

ACTING UPON CONSCIENCE

The Impact of Student Activism

Created by:

Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center

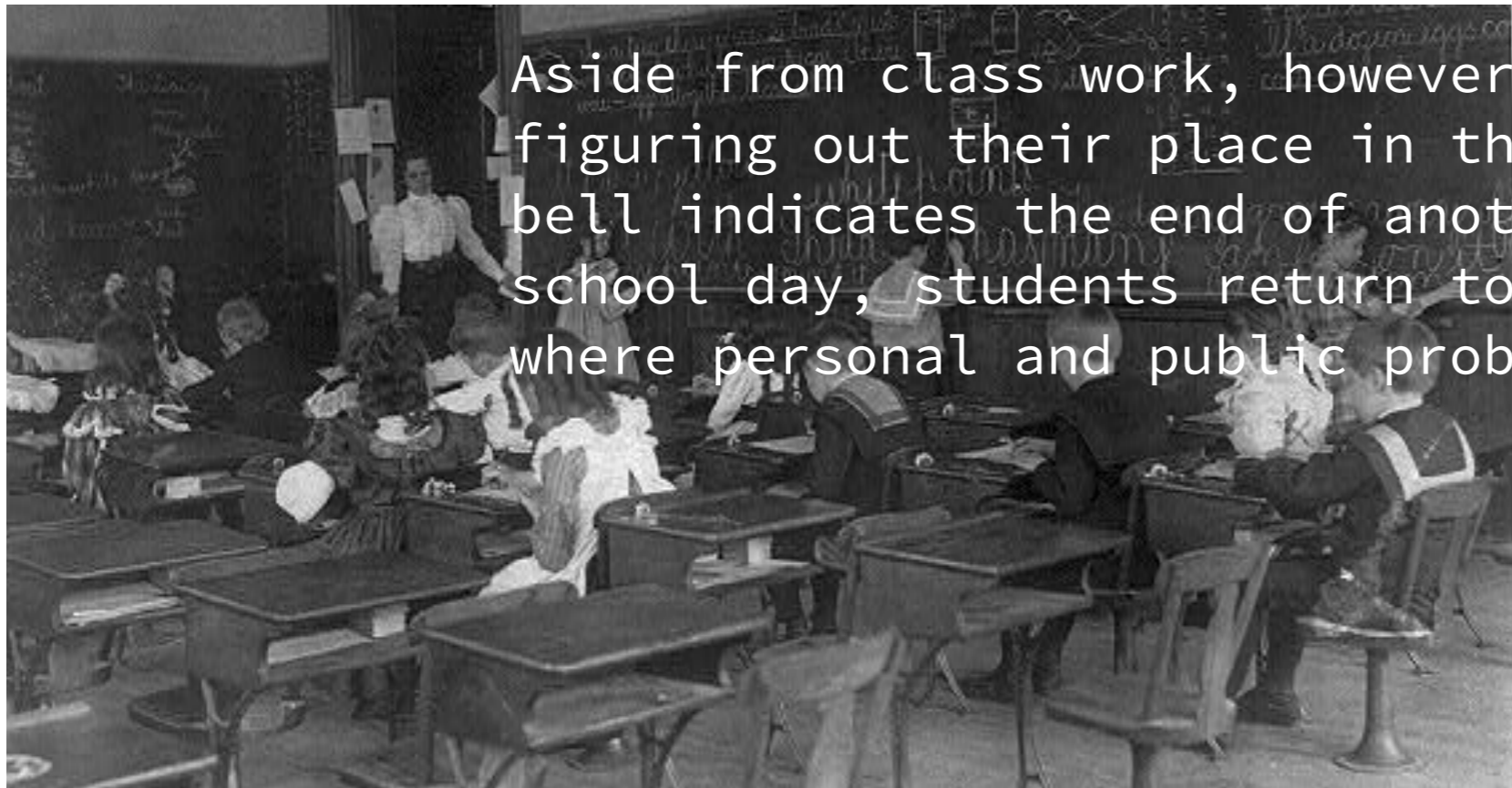
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Students are in a unique position.

Naturally, they are in the position to learn from their teachers. The first schools of the Colonial Era were built with the intention of teaching children practical skills through a religious perspective. Later, schools evolved from a focus on manual training to more general skills. With the advent of public schooling, educating the younger generations became a collective priority for society.



Aside from class work, however, students are also figuring out their place in the world. Once the bell indicates the end of another seven-hour school day, students return to the “real world” where personal and public problems persist.

And it is in this clash of two aspects of a student's life – a **designated environment for learning** and the “**real**” world – where a student's unique position arises.

In being identified as “student”, these young adults do not yet have many compromising stakes to take responsibility for – taxes, professional reputations, having to take legal care of another person.



So, when students observe or experience an injustice outside of school and in the “real” world, they approach it with very earnest and idealistic visions of what a righteous world should look like.

Those who take action in calling out against flaws in the system and advocating for such visions have the right to be heard.

Throughout the history of America, there is a continuous presence of student activists in the public eye. While earlier campus protests during the Colonial Period and the 19th century focused more on internal discontent (the well-known Bad Butter Rebellion at Harvard rallied against the rancid butter served at the institution), student activism began to shift towards issues outside of campus starting from the early 20th century, particularly as the nation began to deliberate conditions of the working class.



Kentucky Mining Incident, 1920

The National Student League (NSL), composed of high school and college students, rose in the early 1900's. The first of their noteworthy actions included a student delegation that was sent to Kentucky's coal region. The students sought to heal the workers' hurt by bringing food and clothing, as these workers had been severely victimized by the Depression, thus leaving their working conditions in an abysmal state. The student's work brought awareness to the issue and resulted in a Senate investigation of mistreatment in the region.



American Youth Congress

The Depression era also saw rise of the American Youth Congress. This organization focused on the youth impacted by the financial crisis. Persistent lobbying translated into support from the the United States President at the time, Franklin D. Roosevelt, to push for domestic reform.

Life Magazine. (Photographer). (1937). Bayonets keep pickets at bay in bloody Harlan County's little coal war [digital image]. Retrieved from <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~kykinfolks/bayonets2.jpg>

Harris & Ewing. (Photographer). (1939, November 30). Representatives of American Youth Congress testify at Dies hearing [digital image]. Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/hec2009014435/>.

The 1960's brought about the famous student movements still referred to to this day. Most notably, the students of the Civil Rights Movement fearlessly fought for equal rights.



For example, the Lunch Counter Sit-Ins protesting segregation and basic civil injustices were organized and conducted by college students. Their work attested to their dedication to the movement and profoundly touched the American people. Their efforts, along with the millions of others', ultimately culminated in the passing of the Civil Right's Act of 1964.

Built upon it's rich history, student activism is still prevalent today.



Feathers of Hope

Canada possesses a brutal history of discrimination against their Indigenous peoples, and the effects are still felt today. Feathers of Hope aimed to address the oppression First Nations Youth students felt in the Residential School System that has been implemented in the country. The project gathered students representing regions all over the country along with officials in the Canadian government to gather their experiences and then craft a concrete action plan to solve the problem at hand.



Student Voice

Student Voice is a national non-profit organization that aims to strengthen the student's voice. The movement actually began with its Monday Nights Twitter chats, discussions on Twitter organized by a single hashtag. The conversations included not only students, but teachers, policy makers, and other noted "adults" as well.



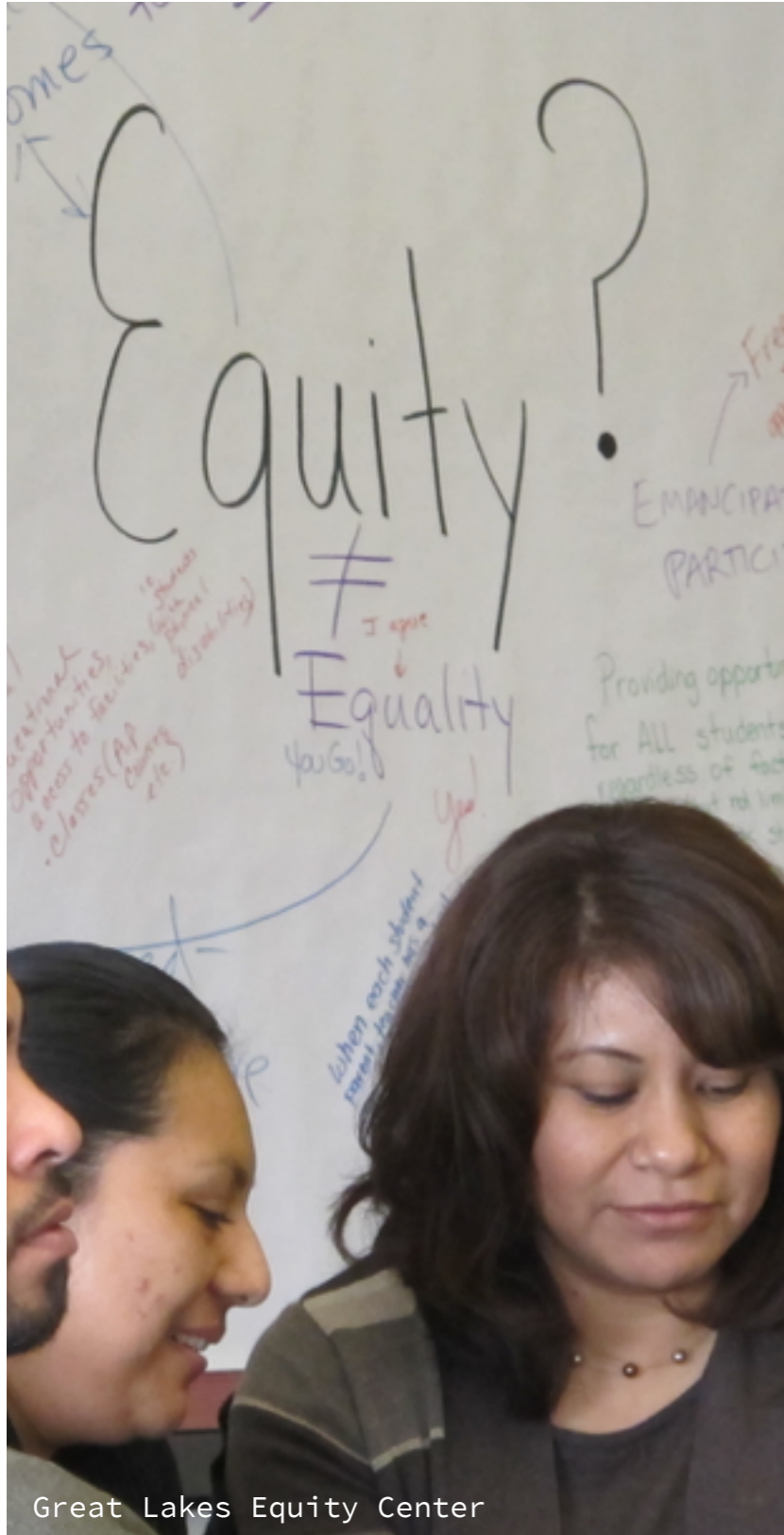
The Global Action project centers around the use of Transformative Media. Students are encouraged to translate their experiences into narratives, primarily through filmmaking. A deliverable such as a film can be shared with the community, thus cultivating a relationship between the students' voices and their audience.



In Chicago, the Voices of Youth in Chicago Education project calls out against the use of harsh discipline policies in exchange for high-quality learning environments in the city. Their campaigns and reports backed by youth-led research have led to successful policy change – VOYCE’s bill requiring drastic change to address the “School-to-Prison” pipeline, SB 100, was recently passed through Illinois Legislature.

In each example, students perceived a violation against their notion of a just world and responded with their notion of an ideal world. Their cries rejected complacency. Most importantly, those in the “adult” world, whether it be administration or political figures of authority, listened and took the time to work with these voices and respond with practicality. Thus, **a proper solution that considers the limitations of the real world and yet pushes society closer to an ideal vision arose.**

Idealism cannot function without a sense of practicality, while practicality cannot function without a sense of idealism. The idealism of students must be addressed, and those with direct power to enact practical change, whether that means administration or policy makers, must be willing to view students as colleagues.



This may look like...

- Providing resources to understand the “real world”
- Engaging students in shared learning opportunities to learn to construct arguments
- Consulting with organizations
 - includes the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center, SoundOut School Consulting
- Prioritizing a culture that encourages students to speak out

Additional resources include...

- [Youth Rising: Centering Youth Voice in the Quest for Equitable and Inclusive Schools](#)
- [Teaching LGBTQ-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms](#)
- [Vodcast: Using Service Learning to Support Educators in Accessing the Assets of American Indian Students](#)
- [Vocast: Raising Critically Conscious Children: Part 1](#)
- [V.O.I.C.E. at SPS 2012](#)



As a student, this is my way of making my voice heard. I am calling out for the validity of student voices, and with the support of the MAP Equity Center, I was able to create this document and share it with you.

Martin Luther King Jr once said, “And there comes a time when one must [take a position] because Conscience tells him it is right.” It is this Conscience that fuels student voices.

More importantly, this voice must be reciprocated.

Listening and working with student to solve problems is an investment in society's future.

Schools are no longer just a place for teachers to preach. Rather, they should be dynamic organisms active in helping students grow as citizens of their communities.

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