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Radical Math at the DOE

“Social justice” teachers propagandize while Chancellor Klein looks the other way.

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Late last month, over 400 high school math teachers and education professors gathered in Brooklyn for a three-day conference, titled “Creating Balance in an Unjust World: Math Education and Social Justice.” Prominently displayed on the official program’s first page was a passage from Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Marxist educator and icon of the teaching-for-social-justice movement: “There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to . . . bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of our world.”

The conference’s organizers left nothing to the imagination about their leftist agenda. At many of the conference’s 28 workshops, math teachers proudly demonstrated how they used classroom projects to train students in seeing social problems from a radical anticapitalist perspective. At a plenary session, Professor Marilyn Frankenstein of the University of Massachusetts’ math education department proclaimed that elementary school teachers should not use traditional math lessons, in which students calculate, say, the cost of food. Rather, the teachers should make clear that in a truly “just society,” food would “be as free as breathing the air.”

New York City’s Department of Education insists that the radical math conference was perfectly appropriate. In fact, as I recently learned, the whole affair got rolling with the assistance of the DOE, which gave a financial grant to the conference’s principal organizer, Jonathan Osler. Osler is a math teacher at El Puente Academy, a small “social-justice” high school in Brooklyn. In 2005, he and two math teachers from other schools applied for the DOE’s Zone Teacher Inquiry Grants Program. Their application proposed “the creation of a system to bring together NYC math teachers to share ideas, curriculum, resources, and experiences integrating issues of social justice into math classes.” Some of the social justice issues that math classes could explore: “Check-cashing locations ripping off poor people. H&R Block and Jackson Hewitt ripping off poor people. Foreclosure agencies ripping off poor people. Issues of joblessness, homelessness, incarceration, lack of funding for education, excessive funding for war. . . . The list goes on and on.”

Duly impressed with the math teachers' commitment, the DOE awarded them \$3,000 in city funds to get the project under way. Osler then created a website (www.radicalmath.org) that, in turn, became the principal venue for organizing the social-justice math conference. But for the conference organizers, getting money from the city wasn't as important as receiving the DOE's official imprimatur that teaching for social justice was acceptable pedagogy in New York City schools. With the DOE's green light, conference participants observed "model" social justice math lessons in seven city public schools during regular school hours. At East Side Community High School, for example, the math department showed off its "Sweat Shop Math" project, in which students calculate the degree of wage exploitation in a sneaker factory in Nicaragua and then discuss the injustice of it all.

But suppose you're a parent with children in the public schools and you happen to believe in the old fashioned, anti-Freirian view that public education in a democracy must be politically neutral, and that teachers have an ethical and professional responsibility to keep their politics, left-wing or right-wing, out of the classroom. What if you want your child to learn, not Sweat Shop Math, but rather the traditional algebra, trigonometry, and calculus—part of a curriculum that throughout the twentieth century helped millions of Gotham public school students from poor immigrant families graduate and pursue productive careers?

Unfortunately, you're probably not going to get much help from the DOE. A few days before the conference, I provided schools chancellor Joel Klein with details on the city teachers and schools that were participating. His response: "This is a private conference, at which a range of views will be expressed. It seems that many of these views are hardly 'radical'. . . . In any case, the people who are speaking at this conference are participating in their personal capacity, not as representatives of the Department of Education. We are committed to making sure that all of our teachers teach math to our high standards—and we are working hard to build on our students' recent substantial gains."

Since gaining control of New York City's public schools in 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has won plaudits from business leaders for his corporate-style reorganization of the school system, and for supporting market-oriented education initiatives such as charter schools and merit pay for teachers. But the mayor's supporters have been reluctant to acknowledge the downside of this new approach. Bloomberg and his schools chancellor have also taken a laissez-faire stance about what gets taught in the city's classrooms. In doing so, they've paved the way for travesties like the radical math conference, the proliferation of social-justice schools, and the legitimization of bringing leftist politics into the classroom.

It's ironic that while Bloomberg extols the benefits of the market in education, his schools are becoming rife with radical teachers using the classroom to trash the American system.