

# Visiting Mission Hill

October 9, 2006

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The new Mission Hill School is located in the middle of Boston, in Roxbury. By the time the subway reaches the neighborhood, all the white people have already left the train. The school itself is nestled into a building long-ago abandoned by a Catholic High School. When it first moved in, they found the remnants of the last high school class had never been removed, their effects somehow frozen in time.

The streets are gritty, the faces dark, and I don't exactly feel comfortable walking outside. This isn't the place you imagine starting a "progressive school". And when you learn that Mission Hill is a public school, part of the Boston Public School system, it seems even less likely. Yet, when educational reformer Deborah Meier set out to build a modern school, that's what she picked. They got a special license from the government and the unions to operate it as a "pilot school" and begun tossing out the normal rules and building it from the ground up on progressive principles.

Meier has since left, as has Straughton, her successor, leaving a woman who introduces herself as Ayla (everyone here goes by their first names). Ayla seems a little overwhelmed, both by the demands of the job and her sudden promotion to the top, but she somehow handles everything with kindness and composure.

"Welcome to our school," she says, smiling so sweetly that I have trouble believing she's a principle. As she continues talking, outlining the school's unique mission and the "habits of mind" it hopes to achieve, some kids begin running and screaming in the halls outside. She gets up and heads to the door. *Now we'll get to see the other side of her*, I think. *She seems nice enough to us but she'll start screaming at the kids*. But she doesn't say a thing, she just closes the door and sits back down with us.

After the overview, she takes us upstairs to get a sense of what classroom life is like. The school is nice enough — "I wish I went to school here," the education students visiting with me gush — with happy decorations, small class sizes (20 is the max.), friendly and dedicated teachers, and very active classrooms. The kids, a very racially mixed crowd, seem quite bright and full of joy, and I can't help smiling for the first twenty minutes, as we watch them bouncing around painting and sculpting.

When we move to math class, things are a little different. For "morning math meeting", the kids sit in a circle in the front of the room, as the teacher goes around asking each one to say something about subtraction before writing it on the board. The teacher tries to be non-judgmental, but when someone says

something wrong, he can't help but ask the rest of the class if they think what that person said was right. (Once, when it actually was right, he has to add the caveat "I'm not saying it was wrong, I just want to know what other people think.") At one point, a child asks him to write a one with twelve zeroes up on the board, saying it's a million. The teacher points out that it's a lot more than a million and counts out for the class what it actually is. He miscounts though, and claims it's one septillion. (It's only a trillion.) I don't say anything.

Later, the teacher tells us how much he likes morning math circle because it gives everyone a chance to speak and think about things. But it's clear that most of the students are bored most of the time (including me) while others don't exactly enjoy speaking. Afraid they'll get the answer wrong and look stupid in front of the whole class, they speak quietly or cover their mouth while they talk, trying to make sure only the teacher can hear them. When the teacher indicates they were right and asks them to speak up, then they're happy to tell the rest of the class.

After everyone has spoken, the class adjourns so people can get the memoirs they've been working on to share with everyone. We head to a class where they're shouting out the names of states on a map. The class is going to explain how America became America by looking at the patterns of migration on maps, the teacher assures us, but right now it looks like the class is only memorizing how to spell stupid state names.

At this point our visit is officially over and we have to head back to a final wrap-up with the principal, but as I think about it and think back to my own school experience, I begin to wonder: is this any different?

There are some differences, of course. This school feels much cozier and comfortable, for example. I don't feel odd just hanging out in the halls. The teachers are all very self-conscious about trying to be "student-centered" and "democratic" (the principal explains how they terminated their relationship with an afterschool program because they refused to stop giving kids rewards, referring skeptical student-teachers to Alfie Kohn's books for "an extreme position" on rewards). But while their hearts may be in better places, it's not clear the effect is that much different.

Still, that in itself is a pretty incredible achievement. I went to an extremely rich, white, private school on an expensive and lush campus in the middle of the richest zip code in the country. That you can build a public school of equal quality for kids in the inner city is an impressive achievement. Just not the one I was expecting.