Teaching "Social Justice" in Schools

by Phyllis Schlafly November 7, 2008

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Many voters didn't think it important when it surfaced during the presidential campaign that Barack Obama's friend, the 1960s radical William Ayers, is now a professor of education at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Ayers's preoccupation with inserting his ideas of "social justice" into public school curriculum didn't seem an issue to make tracks in a national election.

Now we find that in election week, the most respected education journal, Education Week, featured a front-page article on "social-justice teaching." This confirms that accusations about "social-justice teaching" are not inventions of John McCain's partisan consultants, but are matters that vitally concern everyone who cares what the next generation is taught with taxpayers' money.

"Social-justice teaching" is defined in Education Week as "teaching kids to question whoever happens to hold the reins of power at a particular moment. It's about seeing yourself not just as a consumer [of information], but as an actor-critic" in the world around you. This revealing explanation comes from Bill Bigelow, the curriculum editor of a Milwaukee-based organization called Rethinking Schools, which publishes instructional materials relating to issues of race and equity.

Bigelow admits that this is "a subversive act in some respects because it is not always encouraged by the curriculum." Apparently, he intends to provide the encouragement.

In Bigelow's book Rethinking Columbus, he wrote that he encourages his students to walk in the shoes of groups that have been oppressed or disenfranchised. He assigns students to role-play various oppressed groups in the U.S. and foreign countries.

"Social-justice" lessons highlight past mistakes in U.S. history rather than our accomplishments and opportunities. Emphasizing problems and injustices rather than achievements is given the highfalutin label "critical pedagogy."

David Horowitz of the California-based David Horowitz Freedom Center says that social-justice teaching is "shorthand for opposition to American traditions of individual justice and free-market economics." He says it teaches students that "American society is an inherently 'oppressive' society that is 'systemically' racist, 'sexist,' and 'classist' and thus discriminates institutionally against women, nonwhites, working Americans, and the poor."

Sol Stern of the Manhattan Institute describes Professor Ayers as one of the leaders in "bringing radical social-justice teaching into our public school classrooms." Ayers argues in his books and articles that "social-justice teaching" should be injected into various curriculum subjects.

Education Week identifies the "special-interest groups" that promote "social-justice teaching" and provide curricular materials, online resources, and "professional development" (i.e., indoctrinating teachers). These groups include an affiliate of the American Educational Research Association, the Cambridge-based Educators for Social Responsibility, and the Washington-based Teaching for Change, in addition to Rethinking Schools.

The lobbyists for "social-justice teaching" and "critical pedagogy" sponsor well-attended conferences (no doubt at taxpayers' expense) and publish magazines. Teachers 4 Social Justice attracted 1,000 educators to an October seminar in Berkeley, California.

Lesson plans are available from a 30-year-old magazine called "Radical Teacher," which was founded as "a socialist, feminist, and anti-racist journal on the theory and practice of teaching."

Education Week identifies Ayers-style "social-justice teaching" as rooted in the writings of the late Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. His best-known book, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970), is considered a classic text of radical education theory and is regularly assigned in education schools.

After Freire's theories took hold in teachers colleges, it's no surprise that they made their way into public schools, especially where low-income and minority kids can be taught Oppression Studies. Schools that specialize in "social-justice teaching" exist in Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia, among other cities.

The Social Justice High School in Chicago, for example, has a 100 percent Hispanic or black student body. The principal admits that the lessons taught there are often "atypical," such as teaching the relative likelihood of whites and minorities being pulled over by police.

This district recently announced plans to open a "gay-friendly" public high school called Pride Campus with 600 students, half homosexual and half heterosexual. Official materials say that the curriculum will "teach the history of all people who have been oppressed and the civil rights movements that have led to social justice and queer studies."

It is clear that "social-justice teaching" does not mean justice as most Americans understand the term. Those who use the term make clear that it means the United States is an unjust and oppressive society and the solution is to "spread the wealth around."

Professor Ayers declined to be interviewed for the Education Week article. His comments were unnecessary since the article was generally favorable to "social-justice teaching" and dismissive of its critics.