

“I don’t radicalize my students, they radicalize me”:

One teacher’s testimony on student and community action as relevant learning

Too often we’re encouraged to view “teaching heroism” as an individual pursuit. Stereotypically great teachers plan meticulous paths of instruction and then lead students down those paths effectively. Much of current policy features a societal hyper-focus on “teacher quality” through attacks on tenure and job security. While many are approaching this issue by pointing out the lack of respect for teachers, I find it important to focus on how these attacks miss the actual fundamentals of good teaching or “teacher quality.”

As educators, we cannot be islands. There is no human being on the planet talented enough to be all things to all students in all situations. As our students face an educational system that so often isolates them and robs them of their joy of learning, we must effectively model how to build strong relationships and grow community power through education.

In regards to this, I am intensely humbled by our collective work here in Chicago. I’ve been blessed to work with amazing colleagues, students, community members and activists at Julian and Gage Park High Schools (Chicago Public Schools). I met great justice-minded colleagues and community members and together we built beautiful events and campaigns. In these schools, we worked together to build strong networks and accomplished many great feats, from individual student awards to major group accomplishments. Together we formed groups like the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), Chicago Youth Initiating Change (CYIC) and the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), all of which have had major impact on the face of educational justice. I’ve seen how this work, driven by students and communities, has helped to build major social movements impact far beyond our city.

The nuts and bolts of this work breaks into three categories: 1) Student work within the school through classes, organizations and campaigns; 2) Informal organizing of teachers and community members occurs through broad networks and gatherings; and 3) Mass organizing through citywide organizations and local actions.

Before considering the specifics of how to approach each of these strategies, it’s important to note what they have in common: all this work is relational. Students are organized within a school in the same way we organize each other as teachers or into a larger campaign. People can be inspired to act initially by a mass action or “getting the word out”, but ultimately every lifelong activist is born through one-on-one, deep human conversations.

In my work with students, I want to highlight that I do not “radicalize students”. When students I’ve worked with have lobbied for restorative justice, or held a rally against school closings, I’m often asked how I get so many of my students involved in radical politics. My answer is the always the same, “I don’t radicalize my students, they radicalize me.”

At the school level, this means spending a lot of time getting to know as many of my students’ interests and passions as possible. We do *interest surveys* at the beginning of the year and, together, design lessons on topics students are interested in. We do activities like “crossover” and write personal histories so students have a safe space to share their lives. Students are always encouraged to be critical - of my teaching, of themselves, of our school, of our society. They are not “corrected” when they attack the lack of relevance of material or the inequity of the society. Instead, we develop a routine, what the Mikva Challenge calls, “Issues to Action”. They are welcome to identify any and all issues, but they also held responsible to propose action-based solutions.

At Julian High School, this led to a vibrant social justice club named *Jaguars for Justice*, which started meeting during lunch periods and grew to win tens of thousands in grant dollars and countless awards. More importantly, it really had a strong impact on the school and community. Students led campaigns to save the major bus routes to

the school, prevent teacher firings, improve the nutritional content of school lunches, publicize the impact of charter schools on their community, prevent aggressive military recruitment, promote a safer space for LGBTQIA students, pressure the alderman to provide equitable resources to all parts of the ward, stop discrimination against teenage mothers, help pass legislation in the Illinois General Assembly, and develop interventions to address the roots causes of violence in our community.

At Gage Park High School, students built upon an existing student organization through the Southwest Organizing Project called Voices of Youth in Chicago Education. With the tremendous support of a community organizer, Joel Rodriguez, we were able to develop a peer jury/peace circle based on restorative justice for our school. We then orientated incoming Freshman and held a Freshmen awards dinner/prom, held peer trainings to support undocumented students and DREAM candidates, testified at hearings against school closings, changed the districtwide discipline code, connected to charter school parents and students to change Noble Street Charter Schools' oppressive system of fines and "push-outs". We also organized for *and* saw the passage of two state laws to force reporting on student discipline statistics and we facilitated undocumented people in receiving driver's licenses.

The underlying lesson here is that youth know no limits to civic and academic engagement when they are supported in identifying their own causes and strategies to struggle for those causes. Both schools where this work occurred were labeled as highest-need schools (Level 3) on probation for multiple years and both were threatened with closure. I can only imagine how well these schools would do if they fully adopted student-based inquiry to action methods since students in these programs showed strong academic achievement. We were particularly inclusive of highest-need students and students with disabilities.

At the same time, we conducted grassroots organizing among adult colleagues and fellow organizers. While there were some different dynamics - most adults were voluntarily attending community meetings about issues or approaching our groups on their own agency - there were also many similarities. We sought to listen first and hear folks' own grievances about their situations and the challenges their children faced. We worked with existing organizations such as neighborhood organizations and churches or faith groups that hosted events on education or justice.

Finally, we built on a citywide level and later nationwide. My colleague, Jackson Potter, current Chicago Teachers Union leader, pulled together a group of us to organize within the union. I resisted as I wanted to focus on supporting my students, but he insisted that we could not win our larger campaigns without also tapping into the power of the union. At the time, I was working with other colleagues like Zane Bullie, Anton Miglietta, Lindsay Smith and Danielle Ciesielski worked with students like Miguel Meza, Brittany Barnes, Micilin Jones, Kellina Mojica, Asucena Lopez and Raymond Flowers to form a citywide social justice organization. We also worked closely with, and on the shoulders of, Chicago community groups that had formed the early struggles for educational justice in the 1980s, along with new organizations as well. These groups later became CORE, CYIC and GEM respectively. This work has continued as students formed the Chicago Students Union (CSU), and most recently a national social justice unionism network has emerged.

This work, in particular, might seem daunting to teachers who are extended to their limits in their daily classroom and school-based instruction. I feel that. But I want to emphasize the simplicity: rejuvenating one-on-one relationship-building for justice. I would teach my full load of classes and then build relationships with my students and take them to an event where they'd do the same. In the end, it didn't burn me out - quite the opposite - it was work that ignited my classroom instruction and allowed me to be a better teacher even while we all built giant communal engines for justice. Through it all, the students, community members and educators involved were amazing, but your students, community and colleagues are amazing too. Let's build together!

By Xian Barrett