

## *Small is Local and Personal!*

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Almost one in three of San Francisco's school age population goes to private independent or religious schools. One of the many reasons why parents pay as high as \$26,000 a year (per pupil) to send their children to private schools is because they are small. The school staff know most if not all of the students, the students know each other, and parents know the teachers. In this way, small schools can reflect the goals and culture of the parents and students in the school.

Furthermore, in small schools (usually no more than 600 students), relationships can develop that support conflict resolution, learning that is connected to the students' interests as well as allow parents to *really* hold the school accountable. These kinds of relationships can exist in large schools, but it is much more difficult. The larger the school, the harder it is for teachers to get to know the students and the parents of their students. The larger the school, the easier it is for students to fall through the cracks, their needs ignored.

Schools for rich students are invariably small. Public schools have been invariably huge. In the 1980's, Debbie Meier and several other educational reformers decided that the benefits of small schools should not be monopolized by private school children. They started a movement in New York City that is now national in scope (although the infusion of corporate money into the movement threatens to subvert its original intent). Out of her experience with small school reform, Meier has defined six "assumptions" she believes should be the basis of *any* educational reform model (see [http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/Resources/Meier\\_Assumptions.htm](http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/Resources/Meier_Assumptions.htm))

The public small schools movement came to San Francisco six years ago when three teachers from Balboa High School decided they wanted to start a small high school in the city. With the help of parents in the Excelsior and the San Francisco Organizing Project, June Jordan School for Equity opened its doors in the Fall of 2002. The original idea was to organize and advocate for system-wide reform like Oakland was doing at the time (see [http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/Resources/OCO\\_story.htm](http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/Resources/OCO_story.htm)). But, SF Superintendent Ackerman was opposed to a district-wide small school policy and she had a four member majority on the board that supported her. But the community support for one small school could not be denied and June Jordan was granted the right to exist as a public school, under the aegis of district supervision (unlike charter schools which are free of public accountability for the duration of their charter).

The school board elections two years ago deprived Ackerman of having a solid 4 member majority on the board, giving small school advocates some more wiggle room (see <http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/SF/StateOFSFUSD.html> for my analysis of Ackerman's tenure, and last month's column for an explanation of why people should be very concerned about who the next superintendent will be). Nevertheless, June Jordan, along with several other very small, small schools and a couple of "re-designed" large schools have yet to get the kind of support that a new project needs to get up and running on its own. This may change since the school board recently commissioned an advisory group to come up with a district-wide small schools policy. Meanwhile, June Jordan continues to keep the beacon community-driven reform alive (see [http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/Resources/resources\\_community.htm](http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/Resources/resources_community.htm) for resources on "community control" of education).