School Reform: continued from page 14

we needed to have the power to make the primary decisions about what goes on on the school site."

Restructuring and School Reform

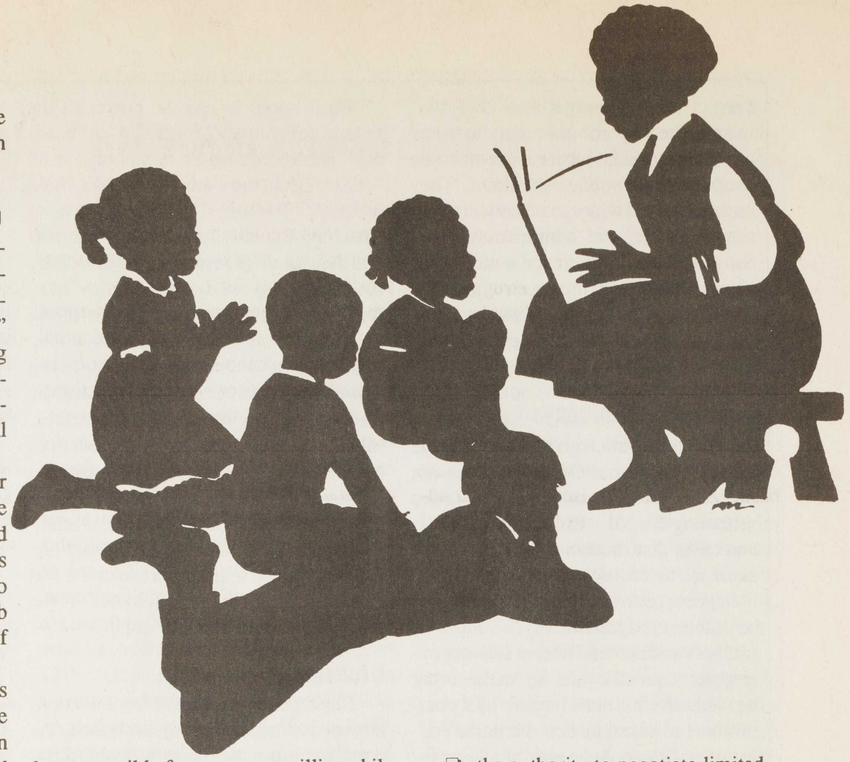
In the current jargon of education reform, the Melrose school has been "restructured" using a model known as "site-based (or school-based) management." Under this kind of plan for reforming school systems, authority over decision-making is moved from the central administration down to the level of individual schools.

In some cases, such as Chicago (by far the most developed example), the whole system is decentralized at one time and every school is not only allowed to set its own policy, but is more or less required to do so. In Milwaukee, says teacher Bob Peterson, the move is "toward a system of schools, rather than a school system."

In other public school districts, such as Oakland, schools that can present the central administration with a coherent plan are permitted to experiment with site-based management and given the authority to establish policy within certain limits, but decentralization is not instituted system-wide.

Proponents of site-based management say that it offers the best opportunity for parents and communities in the inner city to take control of the schools where their children are enrolled, and by so doing to make sure that the children receive the best education possible. Decentralization is not going to solve all the problems, says Ronald Sistrunk, Executive Director of the Chicago-based advocacy group Designs for Change, "but it does give us the one thing we need to make meaningful changes — the ability to do for ourselves. Once parents and community people have the say-so in how the schools are run, then we have the flexibility to innovate and the [authority] to hold teachers and principals accountable."

Groups like Designs for Change insist that there is a strong correlation between the way a school is run and the quality of the education offered within its walls. A school system where the key decisions are made in a central administration that may



be responsible for up to one million children in grades from first through high school cannot possibly be sensitive to the needs of students in individual schools. "The more we can take away from the central administration and give to local school councils the better," said Sistrunk.

As it is currently being implemented, site-based management plans involve creating a council or team made up of parents, teachers and the school principal. In Chicago, the plan requires that there be six parents, two community members, two teachers and the principal on the council, with the parents elected by community members in the area served by the school. School reform advocates believe that a majority of parents is necessary to reverse the traditional power structure that favors school staff over parents and community members. In most other instances, teachers and staff are in the majority. In any case, site-based management generally offers the new governing council or team some combination of policy-making powers, such as:

- ❑ the ability to recruit teachers and recommend them for hiring (although generally not to hire them directly);
- ❑ the authority to negotiate limited-duration contracts with principals subject to renewal based on performance;
- ❑ the responsibility for budgetary allocations, in terms of putting more money into materials versus staff, or bilingual programs over early childhood, etc., although the overall budget size itself is set by a central administration;
- ❑ the ability to hold individual teachers accountable for their classroom performance;
- ❑ the control of curriculum content and teaching methods; and
- ❑ the capability to undertake school improvement plans and carry them out.

In a nutshell, site-based management offers the promise of community control over schools. Parents and community members concerned over the content and form of their children's education have often found school system bureaucracies almost immune to all but the most intense pressure. If the school administration has the power to make most of the meaningful decisions, student and community needs are much more likely to be heeded, and parents are much more likely to be involved in the school.

Especially for communities of color that have historically faced an almost all-white educational system and unresponsive school systems, site-based management seems to offer the possibility of real control over their children's education. In fact, some of the system-wide decentralization plans underway have been implemented as a result of long struggles in communities of color. In Milwaukee, for example, the deep frustration in the African-American community with the low quality of the education students were getting was one important motivation in a movement to secede, to cut the inner-city out of the rest of the urban area a few years back. As a compromise, the central administration agreed to permit school-based management plans, among other reforms. (One of the key leaders in the movement for secession, Howard Fuller, is now the superintendent of schools.)

Site-based management, in the view of its advocates, is the cornerstone that provides a basis for implementing other reforms, such as doing away with tracking or developing a multi-cultural curriculum. There are many examples across the country where site-based management is credited with helping to turn around troubled schools.

Saving Education or Money?

According to a national survey, over half the schools in the country have school-based management plans underway or in the planning stages. Despite its current popularity, however, education reformers are by no means universally convinced that the move to decentralized administration of the schools is positive from the point of view of improving the educational opportunities of low-income inner-city children. Some activists point out, for example, that conservative think-tanks and corporations also advocate for decentralized school systems as part of a privatized market approach to education and other public services.

Laurie Olsen of California Tomorrow, a research and advocacy organization based in San Francisco, has serious suspicions about site-based management. "The movement to implement these kinds of reforms," she argues, "is propelled by concerns with making the schools more efficient, or making them better workplaces for teachers. This may not have anything to do with increasing access to the schools for language-minority kids, or improving equity, or improving education for inner-city minority students. Other forces are at work in this movement, and I think that the cases in which a change in governance leads to control and accountability for the community is a very slim percentage."

Indeed, the phrase "local control" has some negative connotations for community activists who have fought for years to improve access and equity in the public schools for low-income children of color. Desegregation efforts in the South after the 1954 Brown v. the Board of Education Supreme Court decision were often followed by wholesale abandonment of the public school system by whites, who argued that each community had the right to educate its children as it saw fit. Busing opponents used the same arguments.

When communities are strictly segregated by race and by income, which is as true in most inner cities as it ever was in the South, the rhetoric of community control can be used to hide a de facto dual school system, where poor communities of color have limited control over schools with no resources and where decision-making is a zero-sum game. Ronald Reagan frequently invoked the phrase "local control" while cutting federal aid to education by 30 percent since 1980, and Bush is doing the same thing while proposing to undermine the last remaining federal program that channels money to schools in poor communities (the Chapter 1 Program). As Jonathan Kozol makes painfully explicit in his new book *Savage Inequalities*, administrative changes are not going to mean much in segregated, underfunded urban schools where "restructuring... is very little more than than moving around the same old furniture within the house of poverty."

In this sense, site-based management dovetails neatly with the continuing efforts on the part of the federal government and conservative activists to demolish tax-subsidized public education and replace it with a semi-privatized sys-

continued on next page