



Part of the thrust of the Black Panther Party, although diminished at the height of the party's national prominence, has been education of black children. Once highly anti-authoritarian and inflammatory, the party's educational efforts are now concentrated in a traditional and very successful elementary school in Oakland. But party leaders' seemingly perennial involvement in violence and trials casts a long shadow on the school, which some say could serve as a model for the improvement of public education.

By Pat Roberto  
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**Oakland, Calif.**  
A peace-setting private elementary school that has provided first-rate education to some of this city's poorest children — and high acclaim to the Black Panther Party, which runs it — is facing an uncertain future as a result of charges of attempted murder, extortion and fraud brought against party members. The allegations, some believe, may threaten the survival of the party itself.

The accusations, including welfare fraud, extortion and two shootings supposedly connected with the murder trial of Panther leader Huey Newton, have already created a breach between the Oakland Community School and public officials such as Oakland Mayor Lionel Wilson, who recently resigned from the school's board.

But while officials from all Panthering a discreet distance from all Panther activities, the school's grass-roots support in this predominantly white city of 328,000

has grown even more loyal. "I go down there and I see for myself the love and concern they have for the children," said one mother. "Why for the children, said one mother. 'Why should I care who runs it or what is being said about them?'"

If reading and math scores are indications, the progress of the school's 150 2½- to 12-year-old students is remarkable. Children enrolled in the program from the start consistently score one to two years beyond grade level on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, which the school administers twice each year. Transfer students from the Oakland public schools, where students score among the worst in the state and the nation in reading, usually reach grade level in two years.

The staff, who devised the curriculum, feel the students' achievements are small cause to marvel. "This is ordinary everyday stuff," said Carol Granison, language arts director and former staffer for Scholastic magazine. "For a child to learn as inevitable as breathing. What is extraordinary is the millions of kids who learn nothing in public-school classrooms."

What must be acknowledged as extraordinary about the Oakland Community School is the amount of attention available to students. The staff consists of 16 full-time teachers — 14 blacks and two whites. Class sizes vary from seven to 12 students, compared with the public-school average of 28. The school provides before-and-after-school child care, three hot meals a day, complete medical and dental treatment and overnight care at a Panther-run dormitory when parents request it.

All of this is free to parents who cannot afford the \$25-a-month tuition. Most are single mothers who cannot. It costs the school about \$30,000 a month to provide the services and pay salaries. The money comes from a variety of grants, public food programs and contributions. "We do everything for our children," said Ericka Huggins, director of the school. "We see to it they have their meals, that their noses are wiped and that they are feeling OK."

This adds up to a very heavy workload for the teachers, three-quarters of whom have public-school experience. They earn a flat \$800 a month, or an average of \$300 a month less than their public-school counterparts. Most feel that working with small classes and the freedom from bureaucracy makes up the difference.

But the work is rigorous. Teachers work eight to ten hours a day, including supervising children before and after school. They rotate breakfast, lunch and dinner duty, often serving the children and eating with them. They must also write brief weekly progress reports on every child they teach. And they are responsible to the other teachers if their homeroom students fail to turn in assignments.

At weekly faculty meetings, teachers and staff discuss the behavior and academic performance of individual children and plan strategies for improvement.

"Sure we sympathize with public-school teachers who say they need more pay and better working conditions," said curriculum coordinator Dr. Bill Moore. "But if you want those things, show us where your children are progressing and show us where they are not shooting up drugs or drinking alcohol or tricking in hallways. Because if you are a teacher, these things are your responsibility."

There is an added dimension to the teaching zeal at the Oakland Community School: The majority of teachers and administrators are members of the Black Panther Party. With their social, political and professional lives largely focused on the school, they form the core of a crucial alliance between faculty, parents and community resource people.

"These people are visionaries without any economic motives," said one observer. "For the sake of that vision they have learned to fit into any structure that exists. They know how to organize, to get projects funded. Whatever it takes."

Non-party members at the school praise the party's idealism but insist they see little influence emanating from its ideology. "What binds us as a group is our commitments to the same goal, not politics," said mathematics teacher Jackie Nado. "We are working together to educate children so they can analyze and make choices. There is nothing more exciting."

Besides the dedication of teachers, Huggins says a crucial element in the school's success is the involvement of parents, who are asked to work 12 hours a month as classroom aides, cafeteria workers or

office personnel at the school in lieu of tuition. Family members are encouraged to participate in Panther-run teen projects and adult-education courses at the school.

"Without prying, we try to know as much as we can about a child's home environment and we don't hesitate to make suggestions when we feel a change is needed," Huggins said. For example, one four-year-old girl, labeled autistic by a county psychologist, had seen her parents fighting constantly, at times threatening each other with guns. "That situation could not be improved," said Huggins. "So we explained to the mother how deeply her child was being hurt and urged her to move. She did, and the girl started to talk and later to read much as any child."

Since ghetto children rarely have an alternative to the public school, parents whose children go to the Oakland Community School express a mixture of enthusiasm and gratitude. "I consider myself extremely lucky," said Marianne Keyes, whose nine-year-old son spent a year in public school "without learning a single thing. I was beside myself," she said. "Since he's been at the community school I just can't believe the difference. He's grown up. He reads well and he has a lot of confidence."

Pat Dudley has three children at the community school. A fourth daughter who graduated last year is an honors student at one of Oakland's best junior high schools. The school helped Dudley get legal help after one of her children was hit by a car. And when she went to the hospital this past summer, the school took care of the child at its dormitory.

Parents seem unconcerned over the possibility that their children might be politically influenced by the Panthers. "There is no politics involved. But they do talk to the children about where they live and why they live there," said Rita Means. "There is a lot of discussion about social conditions. The children become aware."

"We do not impress our ideas on these children," Huggins said. "But the education they get here is not just the three R's, either. It is an understanding that there is no more important purpose than to be obligated to other human beings."

On the other hand, Huggins says the school and other community programs sponsored by the party in no way signal a change in Panther philosophy. "We are the same people we always were," she said. "We want a new order of things in this society and in the world. But we realize that if 'A' is oppression and 'Z' is freedom, you just can't jump from A to Z. If we want to change things the best way to begin is to educate our children."

Although education students from nearby



Ericka Huggins, at the time of her trial in 1971.

colleges constantly observe classes and write papers on the school, and state officials periodically comment it, local school officials have shown little interest in it. "The children in that school," said Oakland city councilwoman Mary Moore, "are the same as you find in the public school, yet their intellectual output is prodigious. Unfortunately, most educators want to ignore the school because it is run by the Panthers and also because it is a tremendous indictment of the school system."

But public-school teachers familiar with the community school do not feel indicted by its successes. Instead, they feel that the school makes the very case teachers have been trying to make all along. "Smaller classes, and an administration that draws in the parents and the community, make all the difference in the world," said Ron De George, an Oakland teacher.

Councilwoman Moore believes the public schools could benefit from studying the community school and adapting some of its developmental programs. "It would cost a fortune, but it could be done and it would save money later on, for welfare and social aid," she said.

But the school, or more properly the Educational Opportunities Corporation that runs it, is being studied from a different angle recently. Since the first shooting incident, newspaper articles have alleged that grant money awarded to the corporation for educational projects was used to pay rent for Panther party members. Some party members have also been accused of extorting contributions from local businesses for community projects. The city is now auditing the corporation's finances, a move that brought about the mayor's resignation from the board. Suspects in the shootings have been identified as employees of the corporation who worked on the school premises. Huggins is under investigation for welfare fraud.

All these problems, which have descended on the Panthers since Huey Newton's return from exile in Cuba last July, carry the implication that necessary political and financial support for the school could fade. "People in high places forget to return phone calls or invite you to meetings," said Councilwoman Moore in characterizing the reaction in city government.

And a local political observer commented, "They do a fantastic job. But they also use those children to gain respectability. The school is their big money-getter so it's a pretty thorny question."

Though parents tend to dismiss these problems, some who have expressed concern that a Panther-police confrontation might endanger their children were reassured by Huggins. At a recent meeting, that the school is safe. Huggins told the meeting that the school would close rather than leave the children open to danger. But even as a suggestion, the idea of closing brought protestations of loyalty. "There is just no way the parents would stand by and let the school go down," said Judy Freeman, the president of the Parent Advisory Committee. "Some people may disappear but we'd keep it going if we had to take it into our own living rooms."

For the present, the school seems to be in no danger. "We haven't suffered at all in terms of losing children or contributors," said Huggins. "Black people don't believe everything they read in the papers. All this harassment stems from the fact they want to destroy Huey Newton and the party. But the school stands on its own two feet and nothing can destroy it because it is so firmly rooted in the community."

## The Panthers / A look back

The Black Panther Party probably first came to national attention in the late 1960s with its coloring book, distributed to children taking part in its ghetto lunch programs. The book depicted black children killing policemen drawn as giant pigs. The party was founded by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton in 1966 as a defense organization for blacks against the police, and Panthers patrolled ghetto streets with shotguns.

The party's line then was an extremely militant one. Excerpts from a November 1970 speech at Macalester College by Emory Douglass, Panther minister of culture, give some feeling of the rhetoric used by party leaders:

Douglass told blacks to "take an eye for an eye — a tooth for a tooth." Although Panthers, he said, did not intend to shoot white people indiscriminately, "I'm here to tell you we will no longer stand by while our people are killed."

Douglass called Macalster President Arthur Fleming a "criminal" who "deserves justice at the hands of the people," and Hubert Humphrey "a war maniac who is running around bootlicking so one day he can become head man in this country."

"The only way to end war and racism," he said, "is with war — to open a second front right here. They have guns and tanks, but I say we will not hesitate to kill or die to get our freedom."

Throughout the late '60s and early '70s, cities across the country saw violent incidents involving police raiding Panther headquarters or Panthers shooting policemen or other Panthers. The party's leaders seemed to be forever on trial on charges of murder, conspiracy or assault.

Early in 1971, the international wing of the party, led by Eldridge Cleaver in exile in Algeria, split with American branch, Cleaver expelling Newton and vice-versa. The Newton forces stressed political education of blacks and freeing what they called political prisoners. The Cleaver wing called for underground attacks on the establish-

ment. The split apparently led to at least one Panther being killed by other Panthers.

But the Newton forces prevailed here, and the party and its leaders seemed intent on abandoning the gun for the ballot box and community aid.

In early 1971 Seale and Ericka Huggins were on trial in Connecticut in the murder of Panther Alex Rackley, who was suspected of being a police informer. As happened in many other Panther trials, for various reasons, a mistrial and dismissal of the charges ultimately resulted. By late 1972, Huggins, who had admitted pouring boiling water on Rackley, was an elected member of the Berkeley (Calif.) Community Development Council and Seale was running for mayor of Oakland. (He came in second, having run a race that was commended by his opponent, before the election, as "responsible and positive.")

Eventually the militant Panther wing fell into disfavor in Algeria, and, in 1975, Cleaver surrendered to U.S. authorities in Paris and returned to face parole-violation and assault charges. His trial has yet to be held. Cleaver has since said that he has had a religious conversion.

Seale left the party in 1974 and recently wrote an autobiography. He has been on a lecture tour to help raise \$350,000 for a program of preventive therapy for the homicidally violent.

Newton jumped bail in 1974 while murder and assault charges were pending against him, and fled, eventually returning to the United States in 1977 after 2½ years in Cuba. Two recent shootings centering on an alleged witness have inflamed the situation surrounding Newton's trial on the 1974 murder charges, which has not yet been held.

In 1974, under orders from the Justice Department, the FBI released documents indicating that its agents had, through faked letters and other means, fomented dissension among black militant groups, notably the Black Panthers, and had harassed their leaders through frequent arrests.