

## Conclusion

Arabolos' Mission High School planning team attempted educational reform in an environment of shrinking options due to a national business-led systemic reform movement. In 1992, the California state superintendent's office directed district high schools to adopt the CBR's "expand and focus" program outlined in *Second to None: A Vision of the New California High School*, a report of the California High School Task Force. The Mission Planning team dutifully incorporated the report's suggestions to create "career pathways" and a college-level courses for all students. The planning team also spent a great deal of time learning about "data-driven" decision-making in response to Rojas' use of reconstitution. The team pored over test scores, attendance rates, suspensions, and the percentages of A's and F's the teachers gave out every semester. They also exerted effort and time writing site plans that explained how the school's "instructional delivery system" "addressed the achievement of all students, especially Latinos and African Americans" (refer to Appendix F). These were the requirements imposed by the rewards and interventions program designed by Rojas' administration to ensure that all educational decisions were "outcome-based," the principle upon which systemic reform rested.

Yet, in spite of the sincerity with which the Mission team implemented systemic reform, they failed to adhere to the true goals of high-stakes testing. In successfully increasing the likelihood of academic success for the majority of minority students at MHS, Arabolos and her allies established a "family" atmosphere and "nourished" relationships. The principle driving their reform decisions was to build community and respond to its concerns. In other words, they interpreted and implemented the BRT's mandate to increase parental involvement and promote site-based decision-making very differently from how it was intended. Instead of focusing on a test-prep curriculum as BASRC promoted or as Linda McNeil witnessed in the Texas schools, the Mission team believed in college level, critical thinking seminars, and a literature and history of identity course. A health clinic was built in the basement, not just for students but also for the entire neighborhood. The students experienced real decision-making authority by participating on the planning committee, working on an uncensored newspaper, and

being elected to student government positions that had authentic representative power. Parental involvement was encouraged by individual conversations between parents, and the administration that were intimately connected to issues of the students' attendance. Arabolos and her team were responding to the interests and needs of students, parents and residents of the Mission High School neighborhood. The school had become part of a "place" in which the residents were bound together by psychological, sentimental as well as material ties.

This was not what Rojas or the BRT CEOs had in mind. Rojas may have fired Arabolos anyway, even if there had been no hovering BRT agenda. She was a threat to his control. Rojas needed to maintain control of the \$500 million system in order to deliver patronage and people in the service of the local corporate agenda. These were issues independent of the national corporate agenda. Nevertheless the limitations placed upon the Mission planning teams' options and the direction pursued by Arabolos' successor reveal the direct influence of systemic reform. From 1996 to 1997, Alfaro began the process of eliminating the college-level seminars of the Step-to-College program by requiring high test scores as a prerequisite for participation. Alfaro eventually replaced Step-to-College with the CBR-supported School-to-Career program. Alfaro reduced bilingual and multicultural academic courses and increased the number of standardized Advanced Placement courses. The degree to which Alfaro successfully dismantled community support for a Mission educational program can be seen by the absence of any neighborhood or community protest upon his removal in 2001.

The protests of Arabolos' supporters — the letters, the student walkout, and the packed school board meetings — failed to prevent a dramatic change in the educational program at Mission High School. The only way the community was able to influence school policy was with a citywide campaign directed against the superintendent's policy of reconstitution. Through campaigns during school board elections and pressure by the San Francisco teacher's union, the community was able to begin reversing the Rojas/BRT agenda. A new school board removed Alfaro and the union was able to eliminate the most egregiously harmful aspects of reconstitution. But these signs of community influence were rendered moot by the adoption of systemic reform in California. In spite of a new MHS principal who has begun to successfully rebuild community ties, the high

school is once again under threat of reconstitution. This time, however, the threat is not from the district but from the state. Furthermore, the new superintendent, Ackerman, is just as attached to test scores as Rojas was and equally insistent that the school board allow the superintendent to determine policy. Ackerman's policy, as articulated in the district's *Excellence for All* program, focuses on aligning district policy with state policy.

Based on a review of the research on school board responsiveness, Zerchykov (1984) gives the following advice to communities who wish to have influence over what happens in their schools: ensure that school board members are elected by district (instead of at large) and have one-term limits; if the superintendent is unresponsive, work to defeat the incumbent board members; or, supplement direct confrontation with the board with indirect relationship with the superintendent; or, try to play the superintendent and the board against each other instead of they giving you the run-around. While some or all of this advice was employed by communities in San Francisco during the Rojas administration, public influence over school board policy was still minimal. One reason for the powerlessness of communities during the Rojas regime was the court's decision to usurp the political process. As a result "experts" determined the fate of desegregation in San Francisco instead of the public. The district's schools remained segregated and unequal while systemic reform prevailed. Since 1999, Zerchykov's advice to communities seeking influence over educational policy has become moot. The passage of PSAA has turned the district superintendent into an administrative arm of state standards and tests. Local school boards, and therefore the public, have no power to alter the situation at the district and school-site level. It remains to be seen how effective local leaders are in overcoming the significant obstacles to organizing community opposition on a statewide basis.

The resources of communities, especially poor ones, can hardly compete with the money and personal access that corporate leaders and lobbyists have. This is especially true since the BRT has succeeded in creating a national network of organizations to support its agenda. Leading educational researchers at prestigious universities praise the implementation of systemic reform and continue to use test scores as dependent variables in their research. Public Agenda informs the press that the "public" is favor of "high standards for all." Editorialists berate those who oppose high-stakes testing for lowering

standards and expectations for poor and minority students. Nonprofit organizations offer training to teachers and administrators on how to use test scores to select effective instructional strategies and programs. State governors regularly convene and consult with the nation's corporate leaders about how to be the "education governors" of their respective states.

Such a widespread and interconnected web of people and organizations has generally succeeded in focusing debate over educational reform away from a discussion of goals to one of means. As the legislative analysts informed California lawmakers in 1994, the goals of education

once controversial and widely debated, are now generally accepted as the foundation of our reform efforts (Connor 1994a; p. 130).

The goal of increasing the numbers of high achieving students by means of high-stakes testing is still, however, "controversial" if not "widely debated." Other goals such as those achieved by integration have been displaced by the BRT agenda. The BRT network of organizations has muted debate over goals and eliminated the community's ability to influence the process by which goals are determined. The BRT believes that the growing "backlash" to high-stakes testing can be "handled" and they may well be correct. As long as the historical antagonism between parents and teachers continues, such a prediction certainly seems plausible.

Yet the expectation that systemic reform will increase the number of high skilled workers is equally problematic. To expect increasing numbers of students to achieve high test scores doesn't guarantee they will do so, nor will threatening teachers and administrators with "intervention" necessarily turn them into more effective test-prep coaches. The tests themselves are most strongly correlated with socioeconomic status, a variable that, if it can be altered, normally takes three generations to do so. Besides good test-takers don't necessarily make good computer programmers, engineers, and industrial designers. Rarely do the technical manuals for standardized tests provide any predictive validity correlation coefficients. If systemic reform is a response to a crisis of legitimacy in the public school system, it may have only raised expectations leading to an even greater crisis than it attempted to avert. If systemic reform was a response to the economic crisis posed by the Japanese challenge in the late 1970s, it seems not to have

been necessary after all, and perhaps high-stakes testing will pass with time as the backlash picks up steam. If systemic reform is the means by communities are to be denied all influence on what the goals of education should be, then it has already been successful and threatens to become even more so.