

City Journal

Radical Equations

Marxist pedagogues are hard at work in New York's public schools.

Sol Stern

19 March 2007

New York schools chancellor Joel Klein often speaks eloquently about the harm that the education system's inability to dismiss incompetent teachers does to children. He's right about that, of course. All the more reason to wonder why Klein has been indifferent to the existence of a group of radical teachers within his own schools who advocate the use of public school classrooms to indoctrinate students in left-wing, anti-American ideology.

One place where this movement thrives is El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, [the city's first "social justice" high school](#). The school's lead math teacher, Jonathan Osler, is using El Puente as a base for a three-day conference in April on "Math Education and Social Justice." Osler offers this compelling rationale for the conference: "The systemic and structural oppression of low income [people] and people of color continues to worsen. The number of people in prison continues to grow, as does our unemployment rate. . . . These problems and many others are being addressed by community organizations and activists, and often find their way into Social Studies and English classes. However, in math classes around the country, perhaps the best places to study many of these issues, we continue to use curricula and models that lack any real-world—let alone socially relevant—contexts."

Among those scheduled to speak at the conference is Eric Gutstein, a mathematics education professor at the University of Illinois and a former Chicago public school math teacher. Gutstein's book, *Reading and Writing the World with Mathematics: Toward a Pedagogy for Social Justice*, combines Marxist teaching methods with examples of math lessons for seventh-graders. One of these lessons is "The Cost of the B-2 Bomber—Where Do Our Tax Dollars Go?" Its purpose, Gutstein writes, "was to use U.S. Department of Defense data and find the cost for one B-2 bomber, then compare it to a four-year, full scholarship to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, a prestigious out-of-state university. The students had to answer whether the whole graduating class of the neighborhood high school (about 250 students) could receive the full, four-year scholarships for the whole graduating class for (assuming constant size and costs) the next 79 years!"

Gutstein also recounts how, on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, he was able to convince his seventh-grade math class that the U.S. was wrong to go to war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. "I told students that none of the hijackers were thought to be Afghan," Gutstein writes. He also told them that he would not "fight against Iraq or

Afghanistan . . . because I did not believe in going to war for oil, power, and control.”

Another of the math conference’s “experts“ is Cathy Wilkerson, an adjunct professor at the Bank Street College of Education. Wilkerson’s only other credential of note (as listed by the conference’s organizers) is that she was a “member of the Weather Underground of the 60s.” Some credential. On March 6, 1970, Wilkerson was in a Manhattan townhouse, helping to construct a powerful bomb to detonate at a dance attended by civilians on the Fort Dix, New Jersey army base. The bomb exploded prematurely, destroying the townhouse and instantly killing three of the bomb makers. Wilkerson escaped unharmed. After resurfacing years later and serving a brief prison term, she became a high school math teacher and, presumably, developed expertise on how to bring the revolution into the classroom.

Backing the conference is another “social justice” teachers’ organization: the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE.) Last October, I attended one of the group’s public meetings on the NYU campus, where about 80 public school teachers gathered to discuss approaches to social justice education. Literature, posters, and T-shirts displayed NYCoRE’s official slogan: “The struggle for justice does not end when the school bell rings.” Inspirational quotations from some of NYCoRE’s heroes, including Che Guevara and Marxist historian Howard Zinn, covered the walls of the room.

The meeting’s chairs were Edwin Mayorga, a twentysomething fourth-grade teacher at the highly acclaimed P.S. 87 on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, and NYU education professor Bree Pickower. Mayorga urged his fellow teachers to “be political inside the classroom, just as we are outside the classroom. The issues we are up against as we teach for social justice are the mandates of [Mayor] Bloomberg, Klein, and No Child Left Behind.”

Pickower then reminded attendees of the group’s “Katrina curriculum,” which teachers could use to convince elementary school students that the hurricane was, not a natural disaster, but an example of endemic American racism. And Mayorga, describing how he had piloted the Katrina curriculum with his fourth-graders, pronounced it a big success. The curriculum leaves nothing to chance, providing teachers with classroom prompts designed to illustrate the evils of American capitalism and imperialism. One section, called “Two Gulf Wars,” suggests posing such questions as: “Was the government unable to respond quickly to the crisis on the Gulf Coast because the money and personnel were all being used in Iraq?”

You might think that public boasting about indoctrinating fourth-graders with canned Marxist agitprop isn’t the best way for a public school teacher to advance either his career or the radical cause. Nor would a former domestic terrorist make the best poster girl for social justice teaching. Surely someone responsible for safeguarding public education

in New York City has stepped forward by now, to say that the social justice curriculum violates every accepted standard of ethical and professional responsibility for public school teachers!

But no: the city's Department of Education has so far turned a blind eye to these radical teachers—who are not only subsidized by taxpayers, but also funded by members of the very capitalist class that the social justice literature demonizes: El Puente was founded with funding from über-capitalist Bill Gates's education foundation, and the conference on math education and social justice has won a grant from Math for America, an organization headed by billionaire hedge-fund entrepreneur James Simons. If Chancellor Klein really wants to banish bad teachers from the schools, there's an easy way for him to start building a dossier of candidates. All he has to do is attend next month's math conference at El Puente Academy.