

Making Youth Known



More than Service

Philadelphia Students Join a Union to Improve Their Schools

WHAT
Kids
CAN DO

**Powerful learning
with public purpose**

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Who we are

What Kids Can Do, Inc. promotes the value of young people, working with teachers and other adults, on projects that combine powerful learning with public purpose. We collect and share feature stories, student work and voices, research and resources that expand current views of what constitutes challenging learning and achievement, particularly for adolescent students. We believe deeply in the contributions of youth as citizens. We put youth voices and work at the forefront of all we produce.

What we value

Powerful learning in which young people:

- Engage in issues that have meaning to them and their communities, in work that inspires their commitment and effort.
- Conduct work that crosses disciplines, connects academics to the real world, requires the application of new information.
- Encounter high expectations, plentiful opportunities to gain new skills, substantial support, clear goals and rules.
- Experience give-and-take with adults that is truly reciprocal and mutually respectful.
- Develop initiative, persistence, flexibility, risk-taking, curiosity, a social conscience.
- Have their work assessed as it unfolds and receive opportunities for ongoing feedback and reflection.
- Share their results publicly.

More than Service: Philadelphia Students Join a Union to Improve Their Schools

*Aiming to build leaders
in school and community,
a new kind of student
organizing emerges as
a strong new voice for
students long silenced.*

Every day all across America, young people make their way past security details into enormous high schools with overcrowded classes and under-trained teachers. In such settings, few students experience their daily encounters with adults as collaborative or mutually respectful. Isolated and unnoticed, many choose to drop out of school altogether rather than to stick it out in a system that treats them more as threats than as partners in their own learning.

But a remarkable initiative begun six years ago by a high school student in Philadelphia is blossoming into an antidote to that anonymity and alienation. A blend of both community organizing and leadership development, the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) now organizes and trains 15 to 20 students a year at five public high schools across the city.

"I've never met an apathetic young person," says Eric Braxton, 25, who in 1995 founded the Philadelphia Student Union under the aegis of Urban Retrievers, a nonprofit organization. "[But] I've met a lot of hopeless and discouraged young people, who think that they are not big enough to change things. How do you start to counteract that belief?"

Braxton's search for answers has helped create a growing sense of possibility and hope. A year ago, for instance, a PSU-written platform on school reform declared without reticence: "Metal detectors give the school a prison-like atmosphere which is damaging to the learning environment. When the first thing we do in the morning is walk through a metal detector, it sends us the message that we are going to be treated like potential criminals, not potential lawyers or doctors."

The statement signals PSU's emergence as a strong, new voice for students long silenced, empowering them to take action on the educational issues that affect them most.

As District Struggles, Students Step Up

At the time Eric Braxton graduated from high school in 1994, Philadelphia's public school system was mired in crisis. Academic performance among the city's 215,000 students was low, the poverty and dropout rates high. The school system's physical plant needed repair and renovation. With limited state support, the gap in per-pupil spending between Philadelphia schools and their suburban counterparts grew to

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about \$2,000. A long-standing desegregation case against the school district resulted in recommendations for a reform agenda, just as a controversial new superintendent, David Hornbeck, announced his own. The city’s teachers union, feeling excluded and imposed on, fiercely opposed reform. Capable teachers and principals fled the system in droves. The turmoil focused unprecedented public attention on the city’s schools.

The atmosphere of controversy swirling through the city was a natural fit for Braxton, who deferred his enrollment at Hampshire College first by one year, then another to launch Urban Retrievers. The son of a kindergarten teacher and a labor activist, Eric had long been steeped in the principles of peer counseling and young people’s rights. During his high school years at an independent Quaker school, he joined the Philadelphia chapter of Teen Voices, a group sponsored by Planned Parenthood to involve youth in school decisionmaking on matters such as condom availability.

When he founded Urban Retrievers, the new nonprofit’s principles were simple, he says: to help students “look at what’s wrong in the community, understand how the problem came about, and then create and sustain changes themselves.” Building on his Teen Voices connections, he aimed to develop young people’s leadership skills through a year-long course for high school students.

In his group’s early efforts, “we knew the issues we wanted to address,” Braxton said. “But we had no idea how to organize, how to motivate, how to facilitate. And we didn’t know how to take into account the dynamics of the oppression and racism young people face every day, both directly and institutionally.”

By contrast, Urban Retrievers’ ongoing efforts to organize extracurricular chapters of the nascent Philadelphia Student Union, gained steady momentum. (Because the PSU turned out to be its most successful venture, Urban Retrievers is changing its name to Philadelphia Student Union.) By 2001, PSU had established after-school groups in three neighborhood high schools with predominantly African-American and low-income student bodies (West Philadelphia, Simon Gratz, and John Bartram High Schools). In addition, it was working in two special-admittance schools (Central and Masterman High Schools) and the Philadelphia High School for Girls (not yet an official chapter), all of which, with roughly 44 percent low-income students, have more diverse populations. PSU also drew students from schools around the city to another chapter that meets on Saturdays to address common problems.

Impact on Funding, Curriculum, and Students’ Futures

A clear impact of Urban Retrievers is its mobilization of students where previously there was none. Since its founding in 1995, Urban Retrievers has enlisted over 500

students to work for justice and democratic governance in schools, and it has posted some impressive results.

In the 2000-2001 school year, the PSU asserted itself in shaping the city's educational policies. Bringing together some 400 students in a one-day Student Convention on School Reform on October 25, 2000, PSU ratified a nine-point student platform on education reform, calling for improvement on public school funding, transportation, student uniforms, school security, safety, curriculum, and school culture. (See sidebar below.) Advancing beyond city politics to the state level, PSU organizers also saw a major victory in 1998, when the legislature in Harrisburg defeated the governor's voucher plan, which they had vigorously opposed.

PSU has also put its muscle behind school funding in Philadelphia. In May 1996, as the district was cutting teachers and programs because of a \$150 million deficit, PSU organized nearly 2,000 high school students in a one-day walkout, the largest since 1968. Gathering at City Hall in support of a bill that would provide \$35 million for schools, they kept the issue alive in the media, and the pressure on the

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From the Philadelphia Student Union Platform on School Reform

ISSUE: Multi-Cultural Education

PROBLEM: A great deal of our curriculum focuses on Western civilization. We are taught American and European history. For one month of the year we are taught African-American history. There is very little Asian, Latino, African (distinct from African American) or Indigenous history taught in our schools. When we are taught about other cultures, the curriculum lacks depth, and more often than not it comes from a Western perspective. The majority of Philadelphia public school students are not of European descent, and we are not being taught about the rich histories of our own peoples. In addition, students need to learn not only about our own culture, but about the many cultures of the world.

DESIRED RESULTS:

1. Greater emphasis needs to be put on Asian, Latino, African (distinct from African-American) and indigenous history.
2. African-American history needs to be taught through-

out the year, not just in February. The curriculum also needs to focus more on the history of African Americans as a group, not just on tokenized individuals.

3. More work needs to be put into ensuring that the ethnic demographics of the teaching staff is representative of the demographics of the student body.
4. The history curriculum needs to be changed to not only reflect the perspectives of kings, presidents, and rich people, but to include the fascinating histories and struggles of working people.
5. In addition to an increased focus on multi-ethnic education, changes must be made in the curriculum to include other cultures such as those of women, various religions, and the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/questioning community.
6. Schools need to provide professional development workshops led by students to give our teachers ideas on what we would like to learn about as well as how it should be taught.

Students at one high school drafted a proposal to give their teachers greater say over staff development. An excerpt:

“For over two years the Simon Gratz Chapter of the Philadelphia Student Union has been working on encouraging more meaningful and engaging instruction. We interviewed many teachers to ask what could be done about this. Many teachers said that the current professional development could use a lot of improvement. They also said that they did not have a say in what professional development was done. Sometimes the workshops did not meet their needs or wants.

“Several teachers suggested that a teacher committee on professional development would help. The new teachers’ contract allows for this to be created. The job of the committee would be to empower the teachers to redesign the way professional development is done at Gratz so that it could really help them. Our vision is not just to come up with a list of topics, but rather to really figure out how to create a space that allows staff to work together and get the support they need to make this a really great school.”

Mayor and City Council eventually led to the transfer of \$15 million in additional funds to the school district. In the years since, several hundred students have traveled to the state capitol to lobby for better funding for the city’s public schools. A new school funding formula is now under study by legislators, and the group intends to maintain its pressure against inequities in the current system.

Braxton also gauges the PSU’s success on a more personal level. Though pleased by the positive evaluations its programs regularly receive from students, he cares most about the difference it makes in young people’s lives. “Our students have gone on to continue their leadership and activism beyond high school,” Braxton said. “They look at themselves as leaders now.”

He cites a litany of examples. Many former PSU members are active on college campuses, organizing black student unions or in support of a unionizing maintenance staff or the anti-globalization movement. A founding member of PSU’s Saturday chapter organizes political and environmental campaigns in Arizona. A former PSU student, now a minister in Philadelphia, has started a mentoring program for young African-American boys. Another serves on PSU’s own professional staff.

Of equal importance to Braxton is PSU’s success in its most direct sphere of influence. “We have actual changes in schools,” he said. At Simon Gratz High School, for example, PSU members in 1997-1998 got the principal to allocate \$8,000 for new textbooks. At West Philadelphia High School, PSU members in their first year (1997-98) testified before City Council and ultimately secured needed repairs. At John Bartram High School, where students long complained of physical and verbal abuse by security guards and other staff, the PSU drafted a job description for a school ombudsman to handle student complaints; the district hired a part-time staff member to fill the position starting in 2001-02. (See Appendix for the job description and complaint procedure the students drafted.)

PSU students have addressed curricular areas as well. At Simon Gratz High School, teachers without sufficient training were struggling to engage students in new, longer class periods. PSU members opened a dialogue with the faculty, and students ran a professional development workshop for their teachers to identify which approaches best held their interest in challenging work. At their suggestion the school established a new faculty committee, with two student seats, to bring about professional development that better addressed the actual learning needs of teachers and students. And for several of Gratz’s service learning classes, students took the lead in organizing projects that involved analysis of the root causes of problems in their community.

Braxton also points to a growing national recognition of the importance of student involvement in school reform. The PSU gets frequent invitations, he said, to visit

groups that are just getting started. “We’d like to create an alliance, because people are starting to look at youth organizing as a field,” he said. “And there are definitely other groups: the Boston Youth Organizing Project; Youth Force, which organizes in NYC around the criminal justice system; a group in L.A. called YUCA; a bunch of groups in the Bay Area such as Pueblo and YMAC.” Braxton also serves on the board of a new nonprofit group including several large funders, known as the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

Not least of all, PSU has begun to attract the attention to its cause and the credibility for its efforts that it sought all along from policymakers and administration officials. “I have great respect for the PSU,” former Philadelphia school superintendent David Hornbeck said in summer 2001, after he had joined another reform initiative. “They pick substantive issues; they do their homework; they are creative in their tactics.” Reflecting on his tenure in Philadelphia, Hornbeck added, he should have started “treating students as vehicles of school reform much earlier, in contrast to seeing them in the first several years primarily as the objects of school reform.” PSU’s work contributed significantly to that view, he noted.

Building Leadership Skills

Awareness and Motivation. A host of programs in high schools offers opportunities for students to contribute to their communities through various kinds of service projects. But “young people can and must do more than service,” Braxton declared. “Too many youth programs don’t get to the root causes of the problems they address—racism, poverty, and youth oppression.” To succeed, he decided, PSU’s strategies would need first to unearth students’ motivation to make change, then to build their skills and connect them to the necessary supports.

Involving students in change efforts early in their school careers is crucial if they are to have time to develop and implement their leadership skills before graduating. As a result, current PSU student members look for ninth and tenth graders to recruit and train; each school’s chapter then works as a group throughout its high school years and even beyond. The group also seeks members with varied perspectives, including both successful and unsuccessful students. “We take anyone who is interested, who is willing to come to meetings regularly and treat other students with respect. Everyone is capable of being a leader.”

Capacity and Supports. Social change in schools and in society cannot occur, Braxton believes, unless young people develop certain key skills around which PSU’s program is organized:

- *Critical analysis skills.* What is the problem? What are its root causes, and what are the relationships between them? Focus a lot on developing an analy-

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sis of social problems—racism, metal detectors in schools, why they exist, not here by accident, what and who created them? How do the problems in my school relate to problems in the city and greater social problems? How does the problem of metal detectors in schools relate to privatization of prisons and the prison-industrial complex?

- *Leadership skills.* Public speaking, facilitating meetings, working with the media, community organizing.
- *Building relationships and community,* among group members, across groups, and between adult mentors and student organizers.
- *Peer counseling.* Identifying and helping each other overcome personal obstacles to being effective leaders.

The process of developing these skills is modeled on classic community organizing techniques,* coached by a core staff of three young adults in their twenties and ten high school students. At the same time, the group pays close attention to the necessary personal skills to develop as leaders and organizers, and to supporting members in what is often a difficult choice to attempt to make change. “Strong organizations are built on relationships,” Braxton said. “When it’s ‘not cool’ to stand up and care, you need those relationships to stay involved.” If an attitude or behavior is getting in the way of a student organizer’s relationships, he added, the group turns to peer counseling strategies to work it out.

Opportunities. Student members develop their change agendas and leadership skills in after-school meetings led by one of PSU’s staff members. Students from any Philadelphia school also may participate in the Center City group, which meets on Saturdays to plan citywide campaigns on matters like school funding. And about 60 of the core student leadership cohort attend a yearly spring retreat, building relationships and alliances across schools and addressing issues of racism.

Each student group begins by analyzing its own school environment and how it does—or does not—achieve its stated goal of student learning. “How do students learn best?” they ask, exploring current theories of learning through discussions, reading, and writing. “How are decisions made? Who has power?” In one early challenge, they call on their own experiences to design a school that might work better for students with different learning styles.

Next, the group chooses an issue that could bring its own school closer to the ideal, if students organized to address it. They research the issue intensively, conduct surveys, interview local experts, and sometimes travel to schools outside the state to

* As key resources Braxton cites *Organizing for Social Change: The Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*, third edition, by Kim Bobo et al. (Seven Locks Press, 2001), and *The Human Side of Human Beings: The Theory of Re-evaluation Counseling*, by Harvey Jackins (Rational Island Publishers, 1982).

investigate a problem or its possible solution. Since reading and writing well are important to the research process, students get continual feedback and coaching on these skills from adult PSU staff members. Their critical thinking skills are honed by the group's focus on trying out multi-faceted solutions to complex systemic problems like school design or student rights issues.

Pushing from Outside, Collaborating Within

The Base of Action. Braxton believes PSU's position as an outside group strengthens its capacity to challenge the status quo. "A lot of education reform experts will tell you about the importance of having autonomous groups that hold the district accountable," he said. "If your group is run by the district, its funding can get cut; you're not in such a good position to challenge things."

PSU also tries to collaborate, he added, with other parent and community groups. On the school funding issue, for instance, it has joined the Pennsylvania Campaign for Public Education, a coalition of community groups including parent organizations, clergy, and communities of faith.

But operating outside the school system presents its challenges, too. Chief among them is access. An interim principal at Simon Gratz, for example, initially bridled when he found PSU students circulating surveys that asked what qualities students wanted in the school's next principal. "He saw us as a threat to him, and he kicked us out of the building," Braxton recalled. But once he learned more about PSU and its motivations, Braxton continued, "he realized that we weren't working against him, and we were able to come back into the school."

Although school people are "wary sometimes," Braxton noted, PSU counters that resistance with persistence, professionalism, and a positive stance. "We take the approach that we're there to work with people, not against them," Braxton said. "We all want the same thing, for young people to have a good experience in school." Making personal connections is also important. "We try to maintain strong relationships with [a school's] staff, so we can come in and help question what needs to be questioned." Summing up, he added, "we've had mostly good experiences."

The Target of Action. Young people are in a unique position to create social change, the PSU founder asserts. "Historically, they have brought a lot of energy to the task, partly because they don't yet have life commitments like family and jobs," he noted. At the same time, young people bring a particularly important perspective to school reform issues. "Students who are not doing well," Braxton said, "often have more insight into the school's problems than anyone."

Braxton wins agreement from perhaps an unlikely source. The initially resistant

"We, the students at Simon Gratz High, want to create a student government to help teachers and students alike understand how we feel about our school. . . . Students should have a strong and active voice in the school. Having a voice in choices that are made about our education would make students feel ownership of the school. If students feel some ownership in the school where they learn, we might have better attendance, fewer suspensions and more respect for keeping our building clean. Also, having a choice in how we are taught might make most students more enthusiastic about learning. Our future is at stake here, and we feel that we should have a say in most decisions. In addition, we feel that students have really good ideas about things that need improvement around the school."

— from a PSU proposal for
student government at
Simon Gratz High School

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interim principal at Gratz, who was later appointed principal, recently wrote about the PSU:

I will admit that this organization provides an excellent opportunity for my students to develop organizational and leadership skills. Additionally, the Philadelphia Student Union gives students a greater voice in school issues. In a school the size of Simon Gratz High School, 2,200 students, it is helpful to have a student organization that can facilitate student involvement on school issues. . . . The students have a way of breaking down issues, so that the faculty can feel the pulse of the students.

One of PSU’s biggest challenges, Braxton acknowledges, is “having young people believe that they can accomplish major changes.” Schools are designed, he asserts, to make young people feel small and powerless, and the larger society only reinforces those attitudes. “It’s hard for young people of color in inner city schools to feel that you can affect things,” Braxton said.

“Schools can’t work better,” he continued, “until students want to learn and feel a sense of ownership of their schools. We won’t be able to succeed until students are playing a major role being leaders for change,” Braxton declared.

Is the Philadelphia Student Union, then, mostly about leadership development, or does it also address larger issues of social change in the community? “You can’t separate the two or put one before the other in a hierarchy,” Braxton said. “You have to help young people become lifelong community leaders, and you have to create changes right here and right now in their lives. You must do the two things together.”

As it joins the larger activist community, PSU cannot help but make concrete the principle that students’ voices and actions are the powerful missing ingredient when it comes to school change. “When we are successful,” David Hornbeck commented about the role of the Philadelphia Student Union in school change, “it will be, I am increasingly convinced, because ‘the children shall lead us.’ It will be their energy, their purity of purpose, their sense of justice and injustice that will sustain the effort in its most difficult moments. They engage far less in the practice of ‘on the one hand and on the other.’ They are far more likely to say, ‘This is right; this is wrong—what’s the question?’”

Eric Braxton has long known the questions. “High schools treat students with disrespect, as if they’re not worth anything. You’re not going to learn anything when you are treated like prisoners. How do you start to counteract that? How do you get people to feel like they can create change?”

The Philadelphia Student Union is a good start towards enacting the answers.