

# Activist Education: Nurturing Students to Work for Social Change

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We became teachers because we want to make the world better. We believe the way to do this is to teach our students move through their lives critically aware of the ways in which change is necessary and to recognize and wield the power they have to make change. If democracy is truly “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” then all who live in a democratic society are responsible for contributing to the thriving society of which they are a part. A politically active public is necessary to fuel a democratic government; the earlier our students understand this, the more likely they will be to participate. We want our students to be active citizens. In order for them to truly internalize what that means, they have to understand deeply how people in the past harnessed the power of their citizenship to create change. They have to comprehend how people organized to solve problems and create new norms, and they need opportunities to make change themselves. ❷ TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE, ❹ INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY, ❻ POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE, AND ❿ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.<sup>1</sup>

In her book *Social Studies that Sticks*,<sup>2</sup> Laurel Schmidt writes about the importance of teaching kids “big ideas that can be examined and applied over and over.” At P.S. 234, one of our “big ideas” that transcends the time, place, and people we are studying is, in students’ words, “You have to go through a lot of hardships to make a big change.” We have also adapted Schmidt’s idea to teach four basic concepts—“survive, thrive, evolve, devolve”<sup>3</sup>—to help students make sense of history and contemporary events. We implemented these concepts in our own classrooms in what we call the “cycle of society”: survive, identify problems, organize, create new norms, and thrive. The cycle is the foundation upon which all of our social studies work is built.

## Studying Social Action—Historical and Current

Over the course of the year, we give every part of the societal cycle its due. This article focuses on our study of social action regarding women’s rights and civil rights and what different groups and individuals did to improve their imperfect societ-

ies so that more of its members could thrive. We start with a four-week unit of study that is an in-depth examination of women’s suffrage and civil rights, focusing on the methods of action people use to make change. Throughout this study of social action movements in history, our students brought in current examples of groups that are not thriving. This year, we discussed many issues, including recent police brutality cases in the United States and Ireland’s vote to legalize same-sex marriage. Students attended an assembly about banning horse-drawn carriages as well as a presentation given by a class parent directly involved in the fight for a traffic light at a dangerous intersection near the school. After thinking and talking about a number of modern social action movements, students chose one to join. We grouped students together in small, interest-based groups, and they formed organizations of their own to help make change, guided by our study of the actions of historical social change organizations and individuals.

## The Women’s Suffrage Movement

We began our study of women’s suffrage by examining the societal norms that applied to women in 19th century America; we used a variety of primary sources so they could construct understanding themselves from actual documents of the time period. Whenever we look at a primary source, we have three goals for students: understand the literal content, make inferences from the source, and articulate the big message that they think the source conveys.

Students analyzed the political cartoon “Woman’s ‘Sphere,’” wherein a woman peers over a fence, longing to engage in topics beyond the traditional women’s topics of fashion and gossip and listened and responded to D. Estabrook’s song, “Keep Woman in Her Sphere.”<sup>4</sup> In small groups, they read passages from the book *If You Lived When Women Won Their Rights*<sup>5</sup> and discussed the limitations on women’s educational and professional opportunities and rights after marriage. One student commented, “Women were treated like children. For example, they were thought of as having ‘delicate natures’ and weren’t allowed to do things like study the human body.” Another student

remarked, “Before women got married, their things belonged to their fathers. Once women got married, all of their things belonged to their husbands. Women couldn’t have property. Women, themselves, were considered property.”

After establishing an understanding of the norms of the time period and that those norms were upsetting to some women who felt oppressed, we examined how women began to organize to create change. We began this work by teaching students about the Convention at Seneca Falls, the first women’s rights convention. Students compare the Convention at Seneca Falls to the First and Second Continental Congresses that preceded the American Revolution, and the need for organization within a movement became clear. In particular, they noticed striking similarities between the Declaration of Sentiments and the Declaration of Independence—both list problems that the writers wanted to solve. We also introduced students to some of the early leaders of the women’s suffrage movement, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They recognized the qualities of these leaders as similar to the leaders of the American Revolution.



**THE LAST FEW BUTTONS ARE ALWAYS THE HARDEST.**  
—Chapin in the *St. Louis Star*.

Many political cartoons, both pro- and anti-suffrage, helped our students understand the challenges suffragists faced. Each time we talked about a cartoon, we asked students to name the words and images they saw, conjecture about their meaning, and explain the overall message of the cartoon. Referring back to the societal norms that the suffragists were trying to change, one student observed that, in the cartoon “What I Would do with the Suffragists,” which shows a woman strapped into a chair with a lock preventing her from speaking, the message might be, “Men did not like women speaking in public, and, in this cartoon they are trying to keep her mouth from talking.”

Students were also able to figure out the message of another cartoon in which a woman struggles with the last several buttons on the back of her blouse, each representing a state needed for ratification of the 19th Amendment. One pair wrote, “The last part of achieving something is always the hardest, but if you persevere you’ll get the job done.”



In addition to political cartoons, students recognized the suffragists’ use of civil disobedience and speeches as methods of change also used during the American Revolution. We told them the story of how in 1872 Susan B. Anthony and others voted illegally as an act of civil disobedience. They were enthralled by the question as to whether it might be okay to break the law as an act of protest. Students were understandably surprised when they learned about Anthony’s unfair trial, at which the presiding judge lost his temper and instructed the jury to find her guilty. We read the defiant words Anthony spoke at her sentencing, at which she famously said, “May it please your honor, I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty.” At this point, the students had a new hero, and the telling of Anthony’s story led them to explore the idea that, even though it seemed bad for Anthony that she was found guilty, the media attention at the absurdity of the trial was good for the cause. Students had many big ideas after this conversation: “Women should and can stand up for themselves. If you aren’t courageous enough, people will beat you down,” and “Making change takes confidence, time, dedication and sacrifice.”

Toward the end of our work on women’s suffrage, we watched the movie *Iron Jawed Angels*,<sup>6</sup> which was well worth the departure from primary sources. The story focuses on Alice Paul and the National Woman’s Party’s work to get a constitutional amendment to enfranchise women. It is both accessible and brutally honest about the hardships women faced during their fight for suffrage. Watching the movie helped students understand the different leaders of the movement and its general timeline. Students had a better grasp of how the 19th Amendment came to be, and they understood how profoundly true it is that as one student put it, “You have to work hard and take risks if you want

to get your rights.” Our study of women’s suffrage reinforced the cycle that we had examined earlier in the year: the women activists identified problems, organized, and created new norms so that more members of society could thrive.

## The Civil Rights Movement

Students looked at the societal norms that African Americans faced leading up to the civil rights movement during the next four-week unit of study. Because we designed our course around the cycle of society, students knew that, once again, people had to organize in order to change societal norms that prevented citizens of the society from thriving. As was the case with women’s suffrage, organizing for social change during the civil rights movement involved analysis of many different methods, including, writing mission statements for activist organizations; creating works of art with political messages; crafting and delivering speeches, songs, and pamphlets; participating in picketing actions, marches, boycotts, sit-ins, and strikes; and engaging in civil disobedience.

Three types of primary source documents that reflected the range of methods used by activists included a Norman Rockwell painting, images of the March on Washington, and a variety of civil rights songs. These sources inspired students in their own social action projects that were the culmination of our yearlong study.

One of the most powerful primary sources we used was Norman Rockwell’s painting, *The Problem We All Live With*,<sup>7</sup> which depicts Ruby Bridges, accompanied by four deputy U.S. marshals, walking to her first day at an all-white school in Louisiana, five years after the Brown decision. The n-word is scrawled on the wall behind her. (Before we began the lesson, we discussed the violence of systematic enslavement, dehumanization, and racism that the hate word connotes.) We took care to explain that students are likely to hear people use this word in ways that seem entertaining rather than harmful, such as in popular music. We believe it is necessary to be transparent about the fact that, while it is not a word we will ever use in school, people make different choices for different reasons about whether or not to use the word.

When we began talking about the painting, students shared their observations and ideas. Teachers recorded these thoughts on a copy of the painting displayed on the board:

“Maybe the white dress is showing that she is innocent.”

“Maybe she is supposed to be an angel.”

“The white could mean that she’s getting a new start.”

“The tomato makes me think of when they would lock you up in the middle of the town if you did something wrong and people could throw stuff at you, but what could this little girl have done so wrong?”

“I think she didn’t do anything, she is just going to school.”

“This connects a lot to the book, *I am Malala*,<sup>8</sup> because it’s the same thing: a little girl who just wants to go to school and she needs to be brave and stand up for her rights just to go to school.”

“Her strong forward gaze makes me think she is moving forward out of segregation. It reminds me of the way Inez Milholland looked ahead when she was leading the suffrage parade. Also it makes me think of the suffrage quote, ‘forward out of darkness, forward into light.’”

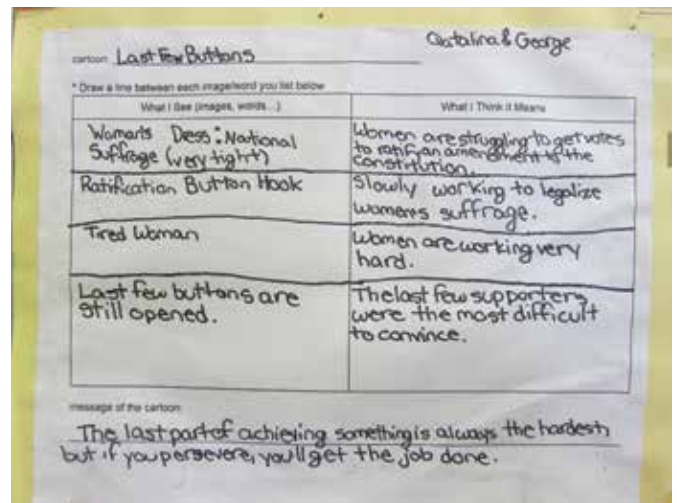
After students shared several ideas, discussed the message of the painting, and expressed a clear understanding of Bridges’ story, we talked about the power of visual art as a method of change. Students noticed that an image can convey a message faster than words, and that images often have an immediate emotional impact, even if you have to linger on the image to understand fully its meaning.

To further explore Bridges’ story, students watched news footage from 1960 of her entering William Franz School in New Orleans and of interviews with the psychologist who worked with her during that first difficult year. We also watched the video of Bridges’ meeting with President Obama when Rockwell’s painting was hung in the White House. After this series of lessons, students discussed the bravery required for social action to challenge societal norms and bring about change and the fact that, even as children, they, too, are equipped to be agents of change.

Like art, music plays an important role in social movements and, thus, in our study of the civil rights movement. As one of our students explained, “I think that people generally like music. . . . It might get stuck in their head, and they might actually think about the meaning of the song and what it means in the real world. People will try and help the cause if they agree with the song.” Music also has an affective power that helps people empathize with the emotions and message of the singers and then, perhaps, to take action.

We listened to several songs, including, “We Shall Overcome,”<sup>9</sup> performed by Pete Seeger; “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round,”<sup>10</sup> performed by The Roots; “Get Up Stand Up”<sup>11</sup> by Bob Marley & the Wailers; “Hurricane”<sup>12</sup> and “Blowin’ In the Wind”<sup>13</sup> by Bob Dylan; and “Living for the City”<sup>14</sup> by Stevie Wonder. Students read the lyrics, quickly recorded their thoughts, and talked about the meaning and messages of the songs. We listened to each song many times over the course of several days so students got to know them well. The story told in “Hurricane,” which is about the wrongful conviction of Rubin Carter, elicited a visceral reaction to that injustice. One student, shaking her head, said, “I think it really shows how racist the situation was. It’s horrible.” After getting to know several songs, students chose one lyric that stood out to them the most and created an image that they felt conveyed the message of the lyric.

In order to give students an understanding of the enormity and diversity of the civil rights movement, we displayed images from the March on Washington. We asked students to think about what big ideas they saw connecting the civil rights and women’s suffrage movements. Students discussed connections to the women’s suffrage parade of 1913. They shared their conclusions about social change movements:



“Instead of waiting for something to happen, we should make something happen.”

“When you’re passionate about something, it inspires a whole different side of you, and you might find a bravery you didn’t know you had.”

“You have to remember to pack snacks on the road to justice. It’s going to take a while, so you have to have persistence and perseverance. You have to have a plan B and lots of ideas.”

### Projects about Social Change

After studying how the activists in the civil rights and women’s suffrage movements worked to challenge societal norms and to make it possible for more citizens to thrive in society, students were ready to use what they now knew to create change themselves. Based on our ongoing conversations about current social change movements, each student chose a social issue they wanted to learn about and be involved in (e.g., ending factory farming, reversing global warming, or amending the Constitution to guarantee the right to marry to same-sex couples). We assigned students to small groups based on their choices.

The initial stages of this four-week project required a lot of research. Students familiarized themselves with organizations that already exist that are working on the same cause. Ultimately, students selected relevant information from the existing and historical organizations to create their own organization, with a particular purpose, name, slogan, and logo. Examples included Association for Clean Energy (ACE), whose slogan was “We’re going to ACE Clean Energy,” and Student Plastic Pollution Prevention Organization, with “Plastic is a time bomb set to explode!” as their slogan.

Groups chose from all of the different methods of action we studied to create mission statements, petitions, songs, poems, essays, letters, fliers for marches, and political cartoons. For example, students who formed the Same Sex Marriage Constitutional Amendment Organization (SMCAO) used the NAACP’s mission statement as a guide in order to inform their audience about their organization, their vision for the future and their goals.

### Stories in Song and Cartoon

Listening to music and analyzing song lyrics inspired students to create songs for their own organizations. One student from the Saving Animal Habitats Association explained,

“We thought it would be cool to write a song because people who were fighting for a cause back then wrote songs and [the songs] got famous...I chose ‘Get Up, Stand Up’ because it’s catchy and its message was clear. When I was writing the lyrics, I was trying to think about how to tell people to save the environment now, because, if we don’t act now, the future will be destroyed. Their song included the lyric ‘Get up, stand up,’ go switch off the lights!”

Political cartoons were another method of action students chose to include in their projects. For example, the students’ Organization for Fighting Factory Farms used drawings of familiar television cartoon characters with the caption, “Even some of your favorite childhood cartoon animals are victims” to share their message about the cruelty that can occur at factory farms.

After studying persuasive essay in writing workshop, each student also created a piece of persuasive social action writing, such as a speech, a letter to a lawmaker, or a brochure. Each year, our students surprise us by adding new methods of action, such as conveying messages on tote bags, t-shirts, and Instagram pages. This year, after talking about the treatment of nail salon workers and then encountering people handing out fact sheets at subway exits, one group thought it was a good idea to make fact sheets. They created fact sheets of their own that encouraged a ban on horse-drawn carriages (for sightseeing) and handed them out at subway exits. The students put themselves in the shoes of an actual organization member and end up truly owning this work. (🎯 INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY)

### A Social Action Fair

As a culmination of this work, the students hosted a social action fair. Families were invited to see all of the students’ hard work in the service of helping all of society’s members thrive. It was incredibly powerful for teachers and families, alike, to watch children speak up for something they believe in and, themselves, be inspired to think about some of the issues differently.

We love teaching about social action, then and now, and are grateful to work in a school where the philosophy matches our vision. At the end of our year together, we asked our students how this year’s social studies work had changed them. Their responses remind us that, as powerful as the work they produce is, the real product of the study is observable in the hearts and minds of our students, themselves (4 INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY):

“The civil rights study in particular changed the way I play my sport because I used to think African American kids would always foul my teammates, and after the civil rights study I changed my mind and just think people who foul a lot foul a lot. It does NOT matter where they come from or what race they are. I will never judge a whole group of people.”

“Social studies helped me understand that the people who make the most change aren’t just famous people like Martin Luther King, Jr., but regular, ordinary people like me and my classmates.”

Democracy is about everyone’s voice having equal power at the ballot box. It also means listening carefully to minority voices. When teachers collaborate with colleagues to write curriculum, that’s a democratic process. When we let our students’ interests and learning styles guide the work they do, that reflects democratic values. When we, kids and grown-ups alike, recognize the responsibility and use the power we have to make the world better, that’s making democracy work.

We’re writing these final words on June 26, 2015, the day the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples have an equal right to marry. For the last five years we’ve taught this study, students have formed organizations in support of same-sex marriage. Today, when we shared the news with them, students jumped out of their seats, shouted, applauded, and hugged.

One student said, “I think it’s good that gay marriage is legalized throughout the United States of America because then everybody can, well, a lot more people, can be happy and feel more free and just have a lot more happiness in their life.” Working together to expand equality, freedom, and happiness for all is what democracy looks like. ●

#### Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), [www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands).
2. Laurel Schmidt, *Social Studies that Sticks: How to Bring Content and Concepts to Life* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007), 35.
3. Schmidt, 2007, 35.
4. Elizabeth Knight, “Keep Woman in Her Sphere,” by D. Estabrook, *Songs of the Suffragettes*, (Folkways Records, 1958).
5. Anne Kamma, *If You Lived When Women Won Their Rights* (New York: Scholastic, 2008).
6. *Iron Jawed Angels*, Katja Von Garnier, director (DVD; HBO Studios, 2007).
7. Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*, 1964, oil on canvas, 91 cm x 150 cm (The White House).
8. Malala Yousafzai, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot By the Taliban* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2015).
9. Pete Seeger, “We Shall Overcome,” *Pete Seeger’s Greatest Hits* (Columbia Records/Legacy, 2002).
10. The Roots, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round,” *Soundtrack for a Revolution* (Entertainment One, 2011).
11. Bob Marley, “Get Up, Stand Up,” *Legend: The Best of Bob Marley and the Wailers* (Tuff Gong/Island, 2002).
12. Bob Dylan, “Hurricane,” *The Essential Bob Dylan*, (Columbia, 2000).
13. Bob Dylan, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” *The Essential Bob Dylan*, (Columbia, 2000).
14. Stevie Wonder, “Living for the City,” *Innervisions* (Tamla, 1976).

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## FUTURE NCSS CONFERENCES

**2015**

**New Orleans, Louisiana**

November 13–15, 2015  
Ernest N. Morial Convention Center  
Headquarters Hotel—Marriott New Orleans at the Convention Center

**2016**

**Washington, DC**

December 2–4, 2016  
Walter E. Washington Convention Center  
Headquarters Hotel—Renaissance Washington, DC Hotel

**2017**

**San Francisco, California**

November 17–19, 2017  
Moscone West  
Co-Headquarters Hotels—  
InterContinental San Francisco and  
San Francisco Marriott Marquis

**2018**

**Chicago, Illinois**

November 30–December 2, 2018  
Hyatt Regency Chicago

**2019**

**Austin, Texas**

November 22–24, 2019  
Austin Convention Center  
Headquarters Hotel—JW Marriott Austin

**2020**

(100th NCSS Annual Conference)

**Washington, DC**

December 4–6, 2020  
Walter E. Washington Convention Center  
Headquarters Hotels—  
Washington Marriott Marquis and  
Renaissance Washington, DC Hotel

**2021**

**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

November 19–21, 2021  
Minneapolis Convention Center  
Headquarters Hotel—Hilton Minneapolis