

## *RACE, RIGHTS, AND EQUALITY*

**A People's Hearing on the Human and Civil Right to Education in D.C.**

May 24, 2006, Josephine Butler Center



**Background:** Students, teachers, parents and activists celebrated the passion and creativity of today's youth organizing and the legacy of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which struck down "separate and unequal" education in the U.S. Testimony from student activists and the discussion that followed surfaced age-old injustices around class and race. At the same time, the *Brown* vision of education *for all* is facing new threats, such as shrinking government funding, accountability and capacity for public education.

**Students Write about History and Current Realities:** Students from Sousa Middle School presented research on their school's role in the civil rights movement, connecting the history of "separate and unequal" schools to the realities at Sousa today. The student project, which recently won a regional award, presented a vision for a renovated Sousa that delivers on the promise of equal education.



**Students Walk Out:** Students from Bell Multicultural High School shared their experiences in organizing a walkout in April to protest a proposed law criminalizing immigrants and the people who help them, and to support expanded opportunities for college education.



"We felt so happy that we were part of organizing a walkout. We felt like we made a difference. We had a lot of support from people in the street who were honking their horns and telling us what we were doing was important. We felt so unified with the other students who walked out."

**Youth Activism and Organizing:** Students from Cardozo and Eastern High Schools shared poetry and photography documenting conditions in public schools across the city. This documentation process helped change their perceptions of the crumbling conditions they had once accepted to be "normal." The photographs themselves were used in a successful campaign to secure new city funding to fix up the schools.

"The idea that we should have educated black people is still something a lot of people oppose. I'm glad to see youth and adults getting involved and protesting. We need to hear these voices."

*-Member of the audience*



A panel of human and civil rights activists shared their reflections on the student testimony and their vision for equal education in D.C. and globally.

“One of my students raised the question, ‘Is the only way we get a good education to go to school with white students?’ I thought that was not the lesson I wanted to teach my students. But the reality has been that when white children leave a classroom, the money follows them.”



“We talk about getting full funding for our public schools, but look at all the private schools coming up. Who is going to get into these schools? Who is going to benefit from the struggle to get facilities fixed up? For many of us, it’s hard to follow because they’re talking about quality education for children of color and that’s great, everyone deserves choice. But what does that mean? Does it mean demonizing public schools?”

***-Elizabeth Davis, activist and Sousa Middle School teacher***

“Let’s remember that there are many organizers, activists and agents of change throughout our history who have made a difference. The core thing is to find your voice and use it to speak truth to power. You’re already doing this in your schools. You can continue in the community. And reach out to us. We want to reach out, hold you up, strengthen you, and recognize your leadership. We are here to stand with you and help you as you find your voice.”

***-Emira Woods, international advocate***

“I’ve been coming to the US for the last 10 or 12 years, and when I come we’re always talking about the problems of the Global South. We never get to meet real people and talk about struggles here. We don’t see the movements in the North working on issues of inequality in the North.

It’s interesting to see some of the parallels. In Southern Africa today, you see not just racial inequality but class disparities. The new ruling classes, who are mostly black, do not send their children to public schools. It’s considered a mark of failure. You make sure you put your kids in a school that speaks to your new status.



I want to single out some of the campaigns for education that are going on. One of most significant is Global Campaign for Education. I would like to encourage groups here to be part of its global week of action. Also there is work that goes on specifically around girls’ education which tends to be led by African women’s movements or women’s movements globally. This work strengthens girls themselves, and creates support systems so they can participate and stay in school.”

***- Everjoice Win, Zimbabwean human rights activist***

***Race, Rights, and Equality: The People’s Hearing on the Human and Civil Right to Education*** is part of an alternative organizing strategy that seeks to deepen, diversify, and expand democratic participation in decisions about public resources in Washington, DC. ***Race, Rights, and Equality*** was sponsored by Just Associates, Plymouth Congregational UCC Board of Social Action, Youth Education Alliance, Youth Action Research Group and Critical Exposure with input from Center for Community Change. For more information, please contact Darshana Patel at 202-232-1211 or [dpatel@justassociates.org](mailto:dpatel@justassociates.org).