

**“From Mississippi to New Mexico: *Fear and violence go hand and hand*”**

Nine members of SWOP traveled to Mississippi in early November with the goal of building unity between the South and Southwest. For five days we shared stories, built relationships and learned from members of the Southwest Workers Union (San Antonio, Texas) and Southern Echo (Mississippi). During the trip we attended the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual GAP Conference addressing the education achievement gap in Mississippi. Leroy Johnson, the director of Southern Echo and Drustella Neely, the director of Youth Innovation Movement Solutions, both grassroots, community based organizations in Mississippi, spoke of the unhealthy environment of fear their students live in every day and how violence perpetuates more violence. Through poetry a group of student depicted the brutal reality of getting hit with a wooden paddle. They then showed a clip of a young black male student getting hit. Most people in the room turned their head away from the horrible sight and sound of a paddle striking the skin of the young man. While they are fighting the use of corporal punishment in Mississippi, we are fighting officers carrying guns on our school campuses throughout the Albuquerque Public School District. The similarities around education in New Mexico and Mississippi are startling—both turn an environment that should cultivate social and academic skills to prepare youth for their future into an environment of FEAR.

During the 2004-2005 school year 40, 692 students were paddled in Mississippi Public School District. Some were paddled for simply being out of dress code. You might think New Mexico is far from that kind of discipline, but your wrong, corporal punishment is still legal in our state. During the 2004-2005 school year, 722 students were disciplined by corporal punishment. From corporal punishment to officers carrying guns, the messages is the same: “acting out of line” will be confronted with violence. Should a paddle and a gun be practices condoned by Administration and School Board members who’s responsibility is to ensure a safe and health atmosphere for students to develop? NO! Our school leadership should be mentors exemplifying the positive non-violent ways in which conflicts can be resolved. Instead, youth are being taught the way to handle a challenging situation or person is through the use of violence.

New Mexico and Mississippi school systems rank at the bottom for teacher pay and dollars invested per student. You would think our elected official would take the initiative to devote money to areas that create a positive and healthy environment that helps students learn, grow and resolve conflict in a constructive way. Prioritizing, more after school, prevention and intervention programs, pay raises for teachers and support for student and parents when challenges arise. Instead, the APS School Board voted on August 16, 2007 to pursue the creation of a stand alone police force which start up costs would total upwards of 2 million dollars. While waiting for the Attorney General to rule on if it is even legal, they voted on November 7, 2007 to arm the current guards in APS campuses. All of this is a distraction from the business of educating students. While the APS School Board continues to focus, on guns our school system is failing our students.

Albuquerque Public School Administration and School Board must take a second look at their priorities. We as the community must continue to let it be known that our students

deserve better. In Mississippi, grassroots community based organizations, parents and students are fighting back. They are standing up and shouting, corporal punishment is wrong especially when the highest percentage of students getting paddled are black young men. While, they are challenging the remnants of slavery in New Mexico we are receding towards a more reactionary environment, with emphasis on weapons. We are arming guards and teaching our students violence is a solution not a problem. The community must continue to echo over and over again to our School Board and Administration SAFE SCHOOLS ARE GUN FREE. School Board elections are in 2009 when we go to vote it is imperative we look at the issues and elect School Board members that have a vision that will help our young people succeed and prioritize investing in our students and teachers, not in fear.