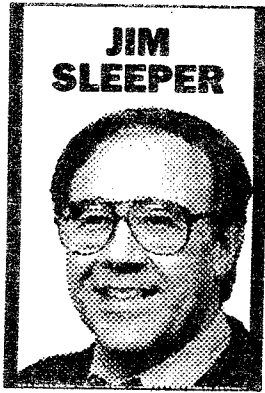


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# Diverse, yes, but all Americans



If the intersection of Newkirk and Coney Island Aves. in Flatbush ever becomes Multi-cultural Heaven, it'll be thanks to Public School 217, whose 1,100 students are about evenly distributed among Pakistani, Chi-

nese, Russian, Caribbean and South and Central American immigrant families. The school is about 25% black, 25% Hispanic, 25% white, 25% Asian and "other." If that ain't diversity, take me to Peoria.

Yet the school works because it doesn't preach multi-culturalism as an ideology. Champions of the late, unlamented "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum made that mistake; the Board of Education shouldn't repeat it as it refines pro-diversity and anti-bias curriculums, pursuant to a resolution it passed last week.

The board should study PS 217 and learn that the best way to curb bias, teach tolerance and celebrate our various cultures is to help parents and students discover how much they have *in common*.

That's the secret of success at PS 217, where Judith Brandwein, whose three children have attended the school, is a volunteer program coordinator. She, Principal Mary Buckley Teatum and outreach workers (whom Brandwein funded by securing private grants) are drawing parents of many backgrounds into school life. For their kids' sake, religious Pakistani Muslims, secular Russian immigrants and Haitian workers "come to feel

comfortable and involved with each other naturally," Brandwein says.

Instead of fighting over multi-cultural curriculums that might violate their beliefs, participants in the Parent Involvement Program — after they drop their kids off at school — take aerobics in a women's exercise group and learn how to talk with teachers and oversee homework.

Sure, there are multi-cultural moments. On "Museum Day," recalls Brandwein, "parents set up cultural exhibits in the gym and stood there, explaining objects and customs to class after class." Students were awed by the rich panoply of cultures, respectful of others' parents and proud of their own. What counted was that parents from diverse backgrounds contributed to a *common* enterprise — an American school's multi-cultural "museum" — that their own cultures might not have supported.

### Kids as authors

Brandwein didn't stop there. She devised and funded a Children's Publishing Group for English as a second language students, bringing in a professional book editor with publishing house experience to help kids write their own life stories and print them in soft, glossy books. This consultant trained teachers and parents to help edit the children's books, too.

To everyone's immense pride, the books are now in the public library's Cortelyou Road branch. When student-authors read them aloud, classmates learn of harrowing homeland experiences and first encounters with America. But what counts most isn't the airing of cultural differences; it's the sharing of English and a common publishing medium. Like the Parent Involvement Program, the Children's Publishing Group makes its partic-

ipants proud to be *Americans*.

The lessons? First, many immigrants come here to escape old homeland feuds and even some cobwebs of tradition. They *want* their kids to be Americans, not walking emblems of cultural difference.

Kids want that, too. One day in 1985, as I regaled a Stuyvesant High School history class with stories of Chinese immigrants who were forced to build railroads, I couldn't make some Chinese-American kids stop studying chemistry books open on their laps. They wanted to become sci-

***In this Brooklyn school, teachers and parents practice multi-culturalism without preaching it.***

entists or computer magnates. They'd had enough of cultural "difference."

Second, precisely because the city is becoming more diverse, we should be working overtime to identify and inculcate the common values and customs that institutions like PS 217 need to survive and succeed.

Let's learn to tolerate some differences without touting them. Some cultures that multi-culturalists claim to revere prohibit other faiths or homosexuality. If multi-culturalism means preaching alternative lifestyles to traditional parents rather than finding tolerance on common ground, it's worse than a waste of time. PS 217 proves we can do better.