

SUPPORTING STUDENT-LED ACTIVISM



Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, “digesting” key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

Get Informed

Why Listen to Student Activists?

Who decides on school policies and practices—adults, right? Who do the administrators talk to about them? Other adults. Who is profoundly impacted by the inequitable policies and practices of schools? Students. So why aren’t we listening to them? Supporting student-led activism is the key to transformational change in education systems.

In this issue of Equity Digest, we define **student-led activism** as intentional acts of collective protest (e.g. rallies, strikes/mass walk outs, petitions, etc.) performed by students in response to oppression, within or related to the school

system (Mitra, Serrire, & Kirshner, 2014).

Student-led activism is often seen as a disciplinary problem and followed with swift punitive consequences (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Cintli, 2013). However, the status quo expectation of students is to be quiet and complacent. Student-led activism is not a disciplinary problem—it actually *adds* to a robust education (Kirshner, 2007).

History has been transformed by student movements against the status quo and toward equitable change. Examples include the sit-ins of the 1960s, spurring on the Civil Rights Movement, and, in modern day, Black Lives Matter, the protests of which have prompted investigations into police brutality, as well as this year's National Student Walkout protesting the school shooting in Parkland, FL.



In this issue, we will explain why we all should be listening to students who are experiencing inequities in their education systems—they are organized, they are at ground zero, and they have something to say.

Why You Should Care

Teaching Children to Think

Co-creating a space where students can challenge inequities in their education system actually adds to a rich learning environment (Gonzalez, Love, Johnson, Picón, & Velázquez, 2017). Seems counterintuitive, right?

When you think of student activists, you probably envision a classroom full of immature, disorganized kids shouting and disrupting class (Irizarry & Brown, 2014). This issue was written in order to help you challenge the status quo perception of student activists as unruly disciplinary problems (Cabrera et al, 2013), and to open your mind to start looking at them in a positive light. Student activists are not protesting just for the sake of disruption. They are protesting against systemic inequities that they confront on a daily basis.

Ideally, a major goal for adults raising children, and educators teaching children, is to teach them how to think for themselves. Ask any parent or educator—that's not always the most agreeable process. In the school hierarchy, students are placed at the bottom as passive

information receivers (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & King Thorius, 2017).

Student-led activism can make educators feel uncomfortable, even threatened, because it bucks against the status quo by challenging inequities and challenges the educator-student hierarchy. However, it's not deviant or destructive, it's *constructive*, presenting creative solutions for persistent and ingrained problems. In the end, don't we want students

Moving Forward

Practical Solutions for Honoring Student Voice

The First Amendment doesn't just apply to adults. Students have First Amendment rights to free speech, assembly, and protest, as long as it doesn't disrupt the school day, and educators must have a justifiable reason to interfere (Lunenburg, 2011). In the case of the recent mid-morning National School Walkout, where the school day was disrupted, supporting educators and administrators walked side-by-side with students.



So what can you do to support student activists and honor student voice? Be an ally. Here's how:

1. In a literal and figurative sense, walk side-by-side with student activists--use and wield your place in adult society to ensure students' physical protection and their right to assembly.
2. Encourage youth participation in school critique. Recognizing their voices helps to empower them.
3. Encourage integration of student voice into the curriculum. A great example of a research method

by which youth are encouraged to address inequities and create solutions is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which encourages youth to challenge oppression and create solutions to seemingly unchangeable inequities, as well as respects them as co-researchers in the study (Mitra et al, 2014). As a guideline, the lesson should be relevant to students, collaborative, student-centered, and empowering. The goal of the lesson should be positive change for the students.

In summary, student-led activism is essential to transformational systemic change in the school environment—and beyond. Without listening to those who are actually going through it and facing those inequities on a daily basis, we can't hope to effect authentic change. The key lies in listening and supporting students who are brave enough to speak out.

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Meet the Authors

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

Disclaimer

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