

A School Board for the People: Baltimore Freedom Fall

By Jacob Rosette

“Without education, there is no life... back during slavery days, you could be killed for trying to learn. You were there to do your job, pick cotton. Now we’re enslaved in the mind. We work sharecropper jobs—working at McDonald’s or the local supermarket. Other people selling drugs, livin’ the street life. We’re denied the consciousness to escape the cycle of poverty, the cycle of death. Without education we have nothing. It’s a civil right and a human right.”
—Chelsea Carson, *Freedom Fall / Algebra Project*.

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reedom Fall: We are exposing Baltimore City to the world,” reads the registration card distributed and signed by students throughout Baltimore as a pledge of support for the creation of the Maryland Freedom Board of Education. The new body is a direct response to the Maryland Board of Education’s refusal to comply with a 1996 state court decision that called for greater funding for inner-city schools. In 2006, the state of Maryland shorted the Baltimore school district by \$1.08 billion—enough money to pay 1,000 extra teachers for 10 years and purchase one million new computers.

While many cities across the United States face similar unconstitutional under-funding of school districts, most of the responses from opponents have played out in courtrooms. But Baltimore’s Freedom Fall is a grassroots movement organized and run by students who actually attend these inner-city schools. Mica Artis, a Baltimore high school student and Freedom Fall organizer explains, “It’s what we need, not what someone else says we need.”

The name Freedom Fall is a reference to the 1964 Freedom Summer in Mississippi, a project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that brought hundreds of northern college students down south to “open Mississippi up” by challenging the disenfranchisement of Black folks and exposing the racist power structure of the Jim Crow South. It is no surprise that organizers with Freedom Fall connect to this history and see themselves as continuing this legacy of struggle.

The city of Baltimore is predominately Black and—like most other inner cities in the United States—is highly segregated, systematically denied resources, and facing widespread poverty. Comparing

Baltimore school districts—with their large class sizes, old books, crumbling buildings, and unqualified teachers—to the predominately white suburban school districts of Maryland, exposes a school system that is “separate and unequal.” According to studies conducted by the Harvard Civil Rights Project, there has been a rapid trend of re-segregation across the country, thanks to decisions made by the Supreme Court in the last decade. This has contributed to a “growing gap in quality” between schools in white communities and those in communities of color.

Civil Rights Roots

The main organizers of Freedom Fall are also members of the student-run advocacy committee of the Baltimore branch of the Algebra Project, an organization founded by former SNCC organizer, Bob Moses. The Algebra Project’s goal is to build math literacy, which Moses describes as the key to challenging a “sharecropper education,” an old term that could perhaps just as accurately describe our modern education system. With an understanding that inadequate math education is used as a method of exclu-



sion from a technology-based, post-industrial United States, the Algebra Project tutors students, beginning as early as middle school. The Algebra Project encourages students who have come through its tutoring programs to mentor other students and organize for education as a civil right.

Just as SNCC registered voters and created the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, freedom schools, and community centers, the Freedom Fall project also employs a dual strategy of both pressuring the political structure and building new institutions that can meet direct needs. Students in Baltimore have been organizing for adequate education funding for years by using tactics such as civil disobedience, demonstrations, and strikes.

Like Freedom Summer, Freedom Fall began with registration cards. Students were asked to rate the education that they receive and write down a topic about which they wanted to learn. Students were also asked to help occupy libraries, cafeterias, and gyms and hold freedom schools. They educated other students about under-funding, the goals of Freedom Fall, and the topics the students wanted to learn about—from the Black Panther Party to the history of racist schools, liberation poetry, and the Algebra Project.

Following these Freedom Schools, on October 14, 2006, hundreds of students and their supporters marched through Baltimore, holding signs reading, “No Education, No Life.” At a local church they held the first session of the Freedom Board of Education, a new body made up of students and adult allies who serve as the “primary commissioners on education for the state of Maryland.” They demand that the state of Maryland “comply with Circuit Court orders” requiring that the \$1.08 billion withheld by the state be paid to Baltimore schools.

In preparation for November’s elections, the Freedom Board of Education wrote a letter to all gubernatorial candidates, announcing its formation and insisting that the new governor comply with their demands. They also began discussing a new budget proposal for schools, and are asking the administration at Baltimore High School to overturn the suspension of 50 students who organized a sit-in in solidarity with their efforts.

Ultimately, the goal of the body is “to become the Board of Education for the people,” says its chair, Chris Goodman. According to organizer Fernandes Harlee, “if the system doesn’t work for us, we need to make our own. We can’t wait anymore.” ■

Photo: The Baltimore Algebra Project students take their message of math and activism to students at Patterson High School.

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Jacob Rosette is an organizer with ALL CITY, which organizes in New York City on student and youth issues. This article was compiled from interviews with Freedom Fall organizers Mica Artis, Chris Goodman, Chelsea Carson, and Fernandes Harlee.

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The Drive to Oust the Middle Class from Inner City Public Schools

By Margot Pepper

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law in 2001 by President George Bush, backed by both Democrats and Republicans. The backbone of the program, allegedly designed to hold schools accountable for academic failure, is standardized state testing for students and educators. Rather than improve public education, however, there is now ample evidence that NCLB testing is part of a systematic effort to privatize diverse urban public schools in the United States. The objectives of privatization have been threefold: first, to divert taxpayer money from the public sector to the corporate sector; second, to capture part of the market, which would otherwise be receiving free education; and third, to drive out middle class accountability, leaving behind a disposable population that won't have a voice about the inappropriate use of their tax dollars, nor the bleak outlook on their futures.

“As a for-profit venture, public education represents a market worth over \$600 billion dollars,” notes Dr. Henry A. Giroux, in *Z Magazine*.¹

“The emergence of HMOs and hospital management companies created enormous opportunities for investors. We believe the same pattern will occur in education,” observes Mary Tanner, Managing Director of Lehman Brothers.²

“Bush’s proposal for national standardized testing is helping to pave the way for these EMO’s,” says Project Censored in their annual collection of most censored stories. “While the aptly named Educational Management Organizations are being promoted as the new answer to impoverished school districts and dilapidated classrooms, the real emphasis is on investment returns rather than student welfare and educational development.”³

For over a century, norm-referenced test results have been misinterpreted in the United States to support racist campaigns. IQ tests were used as an argument against integration of schools, the passage of the Civil Rights Law of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1969, Arthur Jensen used his so-called “findings”—that average African-American IQs were significantly lower than those of Euro-American or white children—to attack educational programs which benefit the poor, like Head Start.⁴

An influential study by Elizabeth Peal and Wallace Lambert in 1962 found that the higher the subjects’ economic status, the higher scores would be on norm-referenced tests. Similarly, higher achievement scores on the NCLB tests have been predicted according to zip codes, used by economists to sort by economic status.⁵

Randy L. Hoover and Kathy L. Shook note that a study of 593 Ohio School Districts show the district’s high stakes tests “to correlate with Social Economic Status to such a high degree as to virtually mask any and all actual academic achievement claimed to be measured by these tests.”⁶ They observe that students were “visible victims of sorting by socio-economic status... by high stakes tests that fail to meet recognized, scientific standards of test validity.”

Now, the standardized tests that are part of the NCLB campaign are being used to lend legitimacy to policies that lead to a cheap, uneducated labor pool and increased profits in the private sector. The effect of NCLB has been to dismantle public education by funneling public tax dollars directly to corporations through penalties, private tutoring companies, and vouchers. Once more, the populations paying for this policy are students of color and the poor, since the poorest schools with limited resources comprised primarily of such students perform the worst on the

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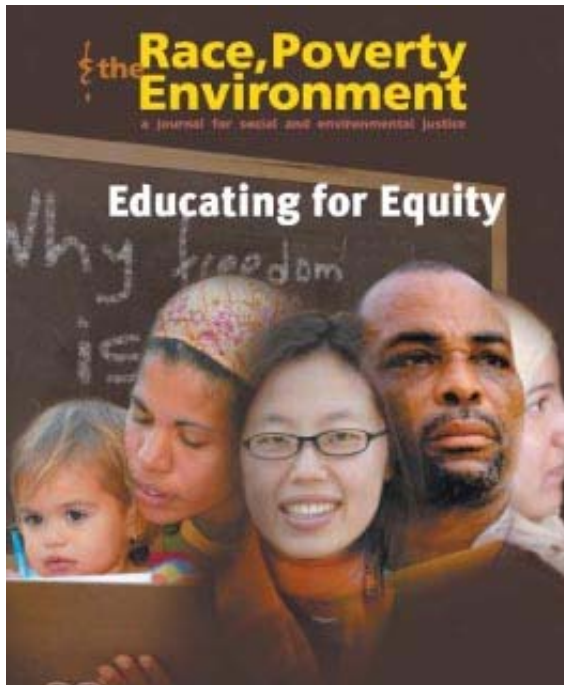
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