

Policy, Practice, Privilege and Power

by Kathy Emery, PhD

Mke4think@hotmail.com

For the *Western Edition*, March 1, 2006, SF CA

On Tuesday, February 27th, the San Francisco School Board formally adopted a specific small schools policy. This represents the culmination of over five years of organizing by teachers and parents who believe that small, autonomous schools can be the engine for creating equity and excellence in San Francisco district schools. I, too, believe this could happen, but only if some important history lessons have been or will quickly be learned by the reformers and by those who must join the movement for it to be a means to a larger end.

Lesson #1— Policy is not Practice

This lesson is aptly illustrated by the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v Board*, which overturned the 1896 *Plessy v Ferguson* precedent. In 1954, the Justices declared that separate was inherently unequal. They decided this based on five court cases that were designed to demand that black students be able to attend white schools whose facilities and curriculum materials were far superior to those of black schools. Most white school boards, so challenged, mounted effective resistance to the new law of the land, some closing their public schools rather than having integrated ones. It took an organized social movement ten years to finally break the back of segregation in the South. In other words, it took hundreds and thousands of everyday, ordinary people acting together over many years to force institutions to implement the law.

The passage of a small schools policy does not mean that the policy will be implemented. Only ongoing public pressure will allow the school board members to hold the district accountable for implementing its policy. Past district superintendents have been able to ignore board policy resolutions with impunity (e.g., Equity Impact Resolution) because the public is not organized to sustain constant scrutiny and pressure on the central office staff or even at school sites.

Lesson #2— Privilege is not Power

In 1964, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee spearheaded a coalition of Civil Rights organizations that successfully broke the back of segregation in Mississippi and in the South—Mississippi Freedom Summer effected a crack in the “middle of the iceberg.” When middle class and poor blacks united behind a Freedom Platform in 1964 and appealed to the Democratic party to be a party of sharecroppers and maids as well as businessmen and school teachers, the Democratic leadership allowed the middle class blacks into the party but rejected the working poor. Today, Mississippi has more black elected officials than any other state in the union and blacks can look whites in the eyes without fear of being lynched. Yet, African Americans in all states, including Mississippi, are disproportionately underpaid, jobless, suffer from poor health and are disrespected.

The passage of the small schools policy does not guarantee that all or even most students in the district will be able to attend small schools or benefit in any way from the kind of pedagogy and structure that the policy promotes. Nor will it solve the financial crisis that SFUSD faces as a result of the 1978 passage of Prop 13. As schools increasingly depend on private corporate entities to supplement declining public funding, these entities will use such funding to ensure that schools continue to reproduce the status quo.

The new small schools policy could be used to leverage social justice for all students in SFUSD, but only if organizers have learned important lessons from social movement history. School equity is about more than just school reform, it's about social reform.