



A University-School-Community Alliance

FLAME: Its Philosophy and Practice

As an affiliate of the National Alliance, “We the People---Math Literacy for All,” FLAME has been driven by the ideals of the Southern Freedom Movement, especially the legendary work of Bob Moses. From its inception, FLAME has pursued providing our underserved youth—Black, Brown, Indigenous, Immigrant & poor White---with innovative mathematics curriculum and instruction in public schools.

We do this work, knowing math literacy is essential for economic equity in a 21st century world. We do this, knowing it requires confronting long-standing issues of injustice and inequities in the quality of public education in this nation. We do this, knowing it requires, as a civil right, a new standard for education and citizenship in a democracy.

What We Value: Student and Teacher Agency

As Bob Moses consistently reminds us, “Young people finding their voice instead of being spoken for is a crucial part of the process [of math education] . . . We believe the kind of systemic change necessary to prepare our young people for the demands of the 21st century requires young people to take the lead in changing it.” (Moses & Cobb, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*, p. 19). Central to this work is building student and teacher agency.

Students as Change Agents: We create democratic classroom spaces for students to see themselves as agents of their own change. We develop students to:

1. Use their agency to build a supportive culture in their classrooms.
2. Form communities of learners among their peers.
3. Take responsibility for their own learning and the learning of their peers.
4. Become proactive in the classroom in building their content knowledge in math.
5. Form themselves into groups that carry on deep and meaningful conversations about mathematics.
6. Shift their perspective about themselves as creators of knowledge:
 - To see themselves as knowledge workers who gain economic power through their skills in mathematics and their understanding of complex concepts of math.
7. Become agents of change in their schools and communities through teaching math to their peers and to younger children, inside and outside the classroom.

Teachers as Change Agents: We create cadres of teachers who learn, teach, and continuously develop their competence in content, philosophy, and the practice of teaching and learning. FLAME's practices include experiences to:

1. Broaden teacher's perspective of Professional Development as a vehicle to deepen their knowledge of mathematics as a discipline.
2. Enhance teachers' capacity to loosen their control in the classroom, to allow student voice to emerge.
3. Broaden teachers' perspective of themselves as co-creators--with their students---of a culture of high expectations for learning mathematics.
4. Support teachers in becoming equal partners with their students in the learning process by:
 - building relationships with students,
 - assisting students as they establish a classroom culture of high expectations and high performance,
 - using the concepts of mathematics as the organizing tool to build student/teacher confidence, empowerment, and community.

Challenges and Present Dilemma of Diminished Resources

The challenges to what we value in education have a long history:

- Those challenges began with the caste abuse of the ancestors of the children we now teach, the enslaved ancestors who were legally and structurally denied education at all levels. Learning to read was a forbidden activity, deterred by a consequence of barbarous physical punishment for any attempt at literacy.
- After only eight years of Reconstruction when African Americans established public schools, Jim Crow became law, and "sharecropper" education became the caste structure used to deny our students' ancestors a quality education.
- That same educational caste system fully operates in our schools today, where disenfranchised students still bear the brunt of inferior schools, curriculum, and instructional delivery---where teacher and student voices are systematically muted.

One manifestation of continuing that historical legacy is resistance to funding a radical change in the paradigm of who gets quality education and who does not. This philosophy dates back in this country to the days of Thomas Jefferson, when he advocated for a two-track school system, creating separate resources for "the laboring and the learned" classes. Upon being asked how a student might advance from education for the laborer to that for the learned, Jefferson replied that educators might "rake a few geniuses from the rubbish."

That Jeffersonian paradigm still lingers. It allows state and local boards to still shackle school systems to insufficient budgets. Instead of demanding adequate public funding for quality education, these boards suggest that districts must rely on the generosity and demands of private

funds. But, across the nation students and parents are challenging that old paradigm of inequity by suing those boards for denying student rights to 21st century literacy. They are demanding public funding for educational excellence for all “We the People.”

Current Challenges

Current challenges to that demand is the notion that CEO’s of foundations, State Boards of Education, District and School Administrators, Business owners can speak for teachers, students and parents. Such assumptions, too often, result in interventions and/or personnel being parachuted into communities, without engaging teachers, students and parents on equal terms on how or if these interventions can be effectively used. While the voices of those other forces, their resources and expertise are important and necessary, they alone cannot decide what and how to teach students, how best to assess student learning and how best to divide budgets for delivering those services.

When teachers and students do not have actual power to control the decision-making process of their own education, they begin to feel paralyzed by systems and become “dependent on the goodwill and good works of others” (Moses, p.19). These practices that deny those voices, in underperforming schools, defeat teacher/student growth as critical thinkers and active democratic citizens of the nation and the world. For, what we have learned from our nations’ history and our own work, is that “Demands must be made on the system by those for whom the system does not work” (Moses, QECR Town Hall, 2020).

Solutions

Finally, if we value our present students and teachers, we must invest in them as the workers in the field. We must fund professional development for **teachers** to work with their peers, with their students, with parents and communities.

We must fund professional development for **students** to work with their peers, with younger middle and elementary school students, and with their parents and communities. Schools and their communities don’t want charity; they want equity. They want to lead their country toward justice---toward a “more perfect union.”

Charity, or what Peter Buffett* calls, “Philanthropic Colonialism,” cannot save us, our teachers, our students, or our schools. As Buffett indicates, it “just keeps the existing structure of inequality in place. Understanding that present danger, we also understand that Philanthropic support is needed now for this important work to shift our nation’s commitment to deliver democracy’s promise of justice for all. Yet we also believe that it will take a deep collaboration, between the local and the national Alliances, including AP and YPP and the supporting foundations, to move us closer to that promise. We look forward to building such collaborations, knowing that we can ultimately gain consensus on the inherent rules, philosophy, and practice of true democratic enterprises.

*Peter Buffett (Warren Buffett’s son), *The Charitable-Industrial Complex*, *NYTimes*, 7/26/2013.