

Democratizing the Public School System

By Kathy Emery and Eric Mar

W

enever popular education is mentioned, Paolo Freire is usually the first name that comes to mind.¹ But students of democratic pedagogy in the United States have plenty of home grown examples of their own to study. John Dewey, for example, who saw the public school system as fundamentally authoritarian, reproducing a “superior class... [whose] culture tends to be sterile [and whose] actions tend to become... capricious, aimless, and explosive...”² He wanted teachers to teach children not by force but by inducement; and growth itself had to be seen as an end.³ Indeed, if American society was to become truly democratic, Dewey argued, the children had to be taught to “take a determining part in the making as well as obeying laws”⁴

In 1932, Miles Horton—taking democratic education to an activist level—founded the Highlander School in Tennessee, on the principle that people had the means to solve their own problems without relying on experts or institutions. Horton believed that a pedagogy that helped people analyze their own experiences, and that of others, would promote participatory democracy. Many organizers of the labor movement in the 1930s gained valuable skills at Highlander. In the late 1950s, Septima Clark made the Citizen Education Program at Highlander the foundation for the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) Citizenship Schools.⁵ In turn, the Freedom Summer Schools of Mississippi used the SCLC citizenship curriculum as a template.

The 1964 Freedom Summer Schools arose in response to the inadequacies of the existing public school system, which was segregated and authoritarian. The teachers were given a written curriculum but were also advised “to shape your own curriculum in the light of the teachers’ skills, the students’ interests, and the resources of the particular community.”⁶ The emphasis on developing curriculum and teaching method based on the students’ experiences arose out of a vision that “[encouraged] the asking of questions,” and a “hope that society can be improved.”⁷

Like the authors of the 1964 Freedom School curriculum, Don Arnstine argues that public schools

have historically failed to produce active democratic citizens. Instead, their aim is only to socialize students, not educate them.

“Socialization is characterized by imitation, participation, and obedience to instruction and command. Its outcome is the acquisition of adaptive habits, skills, and attitudes. The processes of education... are far more subtle, adding to the above processes two-way communication, initiative, creativity, and criticism. The outcome of educational processes is the acquisition of attitudes and dispositions, knowledge and skills, that are individualized and critically thoughtful.”⁸

Uprooting Bureaucracy

To change a system that merely socializes, into one that also educates, would require a social movement. Not only because “macroeconomic mandates continually trump urban educational policy and school reform.”⁹ Or that corporate-engineered high-stakes testing has eliminated community participation in the creation of educational goals and policy.¹⁰ But because a social movement is the only way fundamental change can occur in any deeply entrenched bureaucracy. If the system can prevent a progressive school board in a progressive city from implementing systemic progressive educational reforms as advocated by Dewey or Horton, the only hope for change is outside the system.



The obstacles to introducing popular or progressive methods and goals to school districts caught up in the high-stakes testing paradigm are numerous, and range from the way school boards function as democratically elected bodies, to big business, to entrenched political interests, to the proliferation of foundational support for educational reform.

Because school boards rarely have their own line staff, board members depend upon the school superintendent's office for most of their information and recommendations.¹¹ (The seven San Francisco school board commissioners, for example, share one secretary.) Superintendents, in turn, are focused not so much on the schools' potential, as how to manage the system they inherit. So, their recommendations to boards and district bureaucracies tend to focus primarily on the gargantuan task of managing 10,000 employees and 55,500 students—increasingly poor and working class—with a dwindling school budget and under increasingly complex and rigid rules imposed by the state and federal governments. Consequently, the school boards have tended to close the smaller but more effective schools for disproportionately large numbers of poor and working class students of color.

Board Culture and Structure Resist Change

It is doubtful, however, that even if the superintendents were driven by goals other than maintaining a system that essentially sorts and socializes, they would implement progressive goals and methods. Ziegler and Jennings' research on district politics suggests "in unequivocal terms, the existence of an educational elite which is consciously self-perpetuating."¹²

School board incumbents generally select their successors, and most candidates do not campaign on issues that would distinguish them from rivals.¹³ Even when "delegate-minded" board candidates are elected, they are quickly socialized into a "trustee" mentality and begin to identify with entrenched interest groups. This culture is reinforced by national school board meetings, superintendent sessions, and a plethora of handbooks.¹⁴

In San Francisco, for instance, few voters are aware of educational issues, and school board elections are popularity contests won by those who can raise the most money. When grassroots candidates do get elected, they are subtly socialized to "work with the superintendent," and use meaningless phrases, such as "laser-like reform on academic achievement." The combination of propaganda from professional associations and being wooed by big business vendors makes even the most progressive school board candidate realize that it would be political suicide to challenge a superintendent's "laser-like focus" on creating a lean and mean school system.

School board members who suggest progressive pedagogy and curricula are accused of being "leftist ideologues" or "not about the kids," by business leaders, the media, and fellow professionals. If these attempts fail to inhibit board members, big business can threaten to withdraw its subsidies and political will from desperately needed supplemental district funding (parcel taxes, for example). But most board members respond to the carrot enough to believe that whenever there is a crisis—and there is always one around the corner—the "business advisory board" is the group to approach for advice and support.

Interest Groups Vie for Control

School board members are not the only ones effectively co-opted by the political system. Organized ethnic or identity groups, representing very few constituents, sometimes act as gatekeepers. Leaders of these groups punish those who make decisions based on progressive educational principles rather than skin color, gender, or sexual orientation. Many a San Francisco school board meeting has been rendered ineffective by speeches from leaders of non-representative but highly organized identity groups. The largely white and middle class Parent Teachers Association (PTA) is playing into the hands of the historically disenfranchised ethnic and racial identity groups (and undermining their own political power) when they urge the school board not to be critical of the existing two-tier public school system—for fear of increasing middle-class and white flight from the schools.

As for teacher and service employee unions, having only recently found a place within the system, they are on the defensive and often fight any attempt by school boards to shake up the system. Their focus on wages and working conditions leaves little political capital for social justice issues, and their aspirations for a middle class lifestyle makes them insensitive to potential allies in school reform, viz: parents who earn less than they do. Teachers are socialized to believe in the myth of meritocracy and in their own powerlessness to change the system, long before they begin to teach.

Big business, for its part, has become adept at playing the entrenched interest groups against each other while remaining ostensibly “above the fray.” Foundations and non-profits involved with the school district intensify this dynamic when they focus on issues, such as cleaning bathrooms and community alleyways, instead of focusing on empowering the poor and working classes to challenge inequalities in the distribution of wealth and the power relationships that reinforce that inequality.

Hierarchy Overwhelms Democracy

The school system in the United States is funda-

mentally hierarchical and authoritarian. Hence, its structures and functions are at cross purposes with democratic aims. According to Don Arnstine, education—as defined by Dewey, Horton, and the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools—can only be implemented, if:

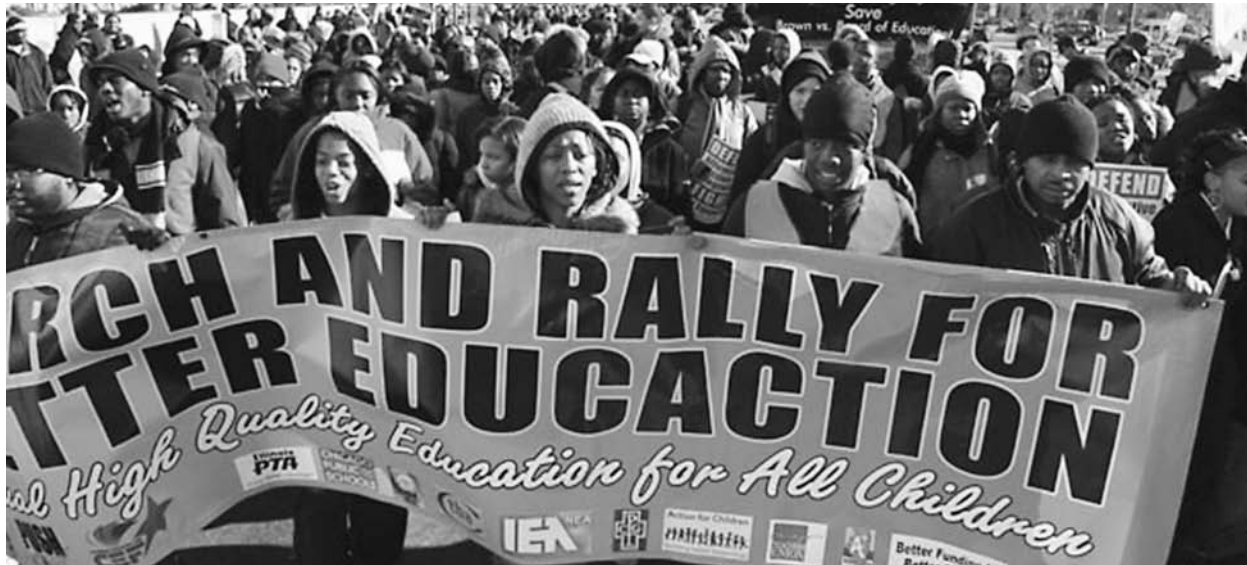
1. The multiple-choice and standardized testing systems and the college admissions procedures closely related to them are changed.
2. There’s a change in the way teachers are prepared and placed in their jobs, and... “organized for effective action.”
3. All forms of segregation (not just race) within schools are ended.
4. Students have opportunities to learn outside school.¹⁵

Debbie Meier in her book, *Will Standards Save Public Education?*, offers “six alternative assumptions” that allow “schools to instruct by example in the qualities of mind that... a democracy should be fostering in kids—responsibility for one’s own ideas, tolerance for the ideas of others, and a capacity to negotiate differences.... [T]his alternative vision isn’t utopian, even if it might be messy—as democracy is always messy.”¹⁶

For democratic education to take place, ideals have to replace standards, and teachers have to understand the purposes and interests of their students. They have to teach students how to pose their own problems and solve them democratically, in groups.¹⁷ Within the current school system, this can only happen sporadically.

Possibilities for the Future

Jean Anyon argues that there are radical possibilities in “the concentration of so many poor people in relatively small urban schools... It naturally offers a potential base for organizing a new social movement.”¹⁸ Yet, the vast majority of teachers focus on high-stakes testing, believing that they have a moral obligation to prepare their students for it. Pursuing this “moral obligation” saps most of their energy, leaving very little for organizing a social movement. It remains for those outside the school system to offer teachers the hope of fundamental



change, and support for the idea that they have a moral obligation to change the system. Simultaneously, progressive school board members need to see themselves as unapologetic activists, not “team players.”

In San Francisco, we believe we have begun to do this. Eric Mar continues to cultivate a grassroots base and Kathy Emery has co-founded the San Francisco Freedom School, which uses a people’s history of the Civil Rights Movement to show educators and other activists how to build the infrastructure for the next

social movement. Teachers 4 Social Justice nourishes progressive teachers and parents through study groups and provides an outstanding local and national networking opportunity during their annual conference. The San Francisco Organizing Project has begun teaching parents how to organize in schools and establish alliances with teachers, and also to connect educational reform to affordable housing, healthcare, safety, and immigrant rights. We believe that these are the building blocks for the next social movement in this country. ■

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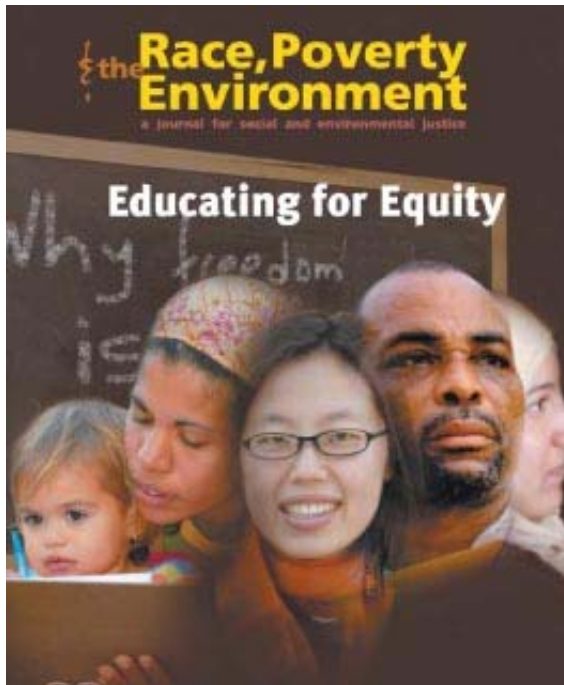
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