

Class Struggle:

Student Activism in American Public Schools



Youth United for Change member speaking at protest against Wal-Mart in Philadelphia, November 16, 2005.
(Photo by Michael Pesa.)

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A note about wording: Throughout this article the word “student” is used to refer to elementary and secondary school students—not college students—except where otherwise noted.

“Children should be seen and not heard.” This popular adage held sway over the world of education throughout most of American history. The same traditional point of view which held that a woman’s place was “barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen” also insisted that her sons and daughters be silent and obedient in the classroom. Yet today more and more young people are speaking their minds and acting on their beliefs in an effort to assert their own rights and to help make the world a better place. Who are these student activists and what approach should teachers take toward them?

The topic of student activism in public schools is extremely broad—and difficult to research. Although disparate writings about the subject can be found, the vast majority of student participation in activism has gone unrecorded and often unnoticed. Aaron Krieder, a software designer who creates online networking tools for student activists, estimates that there are about 10,000-20,000 college activist groups or chapters in the United States (A. Kreider, personal communication, November 7, 2006). He speculates that there are probably a similar number of high school groups but cautions that it is hard to be certain, citing the lack of reliable statistics on the subject. Even less known is the number of informal actions that have been organized by students outside official channels and the number of individual students who have participated in some form of activism inside or outside the school setting. Because of the gap in

statistical data, this article focuses on personal interviews with teachers, teachers-in-training, leaders of youth organizations and former high school activists. I also rely on newspaper articles and individual case studies of selected groups and events that help to shed light on the subject. This article is not intended to be comprehensive in scope but rather to begin a discussion about the place of activism in our public schools and the roles teachers can assume to become better advocates for their students. This article also addresses the additional barriers to student activism that exist in high-poverty urban schools and how those barriers are being challenged.

Defining Activism

The word “activism” has different meanings for different people. In theory there is a major distinction to be made between attempts to alleviate suffering within the existing social context (clothes drives, disaster relief, soup kitchens, battered women’s shelters, programs for elderly people and people with disabilities, etc.) and actions designed to create permanent social change, often through some form of struggle or power-building process. In practice, however, these two different approaches are often used in conjunction with each other.

Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary defines activism as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue” (Merriam-Webster, 2006). Several of the people who were interviewed for this article are current or former college agitators. They’ve organized protests and pressure campaigns, usually around

clearly defined political and social issues like the war in Iraq or logging in endangered forests. These individuals are most familiar with the word “activism” in relation to specific ideological viewpoints and an organized network of like-minded groups and individuals, the majority of whom come from white, middle class backgrounds. On the high school level this brand of activism often takes the form of relatively well-funded national or international non-profit organizations that hire professional staff members and set up student chapters at various schools across the country. Yet there is also another kind of activism, one that is rooted in the survival strategies of poor urban communities and is aimed toward transforming the immediate realities of the community itself. These community activists may also stage street protests and employ other tactics used by issue-based activists, but their goals are much more personal and direct.

Justin Hons, a longtime activist who has served as a social studies teacher at several disadvantaged junior high and high schools in Cleveland’s troubled East Side, explains the difference:

A lot of what is seen as ‘student activism’—groups like Amnesty International and some of the major environmental groups—are outside networks set up to change things for someone else [not for the students who belong to the group] primarily...Meanwhile there are too many issues here on the East Side to list. How do you encourage students to get involved with groups in their neighborhood that deal with issues there...instead of joining a group that doesn’t address the needs of students who are dealing with poverty, imprisonment, police harassment? (J. Hons, personal communication, November 19, 2006)

Julie Gumerman, a socially conscious high school English teacher in wealthy Aspen, Colorado, agrees. “It’s a completely different world. Students here have things that they complain about but it’s not an emergency...They have

the luxury of saying 'I'm really concerned about [the genocide in] Darfur' instead of saying 'I don't feel safe in school'." (J. Gumerman, personal communication, November 19, 2006)

Urban student activists tend to organize around issues that directly affect them such as school funding, having enough quality textbooks and materials, smaller schools, food programs, safety and access to AP classes, tutoring and other academic benefits. To the untrained eye, these may not appear to be "political" issues at all. Yet public schools are manifestations of government, controlled by legislatures, judges and appointed officials. When urban students demand equal access to a Fair and Appropriate Education (FAPE), they are challenging the essential power structure of American society and asserting their basic human rights. Though they may or may not envision it as such, their actions are intensely and fundamentally political.

Poor and minority students face major challenges in their everyday life that wealthy and middle class white students do not. Socioeconomic status (SES) and institutional racism often become barriers to civic engagement. Related to this, schools in low SES urban communities have often been described as having a "dysfunctional culture" (N. Dzurinko , personal communication, November 13, 2006) that makes student organizing very difficult. However, it should not be presumed that poor and minority students are incapable of engaging broader issues that extend beyond their schools and neighborhoods. James Hardy is a senior Education major at Temple University. He has worked with high school student activists through the national Student

Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) and is involved in the Kensington Community Sustainability Circle, a grassroots coalition working on school reform and other issues in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. He is also the founder of an education reform group at Temple called Revolutionary Action for Change through Education (RACE). According to Hardy, “People that are more directly affected by the problems facing our country and our planet—the idea that they are less motivated or able to work on issues that don’t directly affect them is not true. It’s a fallacy. Being directly affected gives them insights into the problem and gives them legitimacy and the right to be leaders in the struggle”, but doesn’t preclude them from partaking in other issues. (J. Hardy, personal communication, November 19, 2006) There are many examples of poor young people of color who have overcome barriers and played a leading role in campaigns they were passionate about but that did not directly affect them. It is important for advocates of urban youth activists to keep this in mind and not limit their possibilities.

Getting Organized

In any society an average individual has very little power, but when she or he combines with others to work toward common goals, their power grows immensely. This is what it means to become organized. Julie Gumerman insists that “A lot of [students] don’t realize the power they have...If students planned a walkout against a particular school policy, the school would have to change their policies.” (J. Gumerman, personal communication, November 19, 2006) Whiles

this is something of an exaggeration (see examples of unsuccessful walkouts below) it is true that students frequently underestimate their strength in numbers. Statistically speaking, students have the adults in their schools surrounded. On a day by day level, authority figures in the school maintain their position less by the actual use of rewards and punishments but by what Gumerman calls the “teacher vs. student mentality”—that is, the psychological perception that teachers and administrators are in control. When this belief breaks down the teachers and administrators quickly lose their authority. As a substitute teacher I can personally attest to the near-impossibility of controlling a class that has decided they are in charge.

Of course, getting organized is useful for much more than confrontation. Any students who want to put their ideas into practice and build projects or campaigns that will improve conditions inside or outside of their school will need some kind of structure to succeed. This organization can take many different forms, from a very loose network of students to a highly formalized group with officers and bylaws. Once a group is established students may join for a variety of reasons. Some join because their friends belong or because free food is provided at meetings. However, in most cases these students either leave the group or become more serious activists as they spend more time around student leaders. As one organizer recalls, “They say they come for the pizza but then they stay for four years”. (A. Perez, personal communication, November 27, 2006)

One important question that must be settled when forming a student organization is how much autonomy will students have and how big of a role will adults play in the organization. This is always a tricky issue and the optimal solution will vary depending on the situation. James Hardy believes that there needs to be a balance between adults running everything and complete student autonomy. “ The best option is a combination. Adults provide guidance and assistance, connecting students with resources, training, and information and provide some perspective. Students goals and experience should be at the center of what’s happening.” (J. Hardy, personal communication, November 19, 2006) Two organizations based in inner city Philadelphia provide excellent examples of how such a balance can be reached: Youth United for Change and the Philadelphia Student Union. In 1990, high school students in the poverty-stricken neighborhood of Kensington who were fed up with the irrelevance of ‘80s style anti-drug programs decided to start a new organization that would respond to the realities of their community and their schools. Under the guidance of Rebecca Larathje, an adult from the Woodrock project who had been working with them on drug abuse education, they got in contact with a youth group from New York City called Youth Force. Youth Force trained the Philly students on how to organize and in 1991 they founded Youth United for Change (YUC). Since then, YUC has spread to five city high schools (Kensington, Edison, Olney, Strawberry Mansion and Mastbaum). (A. Perez, personal communication, November 27, 2006) Each chapter works on their own individual projects but they also come together every Saturday for citywide general meetings. These

meetings are open to any youth regardless of prior involvement and provide newcomers with a chance to become more familiar with the group and perhaps gain some organizing skills. On a citywide level, YUC is largely administered by adults. However, there are also student representatives on the organization's board and most of the adult members come from the same socioeconomic background as the students. On the school level, students have much more direct control over the direction of the group. Students choose what issues to work on, based on what they feel is most important in their particular school. Currently students at Kensington and Olney high schools are working on creating smaller schools that they believe will create a better and safer environment. With the support of other community groups, Olney students have already succeeded in getting their massive school split into two and they are now working on dividing them into four small schools. Kensington students are actively engaged in planning the new smaller schools that will be hopefully be built in their neighborhood over the next few years. Meanwhile, students at Mastbaum are demanding better academic preparation for the Prentice exams and at Strawberry Mansion students are fighting for YUC's right to exist in the school after the organization was recently kicked out of the school (an issue that we will return to later). Certainly the advice of adult staffers heavily influences these campaigns but they ultimately exist because the students choose to work on them. As the group's Director, Andi Perez, puts it, "Students determine issues and strategies...We don't select young people; they select us." (A Perez, personal communication, November 27, 2006) However, there have been

occasions where the adult staff of YUC felt compelled to intervene and override the decision-making authority of the students. Perez recalls a time when YUC members at one of the chapters wanted to start a campaign around school uniforms. YUC polled the student body at the school and concluded that most students supported the uniform policy. For this reason, YUC staff instructed student leaders to choose a different issue to work on. “We insist that student organizers be accountable to the student body”, Perez explains. Youth United for Change also works on larger citywide issues that would be difficult if not impossible for students to tackle without adult support. For example, in 2002, working in conjunction with the Philadelphia Student Union, YUC led a successful campaign to stop the wholesale privatization of schools in Philadelphia. Although private Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) such as Edison Schools now control several elementary and middle schools in Philadelphia, they had originally wanted to do the same for high schools and had even proposed taking over management of the School District of Philadelphia itself. According to Perez, Youth United for Change was instrumental in defeating those proposals, a major feat that required the expertise and full time commitment of adult activists. (A. Perez, personal communication, November 27, 2006) Students certainly played a central role in the struggle but most likely would not have been able to accomplish it on their own. Another benefit to adult involvement in youth activist groups is the ability of experienced adults to impart essential organizing and leadership skills to students. YUC does this through mini-trainings at their weekly meetings, biannual retreats and a weeklong summer leadership institute for

members. At these trainings students learn how to grow and sustain an organization, create effective campaign strategies and accomplish their objectives.

The Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) is organized around similar principles. Self identifying as a “poor people’s organization”, (N. Dzurinko , personal communication, November 13, 2006) the group takes a holistic neighborhood approach toward their members and recognizes the personal issues they face. Founded in 1995 by twelve students “ who were angry about the low quality of education in their schools and wanted to do something about it” (Philadelphia Student Union), the Philadelphia Student Union represents students at Bartram, Sayre, Masterman, Gratz and West Philadelphia high schools. Originally sponsored by the White Dog Café Foundation, the group is now independent. Like Youth United for Change, PSU works on a variety of projects to improve conditions in individual schools while also addressing district-wide issues. Examples of PSU campaigns include demanding more books and materials, demanding better teacher training and teacher quality, improving school climate and student-teacher relationships, organizing around school funding and improving access to public transportation through school tokens. As mentioned earlier, PSU also played a leadership role in the joint campaign with Youth United for Change to stop a complete takeover of the school district by private companies. As the name suggests, the Philadelphia Student Union is an organization for, by and of students. However, as with YUC, adult staff and volunteers are involved too, once again raising the issue of how much autonomy

students should have in their own organizations. Nijmie Dzurinko, the Director of PSU, explains:

PSU requires a lot of commitment from our members. In the past we've had student staff members as well as staff members who were recent graduates. One of the challenges we've had is determining whether or not PSU should be a 'youth run' or a 'youth driven' organization. Different youth organizing groups have different models - some make no bones about being run by adults. We're going for a model in which youth make the important organizing decisions, and where there is enough training and support to allow them to make wise decisions. Honestly, it's a hard balance. (N. Dzurinko , personal communication, November 13, 2006)

This problem becomes even more apparent when younger students are involved. Groups like New Haven, Connecticut-based Solar Youth work with elementary and middle school students, whose level of cognitive development requires that adults provide most of the structure for the organization. However, even Solar Youth takes pains to involve students in leadership to the greatest extent possible by having a Youth Advisory Board composed of young students and also having high school students represented on the organization's official board of directors. (Solar Youth, 2006) In fact, all of the groups and individuals I have been in contact with for this article agree that while complete autonomy may not always be possible, student involvement in leadership and decision-making is essential to the success of any grassroots student group.

Meeting Resistance – Student Free Speech Issues

What happens when the goals of student activists come into conflict with the expectations of school administrators? This question is a serious one

because in order for social change to take place the existing power structure must often be challenged. Youth United for Change was initially welcomed by Strawberry Mansion High School but were expelled as an organization because they were seen as a threat to the school's authority. The Philadelphia Student Union has faced similar problems. Nijmie Dzurinko: describes the situation:

Of course the reality of the situation is that young people have the least decision-making power, but adultism gets in the way of teachers and administrators being able to see that they have a tremendous amount of power. They're thinking up - toward the central administration, [CEO Paul] Vallas, the School Reform Commission...[W]e've received a good amount of opposition, and a good amount of support from principals. It varies depending on the issues we're working on, whether or not the principal believes that having PSU in the school is going to bring to light some of the negative things about the school, instead of taking the attitude that PSU is training leaders and organizers who can speak up for themselves and make the school a better place. (N. Dzurinko , personal communication, November 13, 2006)

When activists fail to persuade administrators through polite discourse they may resort to more confrontational tactics like protests and walkouts. When the target is outside of the school this rarely becomes an issue and administrators are often happy to see students engaged in the democratic process. However, even the most outwardly progressive principals may react much differently when the protests are directed against their own administration, in their own schools. When this occurs, students can face intimidation, suspensions and sometimes even arrest. Below is a small sample of relatively recent protests that have resulted in serious ramifications for the participants:

- Predominantly Latino students at Miller High School in Corpus Christi, Texas wore black clothes (a restricted color) to protest a new dress code. Some students were taken away by police and

others were detained in the school gym. School District officials refused to explain to reporters why the students had been taken away. (Suniga, 2006)

- At Mackenzie High School in Detroit nearly 200 students walked out to protest a lack of books and basic supplies, including toilet paper. They were also upset about overflowing toilets and a new uniform policy. Police arrested and detained 32 students (17 of whom were eventually charged with disorderly conduct) for allegedly blocking traffic, swearing, and pounding on a truck. (MacDonald and Brand-Williams , 2006)
- A student was arrested for allegedly spitting at a teacher who was physically forcing him out of the way, during a protest at Hunter's Lane Comprehensive High School in Nashville, Tennessee. The protest was in response to the unexplained transferal of a popular assistant principal to another school. (Bottorff, 2006)
- Ninth graders at Snow Canyon Middle School in St. George, Utah staged a protest after being told they would not be allowed to wear costumes on Halloween because they were too old. Students who participated in the protest received an unexcused absence for the classes they missed after lunch. (DeMasters, 2006)
- Twenty students were suspended from Barberton High School in Barberton, Ohio for planning a walkout in support of teachers who were about to go on strike. Administrators discovered the plans

before any actual walkout occurred. Community members expressed outrage at the severity of the school's actions against the students. (Scott, 2006)

- Dissatisfied with the conditions of their school, 1,000 students from Montwood High School in El Paso, Texas staged a walkout and refused to return to class. A violent confrontation ensued between students, school security guards and police, resulting in several student injuries, ten arrests and a school lockdown. (Associated Press, 2003)

Of course, these are extreme examples. Most student protests do not result in arrest and therefore usually do not make the news. However, students are very commonly suspended for many types of protests that may potentially violate school rules but do not directly violate any local, state or federal laws. This begs the question: does free speech exist in public schools? This question was posed to the Supreme Court in 1969. In *Tinker vs. Des Moines Independent School District*, the court was asked to consider the case of several students in Des Moines, Iowa who had worn black armbands to school to symbolize their opposition to the Vietnam War. School officials ordered the students to remove the armbands. When they refused they were suspended and told not to return until they agreed to stop wearing the armbands. Although lower courts had ruled in favor of the school district the Supreme Court reversed this decision, ruling 7-2 that the district's actions had been unconstitutional. In its ruling, the court

declared in its majority opinion, "It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate". (U.S. Supreme Court, 1969) The justices went on to state:

The District Court concluded that the action of the school authorities was reasonable because it was based upon their fear of a disturbance from the wearing of the armbands. But, in our system, undifferentiated fear or apprehension of disturbance is not enough to overcome the right to freedom of expression. Any departure from absolute regimentation may cause trouble. Any variation from the majority's opinion may inspire fear. Any word spoken, in class, in the lunchroom, or on the campus, that deviates from the views of another person may start an argument or cause a disturbance. But our Constitution says we must take this risk ... The Fourteenth Amendment, as now applied to the States, protects the citizen against the State itself and all of its creatures -- Boards of Education not excepted... That they are educating the young for citizenship is reason for scrupulous protection of Constitutional freedoms of the individual, if we are not to strangle the free mind at its source and teach youth to discount important principles of our government as mere platitudes." (1969)

This landmark precedent appeared to give the green light to student free speech. However, it left much room for ambiguity. At what point does an act of protest go beyond the realm of free speech and become a punishable offense? The answer is not entirely clear. In November 2001 Judge James Stucky ruled against plaintiff Katie Sierra, a 15-year-old student at Sissonville High School in Charleston, West Virginia. Sierra, who was born in Panama, had tried to organize an anarchist student organization at her school. The school refused to allow it, claiming that there was a link between anarchism and violence.* Shortly

* Anarchism is in fact a sophisticated social theory that has been espoused by intellectuals, prominent medical doctors and at least one former prince. Professor Noam Chomsky, the world's premier researcher in the field of human language, is an anarchist. During the Spanish Civil War, anarchists successfully

afterward, Sierra came to school wearing a shirt with an anarchist symbol on it and a series of quotes against the war in Afghanistan. Given the high level of support that existed for the war effort just a few months after the September 11th hijackings, many people in the school were offended by Sierra's shirt. She was asked to remove it and when she refused she was suspended. With the support of the American Civil Liberties Union Sierra sued the school on the basis of *Tinker vs. Des Moines*. Her lawyer saw the anti-war shirt as the legal equivalent of the black armbands worn by the students in the Tinker case. Sierra's case was further bolstered by school officials' admission that they acted partly because of the unpopularity of the ideas Sierra espoused. (2006) Yet the court ruled against her and the West Virginia Supreme Court refused to hear her appeal. Several other cases have also ruled on the side of school administrators, making it unclear exactly what rights students have in the classroom. In California, state legislators have stepped in to fill that gap, granting rights to California high school students that go beyond federal requirements. Students in California have the right to hand out leaflets, express themselves in official school newspapers and yearbooks as well as unofficial student-published newspapers, circulate petitions, conduct polls, set up information tables, organize clubs and sponsor speakers and activities, post notices and posters on school bulletin boards, organize peaceful demonstrations at their school and wear buttons, badges, insignias, patches or armbands. (National Lawyer's Guild, 2006) California students can still be disciplined if they violate other school rules while protesting

administered the city of Barcelona for over a year. Although there have been violent anarchists, there is nothing inherently violent about the idea itself. Katie Sierra was aware of this and did not advocate for violence.

but they cannot legally be punished for the act of protest itself. Of course, many principals have violated this law and if the students whose rights have been violated don't have the support and resources to challenge such an action in court it will usually stand.

Activism as Education

Resistance from administrators to student activism usually stems from a desire to maintain order and a fear that protests will disrupt the learning process. Negative and/or condescending attitudes toward students also play an important role. During the aforementioned protest at Mackenzie High School in Detroit, Principal Bernard Bonam blamed students for the school's book shortage. Bonam referred to the protesters as "Major violators [with] low grade point averages", declaring "They don't give a doggone thing about their education." Pointing to one of the protesters, he told a reporter, "She'll never get an education if she had three books she could take home." (2006) These comments contrasted sharply with those of many of the parents who had been interviewed. Most of the parents seemed to be proud that the kids were taking a stand to improve their school. This was apparently what the protesters were hoping for in the first place. "If we don't walk out, we won't get recognized," sophomore Markell Donaldson had told the same reporter. Yet the only "recognition" they received from their principal was a reinforcement of the negative beliefs he already held toward them. Ageism also contributes to administrator resistance. Many principals espouse views similar to those of dissenting Justice Black in his

minority opinion on *Tinker vs. Des Moines*: “The original idea of schools, which I do not believe is yet abandoned as worthless or out of date, was that children had not yet reached the point of experience and wisdom which enabled them to teach all of their elders...[A]t their age they need to learn, not teach”. (1969) In my experience, young people often tend to be much wiser than their self-important elders could ever imagine. It is often their very youth that gives them key insights to problems that older, more experienced persons overlook.

The real issue, though, is that too many administrators and teachers overlook the educational value of activism. They think of protest as a distraction from learning when in fact it can be a crucial learning experience. During the countdown to the massive May 1st, 2006 national day of action for immigrant rights, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa urged Latino students not to participate in school walkouts. “We firmly believe children must attend school every day, including May 1, they have to be there ready to learn”, Villaraigosa declared in a public statement. “It is very important that parents...speak to their kids about the consequences of their actions and the result of this important moment in the history of our country. Our kids are the leaders of tomorrow.” Blogger Maegan la Mala (la Mala, 2006) countered by writing “What better way to show your child that rights in this country have come through struggle than by allowing them to share in that struggle and by showing a little resistance to the culture of complacency. Unless the schools decide to have a teach in on immigration, the kids will probably learn more in the streets.” (2006) James Hardy agrees:

Being involved in activism is an educational experience. It varies with the type of experience but it's always educational... You learn how to research, analyze things and understand how society works. You learn about social interaction and crucial life skills that are important for everyone to learn—critical analysis, organization, facts and information about the world. You can connect it with academic disciplines (social studies, sometimes math and science)...If a teacher connects it to school it will help raise student interest and self-esteem. Students will be more motivated to succeed and have hope for the future. They'll be more likely to try to succeed in their classes and be advocates for themselves... (J. Hardy, personal communication, November 19, 2006)

Justin Hons is uncertain whether or not activism will help a student succeed in school but insists that it is an important form of education.

“[Participating in social change] might not help with standardized tests...but if we think of education as something much more fundamental to person's abilities to think critically, it's absolutely a huge benefit.” (J. Hons, personal communication, November 19, 2006)

Teaching for Social Justice

If student activism can be an important learning experience but also carries risks and formidable challenges, what should the role of a socially conscious teacher be in relation to her or his students? A good starting point is to connect to one's students on a personal level, especially when teaching in disadvantaged schools. Justin Hons recounts that for him, “First and foremost it was attempting to understand where my students were coming from and try to understand them...and not make assumptions about why they were or were not interested in something... This is something we weren't trained to do in

college...” (J. Hons, personal communication, November 19, 2006) Along with this, it’s also very important to encourage critical thinking through the exploration of real world issues. This is nothing more than good pedagogy but it enables students to understand social problems and gives them the skills to invent solutions to those problems. It is also a more effective and ethical alternative to attempting to indoctrinate students with one’s own beliefs. “You don’t want kids to accept your ideas blindly”, Hons advises. “Teach them to develop ideas on their own and back up their opinions with their own analysis”. Another strategy is to make the classroom as democratic as possible. Julie Gumerman makes a point of having her students call her by her first name because she wants them to see themselves as her equal. This goes against the conventional wisdom taught in most education courses but it has worked out well for her so far. “Try to be respectful of students and explain my reasoning for things...”, Gumerman suggests. “You can say ‘No, you can’t do that’ but do it respectfully.” (J. Gumerman, personal communication, November 19, 2006) Beyond these basics, teachers can serve as advisors for student activist groups or advocate for a student’s right to start a group, especially when that right is contested. Although teachers may rightfully be concerned about their job security when going against the will of their employers, it should be kept in mind that they still have much more power and influence than their students. Things may have been different for Katie Sierra if her teachers had supported her right to start a student organization. According to Nijmie Dzurinko:

There have been a number of teachers that have been strong supporters of the Philadelphia Student Union and in some cases they have played a critical role in helping us remain in schools where our presence is threatened by the administration. I would love it if more teachers could take a leap of faith and really see themselves as advocates for students, even when they are teaching in difficult situations. I think that if more teachers could do this, could really deep down like their students, they'd see their classroom dynamics shift. (N. Dzurinko , personal communication, November 13, 2006)

Andi Perez states that teachers have been an important part of Youth United for Change as well (although some teachers have actively opposed their members). She encourages teachers to “get more engaged in work around curriculum and changing schools. Teachers should play a bigger role.” Teachers can point interested students in the direction of groups or resources that they can link up with. Justin Hons has even taken one of his students with him to a national pro-choice rally in Washington DC. It was probably one of the student’s first opportunities to experience the world beyond the poverty of the East Side. The possibilities for supporting student-led social change are limited only by a teacher’s imagination and the courage to act on one’s convictions.

Student Perspectives

I will close with the personal stories of two former students at Upper Darby High School. Upper Darby is a suburb of Philadelphia that in some ways is more urban than suburban. The town’s large high school (population 4,000+) (J. Kennedy, personal communication, November 15, 2006) is racially and economically diverse and shares features of both urban and suburban schools.

Because of this unique amalgamation, the case studies that follow should be relevant to socially conscious teachers in a variety of different public school settings.

James Kennedy grew up in Upper Darby, the son of Irish American lower middle class parents who were active in the local Democratic Party. He became politically conscious at a very young age and by ninth grade considered himself a Communist (a label that he abandoned a year later as he continued to search for his political identity). James would frequently make politically charged comments in class and often wrote opinion articles for the school's newspaper, the *Acorn*. He refused to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, drawing harsh reactions from other students and some of his teachers. None of James' teachers punished him for this but he is aware of some teachers in the school who have punished other students for the same 'offense'. (Federal law prohibits schools from requiring students to recite or stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. However, this law often goes unheeded.) James states that teachers were instrumental in providing him with moral support as he ventured into more serious activities. A couple of his history teachers spent time with him after class, helping him to write articles and engaging in political discussions with him. One teacher let James borrow his copy of the Autobiography of Malcolm X, which influenced him a great deal. Although James had little success organizing groups—largely because no one had provided him with the necessary skills—he continued to press his school to make changes that he saw as necessary. Some of his projects included attempting to make the school lunch program healthier (one of the “fruit and

vegetable” options was a sugar based slush called the Vitapup—supposedly infused with vitamins) and demanding that the school implement an effective recycling program. For the latter, he circulated a petition which some of his teacher signed, though others refused. The program was finally implemented the year after he graduated. James had several frustrating meetings with the school’s principal, Mr. Geoff Kramer. After a while Kramer refused to meet with James in person, instead delegating his subordinates to deal with him. “I don’t think I struck him as the type of student who knew his proper place, so to speak”, James explains. (J. Kennedy, personal communication, November 15, 2006) In 11th grade, James wanted to invite a peace group into the school to speak and to have an information table in response to the military recruiters that had a presence in the school. Principal Kramer was skeptical but James wrote to a conscientious objector group that referred him to a local coalition called Youth PAWR (Philly Anti-War Resistor). James got involved with the group, which was mostly composed of college students. Several members of Youth PAWR gave him a lot of personal attention and support, helping him to work through some of his frustrations. He gained the title of “Upper Darby Coordinator” for the group and one day a reporter called his house to find out if any actions were planned at his school during a national day of action against the impending war on Iraq. This incident frightened James’ mother, who contacted Principal Kramer. Kramer then called James into the office and threatened to suspend him if he tried to organize a school walkout. Even before the meeting, James was afraid of the potential consequences of such a walkout and although he had considered organizing one

he refrained from doing so out of fear that he would be punished for it. This meeting with the principal frustrated James and made him feel that he was being “repressed”. However, he continued to speak out in school. He created politically controversial art for his art class and one thought-provoking piece even made it into an art display in downtown Philadelphia. His art teacher actively supported him when one of his works was censored by the school. In 12th grade he became the opinion editor of the Acorn. He credits the support of his English teacher (who also advised the newspaper) for deciding to apply for the position. Through his writing skills he commanded even the respect of some teachers who disagreed with him. He considered himself the “voice of the left” in a school of over 4,000 students and because of this he felt a sense of duty to keep speaking out even though it often made him unpopular. His last act as a student was to write a satirical graduation speech called “The Rape of the Graduation Cap” (a parody of a literary work his class had studied—“The Rape of the Lock”) to ridicule President Kramer’s threat that any student throwing their cap at graduation would be arrested. In the end, James was not allowed to read the speech. Today James Kennedy is in his early twenties and continues to be involved in social and political activism.

Jenna Meyers is a white South African immigrant who entered the ninth grade at Upper Darby High School when James Kennedy was a senior. Jenna was also socially conscious at a young age and against the will of her parents she converted to the Quaker religion. (She later became an atheist.) In high school Jenna discovered that she was a lesbian and she decided to organize a

gay-straight alliance. She had also intended to organize an environmental group, but that plan went by the wayside. Jenna wrote about her experience in *Threshold*, the magazine of the Student Environmental Action Coalition.

According to Jenna, when she met with Principal Kramer to request permission to organize the alliance, Kramer responded by declaring “We don’t pander to homosexuals at Upper Darby High” (Meyers, 2005). In her article, Jenna claims she has been “threatened, physically abused and verbally attacked directly by students and passively by teachers and the school curriculum” (2005) because of her sexual orientation and her outspokenness. She cites frustration about the conservative Christian abstinence-only groups that were invited to speak to her health class (James Kennedy also expressed frustration about these speakers). Jenna states that these groups blamed homosexuals for the AIDS epidemic.

After trying in vain to have a rational discussion with the principal she enlisted the support of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The ACLU met with Principal Kramer to address Jenna’s concerns. Jenna also got 100 students to sign a petition demanding tolerance from the school. Although most of Jenna’s experiences with school officials was negative, she had a great ally in one of her teachers, Dr. Macklin, who agreed to help her establish the group and pressure the school to change their health curriculum. Macklin used her resources as a teacher to make Jenna’s goals possible to achieve. Jenna and other LGBT students and allies published articles in the school newspaper promoting their views, prompting Kramer to publish an opposing article. The school stopped showing health videos, which didn’t fully accomplish the group’s goals but

demonstrated that they were making an impact. Jenna concludes her article by calling for support from older activists. “High school is a place to learn and socialize. A lot of young people’s ideas begin in high school”, she writes. Citing the importance of the support she received from “awesome teachers”, Jenna concludes, “Organizing in high schools is just as important as organizing at a college. So let us not be forgotten. Every single high school group needs help.”

(2005) After the publishing of this article Jenna went through a series of personal conflicts, many of which were connected to her struggle to be accepted as a lesbian. After graduating from Upper Darby High School she continued to be involved in feminist, LGBT, and environmental groups for a period of time. However, she later became frustrated with activism and dropped out of the movement. She is now a second year student at Temple University’s Taylor School of Art.

These stories demonstrate the importance of teacher support and organized groups for student activists. Without this support, socially and politically conscious students become vulnerable and frustrated. At the same time, teacher involvement cannot guarantee that a student activist will succeed or continue to stay involved after graduation.

Youth activism is on the rise. If the ‘80s and ‘90s were characterized by the apathetic “Me Generation” (a highly questionable claim), the new generation that is growing up today is being exposed to more opportunities for civic engagement than any generation before them. No longer are students simply the

leaders of the future—they are leaders of the present as well. Across the United States and around the world more and more organized social justice and environmental groups are sprouting up in our public high schools and even elementary and middle schools. With the advent of the Internet it is now possible for even the most isolated politically socially conscious students to connect with like-minded young people in other places. As we progress further into the twenty first century, students will continue to stand up and speak out on issues that affect them. Teachers may well make the critical difference in whether or not these student activists will succeed. It will be up to the teachers of the future to decide whether to resist them, ignore them or actively support them. If enough teachers choose the latter option, there may yet be hope for our world.

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