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Nairobi Schools

Teaching With a Money-Back Guarantee

By DEBBIE MAJTELES

It's no secret that many public schools are failing to educate children. But since 1972, the Nairobi Day Schools in East Palo Alto have offered parents a "money-back guarantee": if their children don't learn to read, the year's tuition will be refunded. So far, no refunds have been necessary.

Founded in 1968, the Nairobi schools aim to provide children with the skills they need in the real world -- "to be a provider, rather than a recipient," explains Barbara Mouton, administrator at Nairobi. "We're trying to educate children successfully -- that's where we differ from the public schools."

The Nairobi schools emphasize black identity, community needs, and the responsibilities and potential of the individual. "The school gets across the idea that each student has a mission, and it is not his privilege to ... act the fool. The students are so inculcated with the idea 'We can learn' that it becomes an integral part of them forever after," says a booklet about Nairobi kindergarten.

Nairobi is one of the Midpeninsula's oldest alternatives, but the schools are just coming out from a severe financial crisis. Although funds from CETA (Community Employment Training Act) have been granted for some teacher salaries, these black community schools must find further financial support. If they are unsuccessful, other bills, unpaid since October, will force a cutback in operations.

Housed in a complex of three remodeled houses on a quiet East Palo Alto street, the Nairobi schools serve 84 students in grades K through 12. About 40 children from EPA public schools also attend free Saturday morning tutorial classes. There are several full-time teachers, five part-timers and two administrators. Tuition is \$1100 a year per family (not per child). Many of the families pay less than full tuition, and parent fees cover only about 25% of the school's expenses.

Starting at kindergarten, the Nairobi program is "very academic." Asked if emphasizing academics too early didn't mean pushing children into reading before they're ready, Mrs. Mouton explained that the Nairobi kindergarten first "makes them ready." The reading program takes each child from his individual level and follows sequential phonetic steps. Cooperation among the students is also emphasized.

"The average child is very eager to learn, and we tie in reading with everyday experiences" -- reading boxes in stores, signs along the street, simple notes, and eventually, picture books. "Each kindergartener can read when he's finished," Mrs. Mouton claimed.

The kindergarten program also includes science -- "exploring, examining and experimenting with the immediate environment" -- and teaches the children how to get along independently -- cooking, using the phone, developing good health habits.

Mrs. Mouton believes the elementary school is more successful than the high school because the children aren't yet "crippled" by years in public school. A former English teacher at Ravenswood High, she feels that the typical high school student has already been burdened by "layers of psychological damage" and a severe lack of skills.

Nairobi High graduates, however, have no difficulty getting into



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY HUNTOON

college. Some are attending California state universities, and one is studying pre-med in the East. The school has already passed the fourth step in the accreditation process, and when it's able to buy more equipment, especially for science and math, full accreditation should be given.

The high school curriculum includes law and government, economics, mathematics, science, French, Spanish and English. The nationwide decline in writing ability has also been felt at Nairobi, and they now have a special foundation grant for a program to improve students' writing skills. However, the grant won't come through unless Nairobi can find someone to match the funds for a second and third year.

The Nairobi High program also includes hours of "community service." By clearing out a basement room, for example, the students learn to see their school as a community where their services are necessary and useful. This raises their community awareness and helps them realize the need to help others. Participation in outside community groups is also encouraged.

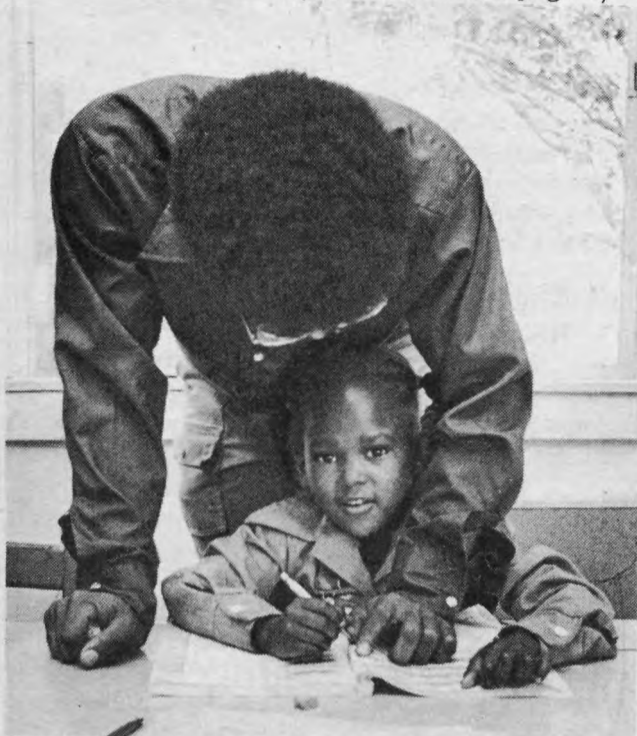
Such emphasis on community has "made a real difference" in the students who have attended Nairobi schools for a period of years, Mrs. Mouton said.

Indeed, Nairobi's main purpose has been to build an institution that serves the East Palo Alto community -- by educating its children with useful skills and encouraging them to use these skills, in turn, to build and replenish their home community.

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Nairobi Schools

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The parents who began the school viewed it as an alternative to the "sneak-out program" in which EPA students attended the predominantly white schools in Palo Alto, rather than EPA's academically poorer Ravenswood High. Since Ravenswood was closed in 1976, Nairobi is now East Palo Alto's only secondary school. And if a desegregation suit now being waged against the Ravenswood School District is successful, the Nairobi schools will be the only ones left in this community of 19,000!

Although the Ravenswood District elementary schools have severe problems, Mrs. Mouton does not believe that disestablishing the District-- and busing the children out of East Palo Alto-- is the answer. "The community has an obligation to educate its own young," she said. The home community "will be in a bankrupt position" if its children are bused out.

While agreeing that the neighboring Palo Alto schools are "academically good," Mrs. Mouton believes they fail to provide their students-- black and white alike-- with the skills needed for survival in the real world. "The achievement of blacks in Palo Alto would probably not be better than it was in Ravenswood High," she said, because she believes the Palo Alto schools fail to instill students with a sense of inner direction and a desire to maximize their own potential.

Despite their ten years' community service, the Nairobi schools have not secured any significant government funding. Pointing to two file drawers full of grant applications, Mrs. Mouton said, "They all say there isn't any money." Yet, she added, when the school situation boils over -- as it did recently at San Carlos High -- there's always money for extra police and law enforcement.

The main reason Nairobi hasn't been able to get government funds, Mrs. Mouton says, is because "people perceive this to be a black institution." Although the school admits children of any race or creed and has a multi-racial staff and board of directors, its emphasis on black culture and identity is offensive to government grant-givers.

While it does receive School Lunch aid and now has won the CETA grant for teacher sal-

aries, Nairobi has been found ineligible for ADA (Average Daily Attendance) funds and moneys from ESAA (Emergency School Aid Act) for poverty-area education.

Of course, most other private schools are also ineligible for such funding, but because of the special nature of its contribution, Mrs. Mouton believes some program should be devised to bring such tax moneys to Nairobi.

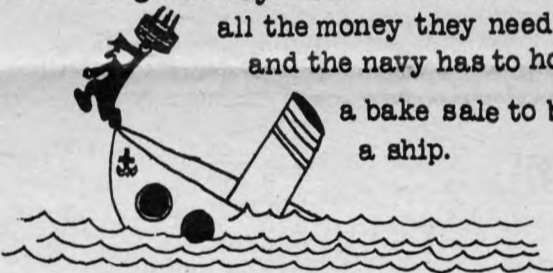
A voucher system in which "money follows the child," whether he or she attends a public or private school, would be another solution, she explained. But although a modified voucher plan has been established in East San Jose, Nairobi's efforts to set up a voucher system in this area have not been approved by Sacramento.

So without other funding, the Nairobi schools have relied on sales of sweet-potato pies and "support from our friends." In the past, such friends have included the San Francisco Foundation, Syntex, Xerox, Smith-Kline, Kidder-Peabody and the Bank of America (which donated three portable classrooms-- but not the necessary cement foundations). "We are very appreciative of these groups," Mrs. Mouton emphasized.

"Things are looking up," she added, but the crisis is not fully over yet, and it's rather a shame when people whose primary role is teaching must spend so much time outside the classroom, scrounging for funds.

Anyone wishing more information can call the school at 325-4049, or write, Nairobi Day Schools, P. O. Box 10777, Palo Alto, CA 94303.

it will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need, and the navy has to hold a bake sale to buy a ship.



from Plowshare Press

Women in Electronics

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the U.S. These countries provide a tax-free, union-free haven for these corporations. So companies based here run away to foreign countries to exploit workers abroad, 80% of whom are women.

A coalition of local organizations has formed to combat the huge problems that exist for women working in the electronics industry. Members from Union W.A.G.E. (Women's Alliance to Gain Equality), the Santa Clara County Commission on the Status of Women, the United Electrical Workers, the Service Employees International Union, the Mid-Peninsula Conversion Project, and lawyers, doctors, women electronics workers, and other concerned citizens are formulating a strategy for bringing about changes in the working conditions of women in this industry.

If you are concerned about this issue or interested in joining in the effort, we need your time and energy. You can call the Mid-Peninsula Conversion Project at 327-4313 for information.

Natalie Shiras is a member of the mid-peninsula chapter of Union W.A.G.E. She also works with the Mid-Peninsula Conversion Project which is trying to convert military corporations to small community and worker-controlled businesses that produce socially useful goods.



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