

Schools, Race and Class

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While state control of local education has deprived the SF school board of the ability to make fundamental school policy (essentially since 1978 in California), school board commissioners still have important decisions to make this year. I discussed two of these decisions—the choice of the next superintendent and a policy on small schools—in this column last month. Another important decision will be a new school placement plan. I do not envy the school board's dilemma in confronting this issue, particularly because state and federal law have given the commissioners a narrow range of options from which to choose.

From 1983-2005, the SFUSD school placement policy has been framed by a series of court orders. The original 1983 Consent Decree settlement was the result of a lawsuit filed by the SF NAACP that was a legal attempt to enforce educational equity through the desegregation of the district's schools. Since the SF NAACP couldn't prove to the judge that the district had intentionally created desegregated schools, the NAACP lawyers had to agree to a compromise settlement that didn't satisfy anyone (except proponents of the status quo, perhaps). One indication of how foolish it is to rely solely on the judicial system to solve the complex problem of educational equity was the immediate formation of a parent picket line that prevented the transport of black students out of their neighborhood. Right from the beginning, the very people for whom the SF NAACP had fought were protesting the implementation of the settlement. And there has been protest and lawsuits ever since.

Student placement policy is probably one of the most contentious topics for parents of school-age children. This would not be the case if all of the district schools were fully-funded and *all* parents at *every* school were truly part of the school site's decision-making process. News reporters fail to address these variables as the most important and fundamental ones affecting quality of education. As a result, the debate over educational equity is focused not on root causes but on manifestations such as neighborhood schools, teacher training, racial quotas, test scores, and language programs. These are all important issues, but they are still manifestations of a deeper structure. Faced with a \$22 million deficit last year, the SF school board choose to close down five schools. At least one of those, John Swett Elementary School, should never have been closed. Swett was not a school that ambitious white middle-class parents wanted to send their children. It was, however, a school in which working class parents of color did want to send their children. John Swett parents were real partners with teachers and members of the local community were heavily involved. The Swett community fought hard to keep their school. They astutely formed alliances with other District 5 schools, which convinced the Board of Supervisors to vote on funding to keep it open one more year (money, unfortunately, refused by the school board.)

Although unsuccessful in the moment, it is this kind of organizing, not placement policies or lawsuits, that will begin to solve the fundamental problems of educational equity (although policies and law can be useful organizing issues). The grassroots organizing that blossomed into the Civil Rights Movement in the mid 1950's had many false starts. It remains to be seen whether students, parents and teachers today can follow the recent example of the District 5 Alliance and use the manifestations of what Bob Moses' calls "sharecropper education" as issues around which to organize for fully funded and democratically run schools.