

Civil Rights Education and Accountability: Why Senate Bill 2718 is Important

by Deborah Duncan Owens

If I could identify one unifying theme in public education these days, it would be accountability. It's the rationale for virtually everything we do as school administrators and teachers. It's the reason test scores are so much a part of the school culture. We're accountable to society for how well our children are doing academically. We debate sometimes about how much we rely on standardized tests and how much we are narrowing our curriculum because of testing. However, I think most educators would agree that accountability is a good thing. Senate Bill 2718 represents a key link between educational accountability and legal accountability.



Deborah Owens in the classroom at Philadelphia Elementary School.

In recent years the state of Mississippi has demonstrated great courage with regard to legal accountability. The conviction of Byron De La Beckwith for the murder of Medgar Evers stood as a landmark case in a state's responsibility to bring justice to those people who fought vigorously—to the point of committing murder—to deny the civil rights of African Americans.

What followed were convictions in the murders of Vernon Dahmer in Hattiesburg, Rodney Pool in Humphreys County, Ben Chester White in Natchez, and James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Neshoba County. Most recently Mississippi overturned the conviction of Clyde Kennard, an African American man who unsuccessfully attempted to enroll at the University of Southern

Mississippi and was later falsely convicted of robbery.

Additionally, the state is investigating the possibility of successfully obtaining convictions for the 1955 Emmett Till murder. Mississippi is addressing its own accountability in the violence that occurred to its citizens who simply sought voting rights and full participation in American society. Simultaneously, with the establishment of the Civil Rights Education Commission, Mississippi is addressing its responsibility for educating its students about its civil rights history.

As an educator I've been surprised and saddened by how

little our students, as well as teachers, know about Mississippi's civil rights history. While students from other states routinely travel to Mississippi to honor our civil rights leaders and learn more about our place in history, our own students know little beyond Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks.

They don't know about the contributions made by Fannie Lou Hamer, Unita Blackwell, Medgar Evers, Aaron Henry, and Dr. Gilbert Mason, among many others. They don't know about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the Biloxi Beach Wade-In, Freedom Schools, and Freedom Summer.

Mississippians are proud of their literary, musical, and artistic heritage. It's time for our students to learn, and be proud of, our historical heritage, too, as part of the movement which lead to the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

The people, according to Thomas Jefferson, are the "ultimate guardians of their own liberty." Public education, therefore, is necessary in order to enable citizens to judge for themselves what will secure or endanger their freedom. As educators we recognize our accountability to ensure that our students are successful academically. As a state we are likewise accountable for ensuring that our students understand their roles as citizens and members of participatory government. A civil rights curriculum is an important step in the development of a truly educated citizenry in Mississippi.