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Focus: Student Voice

Steps for Helping Students Become Activists – A Teen’s Advice

by Melivia Mujia



As a queer Latina student, life has been a constant battle with titles, unpaved paths and barriers. And within the south side of San Antonio, where I live, there

is a huge sense among students that we get the short end of the stick in education and resources for students. There is a sharp contrast in quality and quantity of resources between southern and northern San Antonio.

How is it that we don’t hear the same concern from many adults complaining of poorly-run schools? Mostly, it’s not their fault. When a student has opinions regarding the schools, they are quick to be shut down by faculty. Their voices are silenced before anyone else can hear. Students are taught to have an opinion, but when it is opposing the general outlook, it usually is not liked.

But my school, South San Antonio High School, is different. When I saw injustices regarding LGBTQ issues, student counseling and disciplinary actions, I formed a student club to fight back. We reached out to Fiesta Youth, a non-profit organization that serves LGBTQ teens, young adults and their allies in San Antonio. With the principal’s approval, they provided information and gave sensitivity training to staff

and faculty about LGBTQ issues so teachers could be aware of their hurtful comments and so they would respect the pronouns of a transitioning girl being picked on by faculty.

Then we saw a trend in students dealing with depression and anxiety. Our school counselors weren’t sufficiently trained to help. We talked to Communities In Schools. They provided social workers and therapists to help students transition from high school into college and help them with the issues they faced, whether financial, domestic or educational.

We also brought up the idea of getting a teen center for students to have a safe space where we would have counselors specifically there to help students if they had any issues regarding anxiety, depression or bullying. We realized there aren’t sufficient mental health facilities in our part of town. The closest places students could go to were downtown, which can be two hours away by bus. We worked with our city councilman for three years to get a \$10 million grant for wrap-around services. We’re still working on that project.

We saw there was a noticeable number of students who were getting detention and suspension in an endless cycle. We researched groups in our community, and we set a goal to get help. We found El Joven Noble, an indigenous-based,

(cont. on Page 2)

“Students must have a seat at the table to inform the direction of initiatives that impact them, their families and the broader community.”

*– Celina Moreno, J.D.,
IDRA President and CEO*

(Steps for Helping Students Become Activists, continued from Page 1)

youth leadership development program. We worked with them to take action for students to be able to provide community service and develop stronger self-awareness and confidence, so they wouldn't be stuck in the school-to-prison pipeline.

It may be racism, environmentalism, LGBTQ and gender equity, human rights or social justice – each can be a focus of important student activism. Although the civil rights movement began more than half a century ago, racism and a lack of diversity continue to be issues on campuses across the country. And the concept of “going green” by enacting environmentally-friendly and sustainable policies has been discussed on hundreds of campuses in recent years. Generally, the wide-ranging concept of social justice that is concerned with any mistreatment of an individual by society may, for students, relate to mistreatment by the school administration.

The benefits of students becoming activists are that they learn how to speak publicly, do research, form their identities, and even learn how government and school policies work. They can learn how to organize events, get in touch with important people, and create strong bonds to continue to bring awareness to their issues.

Activism is a way for students to apply academic skills in a real-life context, proving that they have a well-rounded education. Research shows that students' strong sense of engagement or attachment to their school leads to a decrease in the likelihood of their school failure and dropping out.

Below is a simple six-step plan for students who are interested in making change.

Step 1: Pinpoint Your Passion

Whether it's fighting for LGBTQ equality, researching immigrant rights resources or helping

beautify the school, the most important thing is to identify a cause that makes you get up in the morning believing you can make things better.

Step 2: Educate Yourself

Depending on your interest, there likely is an existing related organization. Before you go right in, do a little research to make sure you fully understand the issue. To be unbiased with information, try reading some position papers from groups from opposing viewpoints. Once you have a firm grip on the issue, you can see if you can commit to a strategy for change or need to adopt a different approach.

Step 3: Determine a Goal

When you start making others aware of the injustice you've identified, what action are you hoping to encourage? Listing short, intermediate and long-term goals keeps you organized and shows supporters you've thought things out. The club at my school keeps a spreadsheet that lists different topics with goals for each week, month, semester and year.

Step 4: Tap into Resources

Activists looking for strength in numbers should start on their school campus, preferably by reaching out to a faculty or staff member who will advise you. But don't shy away from contacting national groups. Many have toolkits filled with media strategies and organizational plans.

Step 5: Create an Action Plan

Think about the objectives that need to be in place to achieve that goal. Then develop detailed action steps to complete the objectives and meet your goals. In the spreadsheet our club created, we list the different skills each student has, and we choose committees based on that. For example, the students on our writing committee write all the emails and papers we need.

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Steps to Promoting Student Activism

High school student presents this six-step plan for students who are interested in making change happen.

- Step 1: Pinpoint Your Passion**
- Step 2: Educate Yourself**
- Step 3: Determine a Goal**
- Step 4: Tap into Resources**
- Step 5: Create an Action Plan**
- Step 6: Take Action**

Learn More!
<https://idra.news/StudentAction>

→ "Steps for Helping Students Become Activists – A Teen's Advice," IDRA Newsletter article by Melivia Mujia
→ "Student Activists in High School," IDRA Classnotes Podcast Episode 191 featuring Melivia Mujia and Evany Gonzales

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PODCAST Listen to an interview with Melivia Mujia and Evany Gonzales: Classnotes Podcast #191 – “Student Activists in High School”
<https://idra.news/Pod191>

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Building a STEM Identity through the Chief Science Officer Program

by Lexis Ratto & Kelly O’Kane

Editor’s Note: High school students Lexis Ratto and Kelly O’Kane were instrumental in bringing the international Chief Science Officer (CSO) program to San Antonio through the Alamo STEM Ecosystem. IDRA now manages the program in Texas as it grows across the state.

Research says many students don’t stay in STEM because they don’t identify with STEM degrees and careers. But it is important that students see themselves in these careers or at minimum have direct access to high-quality STEM opportunities, if they decide to participate.

Dr. Stephanie Garcia at IDRA explains that a STEM identity is fragile. But it is powerful for anyone who finds interest in anything deemed innovative. She says it often starts at a young age with a very particular preference toward a tinkering toy or free-time activity and continues to develop along with personal interests.

The Chief Science Officer (CSO) program helps increase STEM interest for middle and high school students, especially with those who are not typically included in STEM programs.

Participating schools select two students to serve as their Chief Science Officers for a school year. CSOs then create plans and lead projects to support STEM programming on their campuses.

Action plans can include such strategies as coordinating field trips, hosting science nights, starting STEM-related clubs, initiating student-led civic action projects, or bringing speakers from local industries to engage students in conversations about the STEM workforce. The program helps CSOs and their peers develop strong STEM identities through tangible interactions.

My [Kelly] own STEM identity puts me in the realm of engineering, a broad category full of smaller subsets, and mine is mechanical. The CSO program affected my STEM identity in two ways: it reinforced my desire to be an engineer



Lexis Ratto and Kelly O’Kane spoke to the San Antonio City Council about climate change.

and helped me realize that I want to serve my community with my set of skills.

My [Lexis] STEM identity has undergone a wide range of drafts and revision before becoming something completely different. When I was younger, I marveled at layers of sediment and stone and wanted nothing more than to become a geologist. Then I became fixated with crystallography, the study of analyzing the structure and properties of crystals.

In middle school, I fell head-over-heels in love with engineering. While that genre of STEM has stayed strong with me, even to this day, the specification has been loose. I have gone back and forth between all types of engineering: chemical, mechanical, manufacturing and mechanics. Name it, and I’ve probably considered it.

It was not until the CSO program that I realized exactly what I enjoyed and admired so much about engineering: improvement. I loved the idea of taking something that was already established and advancing it into an overall more productive system. This small realization led to my pursuit of advanced manufacturing and systems of industry, in short, an industrial engineer.

We both have experienced all sides of the CSO program. One of the biggest benefits was having advocates who followed us through the program and through our graduation. Even as the first alumni of the Texas chapter, we continue to receive such amazing opportunities and resources. We connected with fantastic individuals of amazing corporations and companies, such as Tyler Schroeder of Boeing, Dr. “Rudy” Reyna from the Alamo STEM Ecosystem, and the amazing leaders at IDRA. Through these relationships, not only have we flourished, but we have also witnessed the blossoming of our younger officers. For example, one CSO produced a sort-of safe haven within his middle school to encourage kids to relax with a good book or study for an upcoming course exam. Such peer influence creates an engaging classroom environment and support system among students. The CSO program itself has been like a family to us. As Texas’ first alumni, we are more than proud.

Lexis Ratto and Kelly O’Kane, as high school students, were San Antonio’s first Chief Science Officers.

PODCAST Listen to Classnotes Podcast #191 – “Student Voice – Chief Science Officer International Program”
<https://idra.news/Pod192>

Learn More About the Chief Science Officer Program

The international Chief Science Officer program empowers middle and high school students to enrich school STEM culture and career awareness by bringing STEM/STEAM-related opportunities to their schools and local communities.

<https://www.idra.org/services/chief-science-officers-program>

The Day I Taught My High School Peers

by Alyssa Diaz

During my senior year of high school, I had the rare opportunity to design and teach a lesson to my peers. Although wary about whether or not my classmates would take me or my work seriously, I was eager to fill a gap in the curriculum that stood out to me all year: the lack of multicultural literature, especially Chicano stories and poems.



In this moment, it became clear to me how the saying, “You can’t please everyone,” manifests itself in the classroom. When deciding what my peers would be turning in to earn their grade, I took everything into consideration: the reality of a senior class in the last six weeks of school, after AP testing and with graduation approaching swiftly. So I had them do something long since

forgotten: an illustration.

So, together with a friend, I began the hunt for the perfect poem – something easily digestible, yet complex enough to be thoroughly analyzed by a class of AP English IV students. The poem, *La Tierra*, came to me after digging through an anthology of one of my favorite poets: Abelardo Delgado.

Now armed with my own knowledge of the Chicano culture and what I believed to be the ideal poem, I descended into the classroom trenches to face the terrifying reality of the potential responses of my peers, whose different ethnic backgrounds include Jamaican and Filipino along with African American, Mexican American and Anglo.

With access to a diverse classroom, I was equally intrigued by and scared of how they would react to a poem with a Spanish title that contained a fair amount of code switching throughout. I was afraid because I had chosen a poem that was so representative of my culture – a culture deeply intertwined with my identity, causing any criticism toward the piece to feel like a personal attack.

This is something I imagine every good teacher experiences. Even when the subject is not as intimate as their culture, they still spend hours combing through material until they find something both teachable and, hopefully, enjoyable to their students.

I put students in groups and had them collectively draw a picture that they believed adequately represented a stanza from the poem. Although drawing does not better a student’s writing, I find that it can be extremely useful to strengthen a student’s ability to analyze and contextualize poetry.

By putting them in groups, I intensified the effects. They had to voice their interpretation in a way that their peers could understand and relate to an image. I simultaneously exposed students to different perspectives and interpretations of the same poem.

When my lesson was complete, I was surprised to have students stop me to say that it was their

When students see their own culture, or simply another underrepresented culture, they are far more likely to be engaged with the lesson. That increases academic quality and inclusivity for all students.

favorite poem they read all year, because it was rare to see their own stories taught in the classroom. Others excitedly drew connections between the Mexican American culture and their own. All of this solidified my belief that students are hungry to see different cultures and voices represented in schools.

When students see their own culture, or simply another underrepresented culture, they are far more likely to be engaged with the lesson. That increases academic quality and inclusivity for all students.

Alyssa Diaz is a recent high school graduate from San Antonio.

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Get details! Visit www.idra.org/services.



How Student-Led Lessons Impacted My Understanding of School

by Daniela Herrejon

I was a great student; however I was not a great learner. I had great teachers. Whether they knew or not that I didn't give a second thought to their lessons outside of school, I'll never know. I wanted to start my career and get far away from my neighborhood as soon as possible.

Born and raised to a working-class family in Westside San Antonio, I had "made it work." I needed a job as soon as I was 16, but I was also plagued with a love for music and dance. If I wanted to participate in extracurricular activities and work 30 hours, I had to find a way to make the grade without devoting too much time. I embraced student apathy and senioritis until my plan was interrupted.

Of course, it was an English teacher who interrupted my plan – as much as I hate clichés. My teacher, Andres López, would assign readings but also critical thinking and ontological questions. He pushed me past what I thought I was capable of, which is saying something because I was 18 and was more arrogant than Ernesto de la Cruz from the movie, *Coco*.

But the turning point of my educational career happened when he asked me to lead the class in a lesson. This was a project like no other, and one where I learned as much about the content as I did about myself. Preparing lessons and standing in front of my peers altered completely the dynamic of the class. We were so used to having adults, who in February were already counting down the days to summer, stand with some authoritative PowerPoint and not involve us in the actual action of learning. Suddenly there was a trust in one another to ask questions and talk about concepts we once thought only belonged in higher education.



I continued to prepare lessons throughout the year and watched my peers do the same. Sitting in a professional learning community (PLC) meeting with other teachers and discussing which lessons and assignments worked and which ones didn't made us more invested in our education. Having someone ask me how I would like to learn was a first for me and for many other students. Teachers would then adapt their lessons, which solidified our trust in them.

I could list how many books I read in a six-month period or how my AP scores skyrocketed. But that would not be the true metric of how student-led lessons impacted my class. I would much rather tell you how students would gather to discuss literature or ask each other for help with scholarship essays. I would much rather tell you how confident the students walked out of my school in June in comparison to how they came in August. I would rather tell you how I decided to become a teacher myself and am working to reconstruct not only my understanding of school, but my future students' understanding of the lifelong endeavor of learning.

Daniela Herrejon is a recent high school graduate from San Antonio.

(Steps for Helping..., continued from Page 2)

Step 6: Take Action

Common methods of student activism are Internet activism, petitions, media outreach, boycotting, protests, school board presentations, sit-ins, demonstrations, occupations and civil disobedience. Sometimes you can make change just by alerting school leaders of an issue and offering possible solutions.

Melivia Mujia is a recent high school graduate from San Antonio and served as an IDRA summer intern.

I could list how many books I read in a six-month period or how my AP scores skyrocketed. But that would not be the true metric of how student-led lessons impacted my class.

Students as Co-Collaborators in Teaching & Learning – Advice from the Field

by Andres López

Andres López, a teacher at Stevens High School in San Antonio and winner of the statewide 2019 Outstanding Teaching of the Humanities Award, offers the following advice to educators. To contact Mr. López, email andres.lopez@nisd.net.

Treat Students as Equal Partners in their Learning

I expect my students, as equal partners, to take responsibility for their own learning. To that end, I structure my classes like college-level seminars and use technology to differentiate instruction and create a student-centered environment. I make all instructional materials, such as PowerPoint slides and readings, available online, allowing students to review content at their own pace. I also post extra content, like videos and articles, for students to further explore if they are interested in a particular subject. The extra content also functions as a scaffold for students struggling with a difficult text to unlock deeper meaning, and it pushes students to develop an original, unique analysis.

Teach by Learning Alongside Students and Lead by Example

Rather than only impart knowledge through lectures, I work with students side-by-side to examine and find meaning from the texts we study together. I read what they read and complete writing assignments along with them. I share my writing with my students, explain the process I used, and show them different areas I would explore if I had more time. During class discussions, I set the example by sharing my personal experiences and connecting them to the text, then invite my students to do the same.

Assign Meaningful, Challenging Tasks for Students to Demonstrate their Learning

The assignments that bring out the best in students involve a blend of academic rigor and student choice. For example, as a culminating project called Art Matters, I ask students to analyze a contemporary artistic text of their choosing – such as a song, book, film, poem, or even video game – and convey the artistic value and cultural relevance of the text through a class presentation. I ask them to articulate what sets it apart as worthy of further study. Students must use research to support and enrich their own critical analysis of the text and decipher the deeper implications within the broader context of the times in which we live. Ultimately, they must convince the class they have found art that matters. Projects like this tap into their intrinsic motivation, which is very powerful. This project often results in my students' best work.

Be Agile!

Seek feedback from your students and adjust accordingly. Consider enhancing the productivity of professional learning communities by inviting a panel of students to present their feedback. The students become much more engaged in class, gain new insight into the process

Ultimately, I want students to understand how to tell their own stories about their own experiences. That is only possible through experimentation with students to help them find the work meaningful and to view themselves as collaborators in their own learning.

of teaching and learning, and contribute excellent ideas for assessments, interventions and lesson plans. I also use anonymous surveys collected from my students to revise my instruction. As experts in their own learning, students provide insight that is invaluable in helping me determine new approaches or techniques needed to best meet their needs and goals.

Trust and Train Students to Teach

When you recognize metacognitive and leadership talents in your students, suggest they teach an upcoming lesson. I work with my students outside of class to explain the objective of their lesson and help them plan. They take the responsibility very seriously and implement innovative ideas for delivering instruction. Students grow from the process, and some even fall in love with teaching and decide to change their intended college majors. Alyssa Diaz and Daniela Herrejon, featured on Pages 4 and 5, respectively, are examples. Their teaching experiences go beyond anything a single test can measure.

Incorporate Culturally-Sustaining Pedagogy

I strive to develop lessons that help students realize that the stories of their own families and cultures are valuable and worthy of study. I have seen students, some seemingly disengaged from school, come alive when the right poem, short story, or piece of art activates something within them. Other texts open their eyes to the vibrant hometown history or culture they had taken for granted. One student told me my class was her first opportunity to read literature with characters that “speak like my family and me.” Representation matters.

Get to Know Students as People, Not Just Pupils

When students know you care about them holistically as individuals, their classroom achievement and enthusiasm improve tremendously. Each year, I try to go to at least one extracurricular event of each of my students. This may sound like a daunting task, but it provides the opportunity to see them excel in the areas in which they are passionate. That helps me to create individualized assignments and find texts that might interest them. Attending student extracurricular activities also gives me the opportunity to speak with parents in a non-threatening role.

High School Tutor Learns While Tutoring Others

by Anahi Ortiz

I was supposed to be in child development, but when my counselor told me the next level was a parenting class, I lost interest. I didn't want to do it, and not because I didn't like it or didn't like the teacher. I didn't want to take the fake baby home and deal with the fake crying.

My counselor gave me another option. He told me that our school had a program that would pay for being in class and tutoring little kids. I didn't have to think about it twice. I just nodded my head up and down desperately saying, "Yes!" At first, I didn't have a clue about what I had to do. All I heard was that I was going to get paid just for going to class. Who wouldn't love that?

I thank my school counselor because, even though I saw it as easy money, I learned valuable lessons. The [Valued Youth Partnership*] program is one of the most important programs in my school.

I learned to see other people's perspectives and to make connections with my tutees. I learned how teachers struggle to find new techniques to teach their students every day. I learned how to form a bond and communicate with little kids. The kids share their state of mind, and I loved it. They have taught me more than I've taught them. I love my tutee and I really have fun teaching and learning about him.

I now see education in a different way. My tutees' teacher developed a way to let her kiddos know where they stand in their reading, and it helped me know where my student stands. She decorated her door as a race track, and the goal was to get to the finish line. Some students are very close to the goal. The closer they were, the easier second grade would be. My tutee started the year at the back of the race track, and his car never moved. Throughout the year, we worked on reading and recognizing words. Each week, as he got better and his car moved, the more confidence he built. While his reading car was not at the head of the pack, it moved evenly with some of the other kids'

cars in his class. My tutee is excited to keep reading and makes progress every week. I am so proud of his hard work.

I've experienced a lot with my tutee while in the [Valued Youth Partnership]. I would leave the classroom with a headache. I found this weird because I loved kids. Why did this one give me headaches? At first, I didn't know how to teach him because he moved too much. Once I even thought he was too hyper for me, but then I realized that I'm the same way. Even though nobody told me, I know I have a lot of energy and to get rid of it I start to move and talk a lot. It seemed like I traveled back in time and was teaching myself. When I was little, I loved to have everyone's full attention and to make eye contact with my teacher because it made me feel more secure. While I worked with my tutee, I realized that he was my exact reflection. I found that crazy because he ended



up with me, someone who has been through the same thing he's going through. Is this destiny or just God's plan? We might never know. But what I do know is that the [Valued Youth Partnership] helped me impact another person's life by helping him improve his reading skills. I couldn't be happier.

Anahi Ortiz recently graduated from Odessa High School in Ector County ISD. She is an IDRA Valued Youth Partnership first place essay contest winner.

** Following the successful expansion of the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program to school districts across the country, IDRA and the Coca-Cola Foundation celebrate our longstanding partnership. On behalf of all of our valued youth tutors, families, teachers coordinators, and school and university partners, IDRA is profoundly grateful to the foundation for its visionary and stalwart support of this program. Our unique collaboration from 1984 to June 2019 led to formation of the program's distinctive five instructional strategies and five support strategies, its strong research base and evaluation design, as well as development of resources for participating schools. IDRA will continue to carry forward this transformational program, now known as the IDRA Valued Youth Partnership.*

Learn More About the IDRA Valued Youth Partnership Program

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership is a research-based, dropout prevention program that has kept 98% of its tutors in school. The program identifies middle and high school students who are in at-risk situations and enlists them as tutors for elementary school youngsters who are also struggling in school. Valued Youth tutors learn self-discipline and develop self-esteem. And schools shift to the philosophy and practices of valuing students considered at-risk.



Website: Learn about the program and how to bring it to your school

Brochure: Dropout Prevention that Works

Winning Essays: Full text of the six winning student essays

<http://budurl.com/IDRAVYP>

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