, reflecting a national trend toward multicultural reform.

In general, this trend has been more a delayed reaction to events than a radical innovation. Demographic changes in public school populations, which will raise the number of minority students to 40% by the end of the 1990s, are pushing schools to more accurately reflect in their curriculums the changes in their classrooms. The trend is also an aftershock of the civil rights and social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Social movements for the rights of African Americans, women, disabled people, gays

**Just as civil rights laws ran into "state's rights" bigotry tinged with populist resentment, so too progressive education policies endorsed at the top may run into resistance from conservative parents and local communities.**

and lesbians, and others have already forced changes in cultural sensibilities and federal and state law. Several decades of academic scholarship have revised traditionally narrow versions of literature and history. Lumbering school bureaucracies, which have rarely been on the cutting edge of change, are simply trying to catch up by taking a closer look at their textbooks, course outlines, and bulletin boards.

At another level, however, multicultural education is a potentially explosive issue. Racial tensions increased in the 1980s with the administrations of Reagan, Bush, and, in New York, Mayor Ed Koch all contributing. Police murders of young black men and other racially charged confrontations are

familiar features of the nightly news. Blacks and Jews continue to clash on several fronts. While the gay community has attained new visibility and political influence, religious institutions and sizable portions of popular opinion remain stubbornly resistant to their inclusion. NYC police record 500 bias incidents a year, with thousands of others unreported.

Against this background, a broad, if superficial, consensus developed that promoting harmony among the city's nearly 1,000 schools and 1 million students was crucial.

*Children of the Rainbow* was an attempt to address this issue in a comprehensive and somewhat bureaucratic fashion. Conceived more as a resource guide for teachers than a formal curriculum for students, it was produced by central office personnel with review by a 25-member advisory board. The book is filled mostly with strategies for developing academic and social skills appropriate for first graders. There's an emphasis on celebrating diversity, building self-esteem, and encouraging constructive group interaction. The 440 pages that have been largely ignored during the heated controversy are typically devoted to methods for setting up classroom learning centers, instructions for making Chinese New Year's scrolls, and the words and music to the *Animal Nonsense Song*.

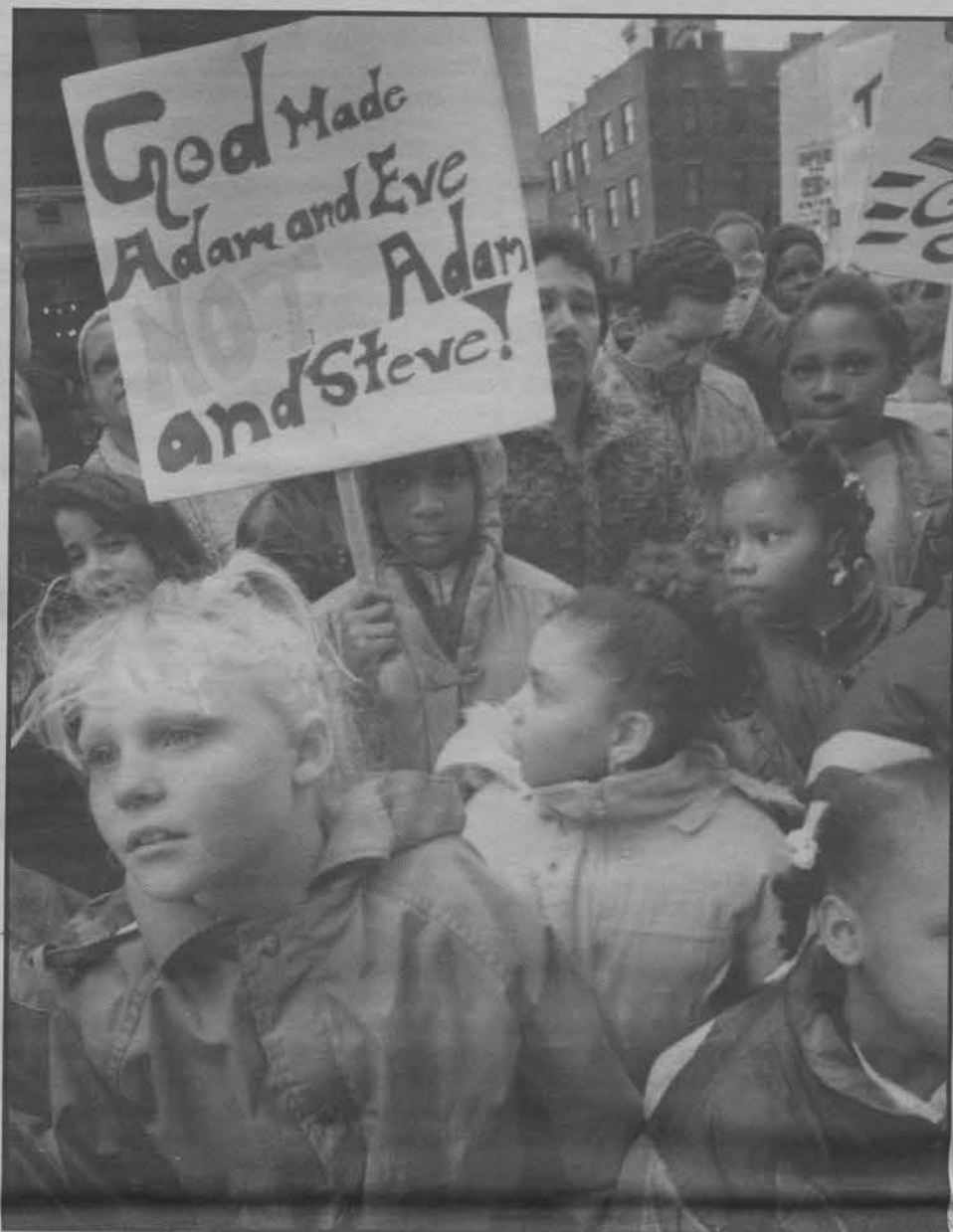
One section on "societal concerns" speaks directly to the pressures growing numbers of kids face early on. This section gives teachers suggestions for dealing with homeless students, "latch-key" children, physically or emotionally abused kids, kids touched by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, etc. It's here that three pages on "Understanding family structures to meet children's needs" mention the special circumstances of students with gay/lesbian parents. The section was drafted by a lesbian first grade teacher who was added to the curriculum-writing project after gay rights advocates, with the help of the Mayor's office, succeeded in getting access to Fernandez and raising their concerns about the climate of hate and gay-bashing in the city.

In the fall of 1991, the curriculum guide was adopted by the Chancellor's office with little notice. Even most gay right's advocates, parent's groups, and education activists had their attention focused elsewhere, including a contentious debate over the Chancellor's HIV/AIDS curriculum and condom distribution policies for the high schools. (Fernandez's opponents wanted an AIDS curriculum that preached abstinence instead of safe sex, and wanted condoms made available only with parental consent. Fernandez prevailed after bitter battles, although the HIV/AIDS curriculum was weakened by a central board resolution requiring all consultants hired from outside the school system to emphasize abstinence.) Like the city's racial climate, debate over school policy was becoming highly polarized.

## Bigotry Explodes

*Children of the Rainbow* was sent to the district boards for use in the schools. Like others before it which had embodied good intentions, the thick manual might ordinarily have collected dust on the shelf while teachers coped with the daily crisis of survival in NYC public schools. The extensive program of staff training, resources, and administrative support necessary to put the curriculum guide into practice was not in place. Most schools and teachers never heard about *Children of the Rainbow* until Community School Board (CSB) #24 in Queens used it to light a fire last spring.

District 24 is routinely described as "conservative, heavily Catholic, and middle class." But over 70% of the 28,000 students in the district's public schools are children of color. The area has the fastest-growing



Critics of *Children of the Rainbow* massed demonstrations against one small part of the curriculum, tolerance of lesbians and gays.

immigrant population in the city and some of the most overcrowded schools. The nine-member community school board, however, is all white. One member is a priest. Six have sent their children to private schools.

Mary Cummins, the board president who became the symbol of resistance to *Children of the Rainbow*, was elected with 346 votes in local board elections that drew about 7% of eligible voters. Cummins ran the board in authoritarian fashion and was no champion of grassroots parental involvement. District 24 was the only local board to file suit against new regulations that sought to expand parental participation in the selection of principals and administrators. Parent groups inside the district publicly complained about the local board's high-handed ways.

Cummins and her board were already angry at the Chancellor over his AIDS and condom policies, though there was little they could do directly to block them, since high schools fall under the jurisdiction of the central rather than district board. Church leaders, including Cardinal John O'Connor, encouraged District 24's opposition, eventually providing legal and other assistance. When Cummins received the Rainbow curriculum, she reportedly consulted with Howard Hurwitz of the right-wing Family Defense Council, who "immediately recognized it as part of the homosexual movement. It was gay and lesbian propaganda."

CSB #24 rejected *Children of the Rainbow* out of hand. Using at least \$7,000 in public funds, Cummins began a campaign of letters and mailings attacking the guide, contending it contained "dangerous misinformation about sodomy."

"We will not accept two people of the same sex engaged in deviant sex practices as 'family,'" she wrote. Tapping into the furor over the AIDS curriculum, she added, "The victims of this AIDS scourge are homosexuals, bisexuals, intravenous users

of illicit drugs and the innocent people they infect by exposing them to their tainted blood and other bodily fluids...[Fernandez] would teach our kids that sodomy is acceptable but virginity is something weird."

For many people inside and outside the schools, news reports of District 24's snarling response to *Children of the Rainbow* was the first they heard of the curriculum. This insured that a complicated debate about how schools should handle sensitive, controversial issues would take place under the glare of sensational media attention against a backdrop of foaming anti-gay bigotry.

The central office process that produced *Children of the Rainbow* had excluded most district board members, parents, and teachers. Chancellor Fernandez's 25-member advisory board and the review process at the Board's Brooklyn headquarters were no substitute for an inclusive debate that might have created support for the curriculum before it arrived in the mail from 110 Livingston St. (At the very least, as one district board member pointed out, more local input would have let Fernandez know what he was in for.) Even gay activists later acknowledged that they had relied too heavily on lobbying Central Board personnel while Catholic, Pentecostal, and other church groups were mobilizing anti-gay sentiment in the boroughs.

When he returned to his native New York in 1990, Fernandez had brought with him a somewhat heavy-handed reputation from Miami. Though he won support from progressives for his AIDS and condom policies, for initiatives to create new, smaller high schools, and for being an effective advocate for public education, he was still, in the eyes of some critics, "a man with a plan and a two-by-four."

As a matter of principle, the Chancellor deserved support for insisting that "at some

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# Fundamentalists Take Aim at Schools Reading, Writing, and Censorship

By Leon Lynn

time in the elementary school grades," schools must deal "proactively with the issue of same sex families." But when it comes to public schools, support for teaching progressive views on sexual, racial, or similar issues needs to be carefully mobilized as part of a democratic debate. Public schools almost by definition are obligated to act as mediators and conciliators in the face of controversy. Schools are highly vulnerable to emotional posturing, particularly when it comes from parents or "taxpayers," and they can easily be immobilized by polarizing crises. Where prejudice or bigotry exists, it absolutely needs to be challenged and exposed and, if necessary, restrained by central authorities from depriving minorities of their right to be represented and protected in public life. But top-down administrative measures, no matter how well-intentioned, have decidedly limited and mixed impact.

Progressive curriculum policies emanating from the top of large public school systems may be likened to federal civil rights laws passed in the 60s. After many grassroots struggle, federal laws attempted to codify democratic impulses and transform deeply-rooted practices like segregation. Yet just as civil rights laws ran into "state's rights" bigotry tinged with populist resentment, so too progressive education policies endorsed at the top may run into righteous resistance from conservative parents and local communities. In the final analysis, the added rounds of education, organizing, and political struggle it takes to turn progressive policy into actual practice must occur at the school and community level. Administrative support for such campaigns can be crucial to their success. But bureaucratic directives alone, imposed from the top, won't get the job done.

In the case of *Children of the Rainbow*, CSB #24's defiance touched a chord of populist resentment against a traditionally heavy-handed educational bureaucracy. This helped lift it above the realm of Cummins' crackpot bigotry and turn it into an angry cry that resonated in many parts of the city. When the Chancellor suspended the District 24 local board after its deliberately provocative rejection of the Rainbow curriculum, he reinforced dictatorial impressions — so much so that the Central Board ultimately reversed the suspension and undercut the Chancellor's position.

But a populist rallying cry against the central administration wasn't the only weapon Fernandez's opponents had. There were some dubious aspects of the curriculum itself. *Children of the Rainbow* was unusual in explicitly suggesting that teachers initiate discussion of gay/lesbian issues with first graders. The guide urged teachers to "include references to lesbians/gay people in all curricular areas" and promote "actual experiences via creative play, books, visitors, etc. in order for them to view lesbians/gays as real people to be respected and appreciated." Exactly what this means for 5- and 6-year olds with no clear notions of adult sexuality is problematic.

Certain sections also provided unnecessary ammunition to critics intent on alarmist distortion. While the guide's aim was clearly to promote tolerance and respect for same sex families, the controversial section that discusses gay households is titled "Fostering positive attitudes toward sexuality." However related, positive attitudes toward sexuality and tolerance of gay and lesbian families are different issues. Similarly, even some who worked on the curriculum later acknowledged that it was a mistake to include books like *Heather Has Two Mommies* or *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* in a list for first graders. The books are too hard

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Robert Simonds is trying to portray Bill Clinton's election as a godsend for right-wing activists trying to gain control over what's taught — and what's censored — in U.S. public schools.

Clinton's victory has "set off a tidal wave of awareness among the conservatives," says Simonds, the president of a grassroots, ultra-conservative political group called Citizens for Excellence in Education. Following Clinton's presidential victory, the first by a Democrat in 12 years, conservatives have been spurred into increased political action, Simonds says.

It's too soon to know whether Simonds is correct. But it does seem likely that Clinton's victory will turn up the heat on the struggle for the hearts and minds of public-school students.

Citizens for Excellence in Education is the largest and loudest of the right-wing groups that call parents to arms in the name of quality education while pushing censorship and intolerance. People for the American Way, a liberal watchdog group, has labeled Simonds' group as "easily the most destructive censorship organization active in the schools today."

Simonds blames so-called liberal educators for a long — and sometimes astounding — list of social ills. In particular, he says educators promote witchcraft, hypnotism, Satanism, and disobedience to parents while claiming to teach higher order thinking skills. Under the guise of conducting lessons about AIDS and cultural diversity, he says, they're opening the classroom door to "every homosexual recruitment plan of the gay community."

Simonds rejects giving schools a stronger role in referring people to social service agencies, an idea that many applaud as helping students and families overcome roadblocks to academic success. Inviting people to school-based social service fairs would mean that "derelicts, homosexuals with AIDS, people with sexual diseases, rapists and child molesting pedophiles could all flood our campuses," he wrote last October.

During a recent interview, he even asserted that liberal educators were to blame for the riots that swept Los Angeles after the infamous Rodney King beating trial verdict last year. That's because teachers claiming to teach multiculturalism have instead led minority students to think they've been abused by society "and that the whites owe them,"

he said.

Christians must unite to force public schools to return to teaching basics like math, reading, and history, as well as "a solid moral base," he says. His agenda also includes promoting a voucher system of school choice.

However outlandish Simonds may sound, and however far he may appear to stray from the views of most U.S. citizens who call themselves Christians, he can't be dismissed as a voice in the wilderness. Founded in 1983 as an offshoot of a group called the National Association of Christian Educators, CEE now claims 1,250 chapters nationwide with a membership of 175,000. In 1992 alone, Simonds says, CEE helped 3,600 conservatives get elected to school boards.

Critics often accuse CEE candidates of waging "stealth campaigns" for office that downplay their religious convictions and connections to the group. Voters will be more likely to support a candidate stumping for "back to basics education" than one connected to censorship campaigns and sometimes wild rhetoric. Simonds claims CEE members are just keeping low profiles to avoid religious persecution.

Simonds' claims of support and success are difficult to substantiate, in part because, as a nonprofit organization, CEE is prohibited from openly aiding political candidates. But there's no doubt that censorship-minded political activists have scored a string of school-based victories in recent years. Among their crusades:

- In 1990, 24 of 46 school board candidates endorsed by anti-abortion activists in San Diego County — who distributed their names among churches — were elected.

- A school board in Xenia, Ohio, abolished a self-esteem program for elementary-school students after two CEE-affiliated trustees lobbied against it. The *Dayton Daily News* quoted one CEE-connected trustee as saying the program "gives children the idea they have power over their parents," and was of little use to students anyway because "there is no correlation whatsoever between self-esteem and moral behavior."

- In Holly, Colo., CEE parents took credit for convincing school officials to require parents to sign permission slips before their children could take part in a self-esteem program called "Positive Action."

- CEE activists have repeatedly targeted the popular "Impressions" reading series, saying that exercises in imagination (such as pretending to be magicians creating magic spells) build support for witchcraft

and Satanism among children. Some chapters have resorted to suing their local school districts, seeking seven-figure judgements.

- In Texas, CEE activists have labeled the teaching of evolution, without mention of so-called creation science, as "biased evolutionary indoctrination."

- In Galveston, Texas, CEE and other conservative groups tried to yank a self-esteem program from elementary classrooms on the grounds that it promoted "New Age" thinking and a "way of life contrary to Judeo-Christian principles." The school board refused.

- In Escondido, Calif., a school board that included two CEE-backed members adopted a sex-education policy that relied totally on abstinence.

- In Spring Valley, Calif., a suburb of San Diego, two conservative Christian school board members tried to block an elementary school from starting a free breakfast program, saying that the school was usurping the proper role of the family. The majority of the five-member board OK'd the program, however.

- In Meridian, Ohio, local CEE members claimed a nurse demonstrated condom use to a sixth-grade class, and Simonds threatened a lawsuit. District officials responded by temporarily banning teachers from discussing sex education, AIDS, or any sexually transmitted disease.

On the other side of the political spectrum, educators are organizing too. In Vista, Calif., for example, teachers last year won the right to have an "academic freedom" clause inserted into their contracts to prevent zealots from censoring otherwise lawful classroom materials and lesson content. And across San Diego County, a coalition of parents and educators has sprung up to oppose conservative Christian inroads to academic freedom, vowing to fight Simonds and those like him by organizing similarly fervent campaigns. For example, the group has asked school-board candidates to agree publicly to a set of anti-censorship statements, in hopes of exposing any so-called "stealth candidates" from the far right who are soft-pedaling their views in hopes of winning an election.

Simonds, meanwhile, shows no signs of letting up, urging his followers to continue fighting what he sees as the most critical battle of our age. "Let them call you censors," he wrote to his supporters last November. "Words won't hurt us. Losing our children will!" □

Leon Lynn is a journalist based in El Paso, Texas.

Credit: Luckovich, Atlanta Constitution



# Trouble Over the Rainbow

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for first graders to read, and they raise issues more appropriate for older kids. Instead of clarifying the intent of the curriculum, the books became red flags for opponents eager to appeal to the worst fears of straight parents.

Gays and lesbians understandably view AIDS education, homophobia, and the bigotry which drives disproportionate numbers of gay youth to suicide as matters of survival. But first grade classrooms are not necessarily the place to address these issues except in the most general ways. Collapsing issues of sexual orientation with issues of tolerance for all people including gays and lesbians can even reinforce what *Village Voice* writer Donna Minkowitz described as "the tendency...to think of gays and lesbians in sexual terms—not in terms of culture, history, romances and families."

The few debatable features of the curriculum in no way justified the hysterical distortions Cummins and company raised about "teaching sodomy" or "recruiting children to the homosexual life-style." Nevertheless, they did put Rainbow supporters on the defensive, and they stand as a caution to progressives elsewhere about the care necessary to unite the broadest possible consensus around progressive approaches to teaching about topics like sexual or cultural identity. Democratic process and clear guidelines are essential.

If the response to *Children of the Rainbow* showed how complicated it is to put multicultural education into classroom practice, it also showed what a reservoir of bigotry and hatred its opponents have to draw on. "A curriculum that was designed to promote tolerance has instead revealed an astonishing level of homophobia," noted Ron Madison, a member of the Gay and Lesbian Teachers Association. As District 24's campaign continued into the fall, it spread to other districts, leading to at least two threats on Fernandez's life, police protection for several local school boards, and outbreaks of violence at several public meetings.

Subsidized busloads of parents and angry residents descended on community school board meetings to condemn the curriculum. Conservative whites who had opposed civil rights, affirmative action, and bilingual education made common cause with religious Latino communities. Gay rights advocates were baited as the representatives of an elite, white agenda which had never been concerned about other racial or ethnic minorities. Sharp class divisions surfaced between gay professionals and black, Latino, and white working class constituencies.

Brooklyn's District 15, a Latino, African

American, white working class, and Catholic area which also has a sizable gay and lesbian community, reflected all these tensions. Norm Fruchter, CSB #15 president and a long-time parent advocate and education activist, recalls, "From the first meeting in September, it was very clear that there was a very large, incredibly aggravated, almost panic-stricken group of people, predominantly Latino, who were mobilized around the curriculum issue." Progressive members on the local board wanted to counter distortions of the curriculum and limit the extent of the growing polarization. Working with the more conservative members, they settled on a series of meetings that would give the community the sort of input they hadn't had earlier.

It seemed like a good place to start. Heather Lewis, a parent activist and District 15 board member, remembers the November hearing as "a model of what democracy should be. It was difficult because there were very strong feelings on both sides, but democracy is messy." Over 90 people spoke and many were "incredibly moving." But while this was exactly the sort of process needed to create a constituency for tolerance, it also exposed the depth and complexity of the tensions involved.

Most of those who spoke in support of the curriculum were white and, in many cases, professional or middle class. "I'm gay and I'm a homeowner," some speakers asserted in the course of impassioned pleas for their rights, as if their mortgages somehow lent legitimacy to their status. (Conversely, the newspapers rarely failed to call Rainbow supporters "activists" while its opponents were usually "parents.") Still, as Fruchter saw it, many gay advocates, given their own anger and pain, found it difficult to recognize the fears and resentments of the groups which had been maneuvered into opposition against them: "I'm not sure how many people saw the class aspects of it at all. I think what many people saw were opponents, and sometimes they saw people acting only out of ignorance. Those perceptions didn't help."

Most of those who spoke against the curriculum were Latino, along with black or white working-class parents. While their opposition to the curriculum was undoubtedly heavily motivated by religious views, there were other concerns at work as well. "The schools aren't teaching kids to read and write," some complained. "Why don't schools leave this personal stuff to the families and concentrate on the basics?" Such arguments, even if disingenuous, also struck a chord. School failure is a desperate issue in many communities. If anti-bias

education is to win broad support it has to be integrated at the school level in the overall context of effective educational programs, rather than introduced as isolated statements of political policy.

Even in District 15, which had pioneered several anti-bias initiatives and had significant progressive leadership, reasoned debate was overwhelmed by the passions unleashed by the organized campaign against the *Children of the Rainbow*. A group called Concerned Parents for Educational Accountability circulated videotapes linking the curriculum to "the homosexual conspiracy." Lillian Lopez, another parent and district board member, recalls parents "in different neighborhoods saying the same thing," as if they'd been coached. Heather Lewis says "it became almost like a witch-hunt." Parents would make wild claims about what might happen and declare, "I can't rest at home if I know that one teacher in the district may do this."

## Things Turn Ugly

When it came time to make a decision things turned ugly. Lopez recalls the session at which District 15 adopted its compromise resolution: "It wasn't a discussion; it was the most horrible display of human intolerance and bad behavior and the ugly side of people. Anybody that got up to speak for the curriculum was told to shut up, sit down, go home. There were more than enough obscenities yelled out. By the time it came down to vote, people were on their feet yelling at us, and all we could do was yell out our vote. The only one who had any chance to say anything was the one board member who voted against it. The police had to escort us out. It was particularly humiliating, one of the most humiliating things I was ever a part of. We could not reason, at no moment."

District 15's resolution called for using *Children of the Rainbow* to support first grade teachers in their efforts to promote multiculturalism and reduce bias. It also reaffirmed the board's "belief that the most effective curricula are developed at the district and school levels rather than at the Central Board" and called for meetings at every school to discuss how "the district's goals of respect for family and cultural diversity, tolerance, bias awareness and conflict resolution" were being addressed. In response to critics' claims and parents' fears, the resolution stated that "there will be no specific references to sexuality in first grade" and that schools should disregard any "specific reference to teaching about sexual orientation." Some gay and lesbian activists complained that this retreated too far, but since the real intent of the Rainbow curriculum was to teach tolerance, not sexuality, CSB #15 members argued that the resolution effectively undercut the opposition while preserving the goal of promoting respect for all groups including gays and lesbians. The resolution passed 7 to 1.

Progressives responded in several other ways. People About Changing Education (PACE), a multiracial activist group that publishes a citywide paper on school issues called *School Voices*, initiated a broadly-based Campaign for Inclusive Multicultural Education. The Campaign enlisted hundreds of individuals and organizations in support of the Rainbow curriculum. Through news releases, press conferences and public forums, the Campaign helped raise the profile of progressive Latino, African American, and Jewish groups which spoke up for multicultural inclusion in the very communities that the right had mobilized against it.

More than half of the local boards responded to protests by delaying mention of gays and lesbians to 5th or 6th grade or otherwise modifying the guide. Fernandez readily accepted these changes and also ordered several of the most controversial passages in the guide rewritten. "Heather" and her two moms were taken off the

reading list. But CSB #24 remained completely hostile to the curriculum and refused repeated invitations to submit an alternative. To die-hard opponents, the wording and the details were almost beside the point. They were looking for ways to sharpen the confrontation, not defuse it.

## The Opt-out Option

A number of people, including writer and gay advocate Richard Goldstein, supported proposals to let parents "opt-out" of curriculum units they deemed inappropriate by pulling their kids out of class. When "two powerful commitments — like gay rights and parental rights — collide," Goldstein argued, opt-outs make sense. "What is at stake here has less to do with discrimination than with the power of central authorities to determine educational standards without parental consent. That's a battle progressives have been waging for decades against these same authorities."

But while it may sometimes make tactical sense to propose such provisions as a way to limit resistance to teaching about homosexuality and other topics like abortion, opt-outs really beg the issue. For one thing, the anti-bias intentions of the Rainbow curriculum are not confined to particular units that parents could exempt their kids from. The point is to promote a pervasive and systematic approach to reducing prejudice in all areas. The methods proposed by the Rainbow curriculum apply as much to everyday classroom practice and unanticipated situations as they do to a particular set of lessons.

More fundamentally, the issue is one of how to make and carry out democratic education policy. Every parent should have a right to participate in the making of public school policy in a meaningful way. But individual parents don't have a right to unilaterally impose their own version of it on teachers and schools. Should prejudiced parents, as matter of school policy, be able to pull their kids out of black history programs? Should anti-Semitic parents be able to avoid lessons on the Holocaust? Parents have a right to teach their beliefs to their children, but public school is where kids are taught what society thinks of itself. What that vision should be continues to be a matter of sharp struggle, but it should remain a collective, rather than an individual process. Students should be exposed to values and norms of behavior that presumably give everyone a stake in making social institutions work democratically. In the process, hopefully they will learn mutual respect and the critical skills needed to make their own judgments about what both their schools and their parents tell them.

There's also another issue: "choice." Extending the logic of opt-outs, some have seized on the Rainbow controversy as yet another argument for a system of public school "choice." *The Wall Street Journal* asserted that the entire Rainbow controversy "all adds up to more fuel for the burgeoning school-choice movement." In the *New York Times*, Richard Vigilante of the Center for Social Thought wrote that "choice" is "a successful and honorable way to avoid the culture wars that threaten our schools...In a true school choice program *Heather has Two Mommies*...would be read by children whose parents chose the schools that accepted the textbook. Overnight, the fight over the Rainbow Curriculum, like all such fights for control over 'the system' would become moot."

The choice scenario, here applied to curriculum issues, envisions an educational market system that would remain "public" only in its provision of public funds to individual schools. Such a system could be quite friendly to pockets of educational privilege and prejudice. Allowing parents or students to escape any contact with democratically achieved guidelines on social policy or racial and cultural

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Credit: Tom McKitterick/Impact Visuals

One of the demonstrations against New York's Rainbow curriculum.

# Aghast over Aladdin

## A Parent Grapples with Stereotypes in Disney's Latest Hit

By Barbara Miner

It was to be one of the high points of our Christmas vacation: a family trip to see *Aladdin*. The movie had been a hot playground topic for weeks, and some kids had already seen it two or three times.

We set the date, got to the movie theatre on time (no small feat), bought the requisite large popcorn with butter, and settled in for a good time. My six- and eight-year-old daughters could barely sit still. I didn't share their manic anticipation, but was nonetheless curious. *Aladdin* had been billed as the first animated Disney film to feature non-white heroes, an example of a new, multiculturally sensitive Disney.

But my high expectations sank with the opening scene. As a Bedouin rides his camel through the desert, the following lyrics are blasted to impressionable kids as part of the song "Arabian Nights":

*I come from a land  
From a faraway place,  
Where the caravan camels roam.  
Where they cut off your ear  
If they don't like your face.  
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home."*

If this is the new, multiculturally sensitive Disney, I thought, please bring back Goofy.

Unfortunately, the stereotypes continued. Arabs with sinister eyes, big noses, beards and turbans filled the screen, almost all of them brandishing swords. Evil characters spoke with Arabic or non-discernable foreign "accents." Good characters talked like Americans or, in the case of the "royal" characters, like the British. The fictitious town of Agrabah was crowded and chaotic, with danger lurking in the background — the almost perfect stereotype of third world cities in general and Middle Eastern cities in particular.

It's little wonder that top-40 disc jockey Casey Kasem, a Lebanese-American, has called *Aladdin* "gratuitous Arab-bashing."

In one especially offensive scene, a marketplace vendor wants to cut off the hand of Princess Jasmine because she took an apple to feed a hungry child — a not-so-subtle attack on Islam, a religion embraced by more than 1 billion people worldwide.

What about our non-white hero and heroine, Aladdin and Princess Jasmine? Amazingly, they had been transformed into almost perfect Europeans, a cartoon equivalent of Barbie and Ken. No beard, turban, big nose, sword or "accent" for Aladdin — in fact, the character was

modeled in part after all-American movie star Tom Cruise.

So, I realized, that's how Disney makes multicultural characters palatable: he turns them into honorary whites.

Despite my criticisms, I found myself seduced by the film. As critics have noted, it is one of the most beautiful animated films to ever whiz across a movie screen. And Robin Williams transforms the genie into one of the zaniest, funniest, most lovable Disney characters yet. By the movie's end, one tends to forget the stereotypes that dominate in the beginning. Further, there are clearly positive values in the film: Aladdin uses his wits rather than his brawn to defeat Jafar, for example, and Jasmine shows some welcome independence — a far cry from many Hollywood female characters.

After we left the theater, I had to decide. Should I let the stereotypes slide or try to talk to my kids about them? It's a decision that confronts many parents almost daily, whether it's *Aladdin*, Nancy Drew books, or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

### Parents and Stereotypes

Although fighting racist and sexist stereotypes is rarely brought up when teachers talk about parental involvement in their child's education, it's a key area. Sadly, there is almost nothing available to help parents do so. Further, parents need more than tips on what to tell their kids. They need advice on how. Classroom lessons usually aren't easily transferable to the home. Many kids will listen respectfully to teachers and accept their lessons as the truth, but look at their parents like Neanderthal no-minds when they bring up the same issues.

Not wanting to admit defeat without even trying, later that night I asked my eight-year-old, Caitlin, what she thought of *Aladdin*. Her predictable response: she loved it. I then asked her if she thought there were any stereotypes. She's been in enough discussions about stereotypes, both at home and in school, so that even bringing up the subject puts her on guard. I could see the anguish on her face: here goes mom again, spoiling something fun by bringing up stereotypes.

"Didn't it seem odd to you that all the bad people had big noses and carried swords?" I asked. (I admit I'm not very skilled at such discussions, but figured I had to start somewhere.)

"But mom," Caitlin responded, "all



Credit: © The Walt Disney Co. All Rights Reserved

**Aladdin, billed as an example of Disney's multicultural sensitivity, is light-skinned and speaks teenage American English.**

cartoon characters have big noses."

"But not all Arabs have big noses and carry swords, and the movie made it seem like they did," I countered.

"Well, I'm not sure what an Arab is," she answered.

I suddenly realized the truly insidious nature of *Aladdin*. Unlike stereotypes of Native Americans or African-Americans, where some kids have enough background knowledge to begin a discussion on stereotypes, Arabs are open game because kids rarely know anything about them.

I've mentioned the film's stereotypes a couple of other times to Caitlin, but I have no clue whether any of it has sunk in. One problem is my own lack of knowledge about Arabs and Islam. But I figure that doing something, even if it is bumblingly inadequate, is better than nothing. I've also talked over the problem with other parents, one of whom approaches the issue by asking her kids what Disney characters they like and why, trying to help the kids figure out for themselves the subtleties of stereotypes.

While my kids often groan, tap their feet and look away when I start talking about stereotypes, I remember how much I resisted my mother's attempts to instill her

values. Such tensions, I think, are an inherent part of parenting. The problem for me isn't discussing stereotypes, but how to do so in a way that helps the kids develop their own critiques rather than having mom dish out the correct line.

So I stumble ahead. Encouragingly, I also know that at least some of my admonitions are sinking in, albeit in a contradictory way.

Caitlin proudly proclaimed recently she didn't want Barbie valentines to give out at school because "they are sexist."

"Aha!" I thought. "Victory on at least one front."

Two days later, however, I realized my victory was limited.

"Mom, can you buy me one of those Barbies with long hair?" Caitlin asked. "I only have the Barbies with the short hair." □

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in Washington, D.C. has launched a campaign, asking Disney to replace the opening lyrics before the film is released in video. Letters should be sent to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Chairman, Walt Disney Studios, 500 South Buena Vista St., Burbank, CA 91521-1070.

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differences is, in fact, not democratic at all. Such proposals reinforce suspicions that the real goal of "choice" plans is to undermine public education as a democratic social institution and to preserve class and racial inequalities.

In this connection, it's worth noting that the focus on same sex families in the campaign against *Children of the Rainbow* masks a deeper resistance to other forms of multiculturalism. While progressive educators are trying to expand multicultural education to include real recognition of diversity and programs that actively fight bias, others want to keep it confined to superficial versions of melting pot myths and exclude whole categories of people. "Multiculturalism does not include lifestyles," said one district board member, as if it applied only to those willing to adopt conventional modes of behavior and belief. Similarly, Michael Petrides, a member of the Central Board from Staten Island, complained that "educators are now picking off voting blocs like politicians, to make sure voting blocs are represented in the

curriculum. We are dissecting everything into what is special and different, rather than what we have in common."

Such claims — which are wildly exaggerated — reflect the discomfort historically privileged groups feel in the face of demands for inclusion and more democratic versions of curriculum. In most schools, multiculturalism hasn't even begun to go beyond food festivals and superficial celebrations of holidays. It hasn't begun to explain why some "differences" translate into access to wealth and power, while others become a source of discrimination and injustice. Opponents want to limit multicultural initiatives before they develop into more substantive pluralist and anti-racist efforts. Attacking tolerance for gay families is a way of attacking multicultural education at its perceived weakest link.

### What role for parents?

With the Board and much of the city deeply divided following Fernandez's ouster, the search for a replacement is likely to be long and difficult. In fact, the one

point of broad agreement seems to be that the current structure is unworkable. As it now stands, the Mayor appoints two of the seven Central Board members, and the five borough presidents each appoint one. This arrangement produces a body with little coherence or accountability.

Norm Fruchter argues, "Long term, there's a major problem with governance in NYC schools. And it's not only governance, but bureaucratic layers that impede anything real happening at the school level."

In the short run, however, the next battle will focus on local school board elections set for this spring. Churches and conservative groups are expected to run an unprecedented number of candidates using the AIDS, condom, and curriculum controversies as the basis of their campaigns. PACE, along with other groups, is trying to organize slates of progressive candidates that respond not only with forthright support for multicultural inclusion, but also with a comprehensive program for school change.

Yet while the elections may be hotly

contested, they're not likely to resolve much. In the final analysis, the deeper issue raised by the struggle over *Children of the Rainbow* is what role the majority of public school parents will play in efforts to remake an educational system that is failing their children.

In last fall's general elections, there was a concerted national campaign by far-right groups to target parents and win school board seats (see story page 9). Aided by homophobia and racial tension, the forces of the right are trying to mobilize parents, including large numbers of Latinos, Asians, and African Americans, behind conservative "family values" and racial-cultural backlash. How to counter this conservative campaign and enlist parents in campaigns for more democratic schooling remains the unfinished lesson of the *Rainbow* curriculum. □

Stan Karp, a Rethinking Schools editorial associate, teaches English and Journalism at J.F.K. High School in Paterson, NJ. An expanded version of this article appeared in the March 1993 *Z* magazine.



## RETHINKING THE CLASSROOM

# There's More to Heroes than He-Man

By Marcie Osinsky

*In Rethinking the Classroom, we hope to collect stories of teaching and learning that illustrate basic features of a critical pedagogy. In the following, Marcie Osinsky underscores the importance of chipping away at the traditional split between classroom and community. She emphasizes the need to build a curriculum characterized by "listening, telling, and questioning."*

*The unit Osinsky describes shows that the classroom can be a place to challenge commercially produced icons and values. Students learn that we can create our own "heroes," our own "models of strength," through classroom dialogue and drawing on community traditions.*

*While Osinsky's article describes working with first and second graders, there are ideas here for teachers of all ages.*

Bill Bigelow and Linda Christensen

As part of a year-long folktale curriculum, last winter I began a study of heroes and heroines with my first and second grade class. First the kids and I brainstormed about heroic characters. The Ninja Turtles and He-Man topped the list. The children's concept of heroism did not include people in their own lives.

As a result, I decided to use oral history and storytelling techniques to highlight the heroism of people close to them. Children need to see models of strength and courage within their own families and communities in order to identify such qualities in themselves. I have also found that oral history and storytelling are wonderful ways to include parents in building a classroom community which respects differing perspectives and voices.

After making our own definitions of heroism using storybooks and folktales, we invited parents to a "story-sharing breakfast" to talk to us about people who were heroic in their lives. In phone conversations and informal chats, parents and I spoke about heroic people and role models in our lives.

To prepare the children, I modeled an interview where I

made a lot of mistakes. I interrupted and asked questions out of the blue. The kids told me what I did wrong. We then did mini-interviews where I interviewed another adult about his/her heroic person.

Then we had our "story-sharing breakfast." The parents sat in small groups with the children and told stories and answered questions. The images of all the characters in the stories filled the room. One grandmother talked of how she stowed away on a ship to Europe in World War II in order to be a foreign correspondent. One man told how he delivered eggs early each day in order to put himself through college while raising his family. As the stories progressed, the atmosphere became one of listening, telling, and questioning.

Kids were involved in the conversation and learned what was dear to their parents. They learned the importance of listening, and realized how experiences and values pass down through generations.

Soon after the story-sharing breakfast, for example, Gabriel and Brent were chopping onions in class to make soup. Gabriel was having difficulty and Brent showed him his techniques to cut onions, explaining: "This is how I chop onions. This is how my mom chops onions and my nana chops onions. This is how my whole family chops onions. We've been chopping onions like this since — since the cavemen."

The stories also connected the kids to another time in history when people also faced everyday hardships, some of which these kids may be facing now. They had many questions about life "back then."

While quite a few parents told dramatic stories about war and conflicts from their home countries, others told stories that showed the heroism of difficult decisions and everyday struggles.

One parent, Lynne, told how she wanted to be a dancer and moved from the West Coast to Boston. She explained how hard it was to be alone in a strange city and to try to make it in a career such as dancing. She told of another dancer who encouraged her and gave her confidence. "I will always remember her," Lynn said of the dancer, "because she gave me such strength to go after what I wanted to do."

One student said of Lynne's story, "She was her own

hero." When I asked why, the child said, "because it was a scary thing to move from California and to become a dancer and live here and she did it."

One parent told of a man saving her mother's life when she was hit by a car in Haiti. The accident occurred during curfew at a time of political unrest, and the driver did not stop. An ambulance was called but did not come. People were afraid the woman might die. "Then a man walked to her [my mother], grabbed her and put her on his shoulder," the parent said. "He carried her to the hospital. If he had not carried my mother, I would not have a mother right now. That man was not afraid to get killed on the street."

The kids were upset after hearing the story. They asked questions like, "Why couldn't you go out in the street? Who would shoot you? Why would you get shot by police if you had not done anything wrong?"

Kids then made connections to stories they had heard about events in Boston or Los Angeles. I felt it was important to give the children a forum to raise their concerns and know that there are adults who share those concerns. The story-telling became a sophisticated discussion of attitudes toward solving conflicts.

As we continued this work, I began to see how stories help connect the listener to a different time, place and cultural context, giving the children a sense of belonging to a larger history. After learning that she had family roots in Africa and after hearing more stories about the continent, Darlene said, "Oh yeah, I been to Africa, with my ancestors."

Through the project, I discovered the power of storytelling, not only to create a curriculum respecting diverse perspectives but to allow parents and children to help shape that curriculum so that it reflects their realities.

The stories from our breakfast became an important part of life at our school. We illustrated and transcribed them and made a book. Throughout the year, the book was read over and over again by the kids and parents. □

Marcie Osinsky teaches first and second grade at Martin Luther King Jr. school in Cambridge, MA.

## A Parent's Perspective

# The Community's Role in School Reform

By Herbert Kohl

Being both a parent and an educator has given me some uneasy moments. Our three children went to public elementary and high schools. In high school, they all rebelled against the sexist and racist practices that were (and still are) normal operating procedure at the school.

My daughter Erica, for example, mobilized a boycott of slave day, when first- and second-year students were auctioned off to seniors and became their slave for a day. I suggested that parents become involved, too, but Erica and her friends told us to let them take care of it themselves. Which I did. The students didn't want parent involvement, a common phenomenon among high school students. The boycott succeeded — slave day was canceled for the year. But Erica and her friends graduated, and the next year the staff and principal reinstated that ceremony of humiliation.

A similar dilemma exist for parents.

My wife Judy and I agitated to improve the schools in our communities for the 11 years our children attended them. I even taught electives when they were allowed, and served a 2-year term on the elementary school board.

Over time, I learned that each time a group of parents began to effectively change the school, their ranks were decimated by a combination of intimidation by school officials, parents sending their children to alternative schools, or parents dropping out because their children had graduated. The staff and administration — almost all of whom had been at the school at least 10

years — were able to subvert the changes we parents had forced them to make.

After our third child graduated from high school, Judy and I also dropped out from the struggle. Since we were no longer parents, our role was often questioned. And we were tired.

However, hope springs eternal, I guess. I am now re-involved as an educator and community member. I also believe I'm more effective now.

As a parent, I responded, as most parents do, to a particular injury or problem facing my child. I didn't take the time to analyze the system itself. Looking back, one of the things that kept our parent group from being more effective is that we didn't focus on important or broad enough issues — issues that would affect incoming parents just as they affected us.

However, the results of my experiences weren't all negative. Many of the parents currently at our schools trust us to help them. To lose is not everything if you are willing to keep on fighting.

These days I am involved in fighting the stigmatizing system of classifying students as educationally handicapped or disabled. The system is used to punish and marginalize youngsters who resist conformity and, in our community, tends to be applied to entire groups of students such as Native Americans. We have had some wonderful success with children who flowered when protected from such categorizing and were instead given educational resources that speak respectfully to their culture and community.

I have also learned that as a community member and an educator (but not an



Community activists, reporters, and police gather in front of I. S. 201 in Harlem, NY, during the community takeover of the school in fall, 1966. Herb Kohl was active in the takeover.

employee of the school district), I have been able to develop effective ways to support parents' struggles and help nurture a long-term movement to reform schools.

Parents have to be in the forefront of change. But it is probably best for them to ally themselves with community people who are willing to continue the struggle when the parents' own children leave the schools. Better yet, it would be wonderful if parents conceive of their roles as more than struggling over their own children's education, and view involvement as an obligation undertaken as a member of the

community for the benefit of all children.

Even the most recalcitrant of teachers and administrators might be unable to resist sustained community-based opposition. Further, those teachers and administrators tempted to join with the community might take that bold step if they feel that parent support will not disappear under pressure or dissipate through attrition. □

Herbert Kohl is author of 36 Children and, most recently, From Archetype to Zeitgeist.

## Boston Project Trains Parents

# Ask the Right Question

By Steven Backman

BOSTON — At 6:30 p.m., after a particularly cold winter day, about 25 public school parents gathered in a semi-circle. They sat nervously, awaiting the start of a school-related conference. The two women who called the meeting passed out forms showing basic arithmetic problems given to first graders. Then they passed out examples of work given to children in 12th grade.

Much to everyone's surprise, both times the parents were given the same basic arithmetic problems.

The group buzzed with questions. Why were their children in 12th grade given such basic problems? Could they talk to the teacher? Could they look at the curriculum? What is going on? Why weren't they told that their children were doing so poorly in math? A lively discussion ensued.

The gathering was not a "real" school conference. Rather, the "conference" was a role-playing workshop organized by a parent training group called The Right Question. Interestingly, however, none of the parents at the workshop said the math problem was extreme and could never happen.

A two-year-old project started in nearby Somerville and Lawrence among Latino parents, The Right Question gives workshops that teach parents how to deal with school officials and ask questions that can help them advocate for their children. It was formed on the premise that democracy needs citizens who can ask questions.

The privately funded project targets low-income parents, who often have the least connection to parent-support groups. Even if their children do not have troubles at school, many poor or minority parents avoid school conferences or don't have the self-confidence to ask questions of school staff.

As a The Right Question leaflet explains, "Parents do not need to be experts to advocate for their children, but they do need to be able to ask questions of the experts. We have learned from many parents that when they acquire self-advocacy skills, they are more able and more likely to support, monitor, and advocate for their children's education and for education reform."



Credit: Even Johnson/Impact Visuals

The Right Question Project helps parents become stronger advocates for their children.

In Boston, the Right Question Project has joined with the Parents' Institute for Quality Urban Education — a citywide coalition of community and school groups — to form a Parents Organizing Project that makes use of The Right Question's workshop strategy.

The strategy encourages parents to ask questions about how decisions are made, who makes them, what criteria are used, and how those decisions will affect them. It focuses on four issues:

- How can low-income parents become an active constituency for educational reform?
- How can family literacy programs prepare parents to be effective monitors and advocates throughout their children's schooling?
- How can one further develop critical-thinking and advocacy skills among disenfranchised citizens?
- How can one enable ordinary citizens to

hold public institutions accountable?

The Right Question's organizing strategy is based on community workshops by trained facilitators. The facilitators try to give parents the self-esteem and self-confidence needed to take part in school issues, using role-plays of everyday school situations. In the workshop I attended this winter, concerns ranged from basic curriculum issues such as the math problem to wider issues such as discipline and demands for multicultural curricula.

Since mid-1990, The Right Question has led more than 24 workshops involving 400 predominantly Latino parents.

Educator Dan Rothstein started the project, whose board of directors includes both parents and well-known academics such as child psychologist Robert Coles from Harvard University.

The project has honed its workshop

strategy, using everyday settings outside the schools like living rooms, church basements, English as a second language classes, and adult literacy classes. It plans to expand its scope in the coming year by training new parents to offer similar workshops around the city.

Part of the value of the project's approach is that it does not involve expensive materials or high-paid consultants. Rather, it is part of an education reform strategy that is linked to community-based efforts. Its methods apply not only to education, but other situations where low-income communities must deal with publicly funded bureaucracies.

### The Project's Approach

For school activists, The Right Question Project suggests a different way to think about school reform. Generally, public school reform efforts are built around those who are already involved, especially teachers and professional educators. Parents and students who want to assert their rights often face a bewildering landscape of pre-existing programmatic conflicts, philosophical debate, and budget issues. As groups try to become more sophisticated in order to take on city and school authorities, it can become even more difficult for new parents to join in.

Realistically, only a relative handful of parents can or will learn the language of teachers, administrators, and educators. This limits the ability of most parents to advocate for their children. It also limits all parents and community members who want to build effective movements involving both schools and the communities they serve.

Ultimately, any citywide or broader coalition has to address these issues. The Right Question Project's approach is a potentially tremendous resource, especially when it can be used in conjunction with specific organizing by other groups around issues such as tracking.

The parents of students in our urban schools must be brought into the process of reform, not as add-ons but as essential players. The Right Question Project seems to be on the right track to help accomplish this. □

Steven Backman has two children in the Boston public schools and has been active in the Parents Agenda Project sponsored by Boston's Citywide Parents Council. For the address of The Right Question see p. 29.

## Helping Parents to Ask The Right Questions About Tracking

By Anne Wheelock

Whereas upper-income parents frequently understand the implications of placement decisions and also have the skills to negotiate about situations that may be detrimental to their children, low-income parents may not have these advantages.

Dan Rothstein, director of The Right Question Project, describes how a workshop on tracking focuses on the impact of grouping on children:

We give each participant two sheets of paper stapled together. On the first page we write: "What Your Child Should Learn: The Curriculum for All the District's Schoolchildren." Underneath is a drawing (an original by a six-year-old) of a boy and a girl sharing a book, standing under a smiling sun.

On the second page we write: "The full curriculum is 100 pages long." On half of the papers we hand out a second page that reads: "Your child will be taught the full 100 pages." The other half of the papers state: "Your child will be taught only the first 50

pages."

We then ask parents what they received. (We ask for volunteers because if some parents cannot read, they will still be able to participate fully.) When the parents who received a curriculum that states that their child will be taught only the first 50 pages hear that others are being taught the full 100 pages, they ask:

Why is my child only being taught 50 pages?

What does it mean that he's only taught 50 pages?

Who made that decision?

When was it made?

Why is this important?

If I want to know, is this something I have a right to know?

Am I supposed to be involved? Can I be?

On a few of the papers we put down some grades in English and math. The grades were all "A"s. We ask what kinds of questions the parents have about the grades. Here are some:

What does the "A" mean?

Does it mean the same for the 100- and 50-page curriculum?

Do they tell us somehow on the report card to which curriculum it belongs?

We then ask them to reflect on the significance of the grades. One father said: "If I didn't know that there are different programs, then I'd be happy if my son brought home 'A's. But I'd be pretty upset if I knew there was a 25-page curriculum, a 50-page curriculum, and a 100-page curriculum."

Parents' newfound awareness of the consequences of placement decisions and differential curriculum for their children leads to further questions. Frequently, African-American, Latino, and low-income parents may begin to wonder about the likelihood of their children being assigned to the "low" classes, and decide to take action to change that placement. Understanding the implications of tracking can also become the basis for a parent-initiated review of system-wide placement practices and collective action for change. □

Anne Wheelock is an educational writer and consultant. The above is condensed from her book, *Crossing the Tracks* (NY: New Press, 1992).

# Boston Project Trains Parents

## Ask the Right Question

By Steven Backman

BOSTON — At 6:30 p.m., after a particularly cold winter day, about 25 public school parents gathered in a semi-circle. They sat nervously, awaiting the start of a school-related conference. The two women who called the meeting passed out forms showing basic arithmetic problems given to first graders. Then they passed out examples of work given to children in 12th grade.

Much to everyone's surprise, both times the parents were given the same basic arithmetic problems.

The group buzzed with questions. Why were their children in 12th grade given such basic problems? Could they talk to the teacher? Could they look at the curriculum? What is going on? Why weren't they told that their children were doing so poorly in math? A lively discussion ensued.

The gathering was not a "real" school conference. Rather, the "conference" was a role-playing workshop organized by a parent training group called The Right Question. Interestingly, however, none of the parents at the workshop said the math problem was extreme and could never happen.

A two-year-old project started in nearby Somerville and Lawrence among Latino parents, The Right Question gives workshops that teach parents how to deal with school officials and ask questions that can help them advocate for their children. It was formed on the premise that democracy needs citizens who can ask questions.

The privately funded project targets low-income parents, who often have the least connection to parent-support groups. Even if their children do not have troubles at school, many poor or minority parents avoid school conferences or don't have the self-confidence to ask questions of school staff.

As a The Right Question leaflet explains, "Parents do not need to be experts to advocate for their children, but they do need to be able to ask questions of the experts. We have learned from many parents that when they acquire self-advocacy skills, they are more able and more likely to support, monitor, and advocate for their children's education and for education reform."



Credit: Evan Johnson/Impact Visuals

The Right Question Project helps parents become stronger advocates for their children.

In Boston, the Right Question Project has joined with the Parents' Institute for Quality Urban Education — a citywide coalition of community and school groups — to form a Parents Organizing Project that makes use of The Right Question's workshop strategy.

The strategy encourages parents to ask questions about how decisions are made, who makes them, what criteria are used, and how those decisions will affect them. It focuses on four issues:

- How can low-income parents become an active constituency for educational reform?
- How can family literacy programs prepare parents to be effective monitors and advocates throughout their children's schooling?
- How can one further develop critical-thinking and advocacy skills among disenfranchised citizens?
- How can one enable ordinary citizens to

hold public institutions accountable?

The Right Question's organizing strategy is based on community workshops by trained facilitators. The facilitators try to give parents the self-esteem and self-confidence needed to take part in school issues, using role-plays of everyday school situations. In the workshop I attended this winter, concerns ranged from basic curriculum issues such as the math problem to wider issues such as discipline and demands for multicultural curricula.

Since mid-1990, The Right Question has led more than 24 workshops involving 400 predominantly Latino parents.

Educator Dan Rothstein started the project, whose board of directors includes both parents and well-known academics such as child psychologist Robert Coles from Harvard University.

The project has honed its workshop

strategy, using everyday settings outside the schools like living rooms, church basements, English as a second language classes, and adult literacy classes. It plans to expand its scope in the coming year by training new parents to offer similar workshops around the city.

Part of the value of the project's approach is that it does not involve expensive materials or high-paid consultants. Rather, it is part of an education reform strategy that is linked to community-based efforts. Its methods apply not only to education, but other situations where low-income communities must deal with publicly funded bureaucracies.

### The Project's Approach

For school activists, The Right Question Project suggests a different way to think about school reform. Generally, public school reform efforts are built around those who are already involved, especially teachers and professional educators. Parents and students who want to assert their rights often face a bewildering landscape of pre-existing programmatic conflicts, philosophical debate, and budget issues. As groups try to become more sophisticated in order to take on city and school authorities, it can become even more difficult for new parents to join in.

Realistically, only a relative handful of parents can or will learn the language of teachers, administrators, and educators. This limits the ability of most parents to advocate for their children. It also limits all parents and community members who want to build effective movements involving both schools and the communities they serve.

Ultimately, any citywide or broader coalition has to address these issues. The Right Question Project's approach is a potentially tremendous resource, especially when it can be used in conjunction with specific organizing by other groups around issues such as tracking.

The parents of students in our urban schools must be brought into the process of reform, not as add-ons but as essential players. The Right Question Project seems to be on the right track to help accomplish this. □

Steven Backman has two children in the Boston public schools and has been active in the Parents Agenda Project sponsored by Boston's Citywide Parent's Council. For the address of The Right Question see p. 29.

## Helping Parents to Ask The Right Questions About Tracking

By Anne Wheelock

Whereas upper-income parents frequently understand the implications of placement decisions and also have the skills to negotiate about situations that may be detrimental to their children, low-income parents may not have these advantages.

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Anne Wheelock is an educational writer and consultant. The above is condensed from her book, *Crossing the Tracks* (NY: New Press, 1992).

# What to Do If Your Child is on the Track to Nowhere

## Why is Tracking Harmful?

The following is adapted from an article by the National Coalition of Education Activists. The article is part of a packet on tracking entitled, "Maintaining Inequality."

Tracking is a way of sorting students. Sorting determines the kinds of skills, knowledge and resources available to students. Although it is often known as ability grouping, tracking has very little to do with ability.

Rather, tracking is usually based on achievement as measured by standardized tests or estimates of a child's ability. Even when tracking is based on the judgement of teachers, students, and/or parents, it rarely accounts for differences in family education or circumstances, past school experiences, and other factors. It fails to fully consider each student's strengths, weaknesses, and potential.

Tracking duplicates inequalities of race, class, and sex that exist throughout our society. In doing so it undermines the most basic goal of public education: to help all students reach their potential and prepare them for life as citizens in a democracy.

Tracking assumes students come with fixed academic abilities that don't change. Most research, however, supports the idea that academic ability develops and is shaped by expectations and community standards.

Tracking does not raise students' or parents' expectations. It does not encourage effort. It is not designed to help students progress. Tracking does, however, pigeonhole students, without developing a plan for moving them forward.

Tracking results in labeling that also has negative effects. As many have observed, there is hardly anyone who isn't bright enough to understand they aren't considered very bright. For students in lower tracks, these labels become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Tracking's advocates say grouping permits teachers to give more attention to individual students' needs, allowing "high" achievers to progress more quickly and "low" achievers to set and meet reasonable goals. However, most studies suggest that when tracked classes do provide more individual attention, it is because classes are smaller and teachers are using a wider variety of strategies, not because the students are at similar "levels."

There is little proof that tracking benefits students. There is much evidence that students in higher tracks receive certain advantages that should be available to all students, including:

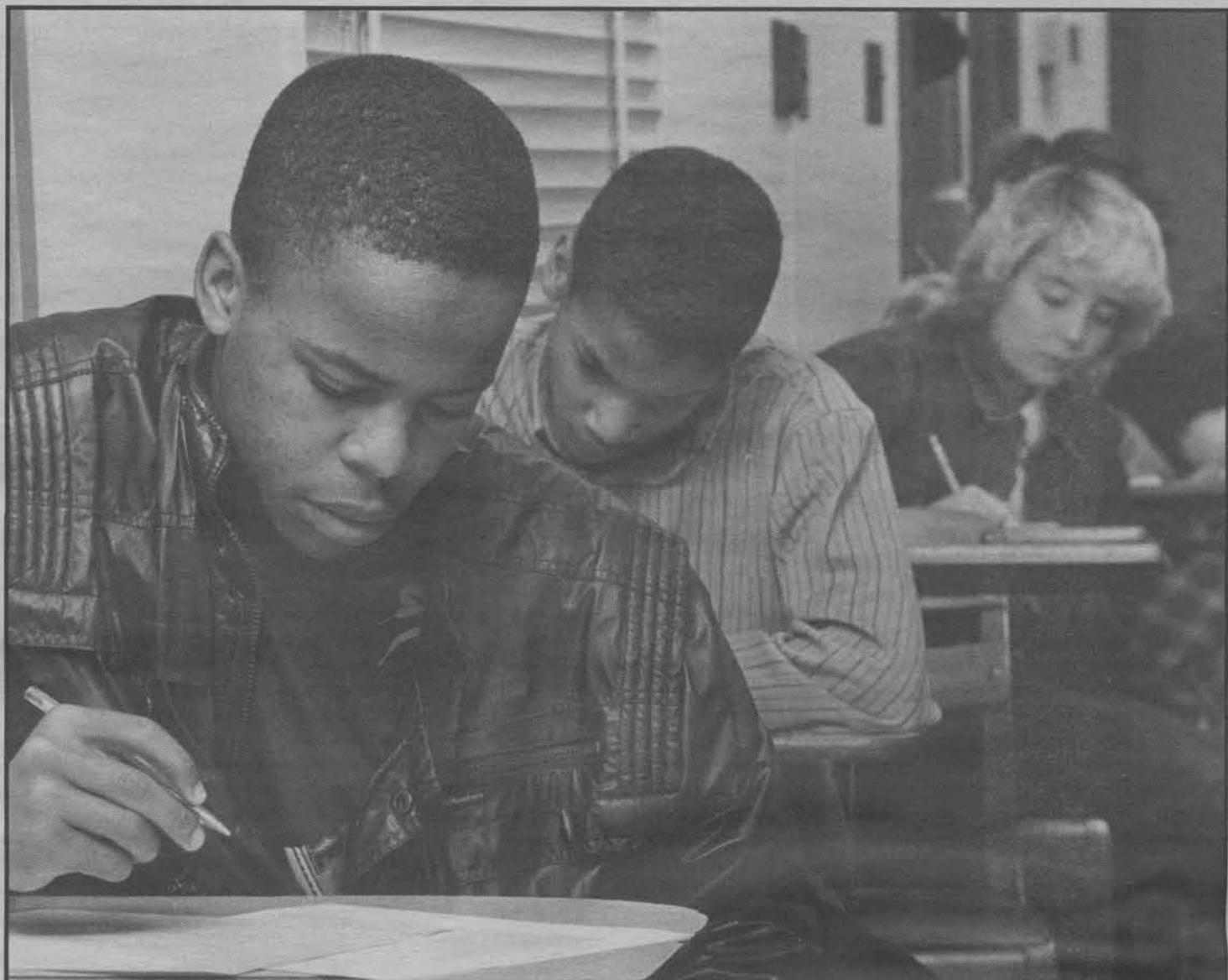
- Highly qualified, experienced teachers.
- Additional resources.
- Access to higher-level skills such as critical thinking, and more intensive writing assignments.
- Exposure to a wider variety of teaching strategies such as cooperative learning and lively discussions.
- Constructive, personal criticism as opposed to harsher correction in front of other students.
- Access to specialized knowledge such as higher mathematics and sciences.
- Active support from parent groups.

Tracking creates classes teachers don't want to teach and tends to segregate students based on race and class.

### Common Tracking Methods

Teachers and parents sometimes believe tracking is beneficial because it seems to respect differences among students. However, in the long run tracking is harmful — once a child is in a low track it is almost impossible to get out. Every day children spend in the low track they lose ground to students in more advanced groups.

Every school tracks differently. This article presents the most common forms of



Tracking often segregates students along lines of race and class.

tracking with the technical name and an explanation of how it works. Since these practices can be hard to spot and some schools will deny using them, the explanations are followed by a list of questions to help you decide if negative forms of tracking are being used.

### Elementary Schools Ability Grouping:

• **Within grade level.** Some schools deliberately — through the use of test scores — or through carelessness create tracked classes within grades. For instance, instead of mixing all children in three second grade classes, the better prepared students end up together.

If your child seems to be with the same children year after year, or if the classes seem to be segregated by race, neighborhood, or the parents' background, you may want to ask questions. (For ideas, see the list on page 15.)

• **Within classes.** Especially in reading and math, students may be divided into groups. Often the groups have names like "tigers," "panthers," and "bluebirds" instead of "high," "middle," or "low." Materials are usually different for each group, and while advanced groups get whole books, the lower groups may get worksheets.

### Action:

If your child is in a lower-level group, insist that there be a plan and a target date for moving him or her into a higher level. Find out what you can do at home to help improve your child's skills and speed up the process.

Question tracking at PTA and other parent meetings. Even though you may be able to protect your child, others will be harmed if the practices continue. If you are able to convince other parents that tracking is harmful, work together to get your school or the entire system to adopt a plan to end tracking. Contact NCEA for organizing ideas.

### Pull-Out Programs:

Many students are taken out of class for special help as part of Chapter 1, special education, or some other program. Students in pull-outs are often labeled in negative ways. If the program's benefits truly outweigh this risk, parents and teachers should try to make sure the students do not see pull-outs as negative.

Students should be evaluated before they are placed in pull-outs and clear, short-term goals should be set. At the end of an agreed-upon period, the program should be evaluated to see if the child's needs are being met and progress is being made.

### Action:

Encourage the school to use Chapter 1 funds in such a way that extra help is provided within the classroom. Fight for lower class sizes so teachers have time to work with every student.

### Middle and High Schools Ability Grouping:

Tracking that began in elementary school is often continued in middle and high schools. Many schools use test scores and teacher recommendations to place students in classes or sections of classes.

Even if your school does not automatically group students by "ability," you may want to watch out for the following tracking methods:

• **Class names.** "General," "Developmental," "Basic," and "Beginning" in course titles often mean lower track. Other times a class will have sections A, B, and C, with the letters standing for the level of difficulty. Section A may be the only one that prepares students to take later classes needed for college.

Some classes are known as "gatekeepers" or "prerequisites." They may be required before a student is permitted to take some other class. For instance, a student who wants to take geometry may need to take algebra first. Occasionally schools will offer

certain gatekeepers only in the summer or will charge a fee; this is probably illegal and you should complain loudly.

• **Electives.** Once a student has signed up for required courses, he or she can usually choose two or three more classes known as "electives." Sometimes students choose their own electives; other times they are advised by counselors.

Foreign languages, journalism, photography, music performance, and similar classes are more likely to encourage critical thinking and other higher-level skills than wood shop, basic/general music, or introductory art. The first group of classes are also more likely to be filled with enthusiastic students who may encourage others to raise their expectations.

### Action:

See action item under "Steering" below.

### Steering:

Counselors or other school staff may discourage students from taking the most challenging courses. Sometimes they will say the student is not prepared or will not benefit from the class because they are not going to college.

### Action:

If the school has a list or catalogue of classes, look it over with your child. Talk with your child about what he or she would like to take and what recommendations, if any, the school counselor has made.

Make sure your child is not being kept out of certain classes because of test scores or recommendations. If you are told he or she is not prepared for a certain class, find out how to get prepared. If necessary, especially if the course is a "gatekeeper," insist that the school provide extra help.

Demand that your child get a strong background in English and math; that means classes that prepare them for college even if they're not sure they want to go. Don't accept excuses about scheduling problems from school staff. □

# Albany Project Advocates Alternatives Parents Challenge Tracking

By Anne Wheelock

If, in principle, *all* parents need to be informed about school grouping practices, too often only a few of them are familiar with unspoken norms that *seem* unremarkable but may have enormous impact on the future of their children. For example, many parents believe that Math 8 is the only eight-grade math course, whereas in reality it may be the lowest track in a particular school's math sequence. Other parents may not realize that enrollment in certain "gatekeeping" courses, such as pre-algebra and algebra in the middle grades, predetermines later access to enrollment in higher-level courses at the high-school level.

Parent advocacy for particular placements traditionally benefits individual students, but parents collaborating together may challenge tracking practices for an entire school or district. In fact, educators who support change may have no stronger allies than parents and citizens knowledgeable about the extent and harm of tracking.

In Albany, New York, the Albany Citizens for Education (ACE) has developed a context within which alternatives to tracking can be discussed openly. Founded in the throes of an electoral campaign designed to endorse a set of independent, non-machine candidates for the Albany School Board, ACE is made up of parents and citizens intent on improving education for all students in that urban district. Over several years, citizens have succeeded in electing a reform-minded majority to the school board. At the same time, with more openness on the board, ACE members have worked closely with board committees, including one mandated to develop a Strategic Plan for Albany Public Schools. Included in that plan, approved by the board in 1990, is a recommendation that the tracking system at every level in Albany schools be replaced or modified.

ACE's early information-gathering efforts that led to this recommendation raised key questions pertaining to district-wide grouping practices. In a letter to the superintendent, ACE began its research by asking for data on students placed in the district's "academically talented" classrooms, background on procedures used for selecting students for these classes, and information about curriculum differences between that program and "regular" classrooms. After a long waiting period, district staff responded with information that enabled ACE to clarify district tracking policies for parents.

With the district's tracking policies finally available in writing, ACE moved forward to make placement policies more widely known through public forums and

school-board meetings. But ACE members also wanted to put out the message that alternatives to tracking could improve schooling across the board and that all children could benefit from curriculum and instruction currently offered to only the most able students. Therefore, during the

## Educators who support change may have no stronger allies than parents and citizens knowledgeable about the extent and harm of tracking.

school year 1990-91, ACE joined with the Urban League of the Albany Area, the Albany NAACP, and the City School District of Albany itself to sponsor a Saturday conference "to promote a long-term, broad-based effort to enrich, diversify, and strengthen education in Albany."

Despite cold winter weather, approximately 200 people joined ACE and its partners at the all-day conference. The theme, "Tapping Every Talent: Expanding Achievement Opportunities for All Students," conveyed the belief that education must and could be improved in heterogeneous settings. Reinforcing the theme that *all* students have gifts and talents

to be developed, workshops highlighted research on tracking, effective instructional strategies, and successful programs. In addition, a local attorney offered a workshop called "Advocating for Your Child in a Tracked System," which focused on the kinds of decisions used to place children in academic tracks and techniques for obtaining standardized test scores. With the energy level still high at the end of the day, participants convened in the school cafeteria to collect recommendations from each workshop. Several participants advocated specific programs. Others, with heightened awareness of the variety of alternatives available, expressed a sense of urgency about pressing for more general tracking reforms.

ACE has begun to see some results from these efforts. In 1991, the district moved to reduce the number of tracks from four to three and adopted a transitional math curriculum to replace the practice of introducing algebra to a selected group of "high" students in seventh grade. While public debate continued at Albany School Board meetings, the School Department formed several committees including parents, teachers, and administrators to research alternative approaches. After several months of meetings and investigation, including field trips to other communities, committee members became excited about "Project Opportunity"—a promising model that they observed in Ithaca, New York, which encompassed both curriculum enrichment in heterogeneous classes and built-in opportunities for strengthening teachers' skills. Although change will begin in the elementary grades, parents will not

stop there. As Joan Ekengren, a parent member of ACE, reports, "We just have to keep persevering and hammering away at the issue, it seems. We hope that people will realize we're not going to drop this. It's too important!" □

Anne Wheelock is an educational writer and consultant. The above is condensed from Anne Wheelock's book, *Crossing the Tracks* (NY: New Press, 1992).

## Is Your Child Tracked?

You may not immediately recognize the practices described on p. 14 or your school system may claim that it does not use tracking. However, if you answer "no" to any of the questions below, you may want to talk with other parents about your concerns and investigate further.

1. Do most classes have a racial and ethnic mix similar to the school as a whole? For instance, if the school is 2/3s black and 1/3 white, are most of the classes the same or are some 90% black and others 90% white?

2. Do most classes have roughly equal numbers of boys and girls?

3. Do students in most classes have backgrounds similar to those found in the school as a whole? For example, do there seem to be classes where most students' parents are professionals and others where most students come from poor or working-class families?

4. Can you see that your children are progressing? Grades may not be the best indicator; notice whether children are reading and writing more or better, moving beyond basic math skills, expressing more complicated ideas, taking on more responsibility, developing skills or talents, and so on.

5. Do your children's teachers seem to know your children's weaknesses and strengths and have a plan for addressing them?

6. When you attend school programs or extra-curricular activities, do the participating students seem to reflect the racial, ethnic, and class mix found in the school as a whole?

7. If your school or school system has special programs or schools, do the students who are part of them seem to reflect the mix found in the school or system as a whole?

8. What kinds of homework do your children have? Ask questions if they:

- Have no homework.
- Get many work sheet drills.
- Are reading and answering questions on paragraphs instead of whole stories and books.

- Have lots of multiple choice questions rather than thoughtful writing assignments.

9. Is your child enrolled in algebra by the 9th grade? This is an important "gateway" course. Students who do not have access to algebra by grade 9 will have trouble fitting in math courses they need for college, trades, and many jobs.

10. Is your child in a class that focuses primarily on basic skills to pass a "competency test" or similar test? If such classes substitute for regular coursework in English, mathematics, reading or other areas, your child is not getting access to important knowledge and skills. □

Adapted from an article by the National Coalition of Education Activists, For information or help in proposing tracking changes in your schools, contact NCEA.



Credit: Joel Pett/Phi Delta Kappan

## NCEA Links Parents, Teachers

The National Coalition of Education Activists is a multiracial organization of parents, teachers, union and community activists working to promote equity and fundamental education reform in local school districts throughout the United States.

Founded six years ago, NCEA acts as a national network providing information and helping activists from around the country stay in touch. Based on a grass-roots philosophy that the communities in which schools are located must be mobilized for change, NCEA has a special focus on helping parents and teachers work together for change.

Two NCEA events this summer may be of special interest to parents.

- The NCEA and the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS) will co-

sponsor an institute for parents July 25-29, 1993, in Washington, D.C., immediately prior to NCEA's annual conference (see below). Parent activists from around the country will have a chance to meet their peers, talk about their work, and improve their skills.

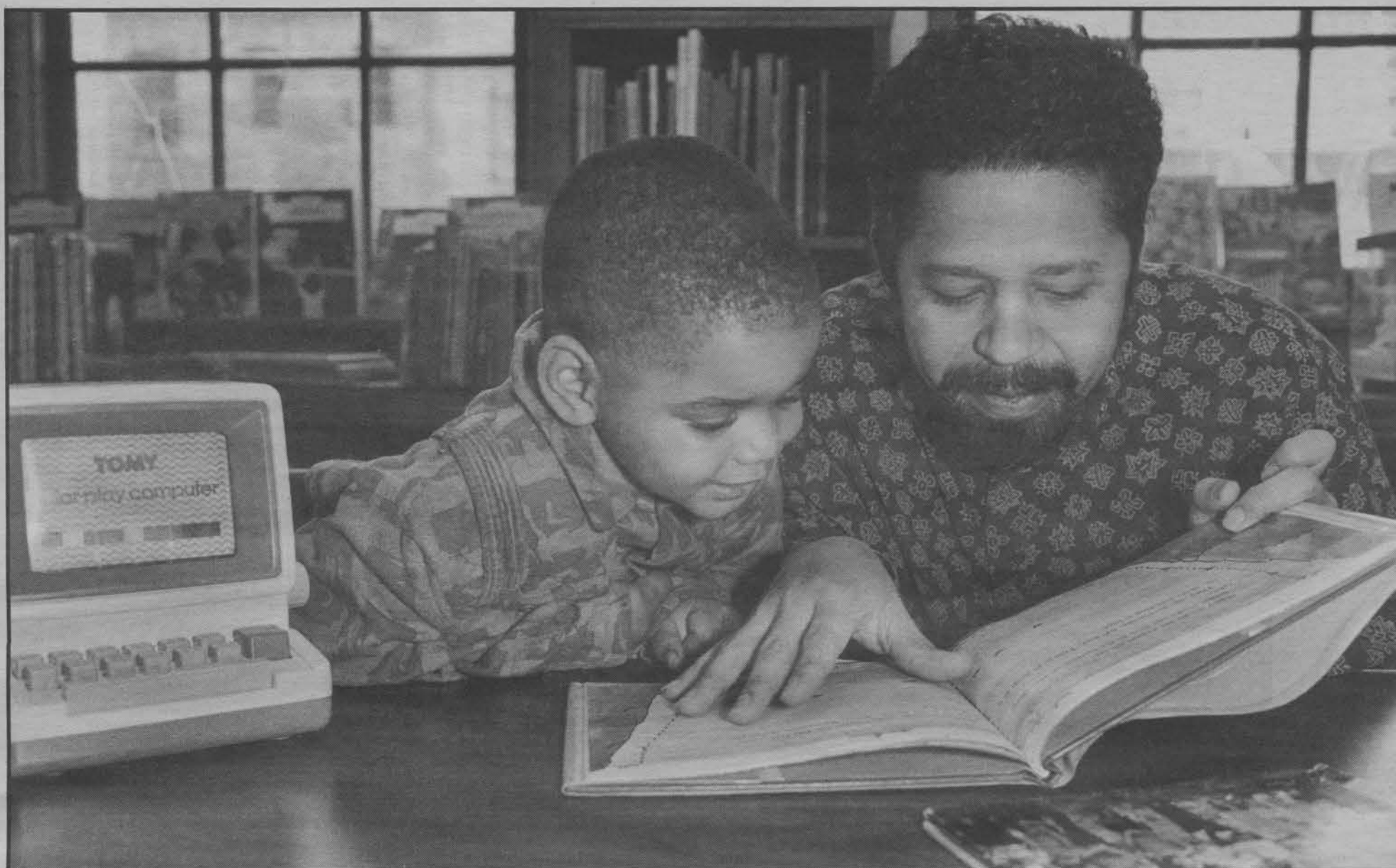
Topics to be covered will include: parents' vision of good schooling, getting the facts about your children's schools, parent empowerment vs. parent involvement, defining and addressing problems, and getting other parents involved.

Registration fees are based on family income.

- The Sixth Annual Conference of the National Coalition of Education Activists will be held in Washington, D.C., Thursday, July 29 through Sunday, Aug. 1. The conference is titled "Building Bridges" and

will focus on parent-teacher relationships, creating anti-racist schools, education reform under the Clinton Administration, and new ideas in teaching. Possible workshops include: "Beyond Bake Sales: Remaking the Relationship Between Parents and Schools," "White Teachers/Students of Color," "Right-Wing Activism and Education," and "Teachers and Parents Together in the Classroom."

A special effort is being made to balance teacher and parent representation at the conference by giving preference in registration to activists who sign up as part of a parent-teacher partnership. Fees are based on family income. For more information, call NCEA at 914-658-8115 or write P.O. Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472.



Credit: Rick Reinhard

The cultural diversity of students in America's schools demands a curriculum that represents all.

# Reconstructing Schools as Multicultural Democracies

By Theresa Perry  
and James W. Fraser

From the beginning of this nation's history the link between democracy and education has been central to discussions of schooling. While some Americans, for many different reasons, have historically supported public schooling, others have opposed or undermined it. Yet others—from slaves who taught each other to read and write and as freed men and women established "native" schools, to nineteenth-century Roman Catholics who founded parochial schools—have sought alternative means of education. Despite differences, however, these proponents of various options all have linked education to the building of differing visions of democracy.

Today this nation's people are more diverse than ever. If there is to be democracy in the twenty-first century, it must be a multiracial/multicultural democracy. Unless democracy is conceptualized such that all groups are included, democracy loses its meaning. And if a democracy which includes all of America's people is to be fostered in this nation's educational system, then multicultural education must be at the heart, and not on the margins, of all discussions about education. Multicultural education is not a matter of simply adding new material to the school curriculum, but of fundamentally re-visioning the relationship of schooling to a democratic society. Indeed, we believe multicultural education is the central issue in education in the decades ahead.

The debate over multiculturalism is not, at its core, about Europe and its relevance for America. It is not even about universal values and whether America can appeal to them any more. The debate is about the United States of America, and what its definitive values and identity will be in the next century.<sup>1</sup>

In this nation, individuals and groups are in the midst of a national debate, an open conversation, not always carefully orchestrated or well-reasoned. This conversation is not confined to a particular place, or restricted in participation. It is occurring on urban street corners, in the feature articles and on the editorial pages of our daily newspapers, in school board meetings and faculty curriculum discussions, and, also, at some of our most prestigious universities.<sup>2</sup> A

struggle is occurring over appropriate mythologies and narratives, about what this country can and will become.

The current "political correctness" debate is a small part of this larger conversation, this broad political struggle to redefine American life and culture.<sup>3</sup> The "political correctness" debate has been socially and politically constructed

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**We believe multicultural education is the central issue in education in the decades ahead.**

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by neo-conservatives who understand that the political activity of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and changing demographics have created the conditions for a new definition of the democracy, one that is anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic.

## Redefining America

In the midst of this broad-based struggle over the nature and shape of our social and cultural institutions, the role of advocates for multicultural education is to re-vision America, to redefine American life and culture, and to develop metaphors, narratives, practices, and social and power relations consonant with this new definition. The question that must take center stage is, "Can we imagine and build a nation, as well as social, cultural, and educational institutions, predicated on a diversity of racial and ethnic identities?" We assume that it is not only possible, but also very desirable, to build such a nation, and that the outcome of the struggle will be a richer curriculum, more equitable and humane schools, and a more worthy society for all of the nation's peoples. It is also predicated on the belief that our educational institutions can and should be places where we both struggle for and prefigure this new vision of society.

It is not simply the demographic shifts, but the contradictions they raise, that have, in part, precipitated America's struggle for redefinition. Demographic shifts are forcing us to reexamine our definition of social and cultural

institutions as white mainstream. The story of this country, its mythology as an open, democratic society, is daily experienced as unbelievable in our city schools where students of color sometimes constitute up to 80 percent of the student population of a district and 90 to 100 percent of many individual classrooms, and where their lives, cultures, and traditions are at best marginalized and at worst ignored or denigrated.

Whether these thoughts are consciously articulated or left simmering, these children want to know why all or most of the people in charge of their schools don't look, talk, walk, or move like they do. They want to know why the teachers don't come from their communities, and why the curriculum provides them little clue about themselves and their history. Sometimes the contradictions prove too much, even for the young, prompting a Black first-grade girl in a Milwaukee city school to ask her White student teacher, "Why are all the student teachers they send us White?"

Perhaps more telling is a conversation between a student and a teacher in a first-grade classroom where the teacher was exploring an ill-conceived, developmentally inappropriate notion of multicultural education. The teacher asked her first-grade students: "Why should children of different races work together?" When silence followed this query, the teacher began prodding the students. She wanted an answer. When the answer was not forthcoming, she announced, "Because all children are the same, because color doesn't matter."

A little Black boy in the back of the room raised his hand and said, "What about Rodney King?" He paused and continued, "The police beat him because he was Black." It is important to note that this incident occurred two months before the LA riots. As students get older the questions, and the failure of schools to provide meaningful answers, turn into a rage that can barely be contained.

Of course, the questions, and the rage, are not new. Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Europe were met by schools and teachers who held little respect for their religions or their cultures. Chinese immigrants in California a hundred years ago were met with outright hostility in the schools while generations of Latinos in the Southwest have been met with contempt. Every generation of African American students who attended White schools has met cultural barriers.

## Resistance Throughout History

Throughout history there have been examples of resistance to the cultural imperialism of schools. In 1859, hundreds of Catholic students at Boston's Eliot School refused to recite the Protestant versions of the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments after one of them, Thomas Wall, insisted, "I wasn't again going to repeat those damned Yankee prayers."<sup>4</sup> While African-Americans in segregated schools struggled for access to a liberal arts curriculum, African-American autobiographies record numerous instances where Black teachers attempted to accord African-American culture and traditions equal stature with the mainstream culture. The Negro National Anthem was often sung along with the National Anthem, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes were studied along with Shakespeare. As M. Carl Holman notes, "Mr. Watts, Miss Armstrong, Mr. Blanton and Miss Lewis taught us from the 'lilywhite' textbooks prescribed by the St. Louis school system, but they also mounted on their bulletin boards the works and pictures of Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer."<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, challenging the status quo is not new in the nation's schools. What is different today is the attitude with which these challenges are raised, these contradictions experienced. While previous generations of the disempowered and historically oppressed wanted their cultures to be respected and in such cases as that of African Americans and Polish Catholics, for their cultures to be incorporated in segregated and Catholic schools, respectively, they did not call for a redefinition of the ruling culture. This generation has a rage, born of a sense of unrealized possibilities, not seen before.

The perennial question for the children of color in urban schools in this country is whether the rhetoric of democracy makes sense if schools are organized around the principle of White political and cultural hegemony. For all who believe in an open democratic society, the growing diversity of the citizens of this nation gives a new urgency to the question of whether it is possible at the same time to maintain and promote democratic ideals and schools which are organized as hegemonic institutions. It is not hard to imagine the consequences for a nation when the story it tells about itself, its origins and identity, becomes unbelievable or bankrupt for a significant portion of the population.

It is important to remember that the United States has never been a White nation, although White institutions and cultural norms have certainly held sway throughout most of the nation's history. Over the last three hundred years, the percentages of Whites, African-Americans, Native-Americans, and Latinos have shifted radically. A hundred and fifty years ago, several of the southern states had Black majorities, while large areas of the Southwest were overwhelmingly Latino and the majority population of some future states was still Native-American. It was only with the massive immigration from Europe in the last century, led by immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, paralleled by the virtual genocide of the Native Americans, that the huge White majorities came to be seen in the demography of the United States. But this demography is now changing again.

In Los Angeles there has been a growing realization that the city is quickly approaching the status of a majority Latino city, the same majority which had been dominant there when California was admitted to the Union in 1850. The changes in Los Angeles are symbolic of changes occurring to a greater or lesser degree throughout the nation. Through a combination of new levels of immigration, especially from Central and South America and Southeast Asia, and of differential birthrates among Whites and people of color, the non-White population of the country is mushrooming.<sup>6</sup>

## The Impact of the Civil Rights Movement

Had the current demographic shifts occurred before the Civil Rights movement, they would not have had the same impact. Though poverty, political disenfranchisement, repression and racism continue to characterize the lives of the historically oppressed peoples, the Civil Rights movement and the resultant legislation changed the operative definition of equal opportunity. The Civil Rights movement dramatically altered patterns of access as well as the nation's consciousness of what were democratic rights—and whose rights they were anyway. All of us— notable and ordinary people who participated in the Civil Rights movement—pushed the boundaries of democracy further outward, prompting its redefinition. Changing demographics, the possibility that our social and cultural institutions could be open, the belief that they should be, and the greater numbers of people of color participating in these institutions, have created the conditions for us to contest the definition of our social and cultural institutions as White mainstream.

## The debate over multiculturalism is, at its core, a debate about the United States of America and what its definitive values and identity will be in the next century.

### The Historical Struggle for Inclusion

The current generation is not the first to grapple with questions of how to build the good society and the role of schools in that process. As the late Lawrence Cremin never tired of noting, it was Aristotle in the *Politics* who insisted that "it is impossible to talk about education apart from some conception of the good life." Cremin went on to say that "people will inevitably differ in their conceptions of the good life, and hence they will inevitably disagree on matters of education; therefore the discussion of education falls squarely within the domain of politics."<sup>7</sup> If participation in a democratic society is essential to the good life, then it follows that education must foster democracy, but it also follows that just as people disagree about the nature of democracy, they will disagree about education.

Two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson gave early voice to the link between education and democracy, even as he failed to include either the slaves that he and the others held or White women as participants in that democracy. Notwithstanding, in the midst of the American Revolution, Jefferson proposed a new system of public schools for Virginia, reminding the Virginia legislators:

"That experience hath shown, that even under the best forms of government those trusted with power have in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large."<sup>8</sup>

The contradiction of Jefferson, the slave owner, giving voice to the proposition of education for a democratic society has not been lost on subsequent generations. But at the same time the voice itself has remained powerful. As Langston Hughes knew:

*His name was Jefferson. There were slaves then,  
But in their hearts the slaves believed him, too,  
And silently took for granted  
That what he said was also meant for them.<sup>9</sup>*

As the historian James Anderson has noted, the history of education in this country is a story of two competing and contradictory traditions—education for full citizenship and education for second-class citizenship. Extending back to slavery, against the backdrop of laws that made it a crime for slaves to learn to read and write, historians have documented the slaves' tenacious pursuit of literacy, sometimes at risk of death.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, given this experience of literacy, slaves emerged from slavery with not only an insatiable desire to learn to read and write, but also with the belief that literacy was a negation of the status of slave and was, in fact, a means to full citizenship.

Out of an educational tradition that saw the emancipatory possibilities of schooling, from slavery to the present, African Americans have conceptualized school as a context for the social reconstruction of society and engaged in activities aimed at subverting the oppressive intent of much of mainstream schooling. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, W.E.B. DuBois, Anna Julia Cooper, and other African American educators, in opposition to the philosophy of northern industrialist/philanthropists, engaged in counter-hegemonic activities and argued that African-Americans should have access to the broadest possible education, that they should be educated for first- and not second-class citizenship.

Although it is important to know that we are heirs to a tradition that has grasped the emancipatory possibilities of schooling, it is equally important to remember that this legacy extends to the present. Indeed, many of us have witnessed and participated in educational struggles predicated on the belief that school is a legitimate place to struggle for freedom and the expansion of the democracy.

### Reconceptualized Schools

We are taking the risk of being dreamers in raising these issues. We believe that our goal as educators is to follow W.E.B. DuBois in his plea for education that would produce "young women and men of devotion to lift again the banner of humanity and to walk toward a civilization which will be free and intelligent, which will be healthy and unafraid."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, until we ourselves are unafraid of being branded romantics for using such language, the essential vision

which will guide all of our work will remain unattainable.

To say that we need to hold this utopian vision is not, however, to say that its implementation will be easy. It won't. There is a long, hard struggle involved in beginning to build a new world, and there will be opposition.

Diversity can lead to clashes. When we bring people together in school from different races and cultures and from differing positions of power and privilege, it is inevitable that there will be misunderstanding, fear, tense moments. That is part of the process of learning about and from each other. A homogeneous school may be quieter and simpler, but it will not help us in the process of building a better society.

Even more important, if the youth we educate view and experience our democracy as including all of the people, they will inevitably ask all sorts of questions about social and political life outside of the school:

—about the distribution of goods and services in this society;

—about racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia;

—about the concrete manifestation of rights and privileges in the democracy.

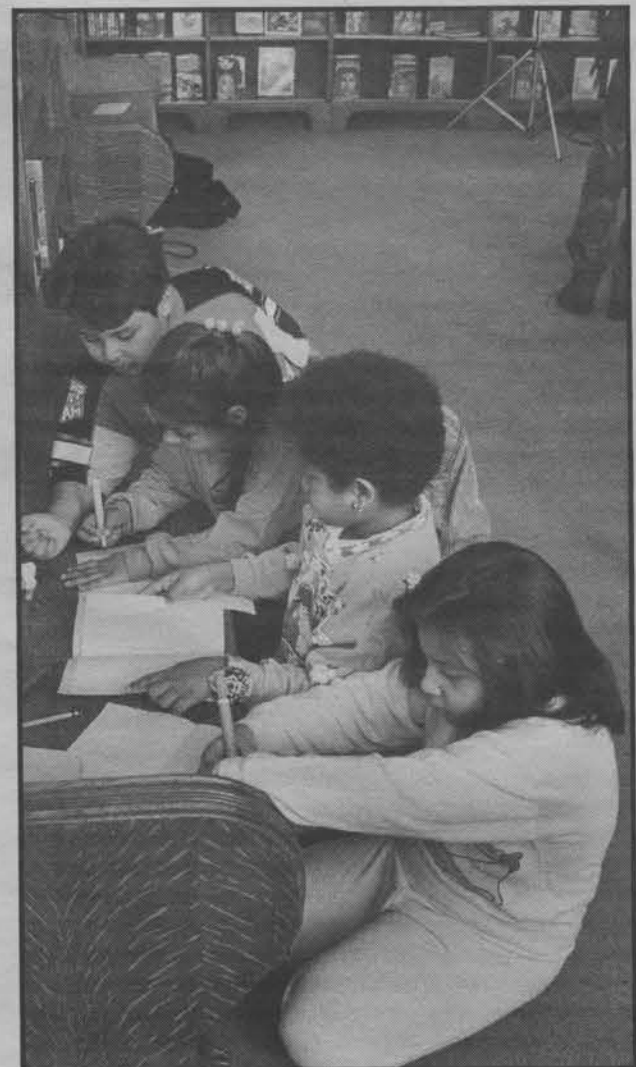
(Questioning by children and youth makes people nervous). Thirty years ago, James Baldwin, in a talk to teachers, said:

"The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for him or herself, to make his or her own decisions, to say this is black or this is white, to decide whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then to learn to live with those questions, is the way a person achieves identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society."<sup>12</sup>

If educators begin to truly embrace the multicultural future and use that embrace to build a new multicultural, democratic present, there are going to be students asking all sorts of embarrassing, uncomfortable questions of the society. And while people of goodwill will welcome these questions, even when they get uncomfortable, the society we live in today does not welcome such questions. All societies are uncomfortable with dissent, and as American society moved from the 1980s into the 1990s, it grew much more uncomfortable. The conservative reaction in this society is alive and well, and it must be reckoned with.

An education for a new public culture of difference<sup>13</sup> must be one which leads students and educators to reject reaction in any form, to demand—for teachers and for students—the alert, critical, engaged consciousness that can optimally come from thinking minds in dialogue with—and ultimately in community with—each other. It is only when

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Credit: Rick Reinhard

Schools must teach diverse groups of children to work together.

## Answers to Common Questions

# The School Choice Debate

Following are answers to some of the most common questions about school "choice." The article is based on discussion among members of the Rethinking Schools editorial board and originally appeared in the special edition of *Rethinking Schools* called *False Choices: How Private School Vouchers Threaten our Children's Future*.

### When people talk about school "choice" what do they mean?

At this point, people generally are talking about voucher plans that funnel public dollars into non-public schools, either through direct payments or tax credits. At issue is the attempt to siphon dollars away from public schools and privatize education.

Interestingly, the word "choice" wasn't used in connection with schools until the controversy over desegregation. Throughout the South, so-called Freedom of Choice plans limited desegregation by putting the burden on African-American students to provide transportation for themselves, to transfer to schools that were majority white, to figure out when to apply, and so forth. In essence, these public school "choice" plans were outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1968.

In recent years, private school "choice" has become explicitly linked to an assault on schools as public institutions. Some advocates of private "choice," like Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, have called for scrapping the entire public school system.

### What about plans that allow parents to choose among public schools?

A lot depends on the program. If protections aren't built in, public school "choice" has some of the same problems as private school "choice." Some plans, for example, set up specialty or "magnet" schools that become havens for middle-class students. These schools often get more resources, or have entrance criteria, or attract parents who know how to work the system.

It's important to look at what parents really want in a school. Above all, they want a quality school with a safe environment that encourages learning. Magnet or specialty schools tend to offer such an environment. They also show that public schools can work if they are given sufficient resources and are properly structured.

At the same time, children learn in different ways and school communities can be built around a certain philosophy or emphasis—such as schools that emphasize music, or math, or a Montessori or whole language teaching philosophy.

Even under a well-structured public school plan, however, "choice" is not a panacea. It must be part of a broader reform strategy that includes such changes as better teacher training, a multicultural, anti-racist curriculum, and more resources. The key is ensuring standards and equity for all schools and all children.

### Because public schools are a monopoly, they don't have to worry about competition. Wouldn't "choice" force public schools to be more innovative?

The notion that competition will engender quality ignores that there are deep race and class divisions in society. The reality is, there are different markets for different people based on how much money they have.

Even though Cadillac and Mercedes Benz dealers may compete against each other, they don't compete with Ford Festiva or Yugo dealers. The quality of the car you buy depends on how much money you have, not on the inherent benefits of

competition. You also see any number of low quality products that stay on the market — from plastic tennis shoes to pre-fab, cardboard homes — because they are all that some people can afford.

It's also important to remember that competition in business depends heavily on advertising and cutting costs. Do we really want our schools to follow the lead of business and cut costs to the bone, perhaps by getting rid of "extras" such as libraries or music and art rooms? Or mimic corporate advertising, by spending precious dollars on public relations efforts?

Most important, talking about public schools as a monopoly misses the point. The reason we have public schools is because education is a public responsibility that is essential to building a democratic society. People need to develop skills and common democratic values in order to participate reasonably and critically in civic life. Our schools are forging the future of our democracy, not just the future of individual doctors and scientists.

### Unions are some of the strongest opponents of private school "choice," and they are opposed because they fear losing their power and membership. Isn't the union position self-serving?

It's easy for proponents of "choice" to continually claim that teachers and unions are only interested in themselves. It's more difficult to answer their criticisms.

Trade unions do have the right to oppose attempts to turn services over to non-union workers. And given the attacks on unions in recent years, both by the government and by businesses, teacher unions have legitimate fears.

In Milwaukee, for example, the teachers in the community-based and religious schools are paid a lot less and have fewer benefits than public school teachers. If you had a significant expansion of voucher schools, you would see a lot more small, non-union shops. You would see less well-trained teachers and there would be a higher turnover. And that would influence the quality of education.

Undoubtedly, some union officials and teachers are motivated by self-interest. And it is incumbent upon progressive teachers to work within their unions and to push them beyond narrow trade union concerns.

But many teachers honestly question whether the marketplace will magically lead to quality. Among them are educators who continuously work passionately to improve schools and advance the opportunities of their students. They worry what will happen when the seats are filled up in the private schools and there are still millions of children left to attend a public school system depleted of resources.

### Don't parents have a right to choose a school that they feel coincides with their value system?

Parents have the right to choose any school they want — but they don't have the right to expect that the taxpayer will necessarily pay for that school.

The more important issue is that parents — and taxpayers — have not only the right but the responsibility to become involved in the public schools. And this needs to take place in the broader context of fighting for a better education for all kids. Are we going to continue the individualistic self-centeredness of the 1980s and allow a few parents to make individual choices with little regard for the public good? Or are we going to fight collectively, as parents and taxpayers, for a better educational system for all?

We must balance the rights of parents against the rights of society as a whole. Parental rights, for example, do not mean that schools with discriminatory policies should receive public funds. Or that public money should go to religious schools.

### Many religious schools have a strong track record on educating kids. What is so bad about opening up the voucher program to religious schools?

The most fundamental reason is that our Constitution, for very good reasons, mandates a separation between church and state. If you're a Christian, it's easy to forget that there are many other faiths in this country.

The core issue is that individuals would be paying tax money to support schools with religious values that might be antagonistic to their own religious values. Religion is a profoundly private matter and should remain that way.

### Why has the idea of private school

### "choice" become so popular in recent years?

First, there is legitimate dissatisfaction with the failures of the public schools. In urban areas, in particular, far too many schools are failing the needs of our children.

Second, there has been a conservative counterrevolution against public services generally. The solution to society's problems is posed in terms of the marketplace, and privatization plans are cropping up all over the place. On an individual level, this counter-revolution has encouraged people to look out for themselves with little regard for others.

Third, we have to consider whether there is a relationship between the government's willingness to abandon urban schools and the fact that urban schools are increasingly populated by African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans.

Fourth, it's important to look at how businesses and wealthier individuals can directly profit from privatizing education. Since most voucher plans pay far less than the per pupil cost of schools, taxes might decrease in some districts. At the same time, middle-class parents who are already sending their children to private schools will get government aid to help pay the tuition. Finally, some businesses hope to make money by setting up private schools or getting contracts for different educational services. Schools are one place where businesses aren't making as much money as they might want.

### Doesn't private school "choice" allow lower-income families to send their kids to private schools — and therefore isn't it a move toward more equality?

In the long run, abandoning public education will only increase inequalities in education. A select few low-income families might benefit from voucher plans, but most poor people would still go to public schools — and these schools would have fewer resources because taxpayers' money would be going into private schools.

If voucher supporters really wanted to promote equity, then they would give \$10,000 to each child to attend the school of their choice. And they would force private schools to accept all students who apply, based on a lottery system. But there's no "choice" plan anywhere in the country that



Parents and teachers must work together to promote investment in public schools.



# Clinton's Choice for Chelsea

By Robert Lowe

Conservatives who support vouchers have read hypocrisy into President Clinton's decision to send daughter Chelsea to an expensive private school. In contrast, many liberals who oppose vouchers have been quick to affirm the right of the President to choose the school that will best serve his daughter.

## A Rethinking Schools Analysis

Conservatives in this case make the more consistent argument, even though their claims for vouchers are ultimately false. Put briefly, they maintain that the President's choice of a private school demonstrates that he finds the public schools of Washington, D.C., unworthy of his child. Yet in opposing vouchers he is denying low-income parents the right to exercise the choice of attending a private school. In other words, public schools aren't good enough for the President's child, but they'll have to do for poor people's children. Conservatives are right that this hardly seems fair. Their own solution, however, would scarcely be fair either.

A voucher system would indeed permit all children to attend private schools and perhaps require it in urban areas by destroying the financial base for public schools. Yet the dollar value of all recent voucher initiatives, as well that of the Milwaukee Parent Choice Program, is pegged too low for the children of the poor to attend well-endowed private schools. A voucher in Milwaukee, for instance, is worth only about one-quarter of the tuition of the school Chelsea

attends. Those Milwaukee private schools that accept vouchers as full tuition may have dedicated faculty and staff, but their inadequate revenue translates into a high rate of administrative and staff turnover as well as limited resources for children. It is not surprising that University of Wisconsin professor John Witte's studies of the first two years of the Milwaukee Choice Program have not found measurable gains in students' academic performance, but have found that a high percentage of students leave the program each year (46.5% left during the first year or did not return the following September; the comparable figure for the second year was 35%). At bottom, despite the focus on vouchers for low-income students in Milwaukee, most voucher proponents are really interested in subsidizing middle class parents' efforts to attend private schools.

## The choice of private education is an act of individual freedom that creates no natural identification with the destiny of public education.

You also need to look at the amount of money that's spent on a child not only in school, but in the family. You would find that in those suburban communities where more money is spent on public education, there is generally more money spent on the camps, or private tutors, or sports programs. One reason those kids are succeeding is that there are a lot more resources spent on them.

If we were a truly democratic society, we would have a financial affirmative action program for poor kids. In other words, we would spend more money on their schools, relative to the amount spent on suburban schools. Our overriding concern must be providing a quality education to all children. School "choice," on the other hand, fosters more privileges for the already privileged. □

offers adequate money or safeguards against discrimination.

Bureaucracy acts like a sledgehammer and beats the life out of schools. Wouldn't "choice" help break this bureaucracy?

We must reduce bureaucracy in our schools, there's no doubt about it. Developments toward site-based management and grassroots control of schools are a healthy step in that direction. But we can't make bureaucracy into a scapegoat for all our problems. There are good schools within large, bureaucratic school systems, and there are bad private schools that are free of bureaucratic overights.

People also forget that there are enormous bureaucratic structures in the Church, which runs many schools, is highly bureaucratic. All complicated organizations require a certain amount of bureaucracy. Some bureaucratic regulations are also hard-won protections helping to guarantee equity around bilingual education, affirmative action, and education for the physically challenged. It would be a step backward if such regulations were thrown out or ignored.

If you're opposed to private school "choice," what's your alternative vision for improving the schools?

There's no one simple answer, but one can outline the elements of meaningful reform. We must restructure our schools so parents and teachers have more say. We must overhaul our curriculum to promote critical thinking and a multicultural, anti-racist perspective. We must demand racial and gender equity. We must eliminate tracking. We must change our testing and assessment so we assess thinking and learning, not just how well one answers multiple choice questions out of context. We must improve the quality of teacher training and have smaller class sizes. On a state level we should equalize funding for school districts. On a federal level, we need to substantially increase our funding for education. The bottom line is our schools need more resources.

Many of these reforms will cost a lot of money. Schools haven't shown they can use the money they already have. How can we be sure we're not throwing good money after bad?

The issue of money needs to be put in perspective. Most important, one needs to look at the amount of dollars being put into urban public schools versus suburban schools. And you will see vast inequities. In Wisconsin, for example, the suburban school district of Nicolet budgets \$12,000 per year per student, while the Milwaukee public schools budget \$6,600 per student annually.

## The personal decision to choose a private school for one's child tends to have social implications.

consequences are ruinous for children attending public schools?

The choice of private education is an act of individual freedom that creates no natural identification with the destiny of public education. In fact, it tends to identify self-interest with an antagonistic stance toward public school support. This in part accounts for the defeat of the Milwaukee referendum, and the social consequences of that defeat for the children without kindergartens, teachers with too many students, and classrooms in catheters and closets.

Of course it is true that some parents whose children attend private schools do willingly tax themselves for public schools and even labor voluntarily for public school improvement. It is also true that some children cannot prosper in public schools, and parents who can afford private schools might be going to sacrifice their rights to make a social statement. Given the prevalence of racism in schools, for instance, it makes sense when parents of color seek out an environment—public or private—that respects their children. Nonetheless, when people choose private education—especially in its costlier forms—the connection between their children's interests and the interests of public school children are easily severed. It can become hard for them to see that sacrificing for other people's children can benefit their own.

Private choices have public consequences. The exercise of individual freedom has social effects. If we do not employ our freedom to struggle for schools that release the intellectual and ethical capacities of all the children—making them genuine stakeholders in society—we impoverish democracy and ultimately imperil our freedom as well. □

Robert Lowe is an editor of Rethinking Schools who teaches at National Louis University.

## False Choices

### Why School Vouchers Threaten Our Children's Future

"False Choices is a terrific package of ammunition in the fight to ward off private vouchers and the right-wing 'choice' agenda." Questions and Answers about School Choice by the editors of Rethinking Schools is particularly important.

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# Is Melodeon to Organist as Crescendo is to Pianist? Why Standardized Tests Are Bad

By Terry Meier

No phenomenon poses a greater threat to educational equity, and ultimately to the quality of education in this country, than the escalating use of standardized achievement tests.

Fueled by public concern that schools are less rigorous than they used to be, standardized tests are increasingly prescribed as the "get tough" medicine needed to return excellence to our classrooms. Across the country, standardized tests are now routinely used to determine how and when students advance, from first grade through graduate school.

Standardized tests, which are notorious for their discriminatory effect on students of color, clearly threaten whatever small measures of educational equity have been won in recent decades. What is less obvious is that standardized tests threaten the educational experience of all children. The threat is so great, in fact, that standardized testing should be abolished.

It is estimated that a student will take more than 30 standardized tests by the time he or she graduates from high school. Because standardized tests are a constant reality in students' lives, it is essential that parents understand the biases and limitations of such tests. Yet, as in so many other educational areas, parents are often excluded from the debate because they are deemed unable to understand the issue's complexity.

Tests are called "standardized" when the same test is given under similar conditions to large groups of students, whether district-wide, statewide, or nationwide. Most standardized tests ask multiple-choice questions and are corrected by a computer which recognizes only one "right" answer.

Decades of research have documented the biases in standardized tests, with students of color bearing the brunt of that discrimination. Across age groups, standardized tests discriminate against low-

**Standardized tests threaten the educational experience of all children. The threat is so great that all standardized tests should be abolished.**

income students and students of color. While girls tend to do better on standardized tests at an early age, by high school and college their scores are on average below those of males, according to FairTest, a national group based in Cambridge, Mass., that lobbies against the growing use of standardized tests.

Advocates of testing argue that standardized achievement tests do not create inequities within schools, they merely reflect pre-existing inequities. According to this argument, children of color and low-income students tend to perform less well on standardized tests because they receive an inferior education.

Two false assumptions support this view. One is that standardized tests are a valid measure of excellence. The second is that standardized tests can be used to improve education, especially for low-income students and students of color.

## No Real Connection to Excellence

Standardized achievement tests tend to focus on mechanical, lower-order skills and to reward students' rapid recognition of factual information. For example,

standardized reading tests for young children stress phonics and the recognition of individual words. Research on learning to read, however, has shown the importance of integrating oral language, writing, reading, and spelling in a meaningful context that emphasizes children understanding what they read, not merely sounding out words. Similarly, research on teaching math stresses the importance of young children learning concepts through first-hand experience, while achievement tests for young children define math as knowing one's numbers.

Thus teachers face the dilemma of providing instruction that they know fosters a student's understanding, versus drilling students in isolated skills and facts that will help them do well on standardized tests.

It's not that students don't need to work on isolated skills sometimes, especially when they're first learning to read and write. But such work is only a means to the larger end of applying those skills in a meaningful context. Removed from context as they are on standardized tests, such skills are meaningless. Held up as a measure of achievement, they become mistaken for what is most important instead of what is ultimately trivial.

There is little, if any, connection between quality instruction and standardized test performance. Consider, for example, a successful high school English class in which students learn to write thoughtful, original essays in clear, concise language about topics they genuinely care about and that draw on their experiences. Assume that the teacher taught students to edit their work so that grammatical errors were rare.

Yet what does the American College Testing (ACT) Program test? Whether a student knows if the word "pioneered" is preferable to "started up by," or if "prove to be" is preferable to "come to be," or if "reach my destination" is preferable to "get there."

On one recent ACT test — which along with the SAT is a key determinant of who attends college — students were asked whether the italicized selection in "my thoughts were *irresistibly sucked* toward the moment when..." should be replaced by *pulled helplessly, uncontrollably drawn, or propelled mercilessly*. (These examples are taken from a study by researcher Mary Hoover.)

How could anyone argue that such questions test effective writing skills or analytical thinking? In fact, one could well argue that a student who preferred "started up by" to "pioneered" might be a better writer than the student who chose the "correct" answer because she chose the clearest, most easily understood words to communicate her ideas.

The point is that the choice is stylistic, dependent upon what one is trying to say and to whom. Removed from real life, the choice is meaningless. It reveals nothing about a student's competence in reading and writing.

Consider another example, from a standardized reading achievement test where the child was asked to determine the "right" answer in the following selection:

Father said: Once there was a land where boys and girls never grew up. They were always growing. What was Father telling?

The truth \_\_\_ A lie \_\_\_ A story \_\_\_

Any of these could be the "right" answer. If the father were speaking metaphorically, referring to mental and not physical growth, he could be telling the truth. It could also be a lie, for in blackspeech the word "lie" can also mean a joke or a story. And, of course, its initial "once" signals the conventions of fiction/fairy tales. (Hoover, Politzer, and Taylor, 1987, p. 91)

Standardized tests also ignore the skills



Credit: Huck/Konopacki Labor Cartoons

and abilities needed to function in a complex, pluralistic society — such as the ability to work collectively in various social and cultural contexts, to adjust to change, to understand the perspectives of others, to persevere, to motivate, to solve problems in a real-life context, to lead, to value moral integrity and social commitment. As Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner points out, "there are hundreds and hundreds of ways to succeed, and many different abilities that will help you get there."

It is tragic that at the time when many developmental psychologists stress a broad and complex conception of intelligence and ability, and when one needs multiple talents to function effectively in the world, we have come to define excellence in our schools within the narrow parameters of what can be measured by standardized tests. When we use standardized tests to decide who gets to go to the "best" high school or college, we may actually be discriminating against those students with the greatest potential to contribute to society.

## Excluding Diversity

It is naive to assume that we can solve the problems confronting society without embracing the perspectives and diverse skills and abilities represented in our multicultural population. Yet the continued reliance on standardized testing perpetuates a narrow definition of excellence that excludes diversity.

Standardized achievement tests thus potentially sound the death knell of diversity in our schools. They silence a cross-cultural dialogue that has barely begun, not only in the field of education, but in every area of academic, professional and political life.

This article focuses on the overwhelmingly discriminatory effects of standardized tests on students of color. It is also well-documented that tests such as the SAT and the ACT discriminate against women and working-class students.

In every ethnic and racial group, females score much lower on the SAT than males. African-American and Latina women face a double jeopardy due to the test's racial and gender discrimination. On the 1988 SAT, for example, African-American women scored on average 724 points compared to an average of 965 for white males, according to FairTest. At the same time, white women score higher on average than male students of color, with the exception of Asian- and Pacific-American students.

Similarly, there is a direct relationship between family income and SAT scores. In 1988, students whose annual family income was more than \$70,000 scored an average

992, with figures declining for each income group to an average score of 781 for students with annual family income under \$10,000. Further, upper-income students are also more likely to afford the \$600 "coaching" courses that can raise student scores by as much as 100 points.

## Tests Won't Improve Education

It is inarguably true that students of color are often ill-served in our schools. But given that standardized tests bear little, if any, relationship to substantive learning, it makes no sense to assume that improving the educational experience of students of color will necessarily affect their test scores. What is clear is that in many schools, the opposite tends to occur. As teachers have come under increasing pressure to raise test scores, the quality of education the students receive has declined. In too many classrooms, test content dictates curriculum.

In some cases, abilities and skills not measured on achievement tests have been removed from the curriculum all together. According to FairTest, when Virginia's state minimum competency tests decided to include only the multiplication and division of fractions several years ago, some teachers in the state stopped teaching students how to add and subtract fractions. Similarly, Deborah Meier, a public school principal in Manhattan, reports that when one New York City test eliminated items on synonyms and antonyms, these were also eliminated from the curriculum.

In some states, matching curriculum with the content of standardized achievement tests has become a system-wide mandate. FairTest reports that school systems in at least 13 states have attempted to "align" their curriculum with standardized tests so that students do not spend hours studying materials upon which they will never be tested, regardless of the value or benefits which could be derived from that effort.

Pressure on teachers and administrators to standardize curriculum in order to raise test scores can be intense. One 1987 report by researcher John Weiss, for instance, found that in 1985 the superintendent of schools in St. Louis fired 60 teachers and principals because their students didn't improve their scores sufficiently on standardized multiple-choice tests.

## Tests as a Sorting System

Clearly, standardized tests neither measure excellence nor foster it in our schools. So why the emphasis on such tests?

The fundamental reason is that the tests provide a seemingly objective basis upon which to allocate limited educational resources — to decide who gets into the

Credit: Fair Test

	Males	Females	Difference
Asian/Pacific-American	956	903	-53
Black	756	724	-32
Mexican American	840	783	-57
Native American	852	805	-47
Puerto Rican	788	732	-56
White	965	907	-58

that they will be better prepared to take tests in school is really to ask that they surrender part of their cultural identity. Those who argue that it is possible to make standardized tests less discriminatory by removing their cultural bias seriously underestimate the enormity of their task. What is a "culture-fair" test in a multicultural society? And who could design such a test? The truth is that any knowledge worth having is inextricably linked to culture and to context — and thus can't be reduced to measurement on a standardized test.

In the final analysis, the most fundamental question to be answered about standardized testing is not why students of color tend to perform less well than white students, or even what can be done about it. Rather, the fundamental question is what is wrong with a society which allocates its educational resources on the basis of tests which not only fail to measure excellence, but which discriminate against the vast majority of its minority population? □

This article is condensed from an article that appeared originally in *Rethinking Schools* Vol. 3 #2.

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were almost never asked questions to which the adult or older child already knew the answer. According to Heath's data, the most prevalent type of question addressed to pre-schoolers in this community was the "analogy question," calling for an open-ended response drawn from the child's experience (e.g., "What do you think you are?" to a child crawling under the furniture). Other frequently asked questions were "story starters" (e.g., "Did you see Maggie's dog yesterday?") and accusations (e.g., "What's that all over your face?") (e.g., "What's that all over your face?") Children were also asked questions to which only they knew the answer (e.g., "What do you want?"). But very seldom were they asked test-type questions, the assumption being, why would you ask someone something you already know the answer to?

Reading was also often perceived as a social event in which listeners, young and old, were free to throw in comments or to elaborate on some connection with their personal experience, rather than a context for testing children's reading comprehension or teaching appropriate school behaviors. People in this community were admired for their ability to tell a good story, draw insightful analogies, or present an interesting and unique point of view, rather than for their ability to display information or show off knowledge for its own sake.

Research in other communities corroborate Heath's findings. Many working-class and minority children grow up in communities where little value is placed upon asking children to display information for its own sake and where "stating the obvious," or "saying what everyone knows" is not encouraged because it is perceived as having no meaningful communicative purpose. Thus, for many working-class and minority students, the testing situation violates deeply held assumptions and values about the nature and purpose of communication. Communicative style — including how one interprets the meaning of what another says, how one frames questions and structures answers, notions about what is worth talking about — is learned early in life and is deeply tied to one's personal and cultural identity. To suggest that members of minority communities change the way in which they interact with their children so



Credit: L. S. Farrar

best classes, high schools, or colleges. To that end, test items are deliberately selected so as to maximize differences between high and low scorers. By design, only some people will do well on the tests. There can be little doubt that if a large percentage of white middle class students performed poorly on standardized tests, the test results would be viewed as invalid and discriminatory. There is no similar concern for students of color, despite some 25 years of extensive documentation of cultural bias in standardized testing.

According to one study, one-third of the items in typical reading achievement tests are prejudiced against those speaking non-standard English. For example, they require students of color to distinguish between words, removed from context, which are often homonyms (sound alike) in their everyday oral speech patterns, such as had/hat and right/rat for African-American dialect speakers or this/these and tag/tack for Spanish dominant speakers (Examples taken from Hoover, Politzer and Taylor, 1987). Despite considerable research indicating that phonological distinctions like these do not necessarily affect reading comprehension when the words appear in meaningful context, such distinctions are used on standardized tests to help measure minority children's reading level.

Dialect items place African-American and bilingual speakers at a major disadvantage compared to native standard English speakers, who do not have to waste energy sorting out the differences between two language systems. Even if the stated intent of dialect-prejudiced items were to determine whether or not students of color had mastered standard English conventions (which it is not), such items would not provide valid information about how these students use language in a real-life context as opposed to the highly stressful conditions involved in taking a test.

**Class and Cultural Biases**

Similarly Weiss found in his study that questions which appear on forms of the Scholastic Aptitude Test necessitated familiarity with such upper-income pursuits as polo, golfing, tennis, minuet, piroettes, property taxes, melodons, and horseback riding. Again, even leaving aside the issue of cultural bias, what does knowledge of these activities have to do with scholastic aptitude? There is some research which indicates that minority children do much better on test items whose content relates to familiar cultural experience. Statistician A.P. Schmidt found, for example, that on a reading comprehension passage about life-style changes in Mexican-American families, Mexican-American students scored significantly higher than they did on content less related to their lives. Similarly, researcher Darlene Williams found that the I.Q. scores of Black students rose when test items included pictures of Black people and of events related to Black culture.

Studying language socialization, children Black community where she spent 11 years Brice Heath found that in the working-class communication. In a 1983 study, Shirley about what constitutes meaningful with very different values and assumptions class and minority children come to school communicate about, and respond to, text. Research indicates that many working pre-schoolers learn as a result of such interactions is how one is expected to Perhaps the most important "lesson" which boy holding?" "What is the bird doing?" (e.g., "Now, how many balls is the little and recalling specific details of the text which focus the child's attention on noting intersperse their reading with questions children, many middle-class parents often questions to which the questioner already has the answer — e.g., "How many eyes do you have?" "What color is this dolly's dress?" "How many fingers is mommy holding up?" The purpose of such questions is not for the questioner to gain information, but for the child to display information, for which she is typically rewarded with extensive non-verbal and verbal praise. When reading stories to pre-school children, many middle-class parents often intersperse their reading with questions about what constitutes meaningful communication. In a 1983 study, Shirley Brice Heath found that in the working-class communication. In a 1983 study, Shirley Brice Heath found that in the working-class communication. In a 1983 study, Shirley Brice Heath found that in the working-class communication.

The advantages which middle class white students have on standardized tests extend beyond the linguistic features and the content of test items, however. There is good reason to believe that the test taking situation itself is experienced very differently by majority and minority students. Test taking is a skill which many middle class students are very good at because they tend to receive extensive practice in answering "test questions" from the time they first learn to speak. Numerous studies of language socialization in white middle class communities indicate that the largest percentage of questions addressed to pre-schoolers by mothers and other primary caregivers consists of simply structured questions to which the questioner already has the answer — e.g., "How many eyes do you have?" "What color is this dolly's dress?" "How many fingers is mommy holding up?" The purpose of such questions is not for the questioner to gain information, but for the child to display information, for which she is typically rewarded with extensive non-verbal and verbal praise. When reading stories to pre-school children, many middle-class parents often intersperse their reading with questions about what constitutes meaningful communication. In a 1983 study, Shirley Brice Heath found that in the working-class communication. In a 1983 study, Shirley Brice Heath found that in the working-class communication. In a 1983 study, Shirley Brice Heath found that in the working-class communication.

# How to Protect Your Rights Parents, the Law and Schools

By David Schimmel

You want to see your child's school records, but you're told they're private. What can you do?

Your child's locker is searched for no apparent reason. Is that legal?

Your child doesn't want to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Can he or she be forced to do so?

Your child is suspended, you think unfairly. What are your rights?

Questions such as these routinely confront parents. Unfortunately, parents are rarely informed of their legal rights and so often they don't realize that they can challenge many decisions by school officials.

Parents of children in kindergarten through high school have two basic kinds of rights, both equally important. First, they have rights as parents. Second, their children have rights and parents can advocate to protect their children's rights.

The first right was established by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1924, when it ruled that parents have the right to direct the education of their children. The second was established in 1969 when the Court held that students do not shed their constitutional rights "to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." It was expanded in 1975 to include due process rights when a student faces suspension or expulsion.

These rights are guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. In addition, parents and students have been granted a wide range of specific rights under state and federal laws. Briefly, these rights are:

- The right to a free public education.
- The right to inspect student records.
- The right to a special education for students with special needs.
- The right to due process of law before suspension or expulsion.
- The right to freedom from unreasonable search and seizure.
- The right to freedom of expression.
- The right to freedom of religion and conscience.

Although some administrators may deliberately break the law, most unlawful school practices are the result of legal ignorance or misunderstanding. Most administrators are anxious to avoid lawsuits. When parents are able to show that school policies are unlawful, most administrators would rather change them voluntarily than as a result of a court order.

Many educators are poorly informed about the rights of parents and students because most of these rights did not exist when the educators were students. Further, educators are rarely taught these rights as part of their training.

I would briefly like to look at two areas of education law, freedom of expression and due process. The purpose is not to develop a legal primer, but to give a taste of some of the rights that parents and students have under the U.S. Constitution.

## The Tinker Decision

During the first half of this century, the Bill of Rights rarely helped parents and students who challenged the constitutionality of school rules. But a 1969 U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Tinker v. Des Moines*, known as the Tinker decision, set a new course in students' rights.

The case dates back to 1965, when a group of students in Des Moines, Iowa decided to wear black armbands to publicize their opposition to the Vietnam War. Upon learning of the plan, Des Moines principals set a policy prohibiting the armbands in order to prevent any possible disturbance. Several students wore the armbands nonetheless and refused to remove them. They were suspended.

Their parents challenged the school policy in court. They lost their case, but

appealed. The case ultimately was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.

While the Court recognized that school officials must have the authority to control student conduct, it held that neither students nor teachers "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." The First Amendment protects symbolic as well as pure speech, the Court said, and wearing an armband is a type of symbolic speech.

The Court further ruled that in this case there was "no evidence whatsoever" that wearing armbands interfered "with the school's work or with the rights of other students to be secure or to be left alone."

**Many educators are poorly informed about the rights of parents and students because most of these rights did not exist when the educators were students.**

School officials might have feared the armbands would lead to a disturbance, but that fear was not sufficient reason to violate student rights, the Court said.

"In our system," the opinion said, "undifferentiated fear or apprehension of disturbance is not enough to overcome the right to freedom of expression."

In a provocative comment about education and freedom, the Court wrote: "In our system, state-operated schools may not be enclaves of totalitarianism. ... Students in schools as well as out of school are possessed of fundamental rights which the State must respect, just as they themselves must respect their obligations to the State. In our system, students may not be regarded as closed-circuit recipients of only that which the State chooses to communicate."

Since the Tinker case, all courts recognize that the Bill of Rights applies to students in the public schools. Individual rights,

however, are not absolute. When a student's rights come in conflict with the rights of other students or with the obligation of the school to keep order, judges weigh these competing interests in light of the circumstances of each case.

Nor does it mean that the constitutional rights of students are always the same as those of adults. Because there must be order as well as freedom of expression in the schools, authorities can impose reasonable restraints on the time, place and manner in which student publications are distributed. Nor does the First Amendment protect students who are abusive and seriously disrespectful to school officials, or those who distribute materials that cause disruption, or are legally obscene or libelous.

## Due Process

Following the 1975 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Goss v. Lopez*, due process has become an increasingly important area of education law. (Due process simply means fair procedure.)

The 1975 ruling involved a case in which nine high school students in Columbus, Ohio were suspended for 10 days without a hearing. Under then Ohio law, officials had the right to do so provided parents were notified of the suspension within 24 hours and given the reasons.

The students and their parents claimed the law denied them the right of due process and was therefore unconstitutional. The Supreme Court agreed. Asserting that "education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments," the Court ruled that although some punishments might be trivial, the power to suspend for up to 10 days is certainly important to the student and cannot be exercised arbitrarily.

A minimum of due process is required even in cases involving short-term suspensions. In such cases, however, it may consist merely of rudimentary elements of fairness such as an informal notice and hearing. This generally means that the student must be told orally or in writing what the alleged wrongdoing was. If the student denies the wrongdoing, he or she is entitled to an explanation of the evidence that the authorities have, and a chance to tell

his or her side of the story.

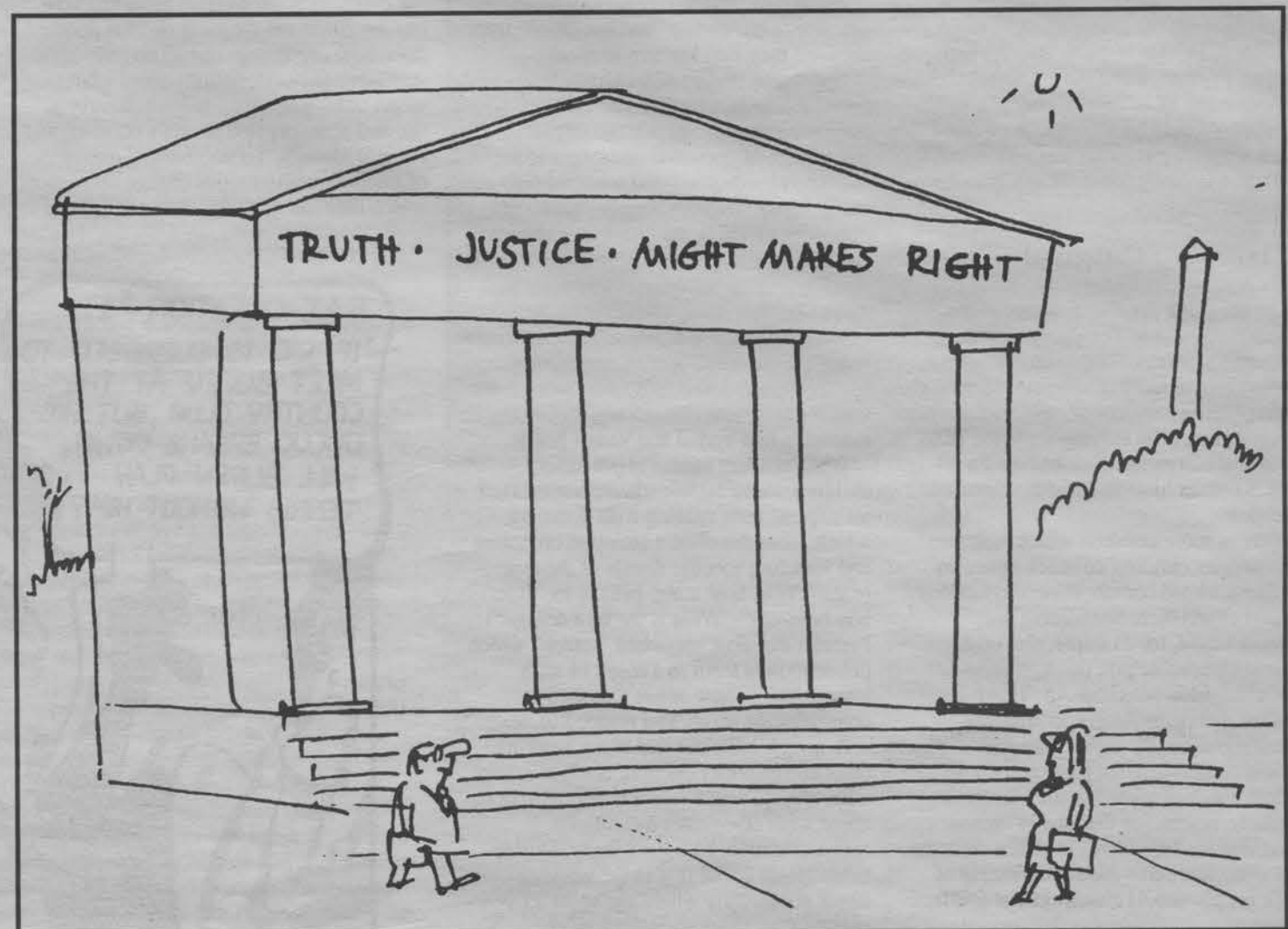
In cases of long-term suspension or expulsion, the courts require more complete procedures. In such situations, parents may insist on a written notice and a hearing, the right to present evidence, to be represented by a lawyer, to cross-examine witnesses, and to be given a record of the proceedings. Parents and students also have the right to appeal, usually to higher school authorities and to the school board.

Constitutional rights to due process and equal protection can also be used to challenge discriminatory testing and tracking policies. While tracking and grouping of students is not inherently illegal, parents have the right to object to tracking systems if they can show that the tracking is based on socioeconomic or racial discrimination.

Curriculum and textbooks are another key area of controversy. In general, judges have been unwilling to force schools to comply with demands that courses be prohibited on family life and sex education, or that texts be removed if they offend someone's moral values. Since school officials have been delegated the responsibility for making educational decisions, courts are unwilling to substitute their judgement for that of professional educators in such matters — except where a valid constitutional objection is made.

If school officials violate the constitutional rights of students or parents, the courts will act to protect those rights. But if parents disagree with the educational decisions that administrators make, judges urge them to use school board procedures or political and legislative action rather than the courts to create change. Since no two cases are alike, and since the law is constantly changing, this article is not a substitute for legal advice. Any parent who contemplates legal action should first consult a knowledgeable lawyer or a legal service office. □

David Schimmel is co-author of *Parents, Schools, and the Law*, available from the National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, NE, Suite 8, Washington, DC, 20002, for \$10.95 plus



Credit: Schwadron

# Know Your Rights!

Following are 24 rights you may have as a parent of a child in a public school. The rights listed are granted by federal or state laws, regulations and court decisions, as of Oct. 1991. District of Columbia and Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DODDS) are included. It's also possible that a right may not apply throughout your state but still be granted by your local school board. Thus it is always important to ask about local policies.

Decisions by school officials may be appealed to the local school board. The next step is either to the state education department or to court. \* Indicates local policies may prevail.

## Discipline

You have the right as a parent in any of the states listed...

- To take legal action against a school official if your child has been disciplined with "excessive or unreasonable" physical force. All states and DODDS.

- To appeal the suspension of your child. All states and DODDS except KS, UT and WI.

- To appeal an administrator's decision to place your child in a class for students labeled "disruptive." No placement can be made in an emotionally disturbed class without obtaining parental permission. All states except DODDS GA, KY, MI, MO, ND, SC, UT, VT, WA and WI.

- To protest the physical punishment of your child because it is prohibited by state law. AK, CA, CT, DC, HI, KY, MA, ME, MI, MN, MT, ND, NE, NH, NJ, NY, OR, RI, SD, VA, VT and WI.

## Instruction

You have the right as parent in any of the states listed...

- To see instructional materials used in research programs funded by the Department of Education and National Science Foundation. All states except DODDS.

- To have your handicapped child placed in an "appropriate" public school program. Parents also must give written consent for the placement of their handicapped child. All states and DODDS.

- To appeal an administrator's decision prohibiting your daughter from trying out for and playing in male-dominated sports. All states and DODDS except AR, CO, IL, IN, KS, KY, MN, MO, ND, TN, WI and WY.

- To visit your child's classroom(s) at any time during the day, providing you first notify the school office. AL, AK, AZ, DC, DODDS, FL, IN, IA, LA\*, MD, ME, NC, ND, NH, NM, NV, NY\*, OH, OK, SC\*, TX, UT\* and VA\*.

- To attend a minimum number of conferences with your child's teacher(s). AL, AK, AZ, DC, DODDS, FL, LA, MD, MS, MT, NC, NH, NV, OH, OK and TN.

- To educate your child at home, providing you meet conditions and standards set by your state. All states and DODDS.

- To request that your child be excused from studying subjects you object to on religious, moral, or other reasonable grounds. AK, AZ, CA, CT, DC, DODDS, FL, IA, ID, IL, IN, LA, MD, ME, MI, NC, NH, NV, OH, PA, SC, UT, VA\*, WA and WV.



Linda Brown, daughter of the principal plaintiff in *Brown v. Board*, the most important educational court decision of the century.

- To request that your child be excused from reading assigned books you object to on religious, moral or other reasonable grounds. AL, AK, AZ, CA, CT, DC, DODDS, FL, ID, IL, IN, LA, MD, ME, NC, NH, NV, NY, OH, SD, UT, VA\*, WA and WV.

- To request that your child be excused from school activities you object to on religious, moral or other reasonable grounds. AL, AK, CA, CT, DC, DODDS, FL, ID, IL, IN, KS, LA, MD, ME, MI, MS, NC, ND, NH, NV, NY, OH, OK, PA, RI, SD, UT, VA\*, VT, WA and WV.

## Records

You have the right as a parent in any of the states listed...

- To look at all your child's school records. You may challenge any record you believe is untrue or unfair. School officials must respond to your challenge within a "reasonable time." If still dissatisfied, you may request a hearing. All states and DODDS.

- To look at all official school policies. All states and DODDS.

- To look at other official school records, such as research and planning reports (but not personnel records). AL, AK, AR, CA, CO, CT, FL, HI, ID, IN, KS, KY, LA, MD, MO\*, ND, NH, NM, NV, NY, OR, SC, SD, TX, UT, VA, VT, WA and WI.

## Other Rights

You have the right as a parent in any of the states listed...

- To appeal a school policy or decision that prevents your child from expressing controversial views, so long as they are not obscene, slanderous, or libelous, and do not cause serious disruption. All states and DODDS except AR, CO, KY, MI, MN, MO, NM, TN, VT and WI.

- To speak at all public meetings of the local school board. CA, HI, IL, MI, MT, ND, UT, VT and WV. In other states, many local school boards make provision for parents to speak at all public meetings.

- To attend all meetings of the school board (except for executive sessions on

personnel and property issues) and be present at the voting on all school board decisions affecting the school district. All states.

- To appeal some local board decisions to a higher state authority (other than a court). AL, AZ, CO, CT, DE, DODDS\*\*, FL, GA, IL, IN, IA, LA, MA, MD, ME, MS, MT, NE, NH, NJ, NM\*, NV, OH, OK, RI, SC, TX, VT, WA, WI and WV.

\*\*Via the school principal through higher echelons to the Secretary of Defense.

- To appeal a policy or decision that prevents your child from joining a club or activity that is controversial but otherwise lawful. AL, CA, CT, DC, DE, DODDS, FL, GA, HI, IA, ID, LA, MD, ME, MO, MS, MT, NC, NE, NH, NJ, NV, NY, OH, OK, OR, RI, SC, SD, TX, WA, WV and WY.

- To be a member of any parent/citizen group and have your group recognized and heard by school officials. AL, AK, AZ, CA, CT, DC, DODDS, FL, HI, ID, IN, KY, LA, ME, MN, MS, MT, NC, NE, NH, NV, NY, OH, RI\*, SC, VT, WA and WY.

- To appeal an action, policy or decision permitting an unreasonable search of your child or his/her property by school employees. According to the Supreme Court Decision of January, 1985 (*New Jersey v. T.L.O.*) school officials must have reasonable suspicion to believe that a school rule or a law has been violated before searching your child, and that the manner of conducting a search must be reasonably related to its valid objective and circumstances. All states and DODDS.

- To challenge the removal of books from a school library based on school officials' personal dislike of ideas they contain. All states and DODDS. □

The above is reprinted from a wallet-sized card available in either English or Spanish from the National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, NE, Suite 8, Washington, DC, 20002. For more information call: 202-408-0447.

## A Parent Perspective A Question of Power

By Earlean Suitte

Parents need to be a part of the everyday policy-making. They may be part of the PTA, but they generally don't help make decisions for the school, whether it's around curriculum or other policies.

For parents who want to get involved, the first thing I suggest is that you know your rights as a parent, because you do have rights. You also need to organize as a group, and you need to know who makes the decisions about education.

On a school level, you need to empower yourself. By that I mean being a part of the curriculum-making process, being a part of the decisions. Know who your PTA president is. Understand terms like LD and ED. Understand tracking and what it means. Understand the Chapter 1 program.

Once you know what some of these programs and terms mean, you can decide; do we really need these programs? Are these programs helping our children or are they just another way of putting a child somewhere where they won't be a bother? If you're told that your child is LD, for example, they may tell you that your child has a problem but they won't tell you that your child is headed to a place where he might not get a good education.

On a broader level, you have to look at who makes the decisions about education. Start with your local government and your local school board. Know who your local officials are and what they are saying about education, and go to them.

Before you go to your officials, you need to have an organized parent's group. If you go by yourself, you may not know the education terminology that they use. And if you don't, one way or another they will get you every time.

When you don't know all the terminology and the language, you can get upset and nervous, and be afraid that you said the wrong thing. If you say, for example, that you think there should be more culturally diverse classes, and they say, "Well what do you mean by that, we already do that," and they throw some fancy language at you, they're going to win the battle. You have to have your ducks in a row and know what it is you're talking about.

Also, if you go as a group, they see it's more than one person. It makes you stronger. They take one parent and say, "She just wants this for her special child." If you go as a group, they think you want it for every child, which is what you do want.

As for administrators and teachers, they need to go beyond making parents feel welcome in the school and as volunteers in the classroom. They need to encourage and allow their input in real decisions. If teachers and administrators are serious about parent involvement, they will let parents be involved in curriculum, on hiring committees.

Even though teachers and administrators say they think parents should be involved in decisions, it's written in everything they say, and in every unspoken word, that they don't want parents with that kind of involvement.

The administrators and the teachers have to give up some of their power. That's an issue. How much of their power are they willing to give up? □

Earlean Suitte is the mother of a 13-year-old seventh grader. She is active with the Legal Aid Task Force of North Carolina, working on issues such as Chapter 1, tracking, and diversity.

Credit: Carl Iwasaki, ©Time, Inc.

## Please Help

Rethinking Schools is looking for volunteers to help with any of the following:  
proof reading, typing,  
and distribution.

If you would like to volunteer,  
call Mike Trokan at 964-9646

## SHORTS

### Channel One Injunction

A judge in Santa Clara, Calif., issued a permanent injunction in November prohibiting a local school district from forcing students to watch Channel One news and advertisements broadcasts in school.

The order by the superior court was issued against Whittle Communications, the producers of Channel One, and the East Side Union High School District. It requires that the school district provide a structured, supervised alternative to viewing Channel One's daily 12-minute current affairs program, which includes two minutes of commercials. Parents must be notified in writing that viewing Channel One is voluntary and teachers will be reminded each semester of the provisions of the court order.

### Chapter 1 Reform

Three recent reports have called for reform of Chapter 1, the \$6 billion-a-year federal funding program designed to improve the basic skills of low-income children. Chapter 1 was created in 1965 by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and is up for reauthorization by Congress this year, as it is every five years.

The first report, drawn up by an independent, 28-member commission, advocates threats of federal funding cuts to force states to equalize funding among school districts. States which do not comply would lose all funds allocated by the 1965 education act, including Chapter 1. The report also urges the elimination of many restrictions on the use of Chapter 1 monies but adds a strict accountability system which would demand student achievement improvements within five years. Penalties for school districts which repeatedly failed to show improvement could include school closures, staff or administration firings, or state-level governance of the district's schools.

The two other reports were released in February by the National Assessment of Chapter 1, created by Congress two years ago. The reports recommend that more Chapter 1 funds go to secondary schools and that services be extended to Limited English Proficiency students and the children of migrant workers. They also suggest more and earlier parental involvement in schools, a greater emphasis on teaching critical thinking and analysis, better student assessment methods, and improved coordination of health and social services with Chapter 1 programs.

### Finance Plans Unconstitutional

Judges in Missouri and North Dakota have ruled that their states' school financing systems are irrational and unfair. In January, Circuit Judge Byron L. Kinder gave Missouri state legislators 90 days from the end of the current legislative session to devise a replacement for the state's property-tax-based system. The present system has produced widely disparate funding, with a range of per-pupil spending of \$2,653 to \$9,750.

"Those disparities are not because of differing student needs," Judge Kinder

wrote, "but instead are associated with local property wealth or are simply irrational."

North Dakota's plan, also largely dependent on local property taxes, was found unconstitutional by a district judge in February because it "arbitrarily and irrationally denies equal educational opportunities to children in low-wealth districts." The ruling requires legislators to come up with a more equitable funding formula within six months. State officials in North Dakota plan to appeal the decision to the state supreme court.

### Outlawing Corporal Punishment

A bill to eliminate corporal punishment in Texas public schools was introduced in February by state Sen. Rodney Ellis. Public school employees would be forbidden by the law to hit, spank, or slap students with hands or objects. School employees would be permitted to use "reasonable and necessary" restraining methods to prevent a student from injuring a person or property, in self-defense, or to take away drugs, weapons, or other "dangerous objects."

Passage of the bill would make Texas the 23rd state to outlaw corporal punishment in public schools.

### Labor History Course

Teachers who want to learn how to teach labor history are invited to a 5-day course this July at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The course, "Teaching Labor Studies in the Schools," is designed for teachers at all grade levels. Teachers who complete the course will also be eligible for two graduate credits.

The course will run from July 11-16, and is sponsored by the Wisconsin School for Workers, UW-Extension, the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, and other labor and education groups such as the Curriculum and Instruction Department, UW-Madison. The program costs \$791 per participant, including housing and all meals. Scholarships are available.

For more information, write School for Workers Registration, 422 Lowell Hall, 610 Langdon St., Madison, WI 53703.

### Leadership Camp for High Schoolers

Applications are being accepted for the 1993 Encampment for Citizenship July 5 - Aug. 15 in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Encampment, founded in 1946, is a six-week camp for high school students whose purpose is to foster social activism and awareness in a multicultural setting.

"Encampers" explore issues of race, gender, health, environment, poverty, politics, and the arts through workshops, art activities, camping trips, and community service. Service projects have included low-income housing renovation and working at health clinics and child care centers.

Applicants must be 15 years old and have completed the first year of high school by July 5, 1993. For an application, contact EFC at 2530 San Pablo Ave., Suite B, Berkeley, CA, 94702, or call (510) 548-8908.



Credit: Huck/Konopacki Teacher Cartoons

### Peace Education Conference

Wisconsin Educators for Social Responsibility will be hosting a one-day conference entitled "Peace Education Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" on Saturday, March 27 at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

Workshops feature peace education ideas for teachers of students from kindergarten through adult and will be led by teachers and activists from around the state. Workshops include: "Taking a Step Back: Running a Democratic Classroom;" "Do You Know Enough to Enlist?" and "Non-verbal Exercises in Conflict and Reconciliation."

Registration fee is \$15.00 (\$10.00 for ESR members). For more information, call

Joan Janus at (414) 476-3606 or Juli Bussiere at (414) 476-4140.

### Malcolm X Poster Available

The Bread and Roses Cultural Project has produced an 18x24 inch poster featuring Malcolm X speaking at a rally in support of a 1962 strike by hospital workers in New York. The rally for Health Care Workers Union 1199 was the first and only time Malcolm X participated in a mass campaign together with whites. The back of the poster outlines the historical context of the rally. Copies are available for \$5.00 from Bread and Roses, 330 W. 42nd St., New York, NY 10036.



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# Children's Books About the Elderly

By Pat Rigg, Francis E. Kazemek and Sarah Hudelson

As the fourth-graders walked down the street from their school to the old persons' "nursing home" I had arranged for them to visit, I overheard one boy say to another, "I've got elephants in my stomach."

"I know," replied his friend, "I've got lizards in mine."  
Elephants and lizards in their stomachs? What on earth were these boys afraid of? I thought I had carefully prepared them for this trip: I had read them Mem Fox's *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, in which a small boy who lives next to an old folks home befriends many of the residents there. I had brought some of the octogenarians from the neighborhood "home" into the class, and had listened to them entertain the boys and girls with stories of classrooms, playgrounds, and games they remembered. It had never occurred to me that these kids could be scared of visiting a place right in their neighborhood, one many of them passed daily.

But they were scared. Unfortunately, for many of them their ideas of old age did not come from long-term, loving relationships with several elderly people. Instead, their ideas seemed to be based on ignorance and half-remembered fairy tales in which old women figured prominently as child-eaters.

These children live in modern times. And in modern times, many families don't routinely eat Sunday dinner at Grandma's anymore. Some grandchildren see their grandparents only two or three times a year, and may not know any other people 60 and over.

Children need to learn that there is as great a variety of old people as there is of younger people. But they won't learn that from the TV set, which has an enormous influence in fixing children's views about the world. Television sitcoms still tend to portray old people as white-haired, frail people who spend a great deal of time sitting, often in a rocking chair. And even if children have grandparents who defy that stereotype, they may tend to think it's because their grandparents are an exception, not that the television stereotype is misleading.

Since many schoolchildren lack personal contact with old people, we need to find ways for them to meet and know a variety of old people through their reading. Ideally, books can enable youngsters to know, respect, and even love old people from a variety of ethnic cultures and social classes.

It is hard to hold a stereotype of grandmothers as frail, white-haired cookie-bakers after reading *My Grandma Has Black Hair*, in which the girl's grandmother neither knits nor bakes, or *Tales of a Gambling Grandma*, in which another grandmother plays cards for her granddaughter's allowance and regales her with stories of the old woman's youth, or *Chicken Sunday*, in which Eula Mae Walker leads her church choir in gospel singing, or *Abuela*, in which the grandmother flies over New York City with her granddaughter, her skirts sweeping the Statue of Liberty as the two sail across the sky. It is hard to fit unwed elderly women into the stereotype of "old maid" after reading *Do Not Open*, in which Miss Moody through wit and courage overcomes an evil genie, or *Miss Rumphius*, in which a world traveler retires to her girlhood home and there finds a way to make the world more beautiful, or *My Great-Aunt Arizona*, about a school teacher whose love of travel and adventure inspired her students.

## Stereotyping in Textbooks

But are these the stories the children find in school? Not if they are reading only basal readers, those standardized reading textbooks. Even though basal publishers have increasingly incorporated the elderly in a non-stereotypical manner into their

readers in recent years, the portrait of the elderly presented in basals is inadequate in important areas.

- First, elders tend to be underrepresented in basal readers: there simply are not enough stories about them (Serra and Lamb, 1984; Meadows and Fillmer, 1987).

- Second, minority elders continue to be underrepresented. One study reports that of the elders in basal readers, fewer than 10% are African-American; fewer than 5% are Hispanic (Fillmer and Meadows, 1986).

- Third, a sex bias in favor of men still exists. As Fillmer and Meadows (1986) discovered, 64% of the elderly characters found in basal readers are men, while 36% are women. This ratio does not reflect social reality: in fact, it is almost opposite of the present ratio of men to women over 65.

- Lastly, while old people are generally portrayed favorably, they continue to be presented in restricted roles. One finds, for example, few single elderly in basal readers, whether never married or widows, widowers, or divorced old people (Fillmer and Meadows, 1986).

Thus, there still need to be more stories which present the elderly in "non-traditional" roles and settings, stories that deal "with elderly people who participate in social activities outside the home, breaking male/female stereotypes," as researchers Judith Serra and Pose Lamb (1984, p. 281) have noted. We also need stories which deal with death in a sensitive, open way. Since basals are not filling these needs, we look to trade books. Trade books, or books written for the general public, offer the variety of excellent children's literature that is missing from the basals (Goodman, 1988).

Some trade books offer stories that show old people respected for their greater experience and their wisdom. (Lawrence Yep's *Child of the Owl*; and Krungold's *And Now Miguel*)

Others show how one can deal with infirmities. (Tomie de Paola's *Now One Foot, Now the Other*; Patricia MacLachlan's *Through Grandpa's Eyes*; Vera B. Williams' *Music, Music for Everyone*; Wittman's *A Special Trade*.) Some also deal with the death of a beloved elder. (Charlotte Zolotow's *My Grandson Lew*; de Paola's *Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs*; Karen Taha's *A Gift for Tia Rosa*.)

A few recent trade books show old and young connecting with each other across cultures. (Patricia Polacco's *Chicken Sunday* and *Mrs. Katz and Tush*; Alfred Slote's *Finding Buck McHenry*; Michael Rosen's *Elijah's Angel*.)

Unfortunately, few books portray grandparents acting as parents, although this

is a reality for many children. Eloise Greenfield's *Grandmamma's Joy* is one that does, as is Amy Hest's *The Go-Between*. *The Go-Between* is also notable for showing romantic possibilities between people over 60.

## Beyond Reading

Teachers and parents can also use trade books to start activities that can build bonds between different generations and further break down stereotypes. Sharon Bell Mathis' *The Hundred Penny Box* and Eth Clifford's *The Remembering Box*, for example, both suggest ways of remembering that can lead to shared storytelling between young and old. Many people have a special coin, maybe a lucky coin, with at least one story about it. Many people have a box of trinkets kept for their sentimental value and will tell the story behind the trinket to an eager young listener. Journals, pen pal letters, and other inter-generational writing activities in the classroom can also serve as opportunities for youngsters and elders to share memories.

As the *Foxfire* (Wigginton, 1972) oral history books have demonstrated, asking the elders in one's community to talk about their lives, especially their youth, gives young students a first-hand look at a time they cannot otherwise know; it is a fascinating and rewarding way to learn local history. *Aunt Arie: A Foxfire Portrait*, for instance, provides a fine example of how students are able to enter into the life of a strong old person and share that life through stories and reminiscences.

In some families and schools, conversational story-telling seems almost a lost art. Many old people, however, still know how to tell a tale, and can sometimes be coaxed into regaling a young audience with family stories or folktales. Carmen Lomas Garza's bilingual (Spanish-English) *Family Pictures*, in which the activities of an Hispanic community in South Texas are pictured and described, is a good model for children and grandparents to start going through their own photo albums.

In addition to family stories, traditional folktales or legends can also provide a link between generations. Every ethnic group has its own collection, and students can enjoy reading stories drawn from their own tradition as well as stories from other traditions. Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* is a collection of Black American folktales; Joe Hayes' *The Day It Snowed Tortillas* has stories drawn from Southwestern Spanish speakers; Yoshiko Uchida's *The Dancing Kettle* is a collection of Japanese folktales; Lynette Dyer

Vuong's *The Brocaded Slipper and Other Vietnamese Tales* introduces children to Vietnamese folktales; Frances Carpenter's *Tales of a Chinese Grandmother* is a fine collection of Chinese tales; and *Coyote Tales* by Hettie Jones introduces children to Coyote, the mythic and mischievous trickster of many Native Americans.

There is a great deal of good children's literature that portrays the diversity, the strengths, and the richness of the elderly. Reading that literature can help our students better understand a group of people that has been under-represented and stereotypically represented — the aged.

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- A good source of pictures and slides for young and old to look at together is BiFolkal Productions, 911 Williamson St, Madison WI 53703. The local library should have some of the BiFolkal materials, BiFolkal Kits and Slides.

Pat Rigg is a consultant in Tucson, Ariz., who has worked with and written about children and adults who are learning English as a second language.

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Today's children need more opportunities to meet and learn about the elderly.

# A Bibliography of Books with Non-stereotypical Views of the Elderly

By Pat Rigg, Francis E. Kazemek and Sarah Hudelson

An asterisk (\*) indicates that the book is a picture book.

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- Ackerman, Karen. *\*The song and dance man*. 1988, Scholastic, New York. Grandpa entertains the kids with his old vaudeville routines. Illus. Stephen Gammell.
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- Levinson, Riki. *\*I go with my family to Grandma's*. 1986, Bantam Doubleday, New York. Five girls, their parents, and siblings travel to Grandma's in Manhattan at the turn of the century. Humor. Illus. Diane Goode.
- Lindberg, Reeve. *Grandfather's lovesong*. 1993, Viking, New York. Grandfather and grandchild walk through New England landscape, while in verse he assures the child of his love. Illus. Rachel Isadora.
- Linden, Ann Marie. *\*One smiling grandma*. 1992, Dial, New York. A Caribbean counting book. Illus. Lynne Russell.
- MacLachlan, Patricia. *Journey*. 1992, Delacorte Press, New York. 11-year-old boy struggles to cope with abandonment by mother, and to accept his grandparents.
- MacLachlan, Patricia. *Through grandpa's eyes*. 1980, Harper & Row, New York. Young boy learns new ways of seeing from blind grandpa. Illus. Deborah K. Ray.
- Mathis, Sharon. *Hundred penny box*. 1983, Penguin, New York. Michael's great-great aunt, who is 100 years old, has a penny and a story for each year.
- McDonald, Megan. *The potato man*. 1991, Orchard, New York. Grandpa tells grandsons the story of his childhood. Illus. Ted Lewin.
- Mora, Pat. *\*A birthday present for Tía*. 1992, Macmillan, New York. Cecilia makes a birthday basket for her 90-year-old great-aunt. Illus. Cecily Lang.
- Nobisso, Josephine. *Grandma's scrapbook*. 1990, Green Tiger Press, San Diego. A young woman leafs through a photo album recalling good times with her grandmother. Illus. Maureen Hyde.
- Nobisso, Josephine. *Grandpa loved*. 1989, Green Tiger Press, San Diego. Boy remembers all the wonderful things he and his grandfather loved to do together. Illus. Maureen Hyde.
- Nodar, C.S. *Abuelita's paradise/El Paraiso de Abuelita*. 1992, Albert Whitman & Co., Morton Grove, IL. With dead grandmother's chair and shawl, girl remembers stories of grandmother's life in Puerto Rico. Bilingual.
- Passen, Lisa. *Grammy & Sammy*. 1990, Henry Holt & Co, New York. When Grammy comes to live with the family and share her granddaughter's room, the cat Sammy has to move outdoors. Illus. L. Passen.
- Patrick, Denise Lewis. *\*Red dancing shoes*. 1993, Tambourine. Grandma returns from a trip with a pair of red dancing shoes for little sister. Little sister dances through the neighborhood. African-American. Illus. James E. Ransome.
- Paulsen, Gary. *Dogsong*. 1985, Bradbury, New York. Inuit boy discovers himself and his heritage when an elder offers advice and a



From Tomie de Paola's *Now One Foot, Now the Other*.



Credit: David Soman



"We look at the old pictures and try to imagine the people in them. It might make us cry...but that's O.K."

in Angela A. Johnson's When I Am Old with You.

Limona, Mercedes. *Del tiempo de la abuela*. 1979. Hymna, Barcelona. Grandmother shares stories of her childhood with her grandchildren.

Löfgren, Ulf. *Los niños de la Pacanda*. 1986. Silesa, Tlapam, Mexico. Informational book about family in Patzcuaro includes details of a grandmother teaching her granddaughters.

Martinez, Paulina. *La sorpresa del abuelo*. 1986. Editorial Plus Ultra, Buenos Aires. A child and his grandfather take a walk to discover the promised surprise—a Christmas fiesta. Spanish.

Mateos, Rita. *El cuento interrumpido*. 1985. Editorial Noguer. Nicolas helps his grandfather learn to read, and the two are transported by one story. Spanish.

Oxenbury, Helen. *En la casa de los abuelos*. 1982. Timun Mas, Barcelona. Child visits grandparents. Spanish translation.

Pico, Fernando. *La penita colorada*. Ediciones Fuenmayor. Spanish.

Cumpiano, Ina. *Fan, pan, pan, gran pan*. 1990. Hampton-Brown Books, Carmel. Grandmother and two young grandchildren start to bake bread.

Sal Murdocca. Spanish.

Donato, Magda. *El niño de mazapan y la mariposa de cristal*. 1990. Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Mexico, DF. Spanish.

Estabén, Asun. *¿Donde has estado, Aldo?*. 1986. Juventud, Barcelona. Picture book shows young boy fishing with grandfather, and his dream of travel under the ocean. Spanish.

Fernandez, Laura. *El secreto de Perejil*. 1990. Ediciones Corunda, Mexico, DF. An old man who enjoys standing in line teaches the rest of the town to enjoy it too. Spanish.

Fox, Mem. *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. 1984. Omnibus/Ekare-Banco del Libro, New York. A young boy helps a friend in the old folk's home regain her memory.

Garza, Carmen Lomas. *Family pictures*. 1988. Illus. Julie Vivas. Spanish version *Guillermo Jorge Manuel José*.

Garza, Carmen Lomas. *Family pictures*. 1990. Children's Book Press, San Francisco. Day to day experiences of a young girl in a traditional U.S.-Mexico border community. Illus. Carmen Lomas Garza.

Gerson, Sara. *El escondite*. 1986. Editorial Tillas, Mexico, DF. Grandmother and grand-children play hide-and-seek. Spanish. Illus. Alejandra Walls.

Row, New York. A boy comes to Chinatown in San Francisco at the turn of the century, where he learns from his elderly "uncle." Chinese-American.

Uchida, Yoshiko. *The rooster who understood Japanese*. 1976. Scribner's, New York. The elderly Mrs. Kitamura's rooster annoys her neighbor.

Scott, Ann Herbert. *Grandmother's chair*. 1990. American Society for Jewish Education. Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

Polacco, Patricia. *Chicken Sunday*. 1992. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

dream to take out into the wilderness.

Peters, Lisa Westberg. *Good morning, river!* 1990. Arcade, New York. An elderly man helps young friend understand the language of the river and his own frailty. Illus. Deborah K. Ray.

Polacco, Patricia. *Babushka's doll*. 1990. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

Polacco, Patricia. *Chicken Sunday*. 1992. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

Polacco, Patricia. *Mrs. Katz and I*. 1992. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

Polacco, Patricia. *Mrs. Katz and I*. 1992. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

Polacco, Patricia. *Mrs. Katz and I*. 1992. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

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Polacco, Patricia. *Mrs. Katz and I*. 1992. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

Polacco, Patricia. *Mrs. Katz and I*. 1992. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

Polacco, Patricia. *Mrs. Katz and I*. 1992. Polacco, Russian-American. Illus. Patricia.

## NO COMMENT

### George Was Extreme, Too

Deciding he had had enough of criticisms of the proposal to rename Fulton Middle School after Malcolm X, Milwaukee School Board member Jared Johnson took on board member Lawrence O'Neill's view that schools should not be named after "extremist or aggressive" people.

"George Washington was a slave owner," Johnson said. "I think that's pretty extreme."

To which we might add that George was a pretty aggressive guy, what with being a general and helping to start a revolution.

The proposal to rename the school passed 4-3 — a bit too close for comfort but a victory nonetheless.

### Multiculturalism Out of Greenfield!

More than 70 parents met at Greenfield Middle School in mid-February to discuss charges that students of color were mistreated at the Greenfield, WI school by teachers and administrators. White and African-American parents shouted at each other several times during the meeting, with white parents strongly supporting the school staff in the controversy, according to news reports.

In the midst of such tensions, parent Bill Lang got up to say he had had enough of schools teaching multiculturalism. His seventh grade son, he said, was in school "to learn to read and write and do arithmetic. He's not here to learn about other cultures."

### The Tax Man Cometh

Learning Enterprise of Wisconsin, a private, non-profit corporation that operates the Safe House, a daycare center and an alternative high school under contract with MPS, owes more than \$175,000 in taxes to the city, state, and federal governments, according to a report in the Feb. 20 *Milwaukee Sentinel*. (Learning Enterprise has also advocated that MPS contract out kindergarten and early childhood slots to community organizations, like itself).

Jeff Aikin, spokesman for the Milwaukee County Department of Human Services, said that Learning Enterprise provides quality daycare services, but that their bookkeeping system seems to be "overwhelmed."

Aikin also said that Learning Enterprise "would sometimes resubmit bills that had already been paid or they would bill us for clients who had not been authorized to receive daycare funding. We would consistently find that they had been paid but [the children] had not been documented in their own bookkeeping system or their clients hadn't been authorized to receive daycare. Sometimes they would bill us for

reimbursement for a child, expecting payment for full-time care when their own documentation showed the child had not been there full time."

### White Flight in Iowa

School "choice" plans are often proposed as a way to give poor and minority students the same opportunities as middle-class white kids. But an analysis of the public school choice plan in Iowa showed that 401 of the 413 students who left the district in the first two years to attend suburban schools were white. About 20% of the city's student are from minority groups.

As *The New York Times* reported last December, "The case shows how social forces can make it tough for urban schools to compete in an educational free market —

forces like urban crime and blight, middle-class infatuation with suburbs, a low threshold among some people for high levels of integration, and the challenges of educating an increasingly poor student population with dwindling tax dollars."

### Historical Distortions

Only two of eight history textbooks recently adopted in the state of Arizona mention indigenous peoples in describing the origins of what is now the United States, according to an article in the *Journal of Navajo Education* (Fall 1992).

### Nike Math

How's this for a math question for your middle-schoolers:

If a pair of Nike Air Jordan shoes costs

\$80, takes five hours to make, and Nike workers get paid 14 cents an hour, what percentage of the price goes to the workers who actually make the shoe?

(According to the AFL-CIO, the Nike Corporation pays its workers as little as 14 cents per hour in Indonesia, China, Malaysia, and Thailand.)

### Wanted: Superintendent

When the New York City board of education voted not to renew the contract of chancellor Joseph Fernandez, it meant that the three largest school districts in the country were looking for a new superintendent. Los Angeles Superintendent William Anton retired last fall, and in Chicago, General Superintendent Ted Kimbrough was ousted in January.

### Prohibited: Children Who Think

Right-wing gadfly Phyllis Schlafly (no, she didn't retire after helping to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment) wrote an opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal* Jan. 19 condemning public school curricula that "attack family faith, morals, discipline and authority."

Referring to a health education curriculum in Michigan, Schlafly wrote: "Parents object to the way the curriculum teaches children to decide for themselves (instead of consulting their parents) what is right and wrong in all kinds of risk-taking situations, especially those involving sex and substance abuse."

### Million-dollar Parachute

Former school superintendent Edward Murphy in Long Island says he has no intention of giving up a \$963,883 severance payment. The New York Attorney General's office has gone to court to void the contract that allowed the severance package.

Murphy retired as superintendent of the Board of Cooperative Educational Services in Suffolk County in October. The severance pay was based on a contract that, among other things, gave Murphy up to 90 paid vacation days a year and allowed him to carry over unused vacation days until his retirement.

The severance pay was in addition to Murphy's total compensation of about \$220,000 a year, according to *The New York Times*. Under usual retirement rules, Murphy would have also received an annual pension of about \$150,000. If the severance pay is counted toward his retirement, his pension could double to about \$300,000 a year.



Credit: Herbblock

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## PARENT RESOURCES

### Books and Brochures

*Guide to Parent Involvement Resources.* National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, N.E., Suite 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557, 202-408-0447. A production of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, the guide outlines the activities and publications of over 30 national organizations working for parent involvement in schools.

*First Teachers: Parental Involvement in the Public Schools.* National School Boards Association, P.O. Box 63422, Baltimore, MD 21263-0422. \$15.00 plus \$3.75 shipping and handling, pre-paid. Designed to help school board members understand the issues surrounding parental involvement, including the benefits of involvement, the educational, societal, and demographic barriers that can discourage participation, and policy implications for school boards. The booklet also includes descriptions of model programs from around the country.

*Beyond the Bake Sale: An Educators' Guide to Working with Parents,* by Anne T. Henderson, Carl L. Marburger, and Theodora Ooms. National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, N.E., Suite 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557, 202-408-0447. \$10.95 plus \$2.50 postage and handling. Encourages teachers and administrators to look critically at their beliefs and feelings about parental involvement. Practical advice on how to make parents feel more welcome and foster a collaborative atmosphere among parents and school staff.

*The Little Things Make a Big Difference: How to Help Your Children Succeed in School.* National Association of Elementary School Principals. Send a self-addressed, stamped business-sized envelope to Station 9/NAESP, 101 Northwest Point Boulevard, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1019. A free 17-page booklet for parents based on suggestions from a survey of 10,000 elementary and middle school principals. Outlines concrete steps parents can take to help ensure their children's enjoyment and success in learning.

*101 Ways Parents Can Help Students Achieve.* American Association of School Administrators, 1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209-9988, 703-528-0700. \$6.00 pre-paid; bulk prices available. Specific ideas to enrich childhood education every day. Topics include learning at home, using the newspaper, building self-esteem, parent involvement in the school, and others.

*Parents, Schools, and the Law,* by David Schimmel and Louis Fischer. National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, N.E., Suite 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557, 202-408-0447. \$10.95 plus \$2.50 shipping and handling. A guide for parents that is free of unnecessary legal jargon and offers vital information on the law as it concerns schools and discrimination, freedom of religion, discipline, freedom of expression, testing, and other topics. The appendices summarize relevant court decisions and constitutional amendments.

*Beyond the Open Door,* by Nancy Berla and Susan Hlesciak Hall. National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, N.E., Suite 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557, 202-408-0447. \$10.00 plus \$2.50 postage and handling. Reference guide to regulations regarding school board meetings in the 50 states and D.C. Useful for parents and citizens interested in increasing public access to local school board meetings and school board accountability.

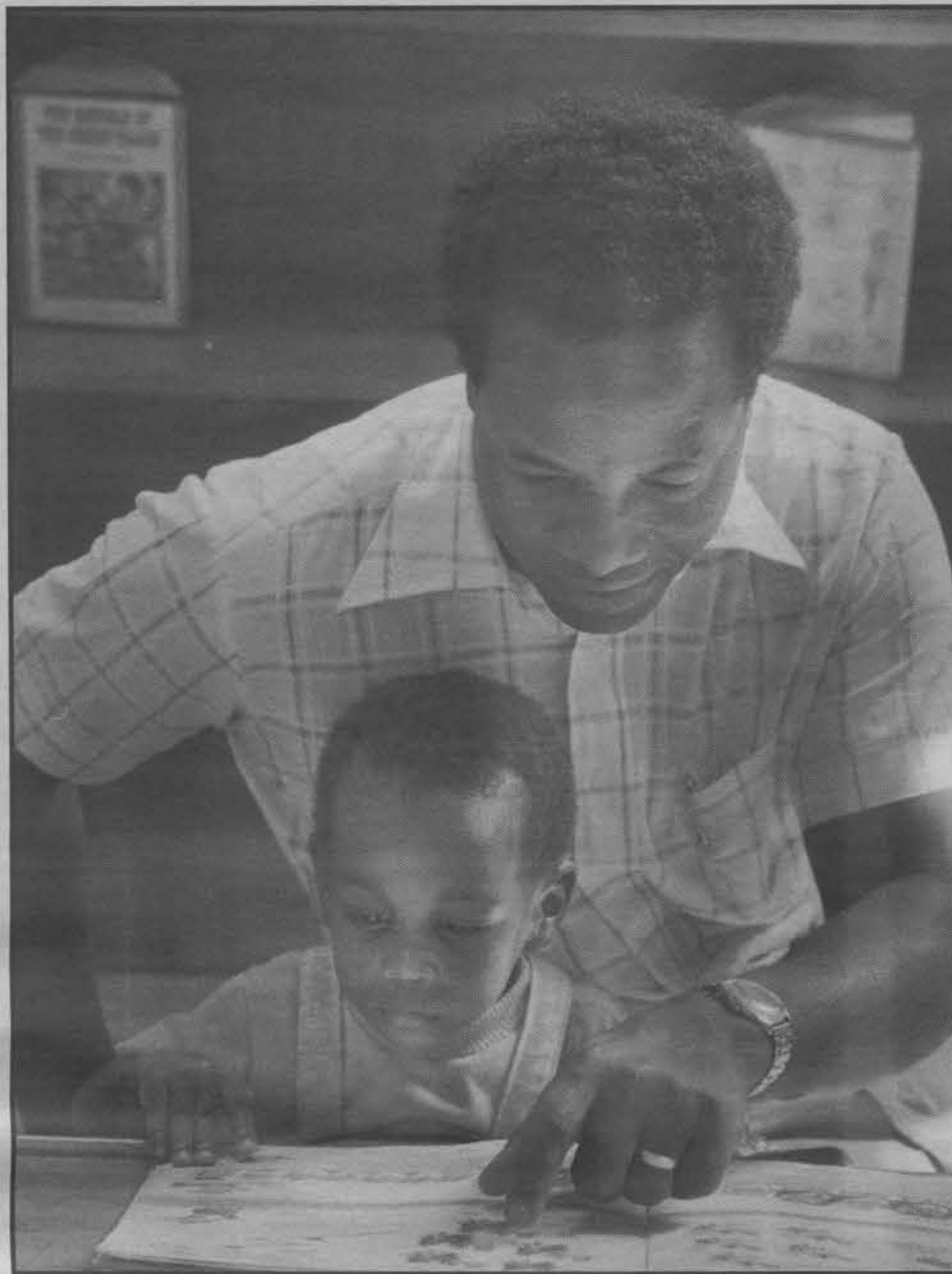
*Information for Parents.* National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, N.E., Suite 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557, 202-408-0447. \$4.95 for the set, plus \$2.50 shipping and handling. A series of twelve brochures for parents. Each brochure contains concise information on a single topic including parent organizing, student discipline, access to records, student rights, and drop out prevention. Also available in Spanish.

*A Handbook for Immigrant Parents: Protect the Educational Rights of Your Children.* META, Inc., 524 Union Street, San Francisco, CA 94133, 415-398-1997. \$2.00. A guide to help foreign-born parents understand their rights regarding their children's education in the U.S. The handbook, which is available in Spanish and English, gives special consideration to parents' concerns about immigration authorities' access to the family's school records and related information.

*Together Is Better: Building Strong Partnerships Between Schools and Hispanic Parents.* Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 538, Washington, DC 20036, 202-822-8414. \$9.00 (including UPS fee). Strategies and techniques for teachers, principals, and school districts, derived from 42 HPDP-funded parent/school partnership projects designed to encourage cooperation between Hispanic parents and their children's schools.

*You're a Parent...You're a Teacher Too and Queridos Padres: En los Estados Unidos la escuela es nuestra tambien.* Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 538, Washington, DC 20036, 202-822-8414. \$.50 each (including postage and handling); ask about bulk pricing. Separate English and Spanish versions of a message to U.S. Hispanic parents explaining why parents are important in the education of their children and how they can work with the schools their children attend.

*Helping Dreams Survive: The Story of a Project Involving African-American Families in the Education*



Credit: Rick Reinhard

*of Their Children,* by Jocelyn A. Garlington. National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, N.E., Suite 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557, 202-408-0447. \$24.95 plus \$2.50 shipping and handling. Book documenting the "With and For Parents" project in Baltimore, Md., provides an inspiring yet realistic look at an urban parent and family involvement effort. The program, which ran from 1987 to 1990, was designed to help low-income minority parents encourage their children to stay in school and graduate.

*What the Outgoing PA President Should Have Told the Incoming PA President.* Community Resource Exchange, 17 Murray Street, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10007, 212-349-8155. \$10.00 for parents (\$25.00 for others). A useful resource for new PA or PTA leadership on fundraising, membership development, by-laws, negotiations, and relationships with teachers and administrators. Loose-leaf for easy photocopying. A glossary is included.

*The Evidence Continues to Grow: Parent Involvement Improves Student Achievement,* edited by Anne T. Henderson. National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd Street, N.E., Suite 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557, 202-408-0447. \$10.00 plus \$2.50 shipping and handling. A detailed annotated bibliography of 49 studies showing how parents' involvement improves their children's performance in school, from pre-school to high school. The studies described build an excellent case for increased parental involvement.

*Organizing for Better School Food.* Center for Science in the Public Interest, 1875 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20009-5728. \$7.00. A 42-page booklet which is an excellent place to start a school food improvement effort. Encourages activists to review school food as critically as we do other "educational support materials." Provides clear methods for action, including coalition building, media techniques, and background on federal law and food service contracts. Includes a collection of success stories with activists to contact and a list of resources.

*Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools,* by Anne Wheelock. The New Press, 450 W. 41st St., 6th Floor, New York, NY 10036. \$19.95. A critical look at tracking with an emphasis on groups around the country that are successfully organizing against tracking in their area schools. Includes a state-by-state list of schools that are eliminating ability grouping.

*Maintaining Inequality: A Background Packet on Tracking and Ability Grouping.* National Coalition of Education Activists, P.O. Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472, 914-658-8115. \$3.00; bulk prices available. Includes basic information on what tracking is and how it affects children, articles by parents and anti-tracking activists, sample resolutions, and more.

*Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality,* by Jeannie Oakes. Yale University Press, New Haven,

CT, 1985. A classic work on how tracking hurts slower and average students and fails to significantly benefit advanced students, and how the practice influences every aspect of school experience.

*Standardized Tests and Our Children: A Guide to Testing Reform.* FairTest, 342 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139, 617-864-4810. \$4.00; ask about bulk prices. A 32-page booklet explaining what standardized tests are, how they are used and misused, and why their use is a detriment to education. Gives recommendations on strategy for testing reform activists. Also available in Spanish.

*Standing Up to the SAT.* FairTest, 342 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139, 617-864-4810. \$6.95. For high school students taking the SAT, this book can be a useful tool for improving scores. It also looks at the many ways the SAT and other standard admission tests discriminate against students on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, sex, and income, and offers ways to fight the overuse and misuse of the tests.

*None of the Above: Behind the Myth of Scholastic Aptitude,* by David Owen. A highly recommended but out-of-print book which exposes the SAT for the unreliable, big-business enterprise that it is. Check local libraries for copies.

*False Choices: Why School Vouchers Threaten Our Children's Future.* A special issue of *Rethinking Schools*, 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212, 414-964-9646. \$3.00 plus \$2.00 shipping and handling. A unique resource examining the danger school choice and voucher plans pose to public schools and America's democratic vision. Includes articles by Jonathan Kozol, Deborah Meier, Herb Kohl, and Maxine Waters.

### Organizations

National Committee for Citizens in Education, 900 2nd St., N.E., Suite 8, Washington, DC 20002-3557, 202-408-0447. National organization to expand parents' and other citizens' access to public schools and build coalitions for public school reform. Publishes numerous high-quality resources, including a newsletter, pocket guides, brochures, and books on parents' rights, school-based reform, and parent involvement. Also runs two hotlines for questions concerning citizen involvement in schools: 1-800-NETWORK (English) and 1-800-LE-AYUDA (Spanish).

National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1834 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20009-5786, 800-424-2460. Catalogue offers books, videos, brochures, posters, and tapes for teachers and parents of children from birth to eight years old. Topics covered include achievement testing, safety, media violence, discipline, school readiness, and many others.

National Parent and Teacher Association, 700 N. Rush St., Chicago, IL 60611-2571, 312-787-0977.

Provides information to parents and Parent and Teacher Associations on building home-school relationships, developing parenting skills, improving learning at home, and promoting parent-child communication. Single copies of many resources are free and some are available in Spanish.

The Parent Institute, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039, 800-756-5525. Produces two newsletters for school staff and parents which are published during the school year. Also offers inexpensive booklets for parents on how they can help their children learn to read, build self-esteem, encourage responsible behavior and motivation, and improve communication.

The Right Question Project, 167 Holland St., Somerville, MA 02144, 617-628-4070. A training program that teaches parents to advocate on behalf of their children and schools. Using role play and discussion, teaches parents to ask questions of school and public officials, to think critically about their children's schooling, and to hold public institutions accountable.

Multicultural Education Training and Advocacy (META, Inc.), 524 Union Street, San Francisco, CA 94133, 415-398-1997. An advocacy organization which works for the full participation of poor children in education. Focusing on immigrant and linguistic minority students, META provides counseling and training to parents and activists, organizes parents into multiethnic coalitions for change, and litigates on behalf of poor and minority students' rights.

Clearinghouse for Immigrant Education (CHIME), 1-800-441-7192, c/o National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 100 Boylston Street, Suite 737, Boston, MA 02116. Offers parents, teachers, and students information on legal rights, bilingual education, student support services, multicultural education, and other topics. Some material is available in foreign language editions.

ASPIRA Association, Inc., 1112 16th St., N.W., #340, Washington, DC 20036, 202-835-3600. Aids Latino youth and their families in decreasing dropout rates, developing mentoring programs, and increasing Hispanic parent involvement in schools. Publishes a quarterly newsletter and other materials.

National Urban League, Inc., 500 E. 62nd St., New York, NY 10021, 212-310-9214. Through its network of 113 affiliates around the country, provides parents with training to help parents assist their children with homework and math and science activities, and provides counseling about college admissions and financial aid.

Coalition for Quality Education, 1702 Upton Ave., Toledo, OH 43607, 419-537-9246. Founded in 1978, this grass-roots organization conducts workshops and training for parents, monitors policies and practices of the Toledo Public Schools, takes legal action when necessary, and works with elected officials on reform. Has brochures on standardized testing and school discipline issues.

Books Project, c/o Network of Educators on the Americas, 1118 22nd St., N.W., Washington, DC 20037, 202-429-0137. Coordinates the Family Involvement Project, a parent and student writing program in which participants write brief stories or essays about their lives and share them with each other. The project is designed to increase parents' comfort in the school environment, promote literacy, and foster understanding between parents and school staff.

League of Schools Reaching Out, a project of the Institute for Responsive Education, 605 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215, 617-353-3309. Works with member schools to get parents and families involved in identifying and addressing problems that face schools and the children they serve. The League has 75 member schools around the country working on a wide variety of projects.

The Center for Law and Education, 955 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA, 02139, 617-876-6611. Assists parents in advocating on behalf of their communities for quality public education. Provides referrals to local legal services and education advocacy groups. Most publications are intended for legal advocates, but some materials might be useful to parents. Write or call for publications list.

People for the American Way, 2000 M St., N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036, 202-467-4999. Promotes anti-censorship efforts. Publishes *Attacks on the Freedom to Learn*, a yearly state-by-state survey of censorship attempts in the schools.

FairTest (National Center for Fair and Open Testing), 342 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139, 617-864-4810. Campaigns for elimination or reform of standardized testing at all levels of education. Provides activists with materials for organizing testing reform efforts in their communities and publishes several resources on standardized testing and its detrimental effects on education and students.

Parents and Teachers Against Violence in Education (PTAVE), P.O. Box 1033, Alamo, CA 94507-7033, 510-831-1661. Publishes materials against corporal punishment in schools. Some materials are available in Spanish.

People Opposed to Paddling Students (POPS), P.O. Box 19045, Houston, TX 77224, 713-493-6232. Activist organization which works for the abolition of corporal punishment in schools. Publishes a quarterly newsletter for members and school and elected officials.

# Race and Property Taxes Deliver Knock-Out Punch The Feb. 16 MPS Referendum

The defeat of the Milwaukee Public Schools referendum can be summed up in four words: race and property taxes.

No one was afraid to focus on property taxes when criticizing the Feb. 16 referendum to build and improve public school facilities. That side of the story is well known.

But, as is Milwaukee's style, race was never openly discussed — even though everyone knew that questions of black and white surrounded every aspect of the vote.

## A Rethinking Schools Analysis

"You hardly needed to raise the race issue at all," *Milwaukee Journal* columnist Joel McNally wrote after the vote. "That's the beauty of having a Black superintendent advocating nice, new schools for the Black community just like those that White suburban kids get. No one had to mention race. It was understood."

While the referendum's defeat was a clear setback, the debate had several positive results. More than any other issue in recent years, it raised awareness that quality public schools are essential to Milwaukee's economic and social well-being. Second, it exposed the severe overcrowding in MPS and the need to begin long-delayed repairs. Third, it made much clearer who are the friends and who are the foes of public education in Milwaukee.

Most important, although most ephemeral, the referendum was the catalyst for the broadest, most multiracial coalition to form around education in Milwaukee in recent memory. The group, Our Children's Future Coalition, began the difficult process of building ties and trust between the diverse groups that will be necessary players in future school reform efforts.

MPS cannot put another referendum before the voters until next February unless a special election is called. Fuller met with the School Board March 1 and indicated that he would like to explore the idea of such a special election in May or in the fall. Before decisions are made, Fuller plans to meet with a range of organized constituencies and get their input. Fuller has said that one idea is to approach the question of facilities in stages and more closely tie each stage to academic and fiscal accountability.

"I think the important thing to lay out to people is that opponents of the referendum can gloat and all of that, but the problems are still there," Fuller told *Rethinking Schools*. "And the longer it takes for us to address them, the more difficult and the more expensive the solution."

### Race Milwaukee-Style

While one can marshal numerous arguments to highlight the racial politics behind the vote's outcome, one set of statistics tells all.

The referendum passed in every city ward that is predominantly Black, according to the Milwaukee Election Commission. In fact, the only aldermanic districts where the referendum received a "yes" majority were those with a majority African-American population. By contrast, the higher the percentage of White voters, the higher the number of "no" votes. In the overwhelmingly White 11th and 13th districts on the south side, voters cast a 92% and 93% "no" vote, respectively.

Largely due to the historic disenfranchisement of Milwaukee's African-American population — itself a result of decades of unremitting racism — African-Americans did not vote in anywhere near the proportion of White residents. Voter turnout in the

African-American 17th District, for example, was only 16% (the lowest of any district), compared to over 50% in the predominantly White 11th and 13th Districts.

At the same time, there were clear gains in improving African-American turnout for a February election. It's just that the gains were not enough to offset White opposition. The 30,000 "yes" votes on the referendum were more than the highest total vote in an odd-numbered year spring primary since 1983. In February 1991, for example, the total Milwaukee turnout was 15,962 voters. In February 1989, the figure was 21,708.

When the final vote was tallied, there were 30,894 people who voted yes and 93,948 who voted no.

### The Proposed Referendum

The referendum asked voters to approve a \$366 million bond to help finance 12 new elementary schools and 2 middle schools in neighborhoods where there are not enough schools, a new vocational technical high school, and repairs and renovations for a number of other schools. The plan was based on reforms that would have reduced class size in kindergarten through second grade, provided computer, art and music rooms in elementary schools, provided technical vocation resources for middle and high schools, and allowed all eligible children to attend kindergarten.

The plan would have mainly affected children of color, in particular African-American children, who account for 73% of all MPS students and who are most affected by the lack of schools in their neighborhoods. While only 26% of MPS students are White, however, the city's voting-age population is 68% White. Ultimately, the referendum came down to the question of whether White property owners were willing to pay for improved



MPS 3rd-grader Amada Zamudio gets a little help while testifying in support of the referendum at a hearing at Riverside High School.

Credit: Cheryl Williams

**No one was afraid to focus on property taxes when criticizing the Feb. 16 referendum to build and improve public school facilities. But, as is Milwaukee's style, race was never openly discussed — even though everyone knew that questions of black and white surrounded every aspect of the vote.**

public education for African-American and Latino children. The answer was a resounding "no."

"There's no question that the call to fear, prejudice, and distrust worked once again in Milwaukee," a key player in the referendum said after the vote. "From the very start, we knew that if the scare tactics and hate mongering successfully invaded this debate, the whole referendum was in jeopardy."

Acknowledging the predominance of race, however, cannot be used to downplay the importance of property taxes as an issue. Many property owners who rejected the covert appeals to racism couldn't bring themselves to support the referendum because of its effect on property taxes. The referendum became a chance for financially squeezed property owners to say "no more taxes," a chance they never get on city and county projects such as the \$106 million County Jail, the \$35 million O'Donnell Park fiasco or the proposed \$375 million light-rail system, to say nothing of federal initiatives such as the multibillion-dollar bailout of the savings and loan industry.

Clearly, the referendum underscored the need to replace property tax funding of public schools with a more equitable method. As Our Children's Future Coalition noted in a statement after the vote: "We can no longer allow our system of school

funding to pit hard-working homeowners and senior citizens on fixed incomes against children and schools. It is inherently unfair to our children that many suburban districts are able to spend more on schools and yet tax their residents at a lower rate — while impoverished urban and rural school districts are squeezed by spiralling property taxes."

### Lest We Forget

In analyzing the "no" vote, the roles of two public officials deserve special attention. Most important is Mayor John Norquist.

Norquist worked both publicly and behind the scenes to equate the referendum with a death sentence for the city, claiming that it would force property owners and businesses to flee to the suburbs. Norquist has argued in the past that poor schools are forcing good (i.e. White) residents out of Milwaukee. He conveniently changed his tune when something concrete was proposed to improve public schools. His anti-referendum position only bolstered the suspicion that there is no way of pleasing the mayor when it comes to MPS, because of his oft-stated belief that our system of good public schools should be replaced with a combination of private, religious, and public schools supported by public vouchers. (As Norquist said in a Nov. 12, 1990, speech and has since reiterated: "I doubt whether the current system of urban education can be reformed. I think it should ultimately be scrapped and replaced with a new system — essentially a voucher or choice system.")

State Rep. Annette "Polly" Williams (D-Milwaukee) also did her best to mislead

voters — whether it was with arguments that the referendum would lead to increased busing of African-American children or, as she told *The Milwaukee Journal*, the referendum was "another plan to colonize, to control the Black community," and that it contained "shades of South Africa."

As with Norquist, one cannot dismiss Williams' support for private school "choice" as a factor in her anti-referendum stance. Williams has built a national reputation as an African-American legislator supporting Milwaukee's private school "choice" plan.

Williams' stance allowed Norquist and other White politicians to claim that their opposition was not related to race. The same day Williams first publicly criticized the referendum, Milwaukee County Supervisor Mark Borkowski and Milwaukee Ald. Annette Scherbert announced the formation of Taxpayers Opposed to Referendum Alliance (TORA). The referendum, which had previously received near unanimous public support, faced an uphill battle from that day on.

TORA, assisted by conservative public relations executive Todd Robert Murphy, built a strong base of opposition — particularly on the city's South, Southwest, and Northwest sides. Using television ads, mailings, leafletting, and phone banks, TORA whipped up a climate of hysteria against the referendum. One anti-referendum leaflet, for example, claimed that the referendum would raise property taxes by 90%. Such lies spread faster than the truth, in this case helped by the incessant anti-referendum ranting of WISN radio talk-show host and right-wing personality Mark Belling.

The pandering to fear and misinformation by certain public officials stands in contrast to the campaign waged by Howard Fuller. While *Rethinking Schools* has had its differences with Fuller, Fuller deserves praise for his leadership in bringing the referendum before the voters, for being upfront about the plan's costs, and for working nonstop to try to ensure the referendum's victory.

### Secondary Factors

Besides race and property taxes, the referendum was hobbled by secondary factors, including:

- Most important, a belief among many residents that MPS is an inflexible bureaucracy impervious to change. This fed into accusations that the facilities plan was a substitute for comprehensive reform.

- Lukewarm support from the business community. While publicly in support of the referendum, groups such as the Milwaukee Area Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Milwaukee Education Trust did little to help ensure its passage, either financially or organizationally.

- A short campaign, which hampered fund-raising and organizing efforts. The campaign's brevity, for example, didn't allow enough time to counter the opposition's distorted yet appealingly simple message that the referendum was nothing more than a bricks-and-mortar plan that gave MPS a blank check to spend hard-earned taxpayers' money.

- Mistrust between the MPS administration and its own employees, who were expected to be a strong base of support. One problem is that MPS does not have contracts with any of its 13 bargaining units. Some units such as teacher assistants have been without a contract for almost three years.

- Legal restrictions that prevented Fuller and MPS from advocating a "yes" vote and that forced them to merely present "information."

- An inability to translate organizational support from key players in Our Children's

Future Coalition into strong support from their members — whether it was the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association or the Milwaukee County Labor Council AFL-CIO.

- The about-face by two school board members, Jared Johnson and Lawrence O'Neill, who mid-way through the campaign withdrew their support. Further, board member David Lucey withheld his endorsement until the day before the vote. (Conversely, Sandra Small and Christine Sinicki deserve commendation for their support of the referendum despite strong pressure from constituents, including physical threats.)

- The failure of some African-American leaders and politicians to strongly unite behind the referendum.

- The opposition from 10 of the 12 White members of the Milwaukee Common Council, who publicly signed a statement opposing the referendum. (None of the five African-American members signed the statement, nor did Lorraine McNamara-McGraw or Don Richards.)

- The wide gulf between the educational experience of many senior citizens and the reality facing today's students. Graduates of MPS from previous decades, in particular White residents, couldn't understand how issues such as smaller classes and 4-year-old kindergarten were linked to school reform.

- A perception that the reforms that were

part of the facilities plan were not commensurate with the plan's price tag.

- A tendency by some voters to blame parents for the problems facing the schools, arguing that if parents did a better job the schools wouldn't have so many problems. This was just one of several arguments that tended to carry implicitly racist messages, for the implied view was that African-American parents were at fault for the schools' problems.

- Failure by the alumni of Milwaukee Technical High School — who pressured MPS to include a new \$68.8 million tech high in the referendum package — to build support for the referendum.

### Where Now?

In a meeting shortly after the vote, members of Our Children's Future Coalition assessed the campaign and mapped out tentative future plans. In addition to addressing the question of facilities, the coalition outlined several other issues. First, the coalition is working with others from around the state on legal and legislative ways to ensure more equitable funding of public schools and to decrease reliance on property taxes. Second, it is looking at how it can best pressure the legislature and Gov. Tommy Thompson, whose proposed state budget calls for a 3% school aid increase, the smallest in seven years. Because education costs are increasing about 8% a year, the proposals would likely mean a dramatic reduction in per-pupil spending. Further, Thompson has proposed a freeze on property tax rates, which could lead to severe cuts in local school budgets.

Perhaps most important, the coalition is hoping to work with the MPS administration to avoid the bruising battles that

characterized last year's budget struggle in MPS. The coalition and Fuller have set up a meeting for March 22 to discuss this and related issues.

One fear among coalition members is that in the face of the referendum's defeat, the MPS administration and school board might be increasingly receptive to privatization schemes such as charter schools as ways to move ahead on education reform.

"These charter schools and privatization schemes all look good on paper, supposedly because you're getting rid of bureaucracy," said Kathleen Hart, a former School Board member and member of Our Children's Future Coalition. "But there are so many holes in it all. I don't see how a private company can make money off the schools. Unless of course you fire people and rehire them at lower wages."

While MPS will continue current initiatives to improve academic achievement — such as the K-12 curriculum reform and steps to require Algebra for all 9th grade students — it is not yet clear how the school board will decide to move ahead on issues such as building new schools, reducing class size, and improving computer, art, and music instruction in the early grades.

"I've talked to superintendents in Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit," Fuller told *Rethinking Schools*, "and they have given up on addressing the question of facilities because it's so far out of hand. What we are trying to do in Milwaukee is not get ourselves into that predicament. The question is, have we reached a situation where a significant number of people, for whatever reasons, don't care whether we address them or not? I don't want to think that's the case." □



Credit: Susan Lina Ruggles

Lakeside bus driver Angelynn Gordon with some of the children on her route.

## MPS School Bus Drivers Organize

Drivers with Lakeside Buses of Wisconsin, the major bus company used by MPS, have decided that they would like the basics of a good job.

More than 90% of the 325 drivers and mechanics have signed cards saying they would like to be represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 998, which represents Milwaukee County Transit System Workers.

Drivers at Lakeside currently start at between \$6.50 and \$6.65 an hour. There is no overtime, or health or vacation benefits, or sick pay. Drivers are also asking for safer and cleaner buses and fair treatment from the company, which is notorious for racial and sexual harassment of its workers.

Lakeside runs about 300 of the 1,600 buses used by MPS to carry roughly 53,000 students every day. None of the bus companies is unionized.

The Amalgamated Transit Union petitioned the National Labor Relations Board in January to order an election for union representation. No decision had been made by early March. Lakeside, meanwhile,

has hired a well-known union-busting firm, Krukowski and Costello, to represent it before the NLRB. The Milwaukee firm represented management in the Patrick Cudahy and Hormel strikes.

At this point, the transit union is merely asking that the Lakeside workers be allowed to form a union. No contract demands are yet on the table.

The transit union is asking the Milwaukee School Board, which has a \$7 million annual contract with Lakeside, to pressure the company to recognize the union. If all else fails, Lakeside workers may go on strike to force union representation, according to John Goldstein, president of the transit union.

"The thing that really gets me about this issue is not only that the working conditions at Lakeside are abominable, but the management's attitude is worse than abominable," said Goldstein. "The owners at Lakeside will stop at nothing to make a buck, and don't care how they treat the workers in the process." □

## Multicultural Schools

continued from page 17

representatives of all races, classes, and cultures, women and men, bring their different stories that a new public culture can emerge.

Educational dialogue needs to be practical. But it is also true that the desire to be immediately practical, to be immediately relevant, has impoverished the dialogue about education in this country and kept us from larger goals and larger visions. There has been too much hiding of larger questions, too much reluctance to discuss the meaning and purpose of education for fear of being impractical. It is time for that larger discussion.

In that discussion, we want to come down on the side of efforts that lead to a larger society quite different from the one we have now: One that is not greedy and mean-spirited; one built on the energies and diversity of all its peoples; one that does not view diversity as a problem to be solved, but an opportunity to be grasped.

It is to building an ever-expanding democracy that a multicultural education worthy of the name must be dedicated. □

*Theresa Perry is Associate Professor of Education and Undergraduate Dean at Wheelock College. James W. Fraser is Professor of Education and Dean of Educational Studies and Public Policy at Lesley College.*

*This article is adapted from Freedom's Plow: Teaching in the Multicultural Classroom, a collection of essays edited by Theresa Perry and James W. Fraser and published by Routledge, Inc. in April 1993. The book is available by contacting the publisher at 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001 or (212) 244-6412.*

### Notes

1. James Woods, "America in the Grip of a Cultural Centrifuge," Sydney, Australia, *Morning Herald*, Jan. 5, 1991; p. 15.

2. Institutions as diverse as the University of California at Berkeley or Stanford University and the public schools of Boston, Massachusetts, Baltimore, Maryland, and other large cities have all been involved in this debate.

3. For a fuller discussion of the issue of "political correctness" and the New Right agenda in education, see *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses*, Paul Berman ed. (New York: Dell, 1992).

4. Stanley K. Schultz, *The Culture Factory: Boston Public Schools, 1789-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 307-308.

5. M. Carl Holman, "Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the U.S. The Afternoon of a Young Poet," in Jay David, ed. *Growing Up Black* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), 44.

6. See Philip Bennett, "The Face of the Future: Welcome to L.A.," *The Boston Globe Magazine*, Oct. 13, 1991: 14-16, 50-54.

7. Lawrence A. Cremin, *Popular Education and Its Discontents* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 85.

8. Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," (1779) in Gordon C. Lee, ed. *Crusade Against Ignorance: Thomas Jefferson on Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1961), 83-92.

9. Langston Hughes, "Freedom's Plow," in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Random House, 1959), 294.

10. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); see also Joel Spring, *The Sorting Machine Revisited: National Educational Policy Since 1945* (New York: Longman, 1989).

11. Cited in W.E.B. Du Bois: *A Reader*, Meyer Weinberg, ed. (New York: Harper, 1970), 153-4.

12. James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," Oct. 16, 1963, reprinted in Rick Simonson and Scott Walker, eds., *The Graywolf Annual Five: Multicultural Literacy* (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1988), 4.

13. We are indebted to Professor Henry Giroux of Pennsylvania State University for this term.

## Student Page



Richard Desir

In this issue we are pleased to highlight children's stories from *The Mango Tree: Stories Told and Retold by Children in the Cambridge Public Schools*, published by the Oral History Center in Cambridge MA. This collection shares the diversity and rich experience of the Boston community as told through the oral histories of the children and their families.

The Oral History Center has a number of resources for teachers as they develop oral history projects for students and parents. For more information contact The Oral History Center, 186 1/2 Hampshire Street, Cambridge, MA. 02139, 617-661-8288.

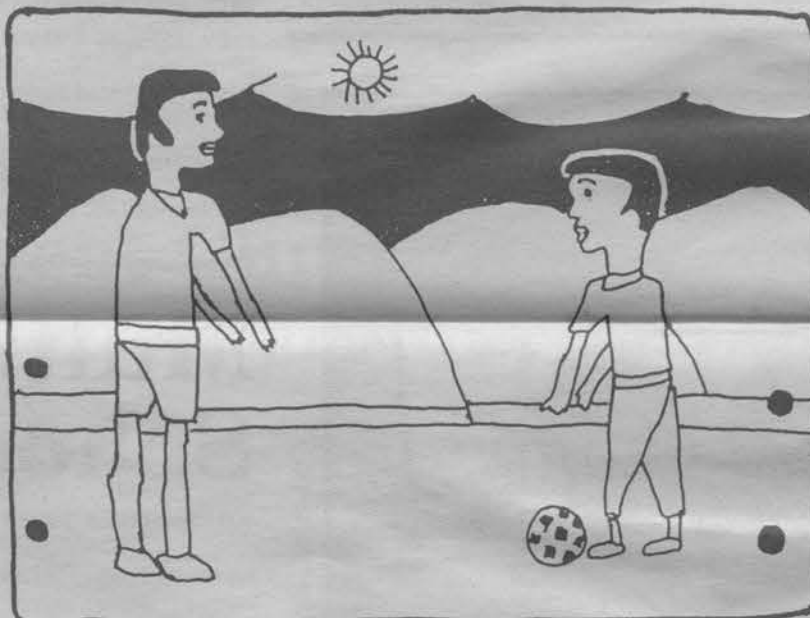
### Childhood Days in Barbados

I interviewed my father, Duncan Payne, who is originally from Barbados. He came to Cambridge when he was 43 years old from a small town in Barbados. When he came to this country, he was not separated from his family because nearly everyone was already here.

Some things were different in Barbados. When he was in school, girls and boys went to different schools. And if someone was bad in school, he was whipped with a bamboo ruler by the teacher. The same children were in class in school and in church. The school was strict and there was no recess.

My father also had to work very hard at home. His jobs were pretty tough. He had to wash dishes, clean the house, and help take care of the animals. "I used to raise fowls, chickens," he told me. So after going to school from 8 o'clock until 3 o'clock he had to do his housework and his homework and then go to sleep by 8 o'clock at night.

**Ronnie Bynoe, from an interview with her father.**



Playing Soccer with Father

Gilouse Vincent

### The One That Didn't Get Away

When my mom was a little girl, she spent part of the summer in Falmouth on Cape Cod. She had two older brothers who loved to go fishing with their grandfather. My mom went, too. Once when she was fishing, a huge fish got hooked on her line and really put up a struggle. The fish weighed as much as my mother did at the time. She was only four years old. She had been taught never to drop, or let go of the rod.

So, when the big fish suddenly yanked on the line, Mom was pulled into the ocean and held onto the rod with both ends. She didn't know how to swim yet; but she knew how to float. So, she just waited, floating in the water until someone would help her. Fortunately, her grandfather saw what happened. He couldn't help but laugh. He called her brothers to come quickly and they ran across the jetty of big boulders to where their grandfather and sister were fishing. They saw their sister floating in the ocean, unable to swim to safety and they dove in after her.

They were very surprised when helping her up onto the jetty of rocks, that their sister not only still held her rod in her hands but she had caught the biggest fish of the summer.

**Jesse Solomon, from an interview with his mother**

### Family Fun

My grandmother thinks that kids had more fun back then because they didn't have a television to stay in and watch. For fun, the family would go visiting neighbors and relatives. Sometimes the men would pitch horseshoes. The kids would play Hop Scotch, Hide and Seek, and they would jump rope. The girls would brush leaves into a ring and pretend it was a house. They'd divide the house in rooms and use leaves to make little beds. Then they'd play house with their dolls.

**Leila Carter from an interview with her grandmother, Leona Madison Carter**



Maria Manafakis

### Students! Teachers! Parents!

Please send us poetry, prose, and artwork of young people.

We prefer drawings in pencil or black ink. Enclose full name, age, school, and phone number.

Send to: Student Page  
Rethinking Schools, 1001 E. Keefe Ave.,  
Milwaukee, WI 53212