Kalamazoo: A Model for Change

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WHERE ARE THE WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS?
Jacqueline P. Clement

Women in elementary and secondary education have watched with envy these past few years as their sisters in higher education formed caucuses and affirmative action committees; consulted with and documented for HEW officials their institutions' hiring practices; and generally moved ahead to seek new opportunities in employment and training for women. Women were in demand in university presidents' offices, as assistants to deans, and as members of advisory committees to prestigious councils. Colleges and universities holding government contracts were responding to Presidential Executive Order 11246 which required them to demonstrate that their hiring practices were non-discriminatory with regard to sex as well as race.

Much has been written about this complicated, multi-faceted, delicate, and painful process which is now evolving under the rubric of affirmative action; but while initial activity raised expectations to new heights, closer examination of the current scene suggests that despite all the rhetoric no area will be so resistant to change as the persistent, pervasive discrimination against women in all aspects of employment. The impact of Executive Order 11246 has nowhere near matched the hopes that it engendered.

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KALAMAZOO: A MODEL FOR CHANGE
Carol Ahlum

The Superintendent of Schools in Kalamazoo, Michigan has made one of his performance objectives the elimination of sexism in schools. This action came at the suggestion of his administrative staff, and since September all school personnel have been directed to take this goal as one of their objectives. As the Superintendent informed me, these objectives are not rhetorical. All administrators and teachers are required to keep descriptive records about how they are eliminating sexism.

This fall, Kalamazoo's elementary school teachers are countering sex-stereotyping in a newly-purchased Houghton Mifflin reading program by using a supplementary book-length collection of revisions to their teachers' guides entitled Recommendations for Eliminating Sex Discrimination in the Reading Program. This collection was devised by a School Board committee of teachers, administrators and parents.

Since last spring, all books and audio-visual materials bought by the Kalamazoo Schools Instructional Media Department are evaluated before purchase to ensure the acquisition of nonsexist and nonracist materials. The guidelines used in this evaluation were developed under the direction of the Media Director, Lee Jameson, who is in charge of the system's libraries and the audio-visual department.

These developments in the city of Kalamazoo are unique in public education. In no other community are administrators initiating such far-reaching changes in their own practices and formulating programs to influence the development of nonsexist attitudes and behavior in their colleagues. How has this happened and why? I spent a week in Kalamazoo talking with both educators and citizens to find out.

A group called the Committee to Study Sex Discrimination in the Kalamazoo Schools (CSSD), created by the School Board in December 1971, has been the impetus behind this change. After eighteen months studying major aspects of the school system (personnel, physical education, elementary textbooks, selected high school courses, student-oriented issues), this committee produced five well-documented reports that include comprehensive short and long-range recommendations to the school system. Two additional reports are forthcoming.

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After the completion of each report, the task force leader and other CSSD members initiated a meeting with the Superintendent and the school administrator directly responsible for the educational area in question. They discussed the findings of the report and possible mechanisms for implementation of the recommendations. From its beginning, CSSD saw its goal, in the words of Jo Jacobs, as "introducing mechanisms into the system" whereby school personnel themselves would develop their own strategies for eliminating sex discrimination. CSSD hoped that its reports and especially its recommendations would lead the school system to initiate needed changes, yet it knew that reports and recommendations alone do not bring about change. Rather, "the system acts when forced," one committee member told me.

From its beginning, CSSD saw itself as an activist group; even its conception exhibited this commitment. In the fall of 1971, a former School Board member was rebuffed when she proposed from the floor of the School Board meeting that this body consider the issue of sex discrimination as part of an educational issue then under discussion. The speaker was told that if sex discrimination were indeed a problem in Kalamazoo schools, then she should return with documentation. The women's liberation movement, a strong one in this city of some 85,000, accepted the challenge and returned to the following School Board meeting (December 1971) with a slideshow on sexism in the elementary reading series (Scott, Foresman) then in use in the Kalamazoo schools. It's reported that this presentation and the presence of over thirty women prompted the School Board to create CSSD. The Board appointed as chairperson Jo Jacobs, the woman who had narrated the slideshow, and she in turn sought out interested people to join the committee.

The group now has a core of about twenty members, mostly women of school-age children, and in over two years, CSSD has involved up to two hundred people in some aspect of its work. Two women administrators from the school system have associated themselves with the committee—first, as designated liaisons between the school system and CSSD, and then, as committed committee members. In May 1973, when the School Board decided to purchase a Houghton Mifflin elementary reading program, CSSD asked it not to do so, because the series exhibited blatant sex-stereotyping, as blatant as that in the Scott, Foresman program then in use in the Kalamazoo schools. CSSD asked the Board to exert its consumer power to say "no" to publishers who produce and promote sexist materials. And knowing that there are no nonsexist elementary readers, the committee suggested that the Board instead buy supplementary materials to enable the system to devise its own nonsexist reading program. This recommendation was not a new one: it had been one of CSSD's original recommendations in the report of the elementary textbook task force, released to the School Board in February 1973.

CSSD warned the School Board in writing that if it proceeded with the purchase, CSSD would file a complaint of sex discrimination under Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, the one federal law that makes sex discrimination illegal in public elementary and secondary schools. (See box on p. 13: if a school system is found in violation of the law, its federal funds are to be withdrawn.) When voluntary compliance failed, CSSD filed the complaint. Sent to Casper Weinberger, Secretary of HEW, it consisted of a one-page letter and a four-page analysis of sex-stereotyping in the Houghton Mifflin readers. The chief contention of the complaint is that the projected five-to-seven year use of blatantly sexist-stereotyped readers will detrimentally affect Kalamazoo children. Using classic examples of feminist analysis of children's books, the complaint reported that the reading program: 1) does not recognize the actions and achievements of women (only a few famous women are mentioned, while famous men are included throughout); 2) does not show the same respect for women and girls as it does for men and boys (the pronoun "he" is introduced in the first pre­primer; "she" in the third); 3) assigns abilities, traits, interests and activities on the basis of male or female stereotypes (men are portrayed in a variety of work roles, while women are portrayed in the typical three: teacher, nurse, mother).

HEW has not acted on the Title IX complaint because the guidelines for this law have not been released; if the guidelines do not include textbooks, the Kalamazoo complaint will not be investigated by HEW. If the citizens' committee wants to pursue this issue further, it will then have to take the school system to court; there a judge will be asked to interpret Title IX to determine whether exclusion of textbooks from HEW's guidelines is too narrow an enforcement of this law.

While the outcome is far from clear, the mere filing of the complaint has been significant—for nonsexist education generally, for feminist groups specifically, and for the Kalamazoo schools. The Kalamazoo CSSD is now nationally known as a feminist citizens' group that has begun to hold its school system accountable for the problem of school sexism. As Jo Jacobs has said, CSSD filed the complaint "to be supportive of other sisters . . . to give others a model of what can be done."

In Kalamazoo, the School Board and Superintendent were angered by the filing of the complaint, and most school personnel confused by it, especially since CSSD maintained that, even in light of this action, it was not an adversary of the school system, but rather a committed community group working toward the system's mutual goal of ensuring the best possible education for Kalamazoo children. The pressure of the complaint has spurred the school administration to develop mechanisms for eliminating school sexism. The creation of the Materials Review Committee (MRC) is one example of administrative reaction. Set up at the suggestion of the central administration and sanctioned by the School Board for the purpose of reviewing the new reading program for sex bias, this group consists of teachers, administrators and four CSSD feminists. It met during the summer and produced the book-length collection of revisions to the teachers' guide mentioned earlier. As the introduction to this collection explains, the MRC 'recognized that nothing could be done with students' editions (i.e., the basal readers) but endeavored to achieve appropriate representation of and balance in the portrayal of sex roles in the teachers' guides, especially in those portions of the lesson plan in which exercises were to be read and written on the chalk board by the teacher."

The Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company has certainly been affected by the complaint. John Ridley, editor-in-chief of the company's reading and language arts department, flew to Kalamazoo during the summer to hear firsthand MRC's criticisms of sex bias in the reading program. This editor perceived the potential economic consequences of school systems using their consumer power to say "no" to sex-stereotyped educational materials. The Kalamazoo Media Director, a co-chairperson of the MRC, reported that Ridley left Kalamazoo with plans to educate his own staff about sex-role stereotypes in children's textbooks. Houghton Mifflin will also incorporate a number of the MRC's revisions in its yearly cosmetic changes of the teachers' guide.

One elementary principal, specifically as a result of his participation on the MRC, has become one of the district's staunchest converts to the goal of nonsexist education. He explained to me that he had accepted the appointment to this committee with a joking attitude: he had not considered sex bias a significant issue. Asked what influenced his change of attitude, he pointed to the committee's interchange of ideas during its item-by-item examination of the teachers' guide and its development of nonstereotyped alternatives. Understanding the process that influenced his own changed attitude, this principal decided to create a similar learning environment for his (continued on page g)
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teaching staff. This fall, when Kalamazoo elementary principals were directed to meet with teachers in school-wide in-service meetings to discuss sex-stereotyping and introduce the prescribed revisions to the teachers' guide, this elementary principal used the record of nonsexist children's songs, Free to Be You and Me by Marlo Thomas (produced by Bell Records and available in most record stores), to initiate discussion. With the help of the school librarian, he then worked with teachers in small groups to discuss item-by-item a sample of the prescribed revisions; he hoped through this process to replicate his own experience.

The Director of Secondary Curriculum is also, as a result of CSSD's systematic involvement of all high school teachers in workshops on sexist attitudes and curriculum in their classrooms. By the spring of 1974, she hopes to hold department in-service meetings that will systematically involve all high school teachers in workshops on sexism.

Admitting that sexist elements in the secondary curriculum until recently have escaped her scrutiny, the Director of Secondary Curriculum pointed to home economics. This past fall, Jo Jacobs' junior high school daughter had found herself assigned to a girls' home economics class. Indeed, CSSD discovered that, in three out of five junior high schools, seventh grade home economics was sex-segregated by design: female students were assigned to these classes. CSSD quickly arranged a meeting with school personnel, including the Superintendent and the Vocational Education Specialist, to inform them that classes sex-segregated by design are illegal under Title IX and also under the Michigan Public Accommodations Act; once again CSSD asked the school system to comply voluntarily with the law. In this instance, the system agreed. Letters have been sent to parents announcing home economics classes open to both sexes. In addition, the Director of Secondary Curriculum set up a committee of home economics teachers to develop new curriculum that will not only admit both sexes but also attract both female and male students to elect home economics courses. This administrator understands that junior high school students will not readily choose courses that until now have been considered for the opposite sex. A new curriculum and the re-education of teachers are the significant mechanisms being used in Kalamazoo to implement a nonsexist home economics program. It will also have a new name—probably "human ecology."

As the Kalamazoo Schools receive national recognition as a model school system moving toward nonsexist education, the citizens' group which has worked for two years toward this development maintains that the change one now sees is only a beginning. In a recent statement to the School Board, while applauding the initiative of the Kalamazoo school administrators, CSSD calls for the establishment of a systematic, long-term program:

The Committee recognizes that the administration and staff have achieved a higher level of awareness over the past two years and that certain steps have been taken to begin the process of eliminating sex discrimination in our school system. We take considerable pride in the fact that it is the Kalamazoo Public School System which is considered as the model for schools across the country, being nationally recognized for its leadership in bringing about the elimination of sex discrimination in public education. However, the pervasiveness of institutionalized sexism and its damaging effects on our young people mean that those beginning steps already taken must be expanded into a thoughtfully planned program to eliminate sex discrimination in our schools, with evaluation and accountability as an important part of this program as any other.

At last word, CSSD has not obtained the commitment asked for in the above statement. Indeed, at a fall School Board meeting, CSSD was officially dismissed as a School Board Committee. However, the Superintendent has announced that the school system recognizes the importance of the committee's work, that he awaits its two outstanding reports, and that he will continue to be as attentive to CSSD as to any community group interested in working with the schools on mutual goals.

The MRC, another Board committee, also seems officially to be disbanded; it has not met since its release of the revision handbook to the teachers' guide. Some school administrators consider its job completed: they maintain that the MRC has eliminated sex bias from the reading program. On the other hand, while agreeing that the MRC substantially eliminated sexism from the teachers' guide, CSSD recognizes that the MRC has only begun to do the same for the entire reading program. And then, of course, materials in all other curriculum areas, aside from elementary reading, need attention.

Regardless of its official status, CSSD will continue to function. Recently, it has been collaborating with the Kalamazoo City Teachers Association, a branch of the National Education Association, about the development of in-service workshops for teachers. In January, through the Michigan Intermediate School District (nine school systems), CSSD offered one three-hour workshop. It hopes to offer many more.

Because it is no longer an official School Board Committee, CSSD has retained legal counsel in order to take its latest concerns to the School Board. At present, the legal counsel is in negotiation with the Kalamazoo Schools about the sex-discriminatory physical education program. This issue may cost the schools more trouble and more money than the problem of sexism in elementary readers.

The author is a staff member of The Feminist Press. For the past year she has been compiling feminist high school resource materials under a grant from The Ford Foundation to the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education.

MORE ON KALAMAZOO

The teachers' guide entitled Recommendations for Eliminating Sex Discrimination in the Reading Program (available for $4.00) and the five CSSD reports (available for $5.00) are distributed by the Kalamazoo Public Schools, 1220 Howard Street, Kalamazoo, Michigan 49001.

The "Guidelines for A Positive, Non-Stereotyped Portrayal of Human Roles in Print and Non-Print Materials" are available from Lee Jameson, Media Director, Kalamazoo Public Schools, 1220 Howard Street, Kalamazoo, Michigan 49001.

The final report by CSSD on the Houghton Mifflin readers documenting the Title IX complaint will soon be published by the Women's Commission of Michigan. Write: Women's Commission, 230 North Washington Avenue, Lansing, Michigan 48933.

For further information about the work of CSSD, contact: Jo Jacobs, 732 Garland, Kalamazoo, Michigan 49001. 616-345-5853.