DEAR STUDENTS: YOU CAN RUN YOUR SCHOOLS

A letter from a youth worker to students in positions of educational leadership

By Grayson Carr

Over the past five years a few opportunities have been created locally that allow students to give input on education policies: Minneapolis Public School Board now has a high school appointee, Richfield School Board created four high school appointee positions, and Saint Paul Public Schools created the 13-member Student Engagement and Advancement Board. The Student Advisory Committee (SAC) has been advising the Minnesota Department of Education since 2012 as a committee of the Minnesota Youth Council (MYC), a group of 36 eighth through 12th graders from around Minnesota and the only legislatively mandated "voice of youth" to a state legislature in the country. The SAC weighs in on laws that affect schools and students in Minnesota.

Each of these groups and student appointees are doing powerful work despite being in environments that are not used to working with young people. Additionally, student appointees are allowed to hold only positions that do not have teeth; students on public school boards, for example, do not have a vote, are limited to one-year terms, and are chosen by adults rather than young people. When MYC votes on whether or not to go on record as supporting or not supporting a bill, the final vote does not force lawmakers to make changes to the bill or have much impact on whether or not it passes in the legislature. As of now, these student positions are toothless; any impact they have on educational policies is due to adults who chose to listen to students' requests. As it stands, some young people in formal positions of leadership in Minnesota's education system have the channels to give their say on some issues, but the power to make decisions about young people continues to rest with adults.

In this reality, how can you build authentic student power that does not rely on adult goodwill? There is no example that people in power benignly and spontaneously bequeath equal power upon people least represented in government to a lasting extent (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2009). And you do not need to be content with being relegated to an advisory position only, hoping that your actions and work one day convince adults to grant young people equal power. This is not surprising; the only times in our country when people underrepresented in government have gained society-wide rights was when they disrupted business as usual. Therefore, to turn the position you occupy as a student advisor in Minnesota's education system into actual power, it is necessary to organize other students in your schools until you build enough power to make demands, disrupt, and make change. In other words: youth radical organizing.

DEFINITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Before opening the doors unique to radical organizing, let us get on the same page for a few definitions and assumptions.

WHAT IS YOUTH?

What makes you a youth? Or more precisely, when do you stop being a youth and become an adult? Policies around the world mark the changing from being a youth to an adult at 16, 18, 26 (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009) or 35 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2009) years old. Not exactly a clear answer.

Maybe being a youth is based on rights granted at a certain age. But which age? You can vote at age 18, at 21 you can buy alcohol and run for school board. You can't run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives

until the age of 25. Under the Affordable Care Act you are no longer allowed to be on your parent or guardian's health insurance after you turn 27. Yet if you're convicted of a felony when you're still a teenager, you may be sentenced as an adult. Age-based rights do not give a clear answer either.

Some argue that youth is the stage when a young person's brain develops quickly and cite that developmental stage as a reason why you should *not* be able to vote at 17 or 16 in the United States, but you *are* able to vote at 18. Brain development continues well into one's 20s, or even the early 30s (Wallis, 2013) and yet adults are not required to prove brain function or development to vote.

What about the idea of *maturity*? Maturity seems about as hard to define as youth! Yet, we have all met some immature adults just as we have met friends and classmates who not only behave maturely but also do mature things like work two jobs or take care of siblings and/or their own children.

So if youth cannot be defined by age, behavior, law, or development, what is it? Youth is a *social construct*. Like race or gender, it is a term and set of prejudices that are attached to people. These prejudices have real effects, but once you start digging deeper into the differences that supposedly set one socially constructed group apart from another, the distinctions that treatment and rights are based upon become fuzzy and eventually disappear entirely.

I spend time on this because if *youth* is defined socially, there is no real way you are supposed to act! As a young person you *are not* a youth. Instead, you *do* youth. In fact, what we now think of as youth has not been around forever, its foundation comes from child labor and compulsory school laws passed in the first half of the 1900s (Schuman, 2017). Schissel (2008) states, "to restrict youth from the labor market…Their restriction from productive society accompanied a shift in the way we thought about children and youth from economic assets to economic liabilities" (p.24). Youth became something that needed to be controlled, kept in place, and protected. The way we think of youth is the result of economic policies and political maneuvers, not something intrinsic to one's age. While it is a social construct, societal shifts translate into real effects, similar to how race or gender have effects that are often discriminatory. This is often called adultism, or when adults are more privileged than young people. Like all –isms, one way adultism's power comes out is through language. How many of these adultist behaviors have you observed?

- An adult thinking that you owe them because they gave you the basics of life.
- Young people have fewer rights than adults.
- Mandatory attendance and no-phone policies.
- Being paid in pizza, but not cash.

If you feel that in your experience adults would not be held to one or more of these standards, that is adultism.

While I do not reference the construct of youth from here on out, the belief in young people leveraging power and the belief that you can run your schools is built entirely on the understanding that there is nothing intrinsic to youth that prevents you from taking power and running your schools or invalidates your desire to have power in decisions that affect you.

A note about language. I use "young people" when talking about people in the eighth through 12th grade age range and "youth" when referring to a wider range of young people and social class who are subject to similar prejudices and political disenfranchisement.

WHAT IS RADICAL ORGANIZING?

Many people have mixed feelings about anything called "radical," but by radical organizing I simply mean *two or more people, coming together democratically, to change systemic power dynamics in their workplace or society*. This definition contains some deep implications, so let us unpack it. Components are intentionally out of order to allow them to build on each other.

Two or more… Organizing happens when people come together to help each other accomplish what they would not otherwise have been able to accomplish by themselves.

Change…power dynamics… Everyone has been organized in some way or another. If you have ever been asked to carry groceries, move furniture, dress a sibling, or talk to someone for a friend, you have been organized. However, these examples do not change power dynamics so they are not radical organizing.

By contrast, a North Carolina student with whom I worked changed power dynamics in her classroom by building enough support with her classmates until they were able to apply pressure on their teacher to make change. This student was bored in her U.S. History class and felt disconnected from the material so she asked her teacher whether she could co-teach a lesson about Native history in North Carolina. After the teacher declined, the student talked first with her friends, who were also bored, and then with other classmates. These students decided, completely outside of class time, that they would get more out of the class if they could co-teach on parts they felt passionate about. A coupleof weeks later they presented their request to the teacher along with a schedule of the upcoming lesson plans with which students wanted to be involved. In this case the victory was easy and the teacher agreed to the students' requests. If she had not agreed, however, the students were prepared to simply stop being students. No work. No listening. No following directions. Just a sit-in during class. They reasoned that it would be too difficult for the teacher and administration to suspend an entire class, and the teacher would not want to hurt her reputation. This was an example where power dynamics were shifted due to radical organizing.

Systemic… Is all direct action radical organizing? Around 1,300 Forest Lake students walked out to protest the city's decision to disband the police force. During the middle of a Tuesday, students from the high school, both junior high schools, and a charter school left class and walked half a mile to the city center. This was a demonstration that was organized by students and which generated a huge march from four different schools in a short amount of time (Devine, 2017). Was it radical organizing though? As I define it, no. It was two or more students, and it changed power dynamics, but it did not shift *systemic* power dynamics. Police are a powerful force in the United States, protected by a legal system that rarely convicts criminal officers. As an institution, police forces were created as strong arms of factory owners or white slaveholders (Kappeler, n.d.; Potter, n.d.), and since then they have consistently used their power to arrest, imprison or kill people of color, immigrants, and youth (Alexander, 2016; Hahn & Jeffries, 2003). Young people are more likely to be charged with a felony than adults (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.) and feel the effects of imprisonment more acutely (Campaign for Youth Justice, 2016). They also have the highest rates of poverty and homelessness (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014). Young people are the center of the school-to-prison pipeline. Youth have been disempowered for at least as long as police have been empowered in some of the worst ways. Young people marching in favor of police officers, even if the officers are "good people" and "good community members," do not shift systemic power. In the case of the Forest Lake walkout, the students' direct action reinforced components of a racist, sexist, and ageist system.

Since the political and capitalist economic systems in the United States are not only built on exploitation of humans but actually require it in the form of a permanent and racialized underclass (Gilens & Page, 2014; Isenberg, 2017), I consider radical organizing to be inherently and necessarily democratic and leftist. Using

the tools of organizing to build power in support of populations already systemically empowered (i.e. white males for the most part) is not radical organizing.

Similarly, the prerequisite of working for equitable shifts in systemic power means that radical organizing requires people to apply pressure on decision makers and other leverage points through direct action. The large scale societal shifts seen in modern times have come about through direct action: boycotts, slowdowns, marches, blockades, sit-ins, and shutdowns, to name a few (Direct Action Everywhere, n.d.). Court cases, legal decisions, and laws benefitting populations not part of the capitalist elite took place only after direct action applied pressure to decision makers to force their decision in favor of workers, people of color, and youth.

Coming together democratically... The direction and frame of radical organizing as working for the empowerment of people systemically kept from formal power also gives direction to how organizers can structure their group, committee, or organization to be most empowering. Radical organizers cannot have exclusive or concentrated power amongst themselves, and democratic decision making, in my experience, allows the most potential for inclusivity, individual commitment, and group ownership. This does not mean that radical organizing structures need be undefined. Max Hoiland, a power theorist and longtime organizer with the radical union, Industrial Workers of the World, concludes that successful organizing requires a structure that is defined and mixes both formal and informal organizing, along with essential features like recruitment and skills development and social cohesion (Hoiland, 2017).

WHAT IS YOUTH RADICAL ORGANIZING?

Predictably, youth radical organizing occurs when two or more young people come together democratically to confront and shift systemic power dynamics, but with a couple added twists. The first is that youth radical organizing confronts and shifts systemic power *as it relates to youth and the interdependent identity of* student. All over the world, young people are involved in all sorts of organizing, radical and otherwise, on issues in which they have a stake by virtue of being people. These issues inevitably have ties to power dynamics around youth. Take for instance the Women's March on Washington, which, if anything, was a march against patriarchy. Wait, how does patriarchy relate to age-based discrimination? Around the world, patriarchy and authoritarianism go hand in hand and feed each other (Brandt, 2012; Fink, 1995; Reich, 1946). The same reasoning that creates and supports patriarchy feeds into authoritarianism, and both power structures are extremely age-based. By contrast, youth radical organizing positions itself with age-based power dynamics at the center. This is not a binary either/or, but rather a spectrum. For example, Sierra Club's Student Coalition and Summer Grassroots Training (SPROG[1]) is run by young people for young people and is all about building organizing skills for young people in an environmental justice context. Does training involve re-orienting your identity as a social construct? No, but also yes. When I participated we did not spend time on youth as a social construct, but by not doing so and instead learning how to plan escalation timelines, send press releases, meet one-to-one with everyone from peers to legislators, and disrupt business as usual, we were empowered to just *do*.

One of the most powerful takeaways from SPROG was that young people *can* do the organizing. High school students planned the entire weeklong training and facilitated sessions more than eight hours a day, along with daily preparation and reflection time. Additionally, every meal was made by people who could easily fit inside the broad 'youth' age range. There were adult allies present but youth were clearly the ones with power. Adult allies never facilitated nor did they set themselves up as experts in any way. For the most part their presence was forgettable, a radical and jarring shift from what most of us experience day to day.

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[1] Cool fact, in Danish "sprog" means language.

Here are some additional examples of youth radical organizing. Links to more information are included in the post script to this letter.

- Chile's Penguin Revolutions of 2006 (Council on Hemispheric Affairs) and 2011 to 2013, as well as more recent protests (Radwin, 2016; Telesur, 2016a), all of which were and are coordinated by thousands of high school students across the country in support of educational equity (Cummings, 2017).
- Over the past year, high school students across Brazil have organized and occupied hundreds of schools in protest of austerity cuts (Prengaman & Dilorenzo, 2016; Telesur, 2016b).
- Youth Empowered in the Struggle (YES) , the youth political arm of Voces de la Frontera, the Latinx rights organization based in Wisconsin, organizes school-based direct actions in support of immigrant and Latinx youth rights (Cersonsky, 2013; Voces de la Frontera, n.d.).
- The Philadelphia Student Union has been a group of high school students working for education equity over the past 20 years (Philly Student Union, n.d.).

Additionally, Minnesota students have conducted mass opt-outs of standardized testing and walked out of high schools in favor of Black Lives Matter (Collins & Olson, 2015). On top of all these, the Civil Rights Movement and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Labor, Immigrant Rights, Women's Rights, Native Rights Movement have all happened because of youth involvement.

I do not consider myself an expert on radical organizing so I hope you form your own conclusions, but from my limited experience, it seems like there are some areas to which (youth) radical organizing is adapting. First, organizing requires people power, an inherently easier task in urban areas where there are more people. Like technological developments and infrastructure, statewide decisions are often made in urban centers, leaving rural residents feeling out of the loop. Rural areas present different challenges for radical organizing since people and leverage points are so spread out (Armstead, Haines, Baker, Glandon, & Cook, 2008; Santiago, Gutierrez, & Soska, 2016; Stephens, 2016; Zucker, 2012).

Another difficulty some people have with radical organizing can be summed up by a high school student with whom I work. After talking about direct action in schools and the organizing required to make it happen the student said, "It just seems exhausting." I laughed and replied, "Absolutely!" A major problem with organizers is burnout. Balance and self-care are vital in order to maintain energy and interest to keep working for victories. Organizers often seem motivated by anger, which is galvanizing and often appropriate given the discrimination they organize against, but which can also feel alienating to newcomers. However, organizing cultures are varied and students in MYC, school board appointments, and other adult-created advisory positions are in an advisory position within which radical organizing has not historically organized. As a student in an advisory position in Minnesota's education system, you can apply pressure that other people cannot.

YOU CAN ONLY GO UP

Students occupying educational leadership positions do powerful and provocative work that makes Minnesota a more equitable place to live. This year alone SAC has written a white paper advocating for a user-driven education system, begun creating student bills of rights in a middle school and high school, and advocated for the SAC to be written into the budget of the Minnesota Department of Education to provide stipends for members. MYC has heard from lawmakers on bills about issues as varied as gender-neutral bathrooms, millions of dollars for Somali community development, funding for civic opportunities, supports for homeless students, voter registration, and affirmative consent to reduce sexual violence. Saint Paul's

Student Engagement and Advancement Board (SEAB) has recommended a culturally relevant curriculum and increased school inclusivity; they have also surveyed students to find out what is important to them. These actions have resulted in some policy creation and I wholeheartedly believe this work creates a more diverse education system. However, adults retain exclusive power to make decisions, whether to act or not act on your recommendations, and the number of student positions, like the SAC or school board positions, has stagnated. This dynamic comes out in the opening and closing remarks of SEAB's December 2016 presentation to the Saint Paul Public School Board:

> **Adult staff member:** *The role of SEAB is to amplify student voice in decision making at the Board and administrative level, not to abdicate the Board or the administration's role.*

> **Student member:** *SEAB has used a lot of nice words in this presentation, like "equity," and "inclusivity." But really what we are talking about is dismantling institutional racism, and ending institutional oppression. You ask what you can do to help us: listen to our recommendations. Look past the fact that we are students and we can advocate for ourselves, and really think about why we are making these specific recommendations. It is time for a shift in the way we do things. This is a perfect way to start. We look forward to working with the Board in the future on these things* (Saint Paul Public Schools, n.d.).

Imagine for a moment a different setup wherein SEAB was a women's rights organization presenting to a board that not only had sole decision making power over women's rights but was also composed entirely of males (it should not be that difficult (Pence, 2017)). How can that amplify voice? The opening statement from the staff member quoted above essentially declares that we all agree that we should be hearing from students more, but let's not get carried away and have them be equals. With that opening line, an adult turned everything that came afterwards into a dog and pony show.

The closing comment by the student member then sums up the disempowerment that student advisory members face: you can pour inordinate hours of work into a project that is vital to student well-being, you can work yourself ragged, you can have a world of evidence that shows your recommendation is good for everyone of any age, but you do not (yet) actually have decision-making power or leverage over the decision-maker. This imbalance of systemic power inherent to government is likely the outcome of the biosocial occurrence called "attention structures." Primatologist J. B. Lancaster described the phenomenon of attention structures in 1975, observing that subordinate animals in a group seem to be going about their business but are very aware of what the dominant members of the group are doing. The dominant animals, however, usually pay little attention to the subordinates, unless their activity intrudes on them (Lancaster, 1975). Attention structures have since been observed in classrooms, when teachers give extra attention to students who come from social classes similar to their own. The concept of attention structures helps explain the fact that survivors of violence or people coming from generational trauma are hyperaware of social and power dynamics.

So what can you do? Where can you go from here to grow your own power for yourself? Organize! Disrupt! Form a concerted student organizing committee to build the actual, authentic student power that so many groups talk about. Are you an appointee to a school board without voting power or other student representatives that support you? Are you an SAC member who wants to leverage power over decision makers? There are around 427,000 eighth through 12th graders in Minnesota, far more than teachers, principals, and other school staff and the entire system runs only with your cooperation. Students are required to be in school. Imagine if students refused?

NEXT STEPS

There are people who are much more experienced in radical organizing than I am. Additionally, organizing is a social endeavor and social endeavors are learned socially. In my experience, trainings, workshops, and simulations build confidence and make seemingly overwhelming, big actions seem manageable and easy. It makes sense that you might not know what to think about organizing at this point. It is not common to learn about youth rights and adultism. We learn *about* the *product* of democracy instead of learning by *participating* in the *process*. Organizing is a skill just like learning how to navigate public transit systems, swim, play video games, or switching how you talk with your friends versus your teacher. And like all skills practicing makes it better. With that said, here are some basic steps and things to watch out for:

1. **Find a buddy.** Talking with other students, setting up meetings, sending reminders, and facilitating meetings, all part of organizing, can create a big work load. Additionally, it is easy to feel alone at the beginning when you are not sure which steps to take. Having a trusted friend with whom to split up tasks, shoot around ideas, and provide mutual support makes organizing more effective all around.

2. **Create an organizing group of other students.** Radical organizing is all about getting groups of people together to tip the scales of power in your favor. The goal should be to keep growing by inviting and asking friends and classmates to bring their power into the group. Invite people into the group with whom you feel trust and have had one-to-one meetings.

3. **One-to-ones.** A time-tested method of building an organizing group is meeting with people one-to-one. A good rule of thumb is to listen and ask questions 80% of the time and talk 20% of the time. Get to know them. What are they having issues with? How does that fit into the organizing group?

4. **Gather contacts.** Walkouts at South High School in Minneapolis and Forest Lake happened when friends texted each other and news of the walkout spread over Snapchat and Facebook. Organizing needs ways to spread the news. Telephone numbers, email addresses, handles, and even home addresses all come into play when organizing. Keeping a list in a place where multiple organizers can have access is also important. It not only lets you communicate, it is also a great backup if someone drops their phone in the toilet or has it taken away.

5. **Map and chart.** Map out the physical and social/hierarchical structures of your school. Where do students and teachers congregate? Where are the surveillance cameras? Who are the student leaders? By student leaders I do not mean president of the student government. I mean people whom others look up to. Which students are joined by family, by after-school activities, and by cliques? Do this first with your organizing partner and then repeatedly once your group expands. By mapping the physical and social space you can start to see who to try bringing into your organizing circle.

6. **Who are the targets and what are the goals?** What identifiable goal are you trying to accomplish? Who has decision-making power to reach that goal and what leverage points would influence them?

7. **If staff want to help, they should organize staff first.** Staff can certainly be supporters, but if they want to get involved with organizing they should be focusing on other staff.

8. **Be aware of how you are defining yourself and where those narratives come from.** As an adult youth worker I have noticed that other adults use language of praise when talking about students with whom they work. For example, adults working with the nonprofit that manages MYC often talk about its members being representatives, which is true to an extent; they are members of a legislative committee that weighs in on bills. It would be one thing for students to organize student power groups in their school and then elect representatives to the MYC, but it is another for young people to apply to MYC and automatically become representatives to constituents that had no say in the matter. When coupled with little skill development around organizing or representing, this flattering

language can actually be disempowering, particularly if it means the charismatic folks are taking more and more leadership (Stephen & Snyder, 2017).

9. **Know that you are powerful!** In many ways you are in potentially more powerful positions than school staff. Tapping into that power only requires some focus and direction. Schools are hierarchical and authoritarian. For example, principals rarely need to give a reason for reassigning a teacher to different grades or require that they teach in many different classrooms which sets them up for failure. There is a danger of being fired and losing income and health insurance. As students however, you do not have that limitation.

There are more components of organizing but for the sake of space I will stop. As students, in some ways you are in the perfect position to force school staff to start working with you rather than you working for them. You do not deserve to be toothless and you do not deserve to receive messages like "wait until you're older," or "respect the people with experience." It is an improvement that student advisory positions exist, and in that regard I believe Minnesota is more student-friendly than other states, but adults advocated for the creation of these positions and since their creation there have not been significant advances in student power. You do tremendous work but as it stands now, there is no institutional, cultural, economic, or political pressure placed upon decision makers to listen to students. In a historical sense this is predictable. No group has gained power without fighting for it, and government entities have never preemptively made policies benefiting labor, women, trans and queer people, and people of color without being pressured from these groups (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2009). A government's purpose is to control and stabilize its constituency, and a common tactic when underrepresented populations start getting loud is to put them on a committee. It makes noisemakers feel powerful but decision making power continues to rest with government. We cannot and should not expect this behavior to magically and spontaneously change. So, let's disrupt, support each other, and build power.

In Solidarity and Love,

GRAYSON CARR

P.S. Some additional resources and groups to check out that could help you on your organizing path include:

- Industrial Workers of the World
- Wiki Tools of Resistance https://www.resistancemanual.org/Tools_of_Resistance
- http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/legislative-advocacy/main
- http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/resources/nonviolent/methods.php

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