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Toward Sex Equity in the Philadelphia School System

by Barbara A. Mitchell

The following is a revised and edited version of a talk delivered on the Capitol Campus of Pennsylvania State University in the fall of 1980.

One of the best kept secrets in American education is that Philadelphia is providing national leadership in the area of sex equity. Another well-kept secret, I suppose, is what sex equity is. Many of my colleagues in public education, hearing that I work in a sex equity project, assume that I am in sex education and feel called upon to make risque remarks. In this essay, I'll attempt to take the lid off both secrets: to explain sex equity, and how it comes to be flourishing in the city of brotherly love.

I work in a one-year Women's Educational Equity Act Program called Project CEASE, a wonderfully inclusive acronym that stands for Campaign to End All Sexism in Education. In line with other self-fulfilling prophecies, Project CEASE will cease in June 1981. Project CEASE is a staff training program designed to make teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents aware of what sex bias is, how it limits children and what it costs the society to confine boys and girls to rigid sex roles. Our staff (two full-timers and a part-time manager, with occasional assistance from two other people and an advisory board) is primarily responsible for training a school team in each of fifteen pilot schools scattered throughout the city's eight geographical divisions. The teams receive thirty hours of instruction designed to change their knowledge, attitudes, and behavior in interactions with male and female children and with their colleagues. Each team, in turn, trains its faculty and develops a plan for eliminating at least one sexist practice in its school. The project also operates a non-sexist, non-racist, multi-cultural resource center which makes books, films, and activities available to teachers all over the city.

Project staff also travel upon request to other schools and to community organizations to introduce these new concepts and to convince groups to recognize and abandon sex-biased materials and to use ours instead. In addition, we sponsor an annual conference for about 200 people from Philadelphia and suburban schools. By the time we conclude our project, we will have been in 120, or half the city's schools; we will have reached 7,000 educational personnel; and we will have had a potential impact upon over 100,000, or over half, the children in Philadelphia.

Any serious discussion about sex equity or women's studies projects in local school districts must be based on several premises: 1) Projects cost money and no school district wants to spend its own tax money for what it perceives as helping only its female students. Sex equity has therefore a low priority. 2) School districts will do only as much as the law requires to keep funds coming in. 3) Keeping districts in minimum compliance with state and federal sex equity laws and regulations usually requires a fuss. Curriculum and materials, I should point out, are not covered by federal sex equity laws. Fortunately for us, Pennsylvania's regulations demand that women and minorities be included in the curriculum.

4) Even with limited state and federal monies, good proposals can be funded. 5) School districts love to get extra money.

Pressure from members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers Women's Rights Committee and Philadelphia NOW's Education Committee in the early 1970's, coupled with the support of the Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, resulted in the formation of a Women's Studies Advisory Committee by the fall of 1973. Its members included elementary and secondary teachers, union representatives, curriculum representatives, and community members. Although Title IX was already on the books and (Pennsylvania Secretary of Education) John Pittenger's directives were quite clear, almost no official attention was paid to the Committee or its proposals. The only money available was for meetings. The Committee's most ardent demands were for staff development for all teachers and administrators and for sex-fair materials to be used with students.

By the fall of 1974, a course in "Rethinking Conventional Sex Role Stereotypes" was offered for graduate credit through the district regular inservice system. It was developed and taught by the then-president of Philadelphia NOW, a substitute teacher in the Philadelphia system. This in itself was precedent-setting, since district policy mandated that only regularly appointed teachers or administrators could teach inservice courses. The class, overloaded with 45 teachers, was the least expensive way the school district could respond to the Committee's demands.

During the same school year two other issues came to the fore. The union's Women's Rights Committee began to explore the inequities in medical insurance coverage. Eventually, the Philadelphia union contract covered pregnancy for all women (including single women) in the bargaining unit, as well as sick leave and disability in pregnancy-related disorders. It was one of the earliest union contracts to offer such coverage before the passage of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act in 1978.

The union committee also became interested in students' rights. In the case of Heidi Beth Kaplan vs. University City High School and the Board of Education, a student was denied access to the all-male swimming team—there was no women's team—despite the coach's admission of her competence. The union supported Ms. Kaplan's victorious suit. From then on, Philadelphia high school swim teams were sexually integrated, but problems with the sex integration of other teams continued.

You may have read about Philadelphia's EEOC suit in 1980 involving the Public and Catholic League basketball playoffs. Each year the public school city champions traditionally played the archdiocesan champions. The School District of Philadelphia futilely urged the parochial system to offer playoffs for the women's championship team, too. When the women's public championship team could not participate in a playoff game, its coach filed a Title IX complaint with the EEOC. After court hearings, the two school districts were ordered to provide the same
Three years of fairly continual pressure finally resulted in some union contract movement, a virtually penniless Committee, and one inservice course—in a district whose expenditures exceeded two million dollars per school day. But by 1976 the Curriculum Division produced its first publication, A Teacher's Resource Guide on Women's Studies, designed to help teachers to focus on the issues and on women's history in the classroom. The Women's Rights Committee of the Federation subtly forced the district to appoint a highly-effective Title IX Coordinator who has enabled Philadelphia to meet federal timetables for sex desegregation of gym classes and vocational arts classes. By 1977 the Office of Intergroup Education had applied for and received a federal grant to conduct a series of two-hour sessions of sex equity staff development for kindergarten and primary level teachers.

The current superintendent has, during the past several years, promoted many women to administrative positions. Women in Education (WE) helped to exert pressure in this area, forming an old-girls' network to assist colleagues in passing the principal's examination and other tests. For the first time, sample questions and answers that old boys had always shared with friends and colleagues were available to women.

Until 1977-78, when the Women's Studies Advisory Committee received a grant for $15,000 from the Women's Educational Equity Program to develop elementary and secondary curricular materials, the district had spent only a few thousand dollars on women's studies, mostly for meetings and printing. (It did cost the district money to begin to equalize medical benefits.) This is still true because the district's current projects are federally funded. Money from the state helped to implement state sex equity and vocational education regulations, and minimal cost was involved in integrating classes by gender. So the citizens of Philadelphia have spent very little (in comparison to the school budget) to achieve the sex equity programs we have now.

One of the best assets we have is our students' sense of fairness and justice and their understanding of their own needs and aspirations. We may have problems with the availability of funding and with recalcitrant administrators, but our students' demands will keep the concept of equity alive. Ultimately, though, the responsibility for the survival of these programs rests with us, the few feminist teachers, parents and school administrators among the millions who are closely watching our educational institutions.

Barbara A. Mitchell is a high school teacher, on leave to direct a sex equity project for the Philadelphia school system.