Annenberg Institute for School Reform | *Voices in Urban Education*

VUE

Spring 2011

Youth Organizing for Education Reform

No Transportation, No Education!
Jorel Moore

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"We're All in It Together": The Role of Youth Leadership in College Access
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The Role of New Media in Youth Organizing for Educational Justice
Charles A. McDonald, Jaritza Geigel, and Fred Pinguel

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* was produced in collaboration with the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ). The authors of three of the articles (Jorel Moore, Nijmie Dzurinko, Johonna McCants, Jonathan Stith, Charles A. McDonald, Jaritza Geigel, and Fred Pinguel) are involved with AEJ and its member organizations, including the Urban Youth Collaborative, Make the Road New York, the Philadelphia Student Union, Future of Tomorrow, and Youth Education Alliance. The editors of *VUE* no. 30 would like to thank Oona Chatterjee and Andi Perez of AEJ for their invaluable support in developing this issue. Movement Strategy Center has provided development support to AEJ and advises AEJ on strategy.

For more information, see <www.allianceforeducationaljustice.org> and <www.movementstrategy.org>.

Youth Organizing for Education Reform
Number 30, Spring 2011

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Voices in Urban Education (ISSN 1553-541X) is published quarterly at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Articles may be reproduced with appropriate credit to the Annenberg Institute. Single copies are $12.50 each, including postage and handling. A discount is available on bulk orders. Call 401 863-2018 for further information.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform was established in 1993 at Brown University. Its mission is to develop, share, and act on knowledge that improves the conditions and outcomes of schooling in America, especially in urban communities and in schools serving disadvantaged children. For program information, contact:

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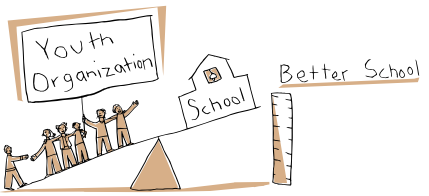
VUE



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The Growing Field of Youth Organizing for Educational Justice

Michelle Reneé

In communities around the nation, youth organizing groups are becoming effective and powerful partners in school reform. As Annenberg Institute researchers Kavitha Mediratta and colleagues (2008) noted in a national study of education organizing, youth are a growing presence in community organizing for school reform, and youth-led organizations are winning changes that lead to an improved learning environment and more equitable policies and practices in schools and districts around the nation. Mediratta, Cohen, and Shah (2007) found that in addition to creating policy and school changes, the process of youth organizing resulted in empowered, educated, and engaged students. We have also witnessed the growing efficacy and impact of youth organizing in our work with the Urban Youth Collaborative in New York City.

Youth, as the people who spend each day inside schools and classrooms, have a huge stake in what happens in schools and bring a unique knowledge and perspective to reforms. As the articles in this issue of *Voices in Urban Education* show, youth are involved both in fighting for changes and in ensuring the equitable implementation of those changes. In some cases, they have succeeded in shifting the entire public discourse on issues such as school safety. The articles provide a firsthand glimpse into just a few of the youth organizing efforts in different communities.

- Jorel Moore shares a firsthand account of the Urban Youth Collaborative's successful campaign to preserve funding for student subway passes, which allow New York City students to get to school, in the face of a severe budget crisis.

Michelle Renée is a senior research associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and co-guest editor of this issue of Voices in Urban Education.

- Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota provide clear definitions of youth organizing and tell the story of students organizing to protect ethnic studies classes in Arizona schools.
- Nijmie Dzurinko, Johonna McCants, and Jonathan Stith explain how by developing their own definitions of school safety and transforming the public discourse, youth were able to create innovative local and citywide campaigns to improve safety in Philadelphia schools.
- Focusing on the long-term implementation of New York City's Student Success Centers, Lori Chajet reports on the unique contributions of this youth-generated solution to the college-going culture in New York City schools.
- Youth organizers Charles A. McDonald, Jaritza Geigel, and Fred Pinguel reflect on the role of new media in the growing national movement for educational justice.

Each article tells a particular story. Together, these articles tell the story of the many education issues communities grapple with, as well as many different points in the arc of education organizing campaigns. They show how youth organizers use strategic media tools to support organizational infrastructure, address the challenge of defining a policy problem from a youth perspective, and mesh youth ideas with research and analysis to create a policy demand. They document the hard work of running a campaign, the glory of a policy win, and the long-term commitment needed to ensure an idea is equitably implemented. What becomes clear in reading these articles is that the moments of public protest are only one very visible moment in a long cycle of education organizing.

We approached the development of this issue in the spirit of collaboration that is so central to organizing. In partnership with the Alliance for Education Justice (AEJ), we selected a range of authors that includes youth organizers, staff of organizations that support

these youth leaders, and academic researchers. Three of the articles – by Jorel Moore; Nijmie Dzurinko Johonna McCants, and Jonathan Stith; and Charles A. McDonald, Jaritza Geigel, and Fred Pinguel – are authored by members of AEJ, a national alliance of youth organizing and intergenerational groups focused on organizing for educational justice.[1] AEJ brings organizations together to collectively impact federal education policy and builds the capacity of organizations and the education justice movement. The appearance of AEJ in the national education reform field speaks to the growth of education organizing from its roots in local campaigns toward a national movement. The Annenberg Institute is proud to collaborate with this new coalition for this issue of *VUE*.

We hope that this issue will serve as an inspiration and resource to young people interested in organizing for educational justice in their communities. And we encourage adult readers, as you reflect on these powerful stories of talented, motivated young people, to think of your own communities. Spend a little time investigating what the young people are thinking about in your school, district, or state. Are there any emerging education organizing groups? Which of the ideas and issues the youth are addressing are present in your schools? What would it take to truly support the emerging generation in learning about and engaging in the great experiment called American democracy? What would our nation, our schools, and our classrooms look like if a youth-led education organizing movement took hold?

1 For more about AEJ, see the article by Charles A. McDonald, Jaritza Geigel, and Fred Pinguel in this issue of *VUE*.

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No Transportation, No Education!

Jorel Moore

A firsthand account of how a campaign by the Urban Youth Collaborative preserved crucial funding for student subway passes in New York City in the face of budget cuts.

"SAVE OUR METROCARDS!"

"SAVE OUR METROCARDS!"

"SAVE OUR METROCARDS!"

When you first start going to rallies, it can be surreal. All around you, people are chanting and carrying signs. Looking at their faces, you can tell that they care.

We're all at this rally because we don't want to pay $1,000 a year for transportation to get back and forth to our schools. My organizations – Future of Tomorrow, a youth organization that brings together youth from neighboring high schools, and the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), a citywide coalition made up of five organizations (see sidebar on page 7) – are here to do what we do best: give the youth a voice.

Jorel Moore is a youth leader in Future of Tomorrow and the Urban Youth Collaborative.

How UYC Works

Sometimes people don't believe me when I say I'm going to a meeting. Maybe it's because I'm only seventeen and not a lot of seventeen-year-olds go to meetings.

But I do go to meetings – *lots* of them. At UYC, our five organizations come together to develop and lead – and hopefully win! – campaigns that affect students from all over New York City. To make change on a citywide level – especially in a city as big as New York – we need to join forces to develop the power we need to be able to influence decisions made about our schools that impact *us*. Lately, it seems that people like to refer to students as "consumers." Well, we don't like that term (Schools are not a business! We are not customers!), but we do believe that because we are the ones actually *in* the schools that we need to have a big part in the decisions made *about* our schools. To build the power we need and convince the people who make decisions to listen to us, we organize.

That means more than just holding a protest rally. It means bringing people together who are impacted by an issue, doing research to understand the issue better and how it can be solved, creating demands, and making a campaign plan about how we are going to win what we want. It means

The first step in our campaign was doing research. How many students receive a free or reduced-price MetroCard? How are they funded? What impact would this have on students?

testifying at city council meetings, writing blog posts, and talking to the media.[1]

UYC was created in 2005, and we already have some big victories under our belt. One is the creation of Student Success Centers (SSCs), which you can read about in Lori Chajet's article in this issue. We have played a big part in fighting school budget cuts over the years (this is always a big fight, and we work closely with our allies on that). Just last December, years of hard work paid off when the New York City Council passed a law we fought for that will force the New York City Department of Education and New York Police Department to share data with the public about student arrests, suspensions, and expulsions by race, age, gender, English language learner status, and special education status.

1 Some of UYC's varied tactics over its different campaigns are illustrated at the end of this article in the Perspectives sidebar, which includes testimony at a city council meeting by Robert Moore and a post on the education blog EdVox by Jaritza Geigel. For more about the use of tactics involving new media in youth organizing, see the article by Charles A. McDonald, Jaritza Geigel, and Fred Pinguel in this issue of *VUE*.

The Save Our MetroCard Campaign

But right now I want to walk you through a campaign that we did last year. First you need to know a little bit about New York. First off, not many students walk to school. Of my friends, only maybe five of them walk to school. Lots of students go to schools outside of their neighborhoods. Well, in New York the way everybody gets around is the subway.[2] I know that students who live far from their school in rural areas get picked up by yellow school buses. Here in New York we get free or reduced-price MetroCards (MetroCards are passes for the subway).

Before last year I had never really thought about how we get our MetroCards (just like kids in the suburbs probably don't think about how the bus that picks them up is paid for). Last year I learned more than I ever wanted to know about student MetroCards and who pays for them. In December 2009, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA – they run the subway and bus system) announced that because they were in a severe budget crunch, they would be "phasing out student MetroCards." The MTA has a board, and the board said that they would be holding hearings about cutting student MetroCards and having a final vote in April. UYC had less than three and a half months to influence their decision.

The first step in our campaign was doing research. How many students receive a free or reduced-price MetroCard? How are they funded? What

2 According to a *New York Daily News* article, "If approved, the measure [eliminating student MetroCards] will affect nearly 585,000 school-age kids but will hit extra hard the more than 300,000 who the Department of City Planning says live in poverty. Ninety percent of them are Black, Latino and Asian" (Ruiz 2010).

About UYC

Our mission statement sums up what we're all about:

The Urban Youth Collaborative brings New York City youth together to fight for change through local and citywide organizing strategies. We strive for social and economic justice throughout our communities – overcoming obstacles to make sure youth voices are heard and youth empowerment is emphasized. We, as a coalition, are committed to building a strong youth voice that can ensure our high schools prepare students to go to college, earn a living wage, and work for justice in society.

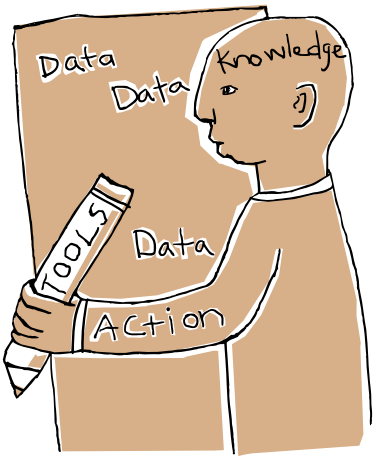
Five organizations make up UYC. Each of these "core groups" works on local campaigns to improve education and the community overall.

- Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) is a multigenerational organization of low-income South Asian immigrants in New York City. DRUM's YouthPower! Group has led a range of campaigns around immigrant students' rights.
- Future of Tomorrow (FOT) of the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation was founded in 2005 and organizes students for school reform at the Franklin K. Lane campus. In less than three years, FOT has won a Student Success Center, led a successful campaign to have the school's cafeteria redesigned, and inserted and legitimized youth voice on the Lane campus.
- Make the Road New York (MTRNY) has been organizing students in Brooklyn and Queens and, among other things, has won a Student Success Center for the Bushwick Campus High School and has created a small, autonomous high school with a social justice theme. MTRNY's Youth Power Project has organized thousands of students in support of the DREAM Act and has worked with a number of schools to implement non-punitive approaches to safety.
- Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition brings together students in the Kingsbridge neighborhood of the Bronx. SBU has secured improvements in school safety policies and facility repairs and has successfully inserted student voice at several local high schools. SBU also worked to create a small high school, the Leadership Institute, which houses a Student Success Center.
- Youth on the Move (YOM) was launched in 2004. YOM has worked with Mothers on the Move to create green jobs in the South Bronx and close down a juvenile detention center in the neighborhood.

For more information on the Urban Youth Collaborative, see <www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org>.

impact would this have on students? (A normal subway ride costs $2.25 one way. That would mean students' families would have to come up with $900 to $1,000 per year per child they had in school!) We started to talk about the issue as a matter of fairness and how it would affect low-income families dramatically and have a much worse impact on low-income students.

We did research and learned that student MetroCards have been paid for by the city and state for about sixty years. Research in organizing involves more than the research you might do for a school paper. It also involves talking to people who have been working on the issue for a while. In the MetroCard campaign, we talked to a political party called the Working Family Party that advocates for better public transit. We started out by meeting with them, and they gave us some history about the funding for student MetroCards. The Working Families Party put us in



touch with the Straphangers, a mass transit advocacy organization. After meeting with both of those groups we understood the history of the issue. In 1995, Mayor Giuliani said the city's share of the funding for student MetroCards was too big a burden. He forced the MTA to agree to a memorandum of understanding that stated the funding for student fares would be shared by the city, state, and MTA (each paying $45 million to get to the $135 million/year the MTA said it costs).

We decided we needed to learn more about the MTA and how it is funded, so we met with MTA representatives who explained the MTA budget to us. They kept saying that the burden of paying for student MetroCards should not be their responsibility and that the state and the city should pay for them.

The Role of Adults

This is probably a good time to tell you about the role of adult supporters (like the Community Organizing & Engagement staff at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, or AISR) in youth organizing. Mainly their job is to give us information so we can make good strategic decisions – they help us understand the issue we are working on. AISR staff give UYC different kinds of support, such as data analysis, research on educational reform, leadership training, and help with strategy development.

One of AISR's UYC support staff was the one who let us know that we should talk to the MTA, Working Families Party, and Straphangers. But what we *do* with that information is up to us – the youth. You could say that the adult supporters give us information and guidance, but the youth make the decisions about what to work on and what tactics we will use.

One example from the MetroCard campaign is that the support staff did an analysis of how many students are living in poverty in New York City and how many of those students depend on free student MetroCards to get to school. That helped us make the argument that cutting the cards would impact nearly 600,000 students, and that their families would have to choose between things like getting their children to school or paying rent. Like we say at UYC rallies, "That ain't right."

Campaign Success

After gathering the research, UYC leaders spoke about the MetroCard issue at our monthly Student Union meeting in November.[3] The meeting was attended

3 The Student Union was created by UYC as a broad outreach effort – beyond the core membership of UYC – enabling students to take action to improve their schools. It includes students from across the city attending more than two dozen schools.

by about 150 students from all over the city. At the meeting it was decided that we needed to run a campaign to save the MetroCards. Because of the three-way responsibility, the targets of our campaign were the city (Mayor Michael Bloomberg), state (Governor David Paterson), and MTA (Chairman of the MTA Board Jay Walder).

At the meeting, UYC core organizations and UYC Student Union members decided to form a coalition named Students for Transportation Justice (STJ) to work on this issue. Together we developed a plan that included many different actions demanding MetroCards for students. UYC/STJ held rallies outside of the MTA offices where we had members of the Transit Workers Union, city council members (including Speaker Christine Quinn), and student leaders speak. We mailed letters to the governor, mayor, and chairman of the MTA requesting a meeting with students to hear how these cuts would affect them and their families. After no response, we hand delivered the letters personally to the mayor's office and to the chairman at an MTA meeting.

We held daily protests at the subway station Mayor Bloomberg uses to ride the train to work. We rallied outside of Governor Paterson's office in Manhattan. We had a sit-down meeting with Jeff Kay (at the time, he was the director of the office of operations for the city). We mobilized a couple of hundred students to attend the public hearings the MTA held in all the boroughs. At the Manhattan hearing, as a result of not getting a response to our letter, UYC/STJ leaders demanded a response from the chairman in front of the packed auditorium, where he agreed to a meeting.

On March 17, UYC/STJ leaders became the only group that we know of to ever have a sit-down negotiation meeting with the chairman of the MTA. At this meeting, we were able to persuade him to not cut the MetroCards (as was planned) until after the state and city budgets came out.

We also took the fight to the state capitol in Albany. We mobilized about fifty students and parents to go to Albany and speak with twenty-four state assembly members and senators about saving the MetroCards. We also held a rally in Albany. Finally, On June 11, UYC/STJ coordinated a school walk-out of more than 1,000 public school students to protest their MetroCards being cut out of the budget. The decision to walk out of school was not an easy one. But we had gone through all of the appropriate steps: meetings with policy-makers and elected officials, testifying at hearings, holding rallies, building alliances, and using the media to tell our story. The deadline for the city budget was looming, and we still had no commitment to fund student MetroCards. Instead, the MTA, city, and state continued to shift the blame. In an attempt to increase the pressure, we planned and executed the walkout. We had learned from past successful youth organizing efforts that sometimes civil disobedience is necessary when all else fails. UYC leaders believed that

> The adult supporters give us information and guidance, but the youth make the decisions about what to work on and what tactics we will use.

time was running out and that more "drastic" action was needed.

The day of the walkout, a rally was held at City Hall Park where student leaders, Transit Workers Union members, labor leaders, professors, and city council members all spoke in support of the students. We then led about 1,000 students on a march across the Brooklyn Bridge to MTA offices in Brooklyn. The walkout and rally were covered by all the major media sources in the city, as well as the Associated Press (reaching as far as Los Angeles), and made the front page of *Yahoo! News*. NY 1's half-hour show *The Call* was dedicated to the MetroCard issue and the walkout.

Six days after UYC's walkout, the state, city, and the MTA announced a deal to save student MetroCards, which included sharing the burden of the cost among the three entities. Three days after the deal was announced, UYC held a victory press conference where assembly member Richard Brodsky, the Transit Workers Union, and city council members Robert Jackson and Letitia James credited UYC's campaign and the leadership of students with forcing the student MetroCard deal. As City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Transportation Committee Chair James Vacca said in a joint statement on June 20: "This victory belongs to the thousands of young people and advocates who spent hours petitioning, rallying, and testifying before the MTA Board to save student MetroCards." Even the MTA acknowledged that it was organized students who pushed the MTA, city, and state to find a way to save student MetroCards. The MTA's statement of June 20 read:

> We heard loud and clear at our public hearings, in meetings with student leaders, and in protests around the city that charging students would have a life-changing impact on the ability of New Yorkers to receive a quality education.

Youth as Leaders

During the campaign, students who had been shy about speaking in class ended up emceeing rallies of hundreds of students. I had never talked to the media before, but suddenly I was seeing myself on TV and in the newspaper. Youth who previously hadn't even known who their City Council representatives were, were meeting with them and speaking out about what we needed. That's one thing I love about youth organizing – students get to take on all kinds of leadership roles. Personally, I emceed rallies, spoke at press conferences, and met with lots of elected officials as part of this campaign. Many of my peers also took on leadership roles for the first time.

Sometimes people ask me why I do this work. I guess I'd say that youth organizing fits me. I've always wanted to make change in the world, and through organizing I do make change. As a Black male, I represent one of the groups most affected by education

policies, including this decision to cut student MetroCards. So I feel like I have a big part to play in changing them.

So, yeah, I go to meetings. I go to meetings because in the youth organizing work I do I feel powerful. The youth are in charge: we are deciding what our strategy is, planning campaigns, and making our voices heard. It's a great feeling, and something I wouldn't trade. UYC is not done – we have a long way to go to improve our schools. But at least now we can get to school.

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PERSPECTIVES:

UYC Leaders in Action on Two Campaigns: Saving MetroCards and the Student Safety Act

Jaritza Geigel is a youth leader at Make the Road New York and the Urban Youth Collaborative. The following is adapted from a post she wrote on EdVox.org about the MetroCard campaign.

I am proud to be one of the dozens of youth leaders in the Urban Youth Collaborative who planned last Friday's walkout. Thank you to the city council members who supported us in this endeavor and to the adults at the Urban Youth Collaborative and the Annenberg Institute who, along with other allies, ensured our safety. By showing their support, they show that they care about our education and are not interested in playing with students' futures.

Mayor Bloomberg said on his radio show that we should have been targeting our action and demands at the state and suggested that we were misinformed about who is responsible for funding student MetroCards. We students are fully aware of who provides funding for our MetroCards and organized ourselves to say that we will no longer continue to be a part of any political game.

Since 1994, the city and state have each paid $45 million for student MetroCards, with the MTA paying the rest. Since then, the city and the state have kept that figure at $45 million. Over the years the cost has gone up, and the MTA can no longer fund the program because of its own deficit. Mayor Bloomberg says he has not cut student MetroCards in his budget. But because the MTA will no longer pay, the city needs to increase its share – not to mention that they haven't raised funding one dollar since 1994.

Now, while politicians play their political game of pointing fingers, the students of New York City decided that it was time to take matters into our own hands. We fought for what is rightfully ours: transportation to get to school. About 600,000 students use MetroCards to get to school. Students that come from large families in poor and working-class communities cannot afford to pay $1,000 per year per child. We talk about how education is a right, and yet education has continued to be placed on the back burner, and students that are Black, Brown, Latino and other ethnic backgrounds are taking it the hardest.

UYC began by focusing on the MTA: we held rallies, mobilized for all of the MTA hearings, and ultimately got a meeting with Jay Walder, the chairman of the MTA. Then, as students began to understand more about this issue, our next target was the senate and assembly. The president of the senate, Senator John Sampson, proposed $65 million for student MetroCards. New York City students thanked him and his fellow senators and urged them to vote no on a state budget with less than $65 million for MetroCards. We also met with many assembly members and urged them to raise their proposed allocation from $35 million (less than in 1994!!) to $65 million. Upset that our "education" mayor had not publicly worked on this issue and agreed to share the cost that the city, state, and MTA agreed to before, the students thought it was about time he was in the hot seat. Shame

(continued on page 12)

UYC Leaders in Action on Two Campaigns: Saving MetroCards and the Student Safety Act *(continued from page 11)*

on our "education" mayor who relies on cuts as a solution.

New York City students – the future voters of this city – are not playing around anymore. We are done having Mayor Bloomberg close down schools, which only increases overcrowding; we are done having funds removed overnight from our schools; we are done seeing valuable teachers laid off; we are done being treated like criminals; and we will not tolerate the mayor's silence on this issue. New York City students are becoming more proactive everyday, and the numbers of students involved is rising every day. It is time that the state, the MTA, and mayor Bloomberg stop playing their political game and fund student MetroCards. The fight isn't over, and we will not be silenced or intimidated into submission. This is only the beginning; leaders are being born and growing everyday, and soon New York City will see just what we are capable of and how organized we can be.

Robert Moore is a youth leader at Make the Road New York. The following is the testimony he gave before the New York City Council in support of the passage of the Student Safety Act, Int. No. 442, part of another initiative that UYC worked on successfully.

Hello. My name is Robert Moore. I am eighteen years old and a youth leader with Make the Road New York.

Last June, I graduated from high school. I now attend the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Since I was a tenth-grader in public high school, I have worked with other students at Make the Road New York and the Urban Youth Collaborative to pass the Student Safety Act. I and the other students here are grateful to council members for helping to get us to the point of having this hearing today, and to get the bill passed this year.

There are very good reasons that all of us have worked so hard to get the Student Safety Act passed. This act is our first stepping stone in creating school safety policies that treat youth with the respect that we deserve. The act will require regular reporting of data on school discipline and police activity in schools. When we have this data, it will open the door to real discussions about whether students in our city, especially students in low-income communities of color, are being kept safe by current policies or being unfairly targeted by them.

I think everyone in our city would agree that we want our schools to be safe, nurturing, and respectful places for all students. Having information on who gets disciplined, for what reasons, and how they get disciplined, will only help us move further in that direction. No student should risk suspension for minor things like carrying a cell phone or being late to class. No student should be put in handcuffs because they are having a bad day and talk back to a teacher. I and many of my classmates have seen things like this happen. I agree that schools need rules to keep students safe. They also need to have appropriate and supportive responses for issues that come up with students every day. Many Black and Brown youth from low-income communities have plenty of challenges already. We shouldn't be criminalized for behavior that other students get comforted or counseled for.

I look forward to seeing the Student Safety Act passed this year and to continuing to work with the city and with other youth to make sure that all students have a chance to succeed. Thank you.

For more on school safety issues, see the article by Nijmie Dzurinko, Johonna McCants, and Jonathan Stith in this issue of VUE.

Youth Organizing in the Wild West: Mobilizing for Educational Justice in Arizona!

Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota

A student campaign to protect ethnic studies classes in Arizona schools provides a clear definition and a compelling example of youth organizing.

On July 29, 2008, Hector Perez woke up to a sweltering summer morning in Tucson, Arizona, in a house with no air conditioning. But this morning, he didn't have time to dwell on the heat, because he was running late for a political education training he was providing to a group of high school students.

At age twenty, Hector had earned a local reputation as a powerful youth organizer from his high school organizing years. His local fame came from an organizing victory in 2005, which compelled the school district to expand ethnic studies classes in the high schools. His persuasive arguments about the need for ethnic studies, along with strategic negotiation about how the district could expand ethnic studies, left little room for the school board to disagree. Merging theory into practice, he argued, is the ultimate goal of ethnic studies. In these courses, students learn about previous generations of young people and the movements they initiated to bring about social change. Students can then take the strategies and techniques learned from the history of youth organizing and put them into practice in order to improve their schools.

The impact of Hector's powerful voice made him a local hero. The day after the victory, the front page of the *Tucson Weekly* displayed a photo of Hector – imposing-looking with his tall, lean frame and jet-black hair – standing on top of a water fountain with a sign held high above his head that read, "No vamos a esperar!" ["We're not going to wait!"]

Hector is part of a generation of Mexican American youth activists who find themselves at the center of a national controversy in voicing their concerns on educational issues in Arizona. Tucson High School has had a highly visible role in that controversy for its implementation and defense of the Mexican American Studies (MAS) curriculum, the ethnic studies program that Hector fought for. With classes open to all, students who take MAS classes learn standard academic subjects, such as English, history, and social science, but from a Mexican American perspective. There are at least forty MAS classes offered throughout several of the Tucson Unified School District's middle and high schools.

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Organizers share the belief that solutions to neighborhood problems come from the power of the people to hold institutions, politicians, and corporations accountable to the common interests of the community.

At the heart of the heated debate is the focus on the MAS curriculum, which some have called "radical," "revolutionary," and even "racist." These allegations prompted former state superintendent of public instruction Tom Horne to investigate and successfully pass a bill that would outlaw programs in Arizona like the MAS program at Tucson High School that is helping hundreds of students like Hector.

In this article, we provide a case study of youth organizing in Tucson, inspired by our close collaboration on the Social Justice Education Project, a key local youth organizing group.[1] The story illustrates the growing trend around the country of young people organizing to improve the quality of education, highlighting three key lessons:

- Youth organizing provides a pathway that connects urban schools' most disconnected students to meaningful curriculum and civic activities.
- Youth organizing not only develops important twenty-first-century skills, but also builds strong ethnic and racial identities. Young people are not only changing educational policy and curriculum, but, in the process, they also discover who they are and what matters most to them. Research suggests that civic engagement activities like youth organizing contribute not only to improved academic outcomes, but also to greater social capital and higher levels of well-being (Prilleltensky 2008; Prilleltensky & Nelson 2000; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2006).
- Youth organizing can be an innovative strategy for school improvement and broader community engagement.

What is Youth Organizing?

There are numerous historical examples of young people sitting in at lunch counters, staging protests on college campuses, and walking out of classrooms, which suggests that young people have always been engaged in educational issues. Organizing is not new to educational change efforts.

However, the term "community organizer" has recently gained public attention because of President Obama's organizing background as the leader of the Developing Communities Project in the South Side of Chicago. For some, the term "organizer" conjured images of Obama rallying unruly youth and neighborhood residents to cause trouble at city hall. The term "organizer," however, simply refers to someone who brings people together to act toward a common vision. Organizers share the belief that solutions to neighborhood problems come from the power of people to hold institutions, politicians,

1 The Social Justice Education Project is a participatory research project whose goal is to help students use the results as a vehicle for action addressing the inequalities that Latina/o students experience in public schools. For more information, see <http://socialjustice.bara.arizona.edu>.

and corporations accountable to the common interests of the community. Similarly, youth organizing provides a way for young people to participate in civil society in ways that hold schools, institutions, and politicians accountable to their interests.

Although all forms of community organizing develop individuals, youth organizing promotes a wider range of developmental outcomes. This "value-added" approach means that youth organizing can have an impact on at least three levels.

First, at the individual level, young people develop leadership skills, a sense of agency, hope and optimism, academic engagement, and rich forms of civic participation. Research shows that youth are more engaged in school when they are exposed to ideas that raise their consciousness about social inequality and build their capacity to change it (Morsillo & Prilleltensky 2007). In a research study of three youth organizing groups, Annenberg Institute researchers found that inter-generational organizing efforts had the impact of increased student attendance, improved test scores, higher graduation rates, and increased college-going aspirations (Mediratta et al. 2008). Similarly, researchers argue that activ-ism and other forms of community engagement contribute to a greater sense of control and well-being in young people's lives (Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005). For young people, organizing provides an internal capacity and resilience to engage in civic and social justice efforts.

Second, there are community-level outcomes, beyond the level of the indi-vidual students, that are directed at improving schools and neighborhoods and increasing access to decision making. Community-level impact focuses on collective power and control over local public policy. For example, students in Sistas and Brothas United, a youth organizing group in the Northwest Bronx, campaigned with adults to eliminate the widespread overcrowding in local high schools. Their efforts produced tangible policy changes that resulted in greater equity in the development of district priorities to reduce overcrowding. This policy secured 14,000 new seats through new school construction and significantly

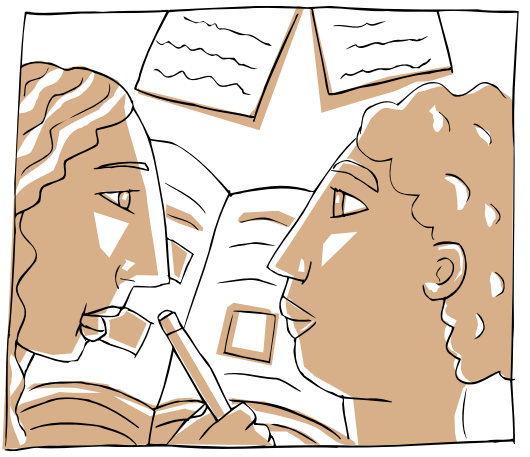
reduced overcrowding in the district's elementary, middle, and high schools (Mediratta, McAlister & Shah 2009). As young people address school and neighborhood issues, they build social capital and important networks where multigenerational alliances are developed. These activities may involve community organizing, planning a neighborhood block party, or attending a public hearing about a school closure. These examples of community

outcomes build trust, relationships, networks, and optimism about the capacity for social change.

Lastly, there are social outcomes with a broader impact that go beyond a community's collective access to public policy. Organizing facilitates greater civic participation, democratic engagement, and commitment for social change. Youth organizing supports the development of a healthy and robust democracy, because young people are engaged in the democratic process and various forms of collective action. Robust and healthy democratic life requires debate, contestation, and participation, all of which signal social well-being.

The Attack on Ethnic Studies in Tucson

Ethnic studies programs around the county sprang up on college campuses during the late sixties as a response to the dominant Eurocentric curriculum. At San Francisco State University in 1968, hundreds of students of color protested to demand that the university include ethnic studies in the standard university curriculum. Their efforts led to a model of educational change that brought both theory and practice together. That is, it led to the idea that learning must be situated in community issues and not separate from real-world problems.



Ethnic studies programs emerged under intense political debates and continue to be criticized for promoting racial divisions. A recent legislative showdown in Arizona centers on the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program, a small but effective educational program in Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) aimed at improving student outcomes. TUSD is the only school district in the country hosting ethnic studies programs that foreground the experiences and needs of Mexican American, African American, Asian American, and Native American students.

In 2006, the MAS program came under fire when Dolores Huerta (cofounder of the United Farm Workers with Cesar Chavez) delivered a keynote address at Tucson High School. The MAS program invited Huerta to speak, and during her remarks, she commented on Arizona's hostile political climate for Mexican Americans. One of her comments will be forever etched into Arizona's historical memory. Huerta calmly stated that "Republicans hate Latinos." She was referring to a series of anti-Latino legislation proposed and passed by Arizona Republicans in 2006. When state Republicans, including Tom Horne, the state superintendent of public instruction, learned about Huerta's statement, they immediately held a hearing at the state capitol to find out who was responsible for her speaking at the high school.

Youth organizing supports the development of a healthy and robust democracy, because young people are engaged in the democratic process and various forms of collective action.

Horne's office learned that the high school's MAS program had extended the invitation to Huerta. After investigating the program, Horne and other conservatives concluded that the program was extremist, divisive, and radical, and they launched an all-out campaign to shut the program down. Despite the fact that the program serves only a handful of the 65,000 students in TUSD, Horne's campaign depicted the program as a threat to equality and educational excellence for all students. The real story, however, is not so much Horne's well-funded campaign to close the program, but rather the profound civic lesson young people learned as they organized a counter-campaign to save what they viewed as a vital element of their education. Arizona Republicans, and many others, failed to understand that community organizing is central to the ethnic studies curriculum. They would soon learn that ethnic studies and youth organizing are interrelated.

Youth Organizing for Educational Justice in Arizona

In 2008, two years after Huerta's comment, Horne proposed legislation that would ban ethnic studies in Arizona's K–12 public schools. The first bill, SB1108, would ban courses that "encouraged dissent from the values of American democracy and Western civilization." In response to the proposed bill, Tucson High School students worked with their MAS English teacher to organize a unity festival at Tucson High that brought together different ethnic studies programs (African American, Asian American, Native American, and Mexican American) to celebrate the importance of diversity in education. The event received considerable media attention and enough widespread support that SB1108 died on the Arizona legislative floor.

In 2009, Horne assembled another bill, SB1069, that would ban courses that "treat students as members of a particular ethnic group rather than as individuals." Students from Tucson High and across the district who support the MAS program worked with a University of Arizona professor to organize a 100-mile run from Tucson to Phoenix to protest the bill. This event required

Youth organizing is not only an important pathway for civic engagement among youth of color; emerging research suggests that it may also contribute to stronger academic outcomes.

the protesters to endure the brutal 110-degree desert heat for more than two days until they reached the state capitol. Upon arrival at the state capitol, the students and community leaders performed an Aztec ceremony with prayer, song, dance, and the burning of sage to cleanse the capitol of bad intentions. This ceremony united people in a single voice. SB1069 also failed on the legislative floor.

Finally, Horne crafted a new bill, HB2281, that would ban any courses that "(1) promote the overthrow of the U.S. government, (2) promote resentment toward a race or class of people, (3) are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group and (4) advocate ethnic solidarity instead of treating pupils as individuals." The clever language of the bill made it politically impossible for anyone to disagree. On the surface, rejecting this bill could be interpreted among the general public as support of overthrowing the government or promoting racial hostility. The presence of this language in the new bill appealed to the general public's common sense. Many would agree with the bill's ostensible purpose of assuring that public schools avoid racial conflict. This time, as the anti-immigration campaign in Arizona continued to gain force, the bill passed in the legislature.

In response to the bill, the students from Tucson High School organized a twenty-four-hour vigil at the school to protest the legislature's unanimous vote to shut down the MAS program. They held arms and formed a human chain reaching across the school. Their signs read, "Arizona Out of Ethnic Studies!" and "La Raza Will Not Be Moved!"

On May 11, 2010, Governor Brewer signed HB2281, effectively placing a ban on ethnic studies in Arizona's K–12 public schools. The next day, Tom Horne came to Tucson to hold a press conference in TUSD's main offices. The students immediately planned a walkout and marched to the main offices to block the entrance of the building where Horne hoped to deliver his "victory" speech. A hundred or so students from Tucson High School streamed out of the front gates into the streets toward the district's main office. Throughout the short march, the students chanted slogans right out of the Chicano youth movement in the 1960's: "La raza unida jamás será vencida" (A people united will never be defeated).

En route to the district office, something quite interesting happened. In an effort to encourage more students to participate in the walkout, many students had sent out text messages to their friends at other schools asking them to join the walkout. By the time the students reached the main offices,

their efforts had attracted more than five hundred students, teachers, and community members who gathered to form a human chain around the district headquarters where Horne was expected to hold his press conference. Both children and adults chanted at the top of their lungs, "Our education is under attack. What do we do? Fight back!" The collective chants could be heard around the entire building, and onlookers could feel the pulsating power of voices and sense the reverberation of a solid vision for educational justice.

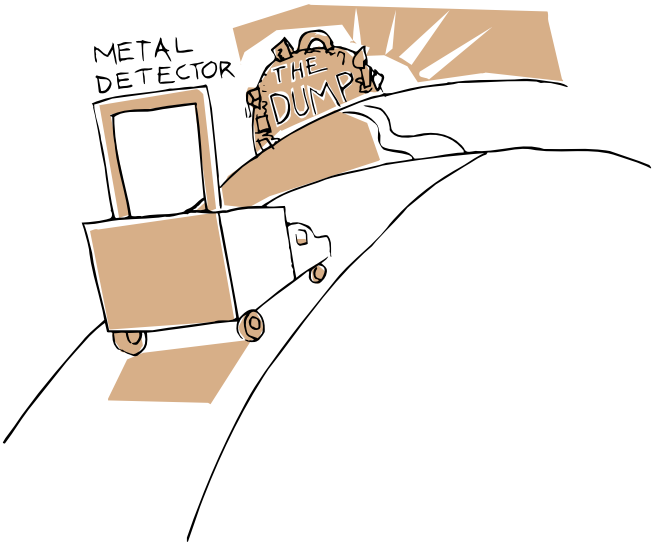
Because of the protest, Horne relocated his conference to a closed, media-only session at the Arizona State building located in downtown Tucson. Students and community members staged an impromptu sit-in in the building's lobby, demanding to meet with Horne. State police told the protesters that Horne had finished his conference and left the building. Despite the police's request to leave the premises, the protestors continued their sit-in while shouting their demand. That night, the police arrested fifteen individuals who refused to leave the building lobby. Among the fifteen were different generations of young people, including middle school, high school, and college students.

On December 31, 2010, Tom Horne, now Arizona's attorney general, filed a complaint stating that MAS was in violation of HB2281. As of February 2011, MAS classes are still offered in TUSD. TUSD has until April 27, 2011, to demonstrate to the State Board of Education that MAS is in compliance with the law. To this day, Tom Horne has refused to visit any ethnic studies classes or even have a dialogue with students. However, students continue to organize and garner public support for a lawsuit filed by eleven of their teachers to stop the ban on ethnic studies. The lawsuit, which will ultimately determine the fate of ethnic studies in Arizona, is pending in federal courts.[2]

Organizing in Arizona and Youth Outcomes

Youth organizing is not only an important pathway for civic engagement among youth of color; emerging research suggests that it may also contribute to stronger academic outcomes (Cammarota 2007). In TUSD, students enrolled in Mexican American studies courses far outperformed non-Mexican American studies students on the Arizona Instrument for Measuring Standards (AIMS), the exit exam necessary to graduate. MAS students passed the test at rates of 68 percent (reading), 76 percent (writing), and 54 percent (math). In contrast, non-MAS students passed at much lower rates: 23 percent (reading), 17 percent (writing), and 21 percent (math). In addition, 67 percent of students participating in TUSD's MAS program enrolled in post-secondary education, nearly three times the national average for Mexican American students. In other words, we have seen that students who take MAS classes are performing well on standardized tests. We are not sure of what the correlation is at this time. We do know that students who take MAS classes cover the range of academic ability from failing to outstanding. Although many in the state do not believe there is a relationship between MAS and academic success, there seems to be a correlation between the students' activism in the

2 See <www.saveethnicstudies.org> for updates on HB2281 and the legal status of ethnic studies in Arizona.



community and their engagement in the classroom; students show up more often and they put more time into their work (Cammarota & Romero 2009).

Organizing in Arizona and Youth Development

Youth organizing also impacts youth development in many ways beyond academic outcomes. It engages youth of color in the democratic process because it provides a pathway for young people to address issues that are most relevant to their lives and create real changes in the policies and resources that shape their schools. For example, in the recent report *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools* published by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, the authors found that organizing contributed to the capacity of urban schools to provide a successful learning environment through new resources, policies, and school improvements. In Los Angeles, youth were key members of a coalition that won a new district policy mandating access to college prep curricula for all students. The study examined organizing efforts in seven cities and documented the impact on school climate, educational outcomes, parent involvement, and other important measures. In a survey of 124 youth members involved with the three youth organizing groups in the study, young people responded that organizing had increased their knowledge of education issues facing their schools and school systems and that they intended to sustain their political and civic engagement over the long term. Moreover, more than 50 percent of the youth reported that they planned to stay involved with activism in the future, and nearly 40 percent reported that they wanted to find a job in organizing in the future (Mediratta et al. 2008).

Youth organizing is perhaps one of the few places where low-income youth of color build leadership skills and foster a critical perspective about how to change the conditions in their schools and neighborhoods. Experiences such as organizing their peers to advocate for new books rather than the adults' solution of more metal detectors at their school are transformative and foster a social justice worldview that guides future decision making.

Youth organizing also contributes to a developmental outcome for young people of color that is critical but under-theorized: the capacity to address inequality, discrimination, and racism (Thomas, Davidson & McAdoo 2008; Ward 2000). Racism, unemployment, and violence not only impede productive development among youth

of color, but also pose serious threats to their social, emotional, and psychological well-being. Research shows that learning to address issues like racism can serve as an important protective factor for youth as they learn to avoid violence and navigate poverty and negative racial experiences in urban settings (Ward 2000). Organizing provides an effective pathway for young people to build these important youth development outcomes.

A New Generation of Activists for Educational Justice

As this issue of *VUE* goes to press, the outcome of the campaign described in this article to keep TUSD's ethnic studies program is unclear. However, the constant attacks aimed at banning ethnic studies in Arizona have fostered an unanticipated opportunity for young people to learn about democracy and engage in social change. Thousands of students, like Hector Perez, are learning that real education occurs not simply in the context of classroom, but also in the community, the streets, and the offices of elected officials. Hector and many of his peers are a new generation of young people who are knowledgeable about the social, political, and economic forces that impact them and understand the need for youth organizing to establish educational justice. In the meantime, this generation will continue to learn, organize, and bring about social change in order to create, defend, and expand their vision for education and a just world.

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The Campaign for Nonviolent Schools: Students Flip the Script on Violence in Philadelphia

Nijmie Dzurinko, Johonna McCants, and Jonathan Stith

Through youth organizing, Philadelphia students have transformed the public discourse on school violence and created innovative local and citywide campaigns to improve safety in their schools.

Lawmakers, the mainstream media, and many in the city of Philadelphia would have us believe that there is an epidemic of violence in the Philadelphia public school system. In Philadelphia, as in many other large urban systems, school and political leaders have generally responded to reports of fights and injuries in or near schools with a "get tough" approach, primarily through the punishment, arrest, suspension, or expulsion of individuals or groups.[1] Elected officials lead large "town hall meetings" to describe incidents of violence and lecture young people about the importance of getting an education and staying off the streets. Young people are urged to "take a stand" on violence. The media regularly portray out-of-control students as the cause of violence.

But this isn't the whole story. Young people across the nation are rejecting this framing of school violence. In their view, the punitive discipline policies and school policing practices favored by Philadelphia and other districts may be politically popular, but they are depriving large numbers of students of an equal opportunity to learn. And the students most affected are students of color, students living in poverty, students with social and emotional needs, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

This new framing of school violence is emerging from a national youth organizing movement to improve schools. These young people possess a unique perspective informed by their daily experience of school life and their position as those directly affected by what happens in schools. As a result, they are able to develop innovative and creative alternative solutions to school safety issues. In this article, we describe one such effort: the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools in Philadelphia.

The Emergence of the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools

The neighborhood schools attended by most of the students affected by Philadelphia's school safety policies are caught in a Catch-22 situation. The schools are labeled violent, and twenty

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1 For example, during the 2007-2008 school year 4,361 students were taken into police custody directly from school. Data from the 2008-2009 school year indicates that eighteen high schools had more than fifty out-of-school suspensions (OSSs) per 100 students. Four had more than 100 OSSs per 100 students.

are "persistently dangerous schools" according to Pennsylvania's interpretation of No Child Left Behind guidelines. But instead of addressing the violence by seeking root causes and repairing harm, policy-makers and administrators subject the entire student body of these schools to punitive and arbitrary discipline that sucks too many students into the school-to-prison pipeline or pushes students out of school even for nonviolent offenses.

The Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) is attempting to break through that Catch-22. For most of its fifteen-year history of school-based and citywide organizing by young people with adult support, PSU had not directly addressed the question of "youth violence." Instead, youth organizers looked at the issue from their own perspective, pointing to things like prison-like school environments, a lack of communication and trust between students and staff, a disengaging curriculum, and over-policing as root-cause issues that resulted in a negative and unsafe school climate. One school, Bartram High School, formed a joint student-teacher committee, which engaged in several retreats off school grounds to build understanding and deepen relationships. Organizers at two other high schools – Sayre and Simon Gratz – held professional development sessions for their teachers on understanding students in the community and increasing interactive and engaging teaching.

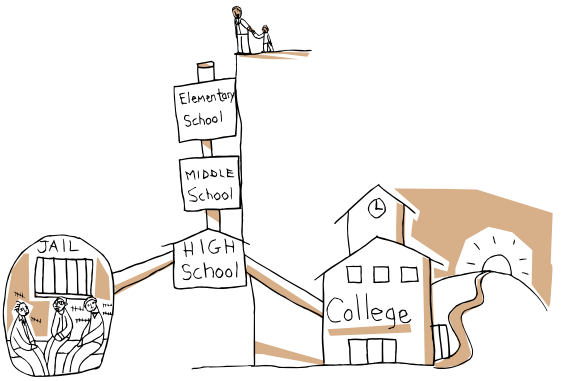
The Lockdown at Sayre

All that changed in fall 2008 after an incident at Sayre High School – a neighborhood school in the Cobbs Creek section of West Philadelphia with 600 students, 98 percent of whom are African American and 85 percent of whom are living in poverty. In September, two ninth-grade students

came to school late and not in uniform and were told by school police officers to go home. A verbal exchange turned physical, Philadelphia police were called, and the school was placed on "lockdown" – a condition in which police essentially take over a school building and the principal cedes his or her authority to the police department.

During the lockdown at Sayre, more than three dozen armed city police flooded the building. Teachers locked their doors consistent with lockdown procedure, leaving bewildered students in the hallway to dodge police batons. Students were not permitted to leave the lunchroom. They became restless and an altercation ensued, resulting in the arrest of sixteen students, all of whom received disciplinary transfers.

In the aftermath of the incident, seniors, one of whom had received leadership training from PSU, organized a petition calling on the school to admit that what had happened to students was wrong. Although several hundred students signed the petition, teachers would not sign it, citing fear of reprisals. The students who organized



the petition felt betrayed by the school for allowing city police to come in and subdue their fellow students and for failing to counter the negative media images in the aftermath of the incident; students felt they were all portrayed as "animals." Student protesters insisted that school police failed to de-escalate the original situation and that city police escalated the problem by their overly aggressive actions. There was no discussion of the incident in classes, no assemblies or academy meetings addressing it, and no counseling for affected students, that students were aware of. Students felt that the adults avoided talking to the students, helping to create a culture in which beating and slandering students was acceptable.

PSU members initiated a listening campaign, talking to their peers about what they had seen and how they felt about it. The listening campaign yielded two major findings: ninth-graders needed more support to acclimate to high school, and students consistently felt mistreated and disrespected by certain school police officers. On a school holiday, student organizers held a press conference in front of the school to respond to the media distortions and offer their recommendations for averting similar violence in the future – a peer mentoring program focusing on supporting incoming ninth-graders and student involvement in training school police in how to relate more effectively to students.

The press conference, which received extensive coverage in the media, was followed by a series of meetings at the school and in the central office with the district's chief safety officer and his central office staff, the principal, and a local pastor. The students carefully cultivated a relationship with district leaders in the office of school safety, in particular then-Chief Safety Officer James Golden. Golden, of a police and military background, initially told students they had to "know their place" and "submit to authority." Despite this, he was open to getting to know the students and eventually came to believe they had something to contribute and a role to play in improving school climate. Over six months of careful negotiations, he agreed to back the students in leading a training for their school police officers.

A Dialogue between Students and Security Staff

With Golden's approval and against the wishes of the principal at that time, PSU members developed a curriculum and strategies for connecting students and school police officers. On April 22, 2009, a professional development day, six students and eight school security officers met for one and a half hours to discuss the root causes of the disconnect between the two groups, using an interactive tool the students had developed.

Students learned for the first time about the pressures experienced by security staff, their lack of training and low wages, and the stereotypes they were subjected to. Students shared

with school police the complexity of their personal lives, the impact of school conditions on their ability to learn, and their lack of voice in school decision making. The students realized that they had much in common with their former antagonists. All participants agreed that the session had broken down barriers, led to greater mutual understanding, and would result in improved relationships.

Immediately following the training, another listening campaign revealed that students felt they were being treated better by school police officers. Many students reported things like being greeted, talked to with respect, asked to do things instead of being told or yelled at, and given concrete and rational reasons for procedures for the first time.

In spite of the hard-won fight to improve relationships and attack the root causes of criminalization of students, the opposition of the school leadership prevailed.[2] PSU was kicked out of the school building and remained ostracized during the 2009-2010 school year. Ironically, the very school police officers who were involved in the student-led training were instructed to prevent one of us [Nijmie Dzurinko], the lead organizer, from entering the building. In 2010, however, with a new principal who is supportive of student leadership and voice, things are once again looking up for youth organizers at Sayre.

PSU Targets Corporal Punishment

Meanwhile, at the site of another PSU chapter, a form of corporal punishment was under way. At a West Philadelphia comprehensive neighborhood high school with 1,500 students – overwhelmingly African American, with 83.6 percent living in poverty – student leaders challenged the late-room policy that was akin to corporal punishment. Students who arrived to school late were sent to the "late room" until the start of the next class period. In the late room, students were forced to stand inside a small square taped to the floor with masking tape. All of their belongings had to be placed between their legs. Any student who stepped outside the box was immediately suspended.

Six students and eight school security officers met for one and a half hours to discuss the root causes of the disconnect between the two groups, using an interactive tool the students had developed.

Although the late-room practice was widely hated within the school, it remained a "secret" to anyone outside the building. PSU members attempted to meet with the principal to address the late-room policy and other issues. Their repeated requests were rejected. Finally, a PSU member captured video footage of the late room on his phone. Members set up a meeting with their city councilperson (an alum of the school) and shared the footage, as well as other concerns about the school. Shortly thereafter, the school ended the practice.

2 During the time PSU was developing the curriculum to connect students and school police officers, the school's leadership rejected the peer mentoring program proposal PSU developed as another response to the incident at Sayre (see the section "The Lockdown at Sayre").

Coming Together in a Citywide Coalition

Students involved in these successful actions had already decided to take their organizing citywide. To do this, they realized they had to make their efforts a true collaboration between organizations and youth from across the city with different ethnic backgrounds and neighborhoods.

A watershed event occurred in 2009 at South Philadelphia High School. South Philadelphia is home to a diverse population of African American, Latino, Asian, and White students. Many of the Asian students were recent immigrants and English language learners and for years had been targeted by other students for bullying and violence in the building. South Philadelphia was known as a "persistently dangerous" school, and violence against immigrant Asian students occurred in the context of a building with years of failed leadership, failed academic interventions, and a lack of vision. On December 3, more than thirty Asian students were assaulted in a series of attacks inside and outside the school, mostly by African American schoolmates; thirteen were hospitalized. The incident led to state and federal investigations and national and international publicity.

In response, a group of about fifty Asian immigrant students led a week-long boycott of the school. From the beginning, the students wanted to point to an atmosphere of indifference on the part of school and district leadership for their ongoing harassment at the school. The district framed the incident as the product of "neighborhood gangs" and different racial groups retaliating against each other. The media followed suit – suddenly it was Blacks against Asians. Students, however felt that the district's view was inaccurate and was an attempt to pit the two ethnic groups against each other and absolve itself of responsibility.

In the midst of this toxic atmosphere, PSU members, who are predominantly African American, realized that in order to hold the school district accountable for real improvements to this underfunded and disinvested school, Black and Asian students would need to speak with one voice. Black and Asian groups began meeting to develop relationships and understanding and to conduct joint political education. This work led to the development of a PSU chapter at South Philadelphia High School and the development of the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools. Today, the school has new leadership and a new outlook. Black and Asian student organizers have started meeting once a month inside the school, for the first time ever.

Launching the Campaign

Students chose Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2010 as the day to officially launch the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools (see sidebar for more about the Campaign's structure and strategies). The launch included nine youth organizations made up of youth organizing groups and youth development groups with strong youth leadership components: PSU, the Youth Voices project of the University Community Collaborative at Temple, the Asian Students Association of Philadelphia, Asian Americans United, Boat People SOS, Citywide Student Government, Philadelphia Freedom Schools, the Youth Commission, and Youth United for Change.

Clergy, teachers, principals, elected officials, parents, and community members joined these organizations. Six hundred people gathered at school district headquarters and marched

How the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools Works

The Campaign seeks to build a student movement based on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s principles of nonviolence through trainings in nonviolent practice, theory, and action throughout the city. The Campaign has conducted two nonviolent youth "flash mobs," which helped to change the perception of youth in the media and community and received coverage as far away as Memphis and San Francisco. The Youth Power Summit of November 2010 engaged more than 200 students in leadership development and nonviolence training.

During the campaign's biweekly meetings, member organizations engage in relationship building, leadership development, setting goals and planning campaign activities. The Campaign is currently working on the following fronts:

- *Systems change:* Shifting the policy orientation of the Philadelphia school district away from punitive discipline and toward restorative policies and practices. This requires strong working relationships with district administrators and other officials. Superintendent of Schools Dr. Arlene Ackerman, the School Reform Commission, officials in charge of discipline, and school police officers have expressed support.
- *School change:* Realizing the citywide vision of a nonviolent school at the school level. District-level policy change is not enough; the Campaign empowers students in individual schools to build their power and collaborate with staff and principals to develop nonviolent schools, which, as the vision develops, may include student-led training of school police officers, student involvement in school budgeting process, and yearly schoolwide student satisfaction surveys.
- *Individual change:* Building a new nonviolent movement of students, which shifts the perception of young people in the media and the public.

Using input from the summit as well as interactive tools developed by PSU and adopted by each member organization, the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools is currently creating a platform of policy recommendations for the School District of Philadelphia. This platform will drive a multi-year organizing effort that will link an unprecedented number of organizations in Philadelphia working for fair and just schools. PSU will continue to coordinate this effort and ensure youth leadership in every aspect of the Campaign.

down the middle of Broad Street to the Arch Street Methodist Church, where Reverend Robin Hynicka welcomed the crowd. The entire demonstration was hosted by youth and led by youth. Speakers included Philadelphia district attorney Seth Williams and state representative Vanessa Brown, who had acted as an ally to student organizers at Sayre High School in her district. The Campaign was gaining steam. The Campaign is currently working on a platform that articulates the vision of a nonviolent school – the culmination of a year's worth of effort involving hundreds of students. As this issue of *VUE* went to press, the campaign was planning to launch the platform during the third week of March. The Campaign's member organizations' plan is to secure hundreds of endorsements for the platform while organizing to implement it in individual schools and as part of district policy. The Campaign is also lining up its priorities with the national demands of the Alliance for Educational Justice to help end the school-to-prison pipeline as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is being debated.

Shifting Discourses of Youth, Violence, and Safety

As PSU members began to see similarities across schools and plan a citywide campaign for more equitable school discipline and policing policies, they developed a new perspective on "school violence" (see sidebars for more on this). They started to view student violence in a broader context based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s understanding that "peace is not the absence of violence, but the presence of justice." They also came to realize that in order to build enough power to shift negative policies and practices they would have to claim the moral high ground by organizing students to be actively nonviolent.

Students had always understood that school conditions, stereotyping and criminalization of youth, underfunding of schools, lack of quality teaching, and a dumbed-down curriculum were among the root causes of problems in our schools, as opposed to "bad kids." But there was now a new way of thinking about these root causes.

Student organizers came up with a basic definition of violence that could be used throughout the membership and was meant to become "viral" – that is, quickly and easily transmitted to other students brought into the organizing from their schools. The definition was: "Violence equals power that hurts." This power could be personal power that is used to physically hurt someone. It could also be the power of the school system, hurting students by deciding to invest more resources and better teachers in magnet schools, as opposed to neighborhood schools, or the violence of the system of school funding that determines how much money is spent on your education based on where you live. Therefore, there is more than one kind of violence. There is interpersonal violence, perpetrated by individuals on each other, and then there is systemic, or structural violence, which is the violence (power that hurts) that results from a set of conditions that limit or restrict the chances of young people to lead successful and healthy lives.

Student organizers also adopted Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea that interpersonal violence is often a symptom of structural violence (see Perspectives sidebar). This was evident in the fact that schools with the most interpersonal violence were also the most underfunded, with the highest rates of teacher turnover; the most unresponsive leadership; overpolicing and criminalization of students; the least amount of student voice; a lack of personalization; and so on. In this context, students defined the opposite of violence not as not being violent but as nonviolence. *Nonviolence* they defined as "power that helps." Again, this can have interpersonal as well as systematic manifestations. Students recognized that all of their organizing efforts could be characterized as nonviolent resistance.

Looking to the Future

The Campaign for Nonviolent Schools aims to transform school safety policies in Philadelphia. But that's not the

PERSPECTIVES: Youth Leaders in Action: Interpersonal Violence and Structural Violence

Markeeta Hudgens was a senior at Overbrook High School and one of the speakers at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2010 campaign kickoff day.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Organized non-violent resistance is the most powerful weapon that oppressed people can use in breaking loose from the bondage of oppression." To understand this quote, we must first understand what "bondage of oppression" means. Oppression is that feeling of being heavily burdened mentally or physically by troubles and adverse conditions. And we as a people are chained down by that. Those who think they hold the power and authority have got us to a point where they no longer have to keep us, the people, down with physical chains or with physical violence. Now, those in power keep us bonded *mentally* – and that is violent.

Many of us talk about violence as being on an individual, one person to another, like a physical fight or an attack. King referred to this as *interpersonal violence*. But we sometime forget to talk about the other form of violence in this world, *structural violence*. For example, our schools not being funded adequately is violent. Not having the resources we need in our schools or to survive is violent. Having more security guards in my school than counselors is violent. And silencing the voice of those most affected by this type of violence – us, the students – is the most violent of all. Why? Because every last one of these forms of violence affects our community and our ability to live a long and prosperous life.

Transforming the Discourse through Film

In 2007, one of us [Johonna McCants] founded a project designed to engage youth in developing and promoting community-based strategies for safety that do not depend upon punitive policies. As an initial step in this effort, youth leaders created *Vision Is Our Power*, a documentary film to center the perspectives and stories of Black youth in public debates on violence. From the shock of a boyfriend's punch to routine bullying by police officers, many of the stories in the film reveal forms and sources of violence against youth rarely featured in the mainstream media. The stories also highlight the many ways in which youth are resisting violence – from leaving an abusive relationship to organizing against police brutality.

Whereas the dominant discourse frames violence by youth as the central threat to young people's safety, the film revealed multiple faces of violence against youth and the importance of the voice of marginalized youth in debates on "youth violence." For more on alternative discourse on youth violence, see Recommended Reading at the end of this article.

only emerging transformation. PSU exemplifies youths' efforts to not only shift harmful policies and practices, but also radically remake the ideological conditions that sustain punishment and violence. Through astute political engagement and careful analysis, youth organizers all over the nation are shifting discourses that label poor students and students of color as wilding juvenile delinquents, apathetic citizens, and academic underachievers who are solely responsible for the negative and unsafe conditions inside schools. The Campaign illustrates how youth can alter power relationships by changing the way young people view themselves, the way young people view adults, the way adults view young people, and the way adults view themselves.

Only a citywide, organized, well-informed, actively nonviolent student movement can demand serious changes in the way that discipline is handled in our district. As the Campaign and its student leaders advance to next steps, they will be an invaluable asset in transforming Philadelphia's schools.

Recommended Reading

Chandler, C., and C. Kingery. 2002. "Speaking Out against State Violence: Activist HIV-Positive Women Prisoners Redefine Social Justice," in *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender, and Criminalization*, edited by J. Silliman and A. Battacharjee. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Feld, B. 1998. "Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems' Responses to Youth Violence," *Crime and Justice* 24, no. 189.

Hosang, D. 2006. "Beyond Policy: Race, Ideology, and the Reimagining of Youth" in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth*, edited by S. Ginwright, P. Noguera, and J. Cammarota. New York: Routledge.

Kaba, M., J. C. Mathew, and S. Haines. 2010. *Something Is Wrong: Exploring the Roots of Youth Violence*. Chicago: Chicago Freedom School.

Kwon, S. A. 2006. "Youth of Color Organizing for Juvenile Justice," in *Beyond Resistance: Youth Activism and Community Change. New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth*, edited by S. Ginwright, P. Noguera, and J. Cammarota, New York: Routledge.

McCants, J. 2010. "Re-Visioning Violence: How Black Youth Advance Critical Understandings of Violence in Climates of Criminalization." PhD. diss., Univ. of Maryland, College Park.

Muncie, J. 2008. "The 'Punitive Turn' in Juvenile Justice: Cultures of Control and Rights Compliance in Western Europe and the USA," *Youth Justice* 8, no. 2:107–121.

Rodriguez, L. 2001. *Hearts and Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Silliman, J., and A. Battacharjee. 2002. "Introduction." In *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender and Criminalization*. Cambridge: South End Press.

Further Resources

The following resources, created by youth organizing groups, can help students to better understand and challenge direct and structural violence in their schools and communities.

Something Is Wrong: Exploring the Roots of Youth Violence, by Project NIA, the Chicago Freedom School, and Teachers for Social Justice: a free 350-page curriculum guide to help students understand the root causes of violence. Available for download at <www http://www.project-nia.org/event_curriculum-guide.html>.

Suspension Stories, by the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team and Project NIA: a youth-led participatory action research project to understand the school-to-prison pipeline. Website: <www.rogersparkywat.org/2011/01/31/announcing-the-launch-of-suspension-stories>

Alternatives to Criminalization by the Detroit Summer Live Arts Media Project: a short video that addresses the criminalization of students and offers alternatives. Video on YouTube: <http://il.youtube.com/watch?v=A8OKyUdrYUo>; Detroit Summer Live Arts Media Project blog: <http://detroitsummer.wordpress.com>

"We're All in It Together": the Role of Youth Leadership in College Access

Lori Chajet

A youth-generated solution creates a college-going culture on three New York City campuses.

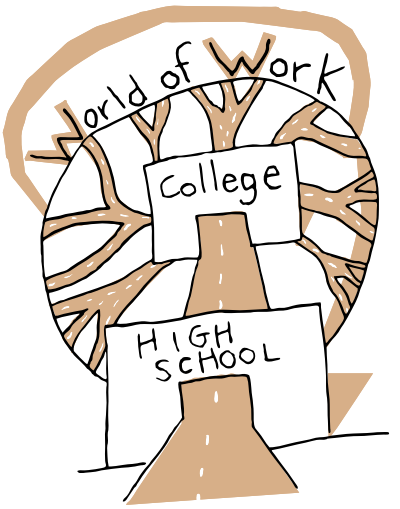
For six years I taught in a small public high school in New York City that held college as a goal for *all* of its students. Having taught the school's first four graduating classes, I worked hard to prepare my students academically for college and to repeatedly send them the message that they could – and should – go to college. At the same time, I often found myself wondering how well we had prepared them to make informed post-secondary choices and if we had effectively supported them throughout the overwhelming application and financial aid process.

Brimming with questions, I moved into a PhD program where I focused my research on the post-secondary experiences of small-school graduates. Having come from a community and family where knowledge about college saturated the lives of young people, I didn't fully realize, until I was well into my research, just how much more needed to be understood, and done, by schools who serve low-income students whose mission it is to see them go to, and succeed in, college.

Lori Chajet is the director of program development and policy for Homebase, an organization based at the City University of New York Graduate Center that supports the development of youth-led college access programs, and a director of programs for the Institute for Student Achievement's College Knowledge Project.

As I observed the students in my study, my urgency to understand grew: What could have prevented Manny from getting so frustrated and overwhelmed by the countless questions on college applications that he opted out of the process (Chajet & Stoneman-Bell 2008)? How could Wesley and his mother have been counseled to better understand the financial aid package they accepted so they were not confronted with an unexpected bill the summer before Wesley intended to start college? How could Maria have been helped to manage the reality that she would be one of only four Latina students in her freshmen class? How could Carmen have been challenged to question her intention of being an accountant when her weakest, and least favorite, subject area was math? What could have helped Malik to better understand, and resist, the lure of for-profit colleges in the face of unexpected testing requirements and remedial coursework at his college of choice (Chajet 2003)?

For the past seven years, I have been involved in a variety of initiatives that aim to better address the high-school-to-college transition for first-generation college-bound students. Among the most powerful are the



Student Success Centers (SSCs) in New York City, which place youth leadership at the core of college access. In 2005 a group of young people affiliated with the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC)[1] knew that they, and many of their peers, aspired to attend college but did not have the support they needed to navigate the process. They argued that a youth-driven initiative could make a significant impact on students' access to college and a school's overall college-going culture.

In an effort to figure out how to translate this idea into practice, UYC organizers visited a sister youth organizing group, the Philadelphia Student Union,[2] to learn about their SSCs and met with several City University of New York experts to better understand the issues of college counseling. These meetings reinforced the idea that a full-service center with a youth-leadership component would be critical to their own initiative. The idea was not just to provide integrated services, but also to make sure that young people were actively involved in identifying and addressing students' needs. With these convictions, UYC organized and founded four SSCs (see sidebars on pages 33 and page 38) with funding from both private and public sources (including the Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, New York Community Trust, the New York City Department of Education, and the New York State Education Department).

SSCs are collaborations between community-based organizations and public schools, staffed by two to three adults (funded by the CBOs, with counseling, training, and administrative roles) and five to twelve high school students who guide other students through the college search, application, and financial aid process. The SSCs are located on multi-school campuses; there are currently three in New York City. The students, called youth leaders, are mostly juniors and seniors and are representative of the high schools they attend: first-generation college-bound students with a range of academic success. While some youth leaders are top students, the model intentionally seeks a range of academic success. It is often the B and C students who serve as inspiration to more-struggling students. For $8 per hour, for approximately ten hours per week, youth leaders staff the SSC during their free periods, lunches, and after school, working one-on-one with their peer juniors and seniors, facilitating early awareness workshops with ninth- and tenth-graders, organizing college trips, and planning campus-wide events to raise awareness about college.

1 To learn more about the Urban Youth Collaborative, please see the article by Jorel Moore in this issue of *VUE* and the UYC website: <www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org>.

2 To learn more about the Philadelphia Student Union, please see the article by Nijmie Dzurinko, Johonna McCants, and Jonathan Stith in this issue of *VUE* and the PSU website: <http://home.phillystudentunion.org>.

Where Are the Student Success Centers?

The first SSC opened in 2007 on Bushwick Campus, with Make the Road New York, serving four small schools; the second opened in 2008 on Franklin K. Lane Campus, with Future of Tomorrow/Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, serving four small schools and one large school that was phasing out; and the third opened in 2010 at Elmhurst Campus, with Make the Road New York, serving four small schools. An SSC also opened at Leadership Institute in the Bronx in 2009, with Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition; elements have remained in place, but not the full model.

Make the Road New York and Future of Tomorrow are members of the Urban Youth Collaborative (see footnote 1).

Youth leaders undergo intense training in order to effectively fulfill their roles. In the summers they attend seven weeks of training, including a series of cross-site workshops facilitated by the Goddard Riverside OPTIONS Institute, an organization that trains college counselors throughout New York City. Youth leaders learn the details of the college search, application, and financial aid process and develop counseling and leadership skills. Youth leaders also meet weekly throughout the academic year for ongoing professional development and several other times for cross-site trainings.

Preliminary data, conducted as part of an internal program evaluation, suggest that the SSCs are increasing the numbers of students engaging in and completing the college process: in 2009-2010, more than 70 percent of seniors at two of the sites applied to six or more colleges (there are no data yet on the third site). It also illustrates how being a youth leader has a significant impact on the youth leaders themselves, as the experience provides them with information about the college process and the skills of advocacy and leadership critical to success throughout college: 67 percent of youth leaders felt more comfortable speaking in front of others; 88 percent felt more comfortable representing their school; 71 percent felt more likely to participate in school activities; and 80 percent felt more comfortable talking with adults.

In the overly competitive world of college applications, where many high school students perceive themselves to be pitted *against* one another for select spots at colleges and middle- and upper-class families invest tremendous resources to ensure their children have an edge in the process (Bloom 2007; McDonough 1997; Perna & Titus 2005), the collaborative role SSC youth leaders take to help one another is rare. Furthermore, it is precisely because of the many hurdles first-generation college-bound students, in particular, face throughout the college process, that youth-led collaboration is critical to meeting students' many and varied needs.

The Context: Challenges to Realizing Aspirations

The SSCs are a response to the ever-growing gap between students' aspirations for college and their achievement. While 95 percent of high school students

want to go to college (Adelman 2002; Kinzie et al. 2004; Rosenbaum 2001), far fewer actually enroll and even fewer persist to graduation.[3] This is due to a variety of intersecting realities for first-generation college-bound students: the limited knowledge and understanding students have about the college and financial aid process (Carnevale & Rose 2004; McDonough 1997, 2005; Roderick et al. 2008); the lack of structured opportunities to receive needed guidance (Knight 2003; McDonough 2004, 2005; Roderick et al. 2008); limited engagement in the college process (Roderick et al. 2008); the growing complexity of the application process (Kinzie et al. 2004); and the multiple socio-emotional hurdles encountered throughout the process (Bloom 2007).

Children from middle- and upper-class families often have their parents or private counselors playing a critical role. Parents of first-generation college-bound students encourage their children to apply to college, but they often lack the knowledge, resources, and time needed to support them through the specifics of the process (Bloom 2007; Kirst and Venezia 2004; McDonough 1997). Some school-based counselors would provide such support if they had the time, but between their large case loads[4] and a variety of non-college related responsibilities, counselors rarely have the capacity to do this for every student. Intensifying the situation, as Bloom (2007) points out, completing the steps required throughout the process is not just a lot of work; it is often alienating and painful for students who feel the application and financial aid forms, and thus college, are not designed for them. Questions about mortgages, investments, employment, parents' marital status, family's past college experience, can leave them perplexed, and moreover, questioning whether college is for them.

The Possibility: Students as Change Agents

Despite the many challenges, the research makes clear:

> The good news…is there are ways that…teachers, counselors, and administrators can improve college access for students: ensuring that students who aspire to attain a four-year degree get the help they need to understand how to make decisions about potential colleges, making sure that students effectively participate in the college application process and apply for financial aid in time to maximize their financial support, and urging students to apply to colleges that match their qualifications. (Roderick et al. 2008)

SSCs take this research one step further by making students into change agents in the process – not just because many schools are unable to enact this vision, but also because youth are best positioned to engage other young people.

A close look at the SSCs reveals that while their existence provides needed additional support to under-resourced schools, the role of youth leadership introduces an element to

3 In 2007, 56 percent of African-American, 64 percent of Latino, 70 percent of White, and 58 percent of low-income students enrolled in college directly following high school graduation. In 2007, 12 percent of Latinos (age 25–29), 20 percent of African Americans (age 25–29), and 36 percent of Whites (age 25–29) had a bachelor's degree; 10 percent of low-income 24-year-olds had a bachelor's degree (Engle & Lynch 2009).

4 McDonough (2005) found that in large cities, the average counselor to student ratio is 1:740.

the guidance process that is effective in engaging first-generation college-bound students. While there was, and continues to be, resistance to and skepticism of youth taking on this role, those adults who see SSCs in action usually evolve in their understanding of youth power. While youth cannot replace the role of counselors, they can complement their work in critical ways. The SSCs provide an opportunity to take seriously the many ways youth leadership confronts salient issues inherent to the college process for first-generation college-bound students.

Engaging Students

One thing the youth leaders understand firsthand is that hesitancy with, or resistance to, the college process is rooted not in apathy or lack of ambition, but rather in students' limited understanding of the process and, moreover, their underlying fears. One student explained:

> I thought that if you wanted to go to college, you could just go to the institution, sign up, give your name, and enroll there. I learned that there is a huge process for it, and it takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of courage.

When the youth leaders were asked what they thought prevented students at their schools from applying to college, their answers coincided with the research cited in the section "The Context: Challenges to Realizing Aspirations" in this article. They most frequently highlighted students' belief that they could not afford college, the fear that they would not be accepted, and their inability to name specific colleges to go to. They also noted how emotionally overwhelming the process is. One student reflected,

> I think it is the fear. There is a lot of paperwork to get done – I have not seen so many forms that need to be filled out in my life, so you get scared.

With these obstacles at the forefront of their minds, and no concrete information about the real costs of college or the entrance requirements, students too frequently avoid the process (Bloom 2007; McDonough 1997; Roderick et al. 2008). Thus, as one youth leader remarked:

> [Students] know they might want to go to college, but they are not doing anything about it. . . . This *is* the moment. Someone has to tell them with a voice that is going to hit them.

This is just what the youth leaders set out to do. Armed with information and an understanding of what is possible for students, they spread the

word in a variety of ways. One youth leader explained:

> After we did a series of workshops in all of the [senior] classes in our school…a lot of them started applying to college. They started coming down to the SSC. …Other people who heard the information we gave them…they weren't that encouraged …because of their grades or because their parents wouldn't give them the information they needed. … We know what is going on, we know the students, we know who to look out for and how to look…so we go in those little corners where they are hiding and get them out – where [counselors] can't see them.

The presence of other students in the SSC and the promise of help from the youth leaders is often what it takes to bring in more reticent students. One youth leader explained, "They say, 'Are you going to be there?' And I say, 'Yes,' and then they come." She concludes, "Bottom line: we bring the students; we get them to come."

In addition to direct outreach, youth leaders also plan events that are distinct from those adults would plan.

For example, the youth at one campus decided to have a late-fall prom; in order to attend, students had to have completed a certain number of applications. Others planned a campus-wide basketball game where teams represented the City University of New York and State University of New York colleges; at half-time the youth leaders did a college-based trivia game.

The youth leaders see their hard work paying off. Once the students come to the SSC, as one explained, "You are kind of hooked so you are going to be down there, like, every single day." Several students commented that at the SSC, they see other students working on the same process as they are, struggling with the same questions, and hitting the same obstacles; but they also see people who can help them and evidence of their peers going to college. One student said, "If you look at the wall, you see different students…who got accepted to colleges. …It does help." While many high schools have a similar wall, it is seldom located in a place with sufficient hands-on help and a communal work environment. As one student commented, "We're all in it together."

The large student-designed space devoted exclusively to post-secondary planning also lures students to the SSC. Most days, music fills the room, punctuated by talk of college and questions about applications. The bulletin boards are covered with important information: grade-point average conversion charts, financial aid guidelines for New York State Opportunity programs, application deadlines. Spray-painted across the walls are: "COLLEGE" and "STUDENT SUCCESS." One student commented:

> I feel like they create a homey environment, and students feel comfortable because it looks like a student would create that space, and it is not crammed. . . . It is spaced out – sofas so if you need to sit and think about something, you have that.

The effect of this is powerful, explained one student:

> I think the majority of the people – everyone I have known who went down to the SSC – they changed their whole mindset. They enjoy people down there. . . . It helps you see college as not so hard.

And so the word spreads: "They get us, and then we go to our friends and we bring our friends," said another student. "And our friends will get their friends and bring them downstairs."

Giving Personalized Attention and a Message Students Can Hear

Youth leaders are not college counselors, but like counselors, they provide other students with information about college, motivate them to complete the process, and assist them over the hurdles. They do this, however, as youth. It is this combination that often makes students open to working with the youth leaders. Unlike school-based counselors, youth leaders are entirely focused on the college process, and they speak the same language as their peers. One student explained:

> The guidance counselor has other duties that she has to do. She can't strictly focus on college issues. . . . I feel like [the SSC] is devoted to only college – you get one-on-one attention.

Several referenced having a difficult time meeting with their counselors. A youth leader explained the difference:

> With the guidance counselor . . . you might have to set up a meeting . . . she [might] tell you, come back next week. . . . It makes it hard for the seniors to keep up with everything. . . . There is always someone [at the SSC], so they always have help every time they come down.

Many of the students noted that it was not that their counselors did not want to help; it was simply that they did not have the time and space to follow through with them as thoroughly as needed. In the SSC, students feel that the attention and guidance they get is more personalized and goes beyond just telling them what they need to do by helping them to actually do it.

"We know what is going on, we know the students, we know who to look out for and how to look."

— A Youth Leader

The messages the youth leaders send are also distinct from those of counselors. One youth leader explained that several students he spoke to had dismissed the idea of applying to college because of their high school standing. While a guidance counselor might focus on the credits owed, he is able to send a different message:

> Someone might say, "I am missing, like, five credits," and you might say "I am missing, like, three." You are not the only one. You can get past that and still go to college. Just because you might graduate a month later doesn't mean you can't go to college.

PERSPECTIVES:

Youth Leaders in Action: Looking Back on the Fight for Student Success Centers

Santy Zambrano was a student at the Bushwick School of Social Justice and a youth leader with Make The Road New York and the Urban Youth Collaborative during the campaign for Student Success Centers.

My name is Santy Zambrano, and I was a youth leader with Make The Road New York and the Urban Youth Collaborative when we were fighting for – and winning! – Student Success Centers. I wanted to say a little bit about why I was part of that campaign and how I see the SSC helping my old school.

In 2005, UYC had an event that brought together 800 New York City high school students. Through surveying students, UYC learned that almost all of the students said they wanted to attend college. Students also said they could not see guidance counselors when they needed to. They did not know who to turn to if they had questions about college and had trouble even getting the information about what they needed to graduate.

It wasn't as if as soon as we presented the idea to the Department of Education they said, "Yes!" We had to have lots of meetings, sometimes hold rallies, have our allies support the idea, and really develop the concept of SSCs into full proposals.

I was there the day that the SSC in Bushwick opened, and the SSC at Lane. I have graduated now, but it is so fulfilling and inspiring to see all the students that the SSC is helping, Students at my old school are talking about college a lot now, and students are helping each other. I wish the SSC had been there when I was in high school, but I also feel great knowing that my work paid off and is making a difference in my community today.

Another youth leader explained the impact of language:

> You have your guidance counselor who will explain things a certain way, but then you have us who will explain things a certain way. . . . We make it easier in the terminology we understand. . . . We break it down for them. We are that bridge to college.

A counselor at one of the SSC schools concurred:

> Lots of times when I am explaining [things], I am not understanding why it is not connecting, but a student explains it in different terminology and the kid instantly gets it.

Youth leaders also have more consistent access to the students, in ways the adult-based staff and counselors do not. As a result, they can give continual support and reminders throughout the school day. The reminders extend beyond class time as well. Many of the youth leaders spoke about contacting their peers on Facebook, calling them at home or on their cell phone, and tracking them down on the lunch line. One youth leader explained just how persistent she has to be:

> There is a whole list of people who haven't done anything, and they say, "tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow." And tomorrow never comes. I just got one kid who came from my class, and he started from scratch – CUNY all the way to FAFSA and then TAP all in one day. I got him to do that. . . . He messaged me on Facebook, and he was like, "What do I have to bring?!" and I wrote a whole list for him, and he brought it in today. I was so happy and now he is just done!

Many students noted that they were also more comfortable talking with their peers about issues related to the college process than they were talking with adult staff. One student explained:

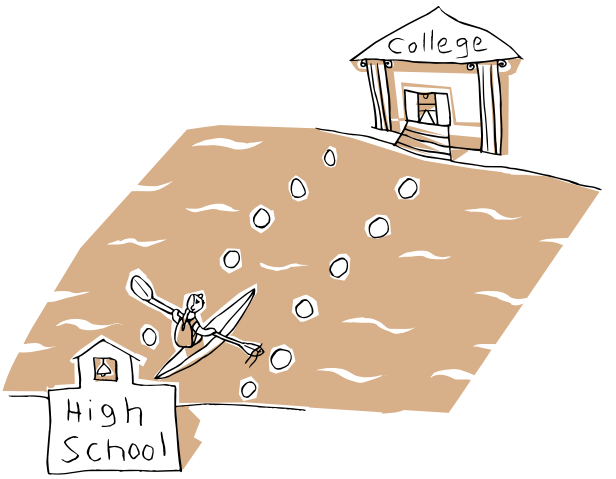
> It is kind of easier to talk to your peers – if you are asking, like, a weird question. . . . if you constantly need help, you don't want to bother an adult.

When students look around their schools, they sometimes doubt that teachers and counselors understand the specifics of their lives; they often come from different backgrounds and, several students noted, from different neighborhoods. One student said that the youth leaders "relate to you more," another that they "understand you more," and another that "they have the same situation." The fact that the youth leaders are a similar age to the students using the SSC, and that they know so much about the college process, is an inspiration in itself. As a result, students openly share questions, concerns, fears, and information with the youth leaders.

The End Result: Empowered Students

Having students guide others through the complexities of the college process is not an idea that many people come to intuitively. There is often skepticism about the role youth can and should play in the grounded work of schools; in the complex arena of college access, there is often resistance to investing resources in such a model. And yet, many who are ambivalent at first change their thinking once they see the effects of well-trained youth leaders. As Allison Palmer, director of the College Access Center for New Settlement Apartments, said,

> When I initially heard about the SSC model, I was skeptical of the concept of high school students providing "college counseling services" to their peers. After working with the youth leaders, I now realize that with the proper support, training, and resources, these students are quite effective in guiding their peers through the college admissions process. Because of the peer-to-peer relationship, oftentimes peer counselors are able to reach students who traditional adult counselors have historically had difficulties reaching.



Youth leaders serve a need in under-resourced schools that do not have enough adults to coach students through the process the way that middle- and upper-class families often do for their own children. It might be argued that SSCs would not be needed if there were equitable funding for urban public schools. However, they contribute something further: youth-to-youth power and support. McDonough (1997) describes the importance of middle- and upper-class youth being surrounded by peers invested in the college process; the SSCs replicate a similar effect for first-generation students. The effect youth leaders have on

other first-generation college-bound students demonstrates that the youth role, in and of itself, is a critical strategy for engaging students in and providing needed support through the college process. Asked what they would change about the SSCs or what advice they had, students' most noted response was: "They should have this in every school."

The work of the SSCs illustrates that the power of youth leadership in college access cannot be ignored; it was the UYC students who developed, successfully advocated for, and provide the bulk of the staffing for SSCs in their schools. Not all college access programs and schools will have the time and resources to train youth as comprehensively as the SSCs do, nor will they have the capacity to have them work as extensively throughout the college process as the youth leaders do. However, there is a spectrum of potential involvement for youth leadership, whether it's training students to support their peers with specific parts of the college process, having them do outreach to younger students, or giving them opportunities to work with the school-based guidance counselor.

Schools and college access programs shouldn't overlook young people as a resource as they seek ways to support the post-secondary aspirations of their students. Youth organizing has proven to be highly effective in creating a way for students to help other students access college – and all of the accompanying opportunities. Support for youth organizations like UYC and its member organizations not only honors youth power – it also takes seriously the aspirations of more than 95 percent of high school students by transforming the college-going cultures of their high schools.

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The Role of New Media in Youth Organizing for Educational Justice

Charles A. McDonald, Jaritza Geigel, and Fred Pinguel

Youth organizers reflect on the role of new media in the growing national movement for educational justice.

The Alliance for Education Justice (AEJ) – a coalition of twenty youth and intergenerational groups across the nation that are organizing for education reform – was sparked by an unprecedented political opportunity in 2008: the candidacy of a former community organizer as President of the United States. Organizers from a range of education justice initiatives seized the moment to launch the national alliance (see sidebar, page 42). Between 2008 and 2010, the group accomplished more than anyone could have imagined: two national days of action, multiple youth-led congressional lobby visits and Capitol Hill briefings, a paid national youth internship program, the creation of a national educational justice curriculum, multiple national convenings, and the formulation of a national campaign and policy platform. And the group accomplished all this in spite of spanning three time zones and possessing limited resources and experience running national campaigns. How was AEJ able to do so much in such a short period of time?

Charles A. McDonald is a national organizer for the Alliance for Educational Justice. Jaritza Geigel is an AEJ Youth Strategy Team member and youth organizer for Make the Road New York. Fred Pinguel is an AEJ Strategy Team member and youth organizer for the Philadelphia Student Union.

Well, credit should be shared among the twenty alliance organizations, which have used the experience of their own local successes over the past two decades to help lead AEJ. Member organizations also deserve praise for their resourcefulness, which has helped them organize and win school improvements – on the back of paper-thin budgets – for years. And it certainly would have been very difficult for AEJ to hit the ground running with such force without years of developing personal and work relationships among alliance leaders.

But aside from these time-tested organizing methods, new media tools have also played a vital role in AEJ's success. By using Web-based project management tools, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, text messaging, and blogging, AEJ has been able to cover a lot of ground in a short amount of time with minimal resources.

Building the Alliance with the Help of New Media

A majority of AEJ's day-to-day operation is delegated between a team of two paid staff organizers and three executive directors from AEJ's "anchor" organizations. Each anchor organization is responsible for leading a major

About the Alliance for Educational Justice

Youth organizing groups from across the nation have been meeting at conferences and gathering for years to share stories, victories, and strategies. At one such gathering in Los Angeles in 2004, a few key groups – Sistas in Action for Power, the Philadelphia Student Union, and Youth United for Change – discussed the initial development of a national movement. The discussion continued at a retreat funded by the Surdna Foundation a few months later in Philadelphia and at many more gatherings over the next few years.

In December 2008, the Alliance for Educational Justice was born at a meeting in San Francisco, funded by the Edward W. Hazen, Bill & Melinda Gates, and Surdna foundations and facilitated by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. The success of the meeting led to work on a national movement. After eight years of increasing federal involvement in public education with No Child Left Behind, local groups agreed they would have to find the means to address national policy if they wanted to be effective in their communities. The election of President Barack Obama provided a political opening to form such a national alliance.

component of AEJ's work. Philadelphia Student Union operates as program and base building anchor; Youth United for Change, also in Philadelphia, is policy and campaign anchor; and Make the Road New York is the lead anchor, responsible for the overall coordination of AEJ. Staff work remotely on opposite coasts, while the three anchor organizations operate out of their offices in Philadelphia and New York City. There is no shared office space and very few opportunities to meet face to face.

In order to compensate for the lack of face time and shared space, staff and anchors have relied on the creation of a virtual office space. This virtual office space is comprised of a series of web-based project management tools that substitute for the traditional office. It's a place to hold meetings, review and update documents in real time while chatting live via webcam, access important documents such as call notes and AEJ's 200-plus-page education justice curriculum, and access a host of other useful organizing tools. Essentially, the office space of AEJ exists in "the cloud" – spread out across the country and linked through the Internet. While the setup is certainly innovative, the operation does not come without some challenges. Each organization has access to AEJ's project management accounts, but some members with limited experience using these tools have a hard time using them. Without proper training, they can potentially do more harm then help. In order to deal with these concerns, staff are in the process of creating a series of video tutorials to help members navigate AEJ's virtual office space with ease.

AEJ does not yet have the resources to hire a communications director, communications consultant, or website developer. Instead, it relies on the experience of staff and youth to deploy an array of social networking

tools and tactics, which has yielded great results thus far. A new media and messaging committee has been formed to develop messaging and explore creative ways to use social networking tools. This committee is currently in the beginning stages of an online communications campaign, which includes monthly youth-led blog posts and viral videos.

AEJ's websites operate as user-friendly WordPress blogs, <www.allianceforeducationaljustice.org> and <www.ncqe.org>. WordPress is an open source content management system that allows its users to create and maintain their sites without much editing to PHP or HTML (scripting language designed for website development). Operating the sites as a blog provides AEJ members the perfect vehicle to transport their message and an ability to post education news that is up-to-date and relevant to their national audience. Staff have developed a workshop series for members who are interested in supporting the operation and maintenance of the AEJ website so anyone with basic computer skills can update posts, upload video and photos, or reconfigure the home page of the site. And as with most websites and blogs these days, AEJ's includes links to their Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr accounts, each of which contain an array of member-created content.

AEJ Youth Leaders Reflect on the Role of New Media Tools

AEJ is certainly not the only example of effective organizing with new media tools in the United States or abroad. As seen in the recent uprisings in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt, the use of new media is greatly enhancing the effectiveness of movements organizing for social justice around the world. These movements are being led by a younger

generation of organizers equipped with both traditional and web-based organizing skills.

I [Charles A. McDonald] recently held a series of discussions with a few of these leaders within AEJ. We began by discussing the challenges and opportunities of organizing with new media tools and concluded with ideas on where our movement is headed with the support of such tools. The participants described how new media tools, used with consistency, creativity, knowhow, and intention, have the capacity to strengthen communication, accelerate the organizing pace, broaden the base of supporters, and enhance traditional methods of organizing. The participants were also careful to point out that while new media has certainly been an asset to the organizing work of AEJ, these tools are not a replacement for traditional organizing methods or the resources required for face-to-face communication.

Jaritza Geigel

JARITZA GEIGEL is a twenty-year-old youth organizer from Brooklyn, New York. As a youth leader at Make the Road, New York (MTRNY) for more than three years, she is a member of the Alliance for Educational Justice youth strategy team, board member of the Bushwick chapter of Make the Road, and was recently elected to the Youth Leadership Team of MTRNY's Youth Power project. Jaritza was introduced to youth organizing and educational justice when MTRNY organizers gave a classroom presentation at her school. She followed up by attending a meeting – and never left.

How were you first introduced to new media tools in your work as a youth leader?

I'm not really sure if it was anything I consciously thought about using. When I first got involved, youth were already using tools like Facebook to communicate with each other day-to-day. When I would go and do outreach to youth in our community, the initial step was to have a conversation with them, and the next step would almost always be to follow up with the contact via Facebook or send them a text message. We did, and still do, a lot of our outreach through Facebook. The great thing about Facebook is that you can have access to everyone's friends list, so you can target larger numbers of youth in a short period of time. I was also introduced to blogging when I got involved with Make the Road when I was asked to write online articles for *GothamSchools* and *New York Daily News*. And the use of short code messaging has been huge for MRNY. Our members can text a short five-digit code from their cell phones and get instant updates from the organization.

What are some of the challenges and opportunities of organizing with new media tools?

I think that some organizers have a tendency to rely too heavily on Facebook and other tools, so what they believe is organizing is actually something completely different. You still have to make a connection with people, and face-to-face discussions are still the best way to build relationships. I think that new media can also serve as just another entertainment distraction in general, so it's important to stay relevant and grab people's attention and find creative ways to connect with them around our issues. The content can be edgy and educational, but if we are too preachy and aren't speaking the language of our audience then we are going to miss the mark. I guess that's where the opportunities begin. We have the opportunity to present the world with a glimpse of the conditions of our schools with the help of a camera phone. We have the ability to show the world the face and story of youth impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline. And with the help of

When I would go and do outreach to youth in our community, the initial step was to have a conversation with them, and the next step would almost always be to follow up with the contact via Facebook or send them a text message.

new media tools, we can also prove to decision-makers that through organizing we have the solutions to the problems facing education.

Taking a page from the recent uprisings in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt, do you think the use of new media can influence large numbers of youth across the country to organize mass protests for quality education?

Its possible, but it's going to take people getting off their butts to do it. Abroad you're seeing 100,000 people take to the streets in peaceful protest, so having just 300 to 500 people isn't going to cut it. Organizers really have to figure out what it's going to take get to that level, and things haven't gotten to that point yet. There are definitely enough issues and tools to help mobilize those numbers, but it must be organized first. People have been organizing forever, and technology has made it easier for us to communicate. If we can figure out more effective ways to get our message out to others then there is no telling what we are capable of achieving.

Fred Pinguel

Fred Pinguel is a twenty-five-year-old youth organizer for the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU). Much like Jaritza, Fred got his start in youth organizing as a youth leader with PSU and was hired by the organization as a staff member in 2008. PSU is one of three "anchor" organizations that help lead the organizing work for AEJ, and PSU is also a member of AEJ's strategy team.

How were you first introduced to new media in your work as a youth leader?

I joined PSU in the early 2000's, and at that time new media, at least the tools we currently use today, simply didn't exist. PSU became very active in using new media around 2006 when our current executive director Nijmie Dzurinko was hired. Around this time Nijmie was instrumental in the creation of the Media Mobilizing Project (MMP). MMP concerns itself with creating a new media infrastructure that serves as a nervous system to communicate with different organizing sectors. With that in mind, new media would become an instrumental part of the organizing work at PSU. So when I joined the PSU staff in 2008, things like e-newsletters, Facebook, MySpace, PSU's radio show, and podcasts were already around.

Which new media tools have become most instrumental in your organizing work?

Social networking has become a huge part of our leaders' work for purposes of outreach, information, and turnout to events. At this point it may be more effective than traditional phone banking. In 2010, we organized an action on Martin Luther King Jr. Day where more than 800 youth turned out, and most of the mobilization was done through Facebook. Social networking as an organizing tool was easy to implement because the youth already used it in their day-to-day lives. They understood it, and it started to become a part of our practice. It's important to note that the youth spearheaded the use of social networking. Before I joined staff, youth created and maintained the MySpace and Facebook pages. Staff eventually saw the utility of these tools and began providing additional maintenance.

Has the proliferation of new media tools changed the required skill set to become an effective youth organizer?

Even if you do not have the capacity to create tools, organizers of the future or current organizers definitely need a level of literacy in new media. Whether we like it or not, it's what the people are doing, and the best organizers are always the ones that are relevant. Most of the youth in PSU have camera phones and Facebook, and some even have blogs. In a way, these tools are a serious part of their identities. The people we will be working with in the future might not have lived in a time when Facebook, cell phones, or an Internet connection slower than DSL didn't exist. Facebook started in 2003, so some eight-year-olds may have had a social networking profile their whole life! If that is going to be the new world of communication, then that's where we need to meet them.

You've discussed the opportunities and utility of new media and youth organizing; can you explain some of the challenges PSU has faced?

The challenges are probably similar to the other tools used to organize. But because of the newness of the medium, it can present unique challenges. For example, there is a tendency to think that if we make a new media tool then it will somehow become something useful by virtue of having the tool. But this actually has the complete opposite impact. Not everything can exist in the cloud. The tools are only as useful as the consistency, quality, and clarity that people bring to the tools. For example, Facebook wasn't useful when we weren't making changes and updates – and when we didn't have enough people, and when trainings weren't provided. So it's not really useful until the practice is met. The same can be said about the other new media tools. The podcasts were less effective until we began embedding them in our curriculum. These tools have to be treated as active mediums, where we find improved and creative ways to communicate and use them effectively.

It can also become a crutch that tries to replace real world organizing. It's important to think of new media as traditional outlets scaled down and out. So simply creating an online petition instead of discussing issues is not maximizing the potential of these tools. We have to fold them into our traditional organizing methods.

What about the challenges specific to the Alliance for Educational Justice?

One of the challenges about doing national organizing is that the times we aren't meeting face to face can seem very conceptual. But being able to have videos, websites, and other tools helps make it real. Seeing and hearing from people we love and care about, who are organizing and struggling just like us, is great, even if not in real physical space.

What are some of the opportunities the Alliance can take advantage of?

Education across shared space is something we have the opportunity to be innovative in. We will begin using live chats, our wiki page, and shared curriculum with more frequency in the near future.

Would this Alliance exist without new media tools and advances in technology?

It's hard to coordinate across time zones, geography, and physical space. I can imagine it would almost be impossible without these tools. But we are doing it through our mastery of new media. There have been national movements, but not like what we are trying to do, which is building a movement that is led and created simultaneously throughout the entire country. We have done things well but can do them better. We just need to be thoughtful in our approach.

What role do you believe new media will play in our organizing work ten, fifteen, twenty years from now?

There have always been people organizing that have been able to communicate with success. The only thing that has changed is the span and scope of mobilization, and we need to start looking at what is going on with new media and movement building more closely. It's accessible, available, and everyone is

Not everything can exist in the cloud. The tools are only as useful as the consistency, quality, and clarity that people bring to the tools.

using it. We are already starting to see the political impact globally, for example in Egypt. A good percentage of the initial demonstrations were organized via the Internet and Twitter, and new media probably played a significant role in the collapse of their government. So we are starting to see real penetration.

New media may be a catalyst for worldwide rebellion. Who knows, maybe someone in a basement in China will create a video that goes viral to spark it all. This can happen anywhere in the world, and it's more likely to happen than not. But these are all just tools, and if we are not using them to outreach and win, then it won't happen at all. As long as we are thoughtful about how we use these tools to enhance grassroots base building, then we are good to go.

A New Generation of Organizers

There's nothing magical about social networking and new media. As AEJ's leaders have reminded us in this article, using these tools is only one tactic among many that organizers deploy: they are a complement to more traditional organizing tactics, not a substitute. But new media have played a crucial role in the movement for educational justice. They have enabled AEJ's leaders to plan and coordinate actions, share knowledge, and get the word out to the larger community, the media, and policy-makers on an unprecedented scale.

AEJ's biggest asset will always be its committed young leaders and their hard-won experience in local organizations. With characteristic resourcefulness, AEJ's leaders are using the profusion of new tools embraced by their generation to meet the challenges of building a movement that transcends geography.

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