

Citizenship and Freedom Schools

by Kathy Emery, PhD.

Mke4think@hotmail.com

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Over the last eighteen years, corporate-engineered high-stakes testing has successfully eliminated public debate over the goals of education. School communities have been reduced to debating only the *means* by which they will raise test scores, never questioning the goals and ideals inherent in using test scores as the ultimate measure of academic achievement. Part of the problem is that standardized test scores have been used in this way for the last hundred years. They have become part of the air we breathe. But part of the problem has to do with the current concept of citizenship and the powerlessness that it promotes. Most parents, students and teachers can wax eloquent as to the serious and fundamental harm that has been done by high-stakes testing. At the same time, these very same people will say they can't do anything to stop the tyranny of testing (or global warming, nuclear proliferation and the War on Terror for that matter.) At best, they hope the powers-that-be will soon discover the error of their ways and stop this insanity. This will be a very long wait!

Such passivity and powerlessness has not always been so prevalent. In fact, as recently as twenty years ago, politicians were consistently having their feet held to the fire by organized groups of everyday, regular people who considered it part of their responsibility as citizens to be actively organized, 24/7. What has happened since then, however, is the successful attack on the concept of the common good and public space—a taxpayers' revolt, a retreat into consumerism, and a relinquishing of political responsibility by regular people. This is not to say that there aren't any people out there trying to jump start the next social movement. It's just that they aren't getting much traction at the moment.

Generally, people have learned history from standardized textbooks. Implied in this approach is the lesson that leaders—mostly older, white, straight men—make history. This creates people vulnerable to manipulation and convinced that only someone else can save them from George Bush. In assessing this state of affairs, I and three others decided it would be useful to revive the idea of summer Freedom Schools. We launched the San Francisco Freedom School (SFFS) during seven Saturdays in the summer of 2005.

SFFS' mission is to offer hope in a time of despair, and authenticity in an era of distortion and deception. We use the history of the Civil Rights Movement as a case study of how social movements happen, and particularly focus on the role that everyday people played in creating that history. To do this, we invite members of the Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement as guest speakers. We also use film, discussion and activities. Each Saturday (10 AM – 4 PM), we explore one topic as illustrated through movement history, such as “Arts and Social Protest” and “Key Concepts of Nonviolent Direct Action.”

We want teachers to bring such a history back into the classrooms, and parents and students to demand it. Social movements just don't happen. They happen when everyday people act collectively at the right historical moment. People who learn this know they need to “get ready to be ready” and can believe Gandhi's optimistic observation that if evil were stronger than good, good would have disappeared long ago. Please join us this summer! Our first of seven consecutive Saturdays begins on July 7th. To register or for more info, contact mke4think@hotmail.com or call 415-703-0465. For more information, visit www.educationanddemocracy.org.