



Lessons from the 2016 Boston Public School Walkouts

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During the spring of 2016, an estimated 3,500 students in the Boston Public Schools walked out of their classrooms and took to the streets to protest proposed cuts to public school budgets. The walkouts occurred in two waves, one in March and one in May. In response to this youth-led protest, Mayor Marty Walsh rescinded some of the proposed cuts, mostly to the high schools, though most cuts targeted on the lower grades remained.

With the support of key adult allies, the Boston walkouts were organized and led by young people aiming to defend their schools, assert youth voice in education policy, and hold the school districts and politicians accountable to their students. As a result of the walkout, a core group of youth became leaders of a broader educational justice movement in Boston and went on to play a critical role in defeating a state ballot initiative (Question 2) that would have led to the expansion of charter schools across the state.

We have done a case study of this movement, involving in-depth interviews with 13 key youth leaders, two adult supporters, and 28 high school focus group participants. Our results hold lessons for youth organizers, supportive adults, and public officials advocating for well-funded public schools. The bottom line is that by encouraging youth leadership, public school backers and leaders can strengthen efforts to secure funding and broaden community support.

Lessons for Young People

Here are our key findings about youth leadership:

Youth-led – Because young people conceived, organized, and launched the Boston walkouts, they consciously and successfully claimed ownership. Student leaders perceived and combated the narrative offered by some elected officials and media outlets that they were being manipulated by adults, especially in the teachers' union. Such accusations actually sparked their organizing work.

Collective and shared leadership – Youth leadership in the walkout was not hierarchal or centered on individuals but was collective and relatively horizontal. Young people formed new relationships within and across schools and spread leadership roles across the district. Veteran youth leaders provided peer-to-peer support to younger participants, encouraging them to plan meetings, speak publicly at events, lead chants and marches, and testify at school committee meetings.

United voice and youth power – The walkout brought together thousands of students from different high schools and backgrounds, allowing them to march in unison, stand in solidarity with one another, and amplify their collective voice. Young people became aware that their voices had been excluded from the political process, and through their willingness to engage in disruptive protests outside their schools, were able to influence critical education policy decisions and hold city officials accountable to their needs.

Representing disenfranchised communities – Many core leaders were youth of color who viewed the school budget cuts as a racial justice issue; they understood the cuts would have a disproportionate impact on education in Boston's low-income Black and Latino neighborhoods. Participants of color valued the opportunity to give voice to their broader communities and draw the attention of public officials to their issues.

Adult relationships – Youth appreciated the supports key adult allies and teachers provided by offering planning spaces and resources and facilitating walkout logistics. At the same time youth had to overcome the resistance and skepticism from adults. Often their voices were dismissed; and in some cases, school administrators threatened academic retaliation and locked the school doors when students walked out.

Broader connections – Students made connections between the budget cuts they were fighting and broader education policy and school funding questions like how charters drain money from public education. After the walkouts, core leaders went on to play a role in the victorious “No on 2” campaign, a grassroots effort that defeated a corporate-backed ballot initiative to lift the cap on funding charter schools in Massachusetts. The walkouts thus laid the groundwork for youth leaders to rise to the forefront of a larger educational justice movement.

What Adults Can Learn from the Walkouts

Parents, teachers, administrators, staff of non-profits serving youth, and sympathetic elected officials who want to encourage youth leadership in the educational justice movement can also draw important lessons from the Boston Public School walkouts. Such adults should:

Recognize the need for leadership from students themselves, those most directly affected by education policies. Adults who support public schools should encourage youth leadership and decision-making at every step of the way – involving them in identifying the issues, proposing solutions, formulating goals, developing strategies, implementing actions, and evaluating campaigns.

Act as experienced collaborators – Provide youth with support, such as organizing space, resources, and technical expertise while at the same time supporting youth ownership overall. Young people should think strategically for themselves and hold decision-making power. The Boston activist students recognized and were grateful for adult backing during the walkout and some said “We couldn’t have done it without them.” But they also made it clear that even adult allies with good intentions could become roadblocks by, for example, talking too much at meetings and derailing student-centered conversations.

Aside from the moral imperative to support student voices and youth leadership, adults in the educational justice movement should **understand that organized and empowered students can lead the way toward stronger public schools**. If students learn about the policies that support their own educational attainment, and take direct ownership in citizen campaigns to ensure such resources, they will learn invaluable personal lessons even as they improve schools and communities. More than funding alone is at stake in this movement.

Co-authored with Katelyn Kelly, Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Read more in Andrew King, Mariette Ayala, Sheetal Gowda, Katelyn Kelly, Jeffrey Moyer, and Mark R. Warren “[Fighting for the Souls of Our Schools: Understanding Youth Leadership in the 2016 Boston Student Walkout Movement](#)” (White Paper, 2017).

Learn more about the role of supporting those most affected by educational injustice in organizing efforts in Mark R. Warren [Lift Us Up! Don't Push Us Out! Voices from the Frontlines of the Educational Justice Movement](#) (Beacon Press, 2018).