

The Northern Freedom School

A Biased Report

Ron Caplan

1966

The condition of education in America is not an education towards realizing the possibilities of one's own life, but is in fact an arm of the larger system of the nation with the duty to turn out people who will maintain whatever that system is or has become.

The education is generally aimed toward preserving, and eradicating what is considered worthless (or, it might better be said, what is considered dangerous—considered so by this segment that determines, in that what is kept out of reach is generally this history and traditions of such minorities as Negroes, any respect for the quality of language they've developed—the very things that would render them a sense of their own worth; that is, roots of their own strength).

The condition of teacher education is generally poor (for reasons ranging from insufficient preparation in their own education to incentives in terms of pay that would draw the most alive minds in the country to the preparation of its youth).

The discipline is the over-riding concern of the high schools (i.e. students who are said to be incapable of learning to read or figure understand perfectly the whole system of hall passes, excuse slips, tardy slips, etc., and how effectively to work around them) and I would submit that it is a situation of terror (see second paragraph) that has led to a system concerned more with control than with the quality of the education.

It is impossible for me to report on something growing as quickly as the Northern Freedom School, but I think a couple points about it can be made clear. It is unquestionably the property of the students and it is they who decided they were not receiving a quality education, who sensed that something more was possible in a classroom than what they were receiving from most of their teachers; it was the students themselves who determined to walk out of Northern High School rather than continue with the abusive administration and with teachers who would pass them if only they would be still, didn't cause them any trouble and disappeared when the bell rang. It is naive to suggest that some of the teachers had no part in encouraging the students to act; but it would be irresponsible to condemn these teachers who (having tried to do something about the situation themselves and finding the administration bigoted and deaf to their concerns) encouraged students to take actions they themselves were not in the position to take. These students are acting for all of us—parents, teachers and students—who spend a great deal of time talking of inadequate education in America, high unemployment rolls, high rates of juvenile delinquency, and on and on, while it finally depended upon these students to take some effective action. That they do attend the Freedom School (when they could otherwise easily be strolling the streets) speaks sufficiently of whether or not the stimulating, concerned teachers; an atmosphere of respect for the student's ability to learn if given a decent opportunity to learn; an atmosphere in which, regardless of color or background, they are not considered to be symbols of potential danger and to be kept at a distance from; and a place where their own background and history and speech is not considered any less dignified or beautiful than the background, history and language of any other segment of America.

It is disgraceful to see members of the Board of Education and the NAACP refuse to face what is admittedly their own failure, and to see them instead turn on the students. Rev. Wadsworth of the NAACP told a gathering of well over a thousand students and parents and teachers of the Freedom School, that NAACP backs them fully; then the next evening he encouraged the students to return to Northern High School. One wonders what motivates a man like Dr Remus Robinson to encourage the students to return to the high school, when (although he lived in the Northern High School district) he himself paid tuition to send his child elsewhere (as did D.T. Burton of the Board of Governors, E. Marshall of Placement and Castline Woodhouse, a teacher at Northern High School). I think the strongest statement as to the rightness of the cause of the students, is that 31 of their teachers at Northern High School petitioned for the right to teach at the Freedom School.

fifth Estate

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