

Community Opposition Sends Marine JROTC Unit Into Retreat

by John Amidon

In February 2000, a short news article announced that a Marine Corps JROTC program was scheduled to begin at Albany (NY) High School in September 2000. According to the article, the program would cost the school district about \$25,000, using money from a budget transfer. The program needed only the approval of the school board. It appeared certain that Albany High School was the next to become militarized by the JROTC program.

Several groups, including Veterans for Peace, Albany Friends Meeting (Quakers), Albany Catholic Workers, and high school students, were dismayed at this turn of events. By the end of May, working as individuals and groups in loose affiliation, we generated enough political pressure to have the proposal rescinded by the district superintendent. With hard work and collective political pressure, we were successful in blocking JROTC, at least this time. (After the proposal was withdrawn, two students presented the school board with 150 signatures in favor of JROTC. Previously, fewer than a dozen students had signed up for the program, when the goal written in the contract was 125. It is unclear if the school board or the Marine Corps will reconsider.)

I hope that our experiences, outlined below, will help other communities block the growing militarization of our high schools and our youth and the further erosion of quality public education.

Stopping JROTC: What Worked in Albany

1. Obtain strong student involvement in opposing JROTC.

Student involvement was key in Albany. By attending public JROTC presentations, Veterans For Peace contacted students who opposed the program. The students became a powerful coalition against JROTC. They organized a petition drive which collected more than 300 signatures against JROTC, educated many other students about the negative aspects of this training, helped increase parental involvement, and wrote letters to the school board. Student leaders also organized a protest rally near the superintendent's office and leafleted the high school. The rally was transformed into a small victory celebration when the superintendent withdrew the proposal for JROTC on the morning the rally was to take place.

2. Examine the JROTC curriculum and release information about its problems.

We used examples of racial stereotyping found in Army JROTC manuals. (See curriculum review by AFSC.) Many people commented that this stereotyping was racist. It is unacceptable academically and is not beneficial to the healthy development of our young and the education of good citizens. We sent these curriculum pages to every group we thought would be offended by racial stereotyping, including the aldermen and women of our city, particularly people of color, the Jewish community, and the Black and Hispanic Caucus of the New York State Assembly.

3. Ask if the administration or the school board has seen the curriculum.

In Albany, no one has yet seen the curriculum. If this is the case, ask how the board and the administration can possibly make a responsible decision about the program without knowing what is in it. JROTC is most often not college preparatory material. In any case, insist on being given a copy of the curriculum.

4. Work with the material you have.

If it is a Marine Corps program and you only have Army JROTC materials to use, use them and keep insisting that the school board and administration provide you with the appropriate material.

5. Recognize issues of race and class.

Youth of color are disproportionately represented in both JROTC and the enlisted ranks of the military. We also saw that the program has negative impacts on young people who are less well-off economically. They are often tracked into low-level military jobs. Be aware that people in power may not see these connections or may think that JROTC is an opportunity for young people.

6. Arrange to have many individuals opposed to this program speak at school board or other meetings, write to newspapers, etc.

It is most important to have students, parents of students, and folks who live in your school district (all people who have a stake in the district) speak. Over a period of several months, Veterans for Peace and others spoke at both school board

meetings and PTA meetings. Both are good places to make contacts and circulate information on the problems of JROTC. Letters to the school board and letters to the editor in local papers were very important. It is likely that no one in your community, including the school board, teachers, administrators, and activists, has any expertise on JROTC. Study of the materials available through the American Friends Service Committee and Veterans For Peace gave us the information we needed to speak out.

7. Set up public informational seminars and leaflet the community heavily.

Go to rallies, stand in front of movie theaters, talk with church groups. Make sure the leaflet states clearly and concisely the points you wish to make. Listen to JROTC proponents; you may learn to answer questions you hadn't yet thought of.

8. Look for any challenges or issues in the targeted school and ask whether the military is the best solution.

For instance, school taxes may be very high. Ask why the taxpayer must subsidize the Pentagon and why it is necessary to duplicate programs since leadership skills are often taught in other courses. Find out the performance level of your school. How are the students doing? Are there problems with drug use, drop-out rate, etc.? Remember that no studies have been undertaken to show that JROTC has an ability to help with such problems. Pentagon claims are unsubstantiated. 9. Address budget information and the role of the military. Taxpayers are being asked to subsidize a military recruitment program while the Pentagon has a budget of approximately \$270 billion. Stress that the military is not the Department of Education. Demand strict financial accounting. Per student, JROTC often has a very high cost. Ask for all local documentation pertaining to the program, including accurate and complete information about costs. This proved very difficult to do here. We still have no real idea of what this program would have actually cost, if approved.

10. Point out the connections between JROTC and military recruiting.

Normally any connection has been denied by the JROTC program, but several military statements, such as Army Policy Memorandum 50 (1999), point out these links. Don't let the military misrepresent what it is doing. Point out that we need quality

education for our children, not military recruitment programs.

11. If possible, document every claim you make with strong reference material.

12. Get into the schools. We did a Veterans for Peace presentation for the high school students.

13. Be willing to spend money on your effort.

Peace work is a good thing to spend money on. Keeping substandard education out of our schools is a good thing to spend money on. Ask your friends and support groups for financial help. It doesn't usually cost that much to be effective. Copying will probably be your biggest expense. Postage, phone calls and research expenses are also likely. In Albany our campaign cost approximately \$350.

14. Demand and elect high quality, accountable school officials.

Ultimately, we will have to run intelligent and thoughtful candidates for the school board. Without people who genuinely care about young people, we will continue to have a substandard school board populated by those who are willing to write off the young for political expediency. This is the only long term solution for each community and must be seriously undertaken to ensure quality public education.

15. Remember to speak the truth - even if some find it unpleasant - and work for quality education.

Be forceful and confrontational when necessary but remain nonviolent and civil. Finally, inspired opportunities will be presented along the way. Be open to them and to the still, small voice within. When these moments come, act on them with vigor and thankfulness.

About the Author:

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