

RECIPE



FOR

BUILDING A SCHOOL

GERTRUDE WILKS

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by

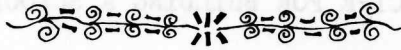
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RECIPE FOR BUILDING A SCHOOL

I am presenting here our recipe for building a new school. After reading all the current literature on education and hearing numerous speeches made by those who haven't had the experience, I realized that there was a contribution I could make to other communities. I could point out that there is a way to beat frustration, develop a future for young people and young people who are prepared to meet that future. It isn't difficult if there is willful desire.

In East Palo Alto during the early sixties, troubles were brewing. As the community turned from white to black, the schools changed from fine to deplorable. Many of us looked the other way and accepted the baby-sitting ways of our administrators and teachers, grade one through high school. After all, who ever heard of ordinary black folk complaining that educators didn't know what they were doing - or worse yet, they did know but wouldn't admit it even to themselves. But a few of us were disturbed. My own son graduated from high school. When he went to apply for a job, he could not read or write well enough to fill out the application form.

Well, we fought the high school district Board of Trustees. There was no change at all. We developed a Sneak-out and then a Transfer Plan, so that high school students could be educated in neighboring white districts. Although these transferred students gained academically, they were psychologically torn. The subtle rejection of institutional racism has a dagger's edge. Our students were demoralized. There seemed to be no way out unless we were to build our own school. We did.

I realize that all black communities have similar problems. That's why I'm giving you the recipe we used. If you aren't sure that you need it, hold onto it. You may soon change your minds.

Why a recipe? Well, I could say formula. That would sound more professional. But we are not really professionals. More Black people are skilled in kitchen work than laboratory pursuits. We know how to work a recipe into our own specific individual pudding; but we really wouldn't feel comfortable altering a formula "just a little bit" to satisfy our needs.

First of all, we had better understand some basic facts about our ingredients. Now, education, traditionally, never meant too much to Black people. Even the few individuals who were able to and did excel in higher scholastic endeavors were never recognized or compensated for their accomplishments. Most Black people have been kept from real responsibility for so long that they are hesitant to accept it, highly reluctant to seeking it out. This is doubly true of black men.

I remember the early days of picket lines when all the big men had to leave early and only the students and mothers remained to carry the action and bolster each other. I remember confronting the public school district Board of Trustees, and not being able to find a man to present our community statements. Black women have long had to abide with frustration. I decided to stand up without any man beside me because somebody had to address the Board. I risked being accused of castrating our men. I knew that, but I had to stand up, however rough it might be. And it was, but I found the strength.

Recipe

I was aware that for any change we desired, we would have to create the alternative. We could no longer afford to provide jobs for professionals - black or white - who walked in at our invitation, surveyed the situation, drew a salary, and wandered on to a more lucrative pasture. These professionals never turned around to see if we were following directions because they had not given us any, not even guide lines. We had to stop pretending and act, because we were on our own. Those big people had even forgotten how to cook. Consequently, we moved on in!

Here is the recipe:

Ingredients

- People - all the community
- Place - several to start. Add as desired.
- Time - as much as you find appropriate while you continue to stir.
- Prayer - use a pinch from time to time.
- Commitment - you'll find you need gallons.
- Students - as much of this spice as you can manage comfortably. Add gradually in the early stages.

People

At the beginning, if you are thinking about a school for the children of the people, you have to go out and talk with the people, all of them, over coffee and tea and maybe in bars. Your greatest challenge will be to get those people to move voluntarily. Find parents who are already disgruntled with the public schools and listen to them. Treat people with care because they may be frightened when they hear themselves talking out against the system.

Have a meeting for parents. Encourage them to talk freely about whatever they think should be done. Make sure that everyone understands there are no experts among you. You must all grope together towards better education.

In this way, parents feel called upon to be creative. You surely know that all Black parents have stories to tell that have never been told before. If you provide a setting, these stories will flow as from a fountain. Just let the waters run. Don't try to turn off a spigot.

You may even hear it mentioned that "nobody ever asked me my opinion about anything before". Only, from time to time you may have to bring the forum back to education. And you must be sure that plans are made for further meetings. Perhaps a mother will offer her house.

Assume from the start that you will lose people who initially cook right with you, and with enthusiasm. The forward thinking may be too risky for them. They are just not ready yet - even though their children may be. The children have been living with destructive deception day in, day out. Understand, the adults may return later.

Place

It is important that parents feel as physically comfortable as possible at these early meetings. When one feels awkward, one hesitates to talk. He cannot possibly let it all hang out when he is worried about being somewhere he really doesn't belong. Therefore, a parent's home is ideal. The informal atmosphere often attracts neighbors and friends to the meeting.

As to the school itself, it can meet anyplace. Do not allow yourselves to get caught in the money bag. "We can't start a school until we're granted enough funding to rent us a real schoolhouse." Now, schoolhouses - old fashioned or new - are lovely. However, learning is something that happens between teachers and students. It can happen anyplace at all. Use whatever is available to you: a home, a church, an empty store. Remember that the Freedom Schools down south met in small country churches. Our own Day School started at St. John's Baptist Church, an older building with many small alcoves where the children were crowded together, almost skin to skin.

Let me add parenthetically that money never opened a school. The costs are small; the procedures are simple. Put your own ideas on paper. Forget about guidelines offered by some PhD in Kalamazoo who will fly in to help you at your expense. Take the paper with your ideas to a local attorney. Any lawyer can satisfy the legal regulations; the cost to you should be no more than twenty dollars. Only three persons are necessary to establish a corporation; and you do not need a permanent address, just one for mail.

Board of Education members from Riles on down will help you with whatever information they have. Your local County Superintendent of Schools will tell you what the few requirements are and how to fulfill them. He will even tell you what textbooks you really need and where to get them. Just talk with these people. Warmth and determination are worth more than paper dollars.

If you happen to receive funds from some angelic source, try to keep hold of yourselves. Take it easy! Don't over-involve your school or yourselves during those early years. Think deeply before you sign any contracts.

The Mothers for Equal Education bought land as we moved along. After five years now, we have three comfortable, renovated buildings in which to hold classes, on a site where we expect to build that day when we know that we are ready. We have architectural plans completed.

Time

Remember that black people are disinclined to speak boldly even though that is the way they are privately thinking. Therefore, let no one push or rush a parent into taking a position. The idea of starting your own school should come from each person involved individually. It may take a little longer than you had planned to get everyone together. Don't feel badly. If there are only three or four bold ones talking together about a new school, you are in business. Crowds only make you look better to outsiders, not to yourselves.

Build your school firmly. Do not try to make all your dreams come true the first month. We started with a supplementary school program which met Saturday mornings and one evening a week. We trained our teachers in both

skills and attitudes. We encouraged parents to work in the classrooms. We grew from 22 students to nearly 300. At the start we taught only reading and writing. The next year we added mathematics. Then we added African Dance and Black Awareness. After three successful years of the supplementary program, we opened a five days a week school. Even moving along, step by step, we have been unbelievably busy.

Starting a new school is a learning experience. Look at it that way. Understand your own delight and eagerness, pushing you ahead to accomplish more and more.

Prayer

Never forget the vitality of prayer in the Black community. For many years, the only property belonging to Black people, purchased with black money, has been the churches. In church, you will meet the preachers of influence who direct the actions of their many parishioners. Through these preachers, if you are able to patiently and gently persuade them of the dire need, much support can be gained. Conservative Black folks do not hassle with problems, nor with the man. They just accept the preacher's word as a holy command given through a man of understanding and maybe learning. A word of caution is necessary. The church, or perhaps the preacher, enjoys this power and may decide to take over your school if you are not watchful. It would be dangerous to leave things to take care of themselves, especially after you've had even small successes.

It is good to start your people meetings with prayer. This gives a tone of reassurance to some who need this little ritual. Your prayer could surely be topical and earnest. The Mothers for Equal Education have always started their meetings with these simple but meaningful lines:

Oh Lord, here we stand, joined together heart and hand, to help provide better education throughout the land . . . Amen.

Commitment

It can be said that a continuing school program requires only students, teachers, and the delicate relationship between them. But to start a new school, you also need huge quantities of commitment from everybody involved. For instance, there are many who speak of reducing the forty hour work week. In a new school, the work week may be closer to fifty than to forty hours. You are building from scratch and you may err which can be fine if you straighten out the mistakes, no matter how long it takes. Your dedication will show when you build bookshelves for the classroom, persuade your boss that the school deserves his support, pay your share of the expenses before you pay your other bills, when you mop the floors and scrub the bathrooms. You will find yourself waking at three A.M. with a new idea for increasing community participation. You will suddenly remember that an old friend had offered you some science equipment about five years ago. You will discover that you know how to teach mathematics very well. Your preparation time may be an hour daily but it's worth it. The kids understand.

Don't be frightened. Commitment comes easily when you realize that the youngsters are placing part of their futures in your strong arms. You will carry them!

Students

This is the ingredient that adds spice and makes the recipe worthy of note. Students are hardy. Students are eager. Students are able to absorb more than you ever expected. Students who are given the opportunity are thinkers. Just let them know that you believe in them, that you expect the best from them. Always be totally honest with them. Make allowance, of course, for destruction that has already taken place. Try to mend.

Students will give you renewed vigor and human growth. Accept; and just keep on moving!



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Other Publications

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