

What is a school?  
by Kathy Emery  
July 2009  
Western Edition

Sometime during the last three years, I began to tell people (when they ask me what I “do”) that I am the executive director of the San Francisco Freedom School (SFFS). Yet whenever I say that, I feel I am misrepresenting myself, and the program of which I am a part. Let me explain what I mean by describing our program first.

The SF Freedom School is not really a school. A school is where people have to go even if they don’t want to, even if they don’t learn anything, and even if they feel humiliated by the experience. A school is where teachers TEACH and students LEARN. Teachers ask the questions and students are to respond with the “right” answers -- they are graded on their ability to do so. School is where students of the same age are supposed to learn the same thing at the same time, but never do. Students in school are ranked and sorted according to tests based on 19<sup>th</sup> century dominant culture definitions of what intelligence and achievement is – very limited and narrow definitions that allow for the making fine distinctions such as those between the 75 and the 76 percentile.

According to this definition of school, the SF Freedom School is not a school. Instead, it is a place where people (from 16 to 82 years old) come of their own free will to learn about the Civil Rights Movement. There is no tracking, sorting or segregation – only mutual respect for each other’s experiences and humanity. What participants learn, how they learn and when they learn, is up to those who come to learn. How do I know they learn? They talk about what they learn, act upon it, ask questions about it and they write about it. No two people learn exactly the same thing at the same time in spite of, for example, both watching a short documentary about Mississippi Freedom Summer and then listening and talking to a veteran of the Civil Rights movement who was an activist in Mississippi in 1964.

During six Saturdays (from 10 am to 4 pm) in July and August in the parish hall of a local church, the “staff” of SFFS offer those who attend a detailed history of the Civil Rights Movement. We present a history in the morning but after a potluck lunch, we share with each other what that history means to us. In that discussion, it becomes apparent that the participants of the morning learned different lessons and have interpretations that we, the staff, have never considered before. The different understandings, meanings, knowledge and experiences that each person brings to the afternoon conversations and activities provoke thoughtful reflection and generate questions that the participants pursue on their own, because THEY want to know the answers to THEIR questions.

So, if the SF Freedom School is not a “school,” why call it a school? I have begun to ask this of myself more and more as the negative connotations of “school” probably scare away many people who would enjoy it. Yet we still call ourselves a freedom school because the term has a very important historical reference, and we think history is important. We try to channel the methods and goals of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools. In calling ourselves a freedom school, we hope to keep alive the authentic history of the original freedom schools. We cannot do that alone, and have discovered we are not alone. This will be our fifth summer. Feel free to drop by some Saturday and join us ([sffreedomschool.org](http://sffreedomschool.org) or 415-703-0465).

In next month’s article, I will explain why the title “executive director” is problematic.