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NEWS FROM MINNESOTA

From a visit to Minneapolis, Carol Ahlum, a staff member of The Feminist Press, learned of developments on varied levels of the Minnesota public school system that exhibit the existence and possibilities of citizens and educators working toward nonsexist education. We hope the brief accounts that follow will spark others to share with the Newsletter similar developments in their own communities.

Teachers and administrators. Some twenty feminist Minneapolis Public School teachers and administrators have formed a group called Women's Educational Action Group (WEAG). Begun in the spring of 1973, the group's purpose is two-fold: 1) to actively work toward the elimination of sexist practices and policies with emphasis on the establishment of an Affirmative Action Program for women in the Minneapolis Schools; 2) to serve as a consciousness-raising group. At a November meeting with the Minneapolis Superintendent of Schools, WEAG asked for the establishment of a Women's Studies Department, Women's Advocate, Task Force on Sexism, and Affirmative Action Program. Of these, the Superintendent agreed to set up the Task Force to be established immediately of both school personnel and interested citizens. WEAG was to draw up a list of possible appointees. At this same meeting, the Superintendent agreed to send a letter in support of the Women's Equity Action Bill which Minnesota's Senator Mondale introduced in the Senate (see p.). The passage of the bill would mean availability of funds to school systems and other public and non-profit organizations for the purpose of developing nonsexist curriculum and materials.

School Board members. At a higher level of Minnesota's educational system, existence of another women's group has implications for the movement toward nonsexist education. When Nina Rothchild, a feminist school board member from Mahtomedi, a Minneapolis suburb, found herself as the lone woman on her school board, she looked around the state to find other women in the same situation. Hoping to find support and resources, among them, she arranged a meeting that has led to periodic informal meetings of women school board members. Although the group does not call itself feminist since a number of the members do not associate themselves with the feminist movement, Ms. Rothchild reports that her purpose in forming the group has been accomplished: she now has support and contacts with other school board members who are women. Although she does not foresee the possibility of the women members of Minnesota school boards changing the consciousness of other school board members at the state level about the issue of sexism, she is more hopeful about the possibility of a women's caucus at the national level of the School Board Association sparking such awareness.

Parents. At the grass-roots level, parents, especially women, through organizations such as the PTA, AAUW and the League of Women Voters (LWV), have been forming citizens' committees to work on the problem of sexism in their school systems. The impetus for this development was a state-wide LWV conference held in October on "Sex Bias in Schools." Nina Rothchild, one of the key speakers, because of her work on sexism in her own school system and her recently published handbook on the subject (see p.), reports that this conference "drew into the feminist movement a lot of people who had not previously been active as feminists." "Since the conference," she continues, "I have been asked to meet with various groups who are now starting to try to do something about sexism in their local school districts . . . I think this is highly significant because: 1) these people have built-in credibility in their local communities; 2) the feminist movement has much greater chance of success if it is supported by local taxpayers; 3) the feminist movement has been greatly expanded by the addition of new blood."

Ms. Rothchild sees the conference as an effective model for involving parents in the issue of sexism in schools. She contends: "If some group of wide membership, support and credibility should do the same thing, the resulting ripples could have a real impact in many local districts . . . I think local pressure from parents is an important ingredient in the total movement and that working through existing women's groups is often a good way to get things going."

State Board of Education. At the state level, the Minnesota State Board of Education in September 1972 issued "a statement of policy and proposed action" entitled *Eliminating Sex Bias in Education*. Although one of the most comprehensive of its kind (others have been released by New York and Pennsylvania), feminist groups working to promote nonsexist education report little evidence of the implementation of these guidelines. One guideline that has been implemented called for the State Department of Education to require all pre- and in-service teachers seeking certification to take a human relations course that includes a component on sexism. Groups like the feminist Emma Willard Task Force, created in 1971 to increase teacher and parent awareness about sexism in school, have taught the sexism component.

Teachers. The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, particularly through the work of a growing women's caucus, has also been working on the issue of sexism. At a November school board meeting, the MFT proposed that the school board hire two teachers to develop materials about women's role. That this proposal was not immediately vetoed, but tabled for further discussion, was seen as significant.

Among Minnesota teachers general awareness about sexism is growing. One measure is the growth of individual women's studies courses taught by junior and senior high school teachers. There are now at least fifteen such courses in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. And at one elementary school, a teacher offered a special interest course entitled "The Wonderful World of Women."

MONDALE INTRODUCES EQUITY ACT

In early December the Senate Education Subcommittee voted to incorporate into the "Elementary and Secondary Education Act" a program designed to combat sex discrimination in education. Senator Walter F. Mondale of Minnesota introduced this bill called the "Women's Educational Equity Act." It would establish a program of grants and contracts appropriate for a wide variety of educational institutions, including colleges and universities, state and local education agencies, and public and non-profit groups. The Mondale bill is the same one introduced earlier in the House by Representative Patsy Mink.

The program would help to eliminate discrimination through the development and dissemination of new curriculum materials, textbooks, tests and other nondiscriminatory items useful for vocational education and career counseling. The bill would also create a Council on Women's Education Programs to supervise the funded programs and to advise the Secretary of HEW on women's education.

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