

The following is a student perspective on the Southside Family School (SFS) which is the site of the filed workshop for MUST Fellows and was the location of her internship in Spring 2002.

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Internship Assignment #1

Mission, History, Issues

The Southside Family School is a place that consciously, continuously, and actively pursues its mission. Currently housed in the St. Stephen's Community Center at 2123 Clinton Ave South in Minneapolis, the school has been around in one form or another since 1972. The impetus for the school's birth was from the federally funded Model Cities project, which was part of President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." This particular vein of the project was to infuse local communities with monetary grants with which to improve their communities. This division, called the Model Cities Mini School, was far less structured and developed than it is now. The vague purpose of improving the community through the idea of open education has since grown into a mission of teaching, promoting, and working for social justice. While it has retained its initial commitment to open education through child-centered methods, hands on activities, and offering youth choices, the school now articulates a mission to "educate students to become independently minded thinkers who respect themselves and others" (SFS pamphlet). The school maintains an environment "free of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia," while they "honor diverse cultural identities, engage children in issues of social justice, decision making and problem solving, encourage volunteer participation, use the community as a classroom, develop curriculum, and advocate for families" (SFS pamphlet).

As articulated by its mission, SFS addresses many social issues. The pursuit of these issues is done in many ways, through methodological practices, curriculum, and the environment created by the confluence of the two. Racism and racial issues are discussed in specific curriculum, and in common conversation. Slavery and Civil Rights are main segments of the curriculum, challenging students to explore the issues in specific time periods, as well as link them to current issues of race on national and personal levels. Curriculum focusing on the contributions of women, as well as the inclusion of women throughout curriculum, promotes gender equality, while there is great focus on the contributions of children throughout history. The demographics of the school represent all types of people, and seek to promote each person and value what they bring to the circle. The school promotes equal rights for all people, regardless of social classifications. While addressing specific issues, the school promotes an overarching message of justice and peace. This does not simply mean being nice to everyone, but means learning, understanding, and thinking critically about life, concepts, and relationships. It means acknowledging and celebrating differences, while also celebrating the similarities between people. SFS stresses respect at all levels, common phrases spoken by students and teachers alike including "that's not respectful", "thank you for being respectful", and "do you think the way you are behaving is respectful to the group?" These frequent references keep present the idea and practice of respect, as well as concepts of justice and the ability of people,

especially students, to stand up for what they believe in, articulating clearly and maturely that they do not like something, why, and a request to change the unwanted behavior.

The manner in which Southside addresses these issues is with an intent of creating social change. This intent is manifested in three main ways. First, the school **is** social change as an alternative learning institution. Because classrooms are furnished with couches and chairs in circles, teachers are called by their first names, students are known well by each staff member, and curriculum includes representations of all kinds of people, SFS has changed the traditional school model. Second, by teaching what and how they do, SFS is helping to raise people who question the status quo by being conscious of and seeking social justice: The school is developing critically thinking social change agents. Experiences such as 6th–8th graders intensive study of the Civil Rights movement and corresponding trip, engages them on a deep personal level about the nature of power, oppression, and justice. Daily methods of “discipline” or conflict management demonstrate to all kids that there are alternatives to violence, alternatives to hierarchical and dominating relations. Third, SFS is making social change through its interactions with the local community, specifically relating to the way people think about young people. By bringing kids to a variety of places, they not only get to experience the content of visit, but also become aware and comfortable interacting with people in the community on various levels. This interaction, as well as their presentation of the Civil Rights slideshow, and the work of the Student Association for the Advancement of Children as People (SAACP), students challenge adults’ conceptions of children, and promote the idea that children be treated as the equals of adults.

Through their work for social change, it is my observation that SFS is changing the world, changing its part of the world. The kids I see in classes are truly different in the way they view and process things than kids I have known elsewhere. They have an authentic understanding that there are other ways of being than those which are presented in our daily culture, politics, and media. They know that you do not have to fight, bomb, exploit, and be violent to survive. They have seen and been part of SFS, where the values of respect, justice, and care make things function. These kids, and the many others who have been through the school, go into the world knowing another way of doing things, and knowing that they have the power to change what they see. SFS has also changed the impressions of countless community members, who have observed and interacted with the kids, striking them with awe as they see the wisdom and strength in people they are more used to viewing as dependent, minor, inferior. SFS is changing the world into a more just, more caring, more connected, more open place.

As introduced earlier, the entity of Southside Family School has evolved over time, though has retained its essential character as a socially aware, hands on educative alternative. The Model Cities program under which it was establishment ended in 1975, meaning the dwindling funds from this source were completely gone. Some parents and teachers wanted to see the school continue, and so worked over the next years to ensure that it did. All funding was raised by parents and teachers, including several grants and contributions. Teachers worked on a volunteer basis, or for small stipends, while kids helped to fundraise by leafleting for the Housing Authority for a penny per leaflet. A sliding scale fee system was also developed, so parents would pay what they could for their student to attend the school. From 1976 to 1981, the school was funded primarily by a City of Minneapolis government contract, the Community

Development Block Grant, but also by individual contributions, parent fees, fundraisers, stipends from the Cooperating Fund Drive, which continues to give the school money today, as the Community Solutions Fund. These funds scraped together enough for the school to survive, though just barely. During this time, particularly from 1974 to 1978, the school grew a great deal, truly becoming a family school, as parents came to be involved with all parts of the school, buying stamps, holding fundraisers, supervising kids at lunch, and serving on the elected parent board that was formed to have overall responsibility for the school. Parents also recruited other parents for their participation, interviewed new teacher candidates, and volunteered in countless other ways. It was during this time that the school came to be known as the Southside Family School, “to reflect its commitment to family involvement and the community around it” (SFS history doc).

The next ten years brought more monetary problems, as Ronald Reagan’s federal budget cuts reduced the Community Development Block Grant the school received by 30%. During this time, the school operated as a private school, raising their entire budget by themselves. While the school was comprised of almost entirely mid and low income families, parents were generous, providing nearly 10% of the schools annual budget during this time. Though teacher salaries rose from \$10,000 to \$12,500, they went down in terms of real wages due to inflation. Some grants were obtained during this time for long term planning and curricular development. In 1986, Susie was honored by the Minnesota Historical Society as Outstanding History Teacher for her development of the Women’s Oral History Curriculum. In 1989, SFS finally secured consistent funding, as it became an official option of the Minneapolis Public School system. Known as a “contract alternative”, MPS quickly funded around 50% of the school’s budget. As a contract alternative, parents and students can choose SFS for their regular schooling, while having it recognized as part of the public system. The current mission statement was adopted in 1989, and has been guiding teaching and learning since then. Changes throughout the 1990’s brought the school to where it is at today, with 75 kids enrolled in grades k-8, and its current staff. This staff is comprised of Jessie, Ramona, Lisa, Amy, Brynn, Pete, and Susie as the seven full time teachers, while Esly is the part time Spanish instructor, Brendan the computer specialist and part time teacher, Gary the Youth Advocate, Eliza the associate director, Flo the director, the lunch lady, whose name I can’t remember, and a special ed teacher who I have not met. The school currently employs many programs, including volunteer tutoring, travel study in the Civil Rights trip and travel trips, Spanish curriculum for all students, counseling services on-site available for all students and their families, computer curriculum, special ed, a youth advocate program which provides a staff member for the specific purpose of acting as a liaison with families, as well as interns and volunteers through Americorps, HECUA, and local college work study programs. All of these programs contribute to achieving Southside’s mission of educating socially aware and critically thinking students, while honoring all people, bringing these issues to the community, and widening the discussion of social justice, with a focus on how kids are treated.

My internship fits in with the mission of the school and thus implicitly its social change work in several ways. As an intern, I am another person exposed to and taught the curriculum, but more importantly, the ways of interacting and relating that are purposefully cultivated at SFS. As a teachers’ aide, I am responsible for being a coworker and active member of the classroom. As such, I help transmit and discuss material with students, a part of this conversation of social

justice. I am responsible as part of the SFS community for helping to maintain an environment consistent with SFS's goals and mission. Internships at the school further SFS's mission by involving more people, by spreading awareness of the school and its way. Such internships, including mine, give interns the opportunity to observe and experience this non-mainstream methodology, one we will have in the toolbox of our being to draw from, consider, or try to similarly create in a myriad of other settings. While some of the things we learn are school particular, many are not, and can be directly used or translated into every setting of interaction. Listening, respect, curiosity, and acting with ideas of justice are applicable in all interactions, whether from acknowledging others you pass on the street, remarking on or challenging degrading jokes and speech, lobbying for a specific cause, or solving disputes with calm, caring words and actions. Personally, I fit into the organization in that I completely support their mission, and am participating and learning about it. My desire to interact in ways that promote empowerment and justice is developed here, helping to make concrete and real the more abstract ideas of justice and peace I have been harboring for years. I feel extraordinarily fortunate to have this opportunity, and for the way I have been welcomed into the SFS community by staff and students alike.