

## *Parents and Teachers: A Necessary Relationship*

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for the *Western Edition*, April, 2007, SF, CA

For sixteen years, I taught high school history. Then I went back to school and got a PhD in education. During the last five years, I have been participating in efforts to help the less powerful gain some leverage in the decision-making process in this city. This has been a daunting task but one in which I have met some amazing and wonderful people.

An important lesson I have learned from both my research and experience is that teachers and parents in San Francisco must find common cause if there is ever going to be “people power” to counteract the current monopoly of power that corporate business leaders wield in this city (state and nation). The Civil Rights Movement emerged out of churches, in part, because that was where the social capital of the community was. Today, school sites offer potential social capital for organizing “people power” if teachers can find a way to use it as such. To do so, however, they will have to make common cause with their parents. They will have to have a very accurate understanding of the power structure in the city, state and nation in order to make effective strategic decisions when organizing.

One place to start on this journey might be to read a study done by Teachers 4 Social Justice and Justice Matters called *Building Strong Parent Teacher Partnerships*. This short, eleven page report identifies four barriers to such partnerships and offers models of how to overcome them. One of the barriers, not surprisingly, is poor communication. The report noted that the inability of parents and teachers to communicate effectively with each other is

... rooted in school culture and structures that cause systemic barriers between parents and teachers. By school culture and structure we mean the way schooling is organized, the rules of the game, how resources are allocated, how decisions are made, and how parent and teacher roles are defined, among many other important factors. Time was a prevalent structural issue that consistently came up during our meetings. Due to the rigid and inflexible structure of school time, parents and teachers felt they were not able to communicate and engage with each other in order to build partnerships necessary for student success (page 5).

Structural obstacles prevent deep and effective communication between parents and teachers. Consequently, teachers necessarily fall back on making decisions based on assumptions that have been institutionally reinforced throughout the history of the public school system. And as the vast majority of teachers are white, middle class and the vast majority of urban parents are working parents of color, the assumptions are based on racial and class stereotypes that undermine rather than promote effective partnerships.

In the last 18 years, district, state and federal mandated standardized testing and its accompanying scripted curriculum have exacerbated the historical impediments to teacher/parent communication. The central irony is that structural support for creating a culture of honest dialogue between parents and teachers would necessarily provide the kind of accountability that high-stakes testing has promised but failed to deliver. But the only way that the structure and culture of schools can change is by teachers and parents beginning to think about how to organize a movement to make it happen. Only people power can combat the corporate power that determines education, health care, wage and housing policy today. (Learn about organizing at [educationanddemocracy.org](http://educationanddemocracy.org))