

The Future Starts Now: Student Advocacy and Activism

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Young people often have the time, energy, and idealism to address the injustice they see in the world. And now more than ever, our youth are using these resources to work at changing public policy. In the article [Student Activism 2.0](#), Harvard professor [Meira Levinson](#), who studies civic and multicultural education says, "We're in a groundswell moment of youth activism."

A [2016 UCLA survey of undergraduates](#) confirms this hunch, finding their own undergrads to be the most engaged student group since 1967. It's not just college students either. A research brief published by the [National Association for College Admission Counseling \(NACAC\)](#) -- [Effects of Political Rhetoric on College Bound Students](#) -- found the same trend of rising social activism among high school students.

[Jessica Taft](#), author and leading scholar on youth activism and professor at UC Santa Cruz, agrees and wants educators to take notice. In the [UC Santa Cruz Newscenter](#) article [Youth activism is on the rise around the globe, and adults should pay attention](#) Taft says, "Youth, given the opportunity to work alongside adults who are willing to manage their own power, can lead

activist communities and organizations. To not include them is anti-democratic. They deserve to be listened to, to be seen as collaborators...”

[Julie Reuben](#), professor of the history of American education at Harvard, is also quoted in the [Student Activism 2.0](#) article, adding that, “No youth movement [in history] has succeeded without adult allies.” This leads to an essential question for educators: what role do teachers, administrators, and communities play in the world of high school student activism? [NPR’s](#) article [From Little Rock to Parkland: A Brief History of Youth Activism](#) illustrates how education is often a focal point in student social movements.

When it comes to defining the ideal role of education in student social movements, some shy away from the notion of involvement. But this is may be shortsighted. It is important for educators not to confuse encouraging social advocacy with encouraging a specific social agenda. The school’s role is to help students think critically around issues, to understand varied viewpoints in order to stimulate critical thinking, and encourage both civil engagement and civil discourse. The goal should be for students to seek truth through free and independent thinking, drawing conclusions based in morality, responsibility, and human understanding.

In this way educators have a responsibility to nurture student voices and be allies in the world of social change. After all, school is one of the primary places where students learn about the social injustice that existed in the past and persists in the present. Education naturally helps students examine social and cultural mores, make deeper connections in their thinking, and formulate sound reasoning in and around these issues that involve policy.

However, it need not be only cognitive or theoretical support. Social work that is embedded into class work and the school community is an admirable goal being pursued by more institutions. High schools in particular are beginning to require students engage in community service projects and many encourage social justice art and essay participation, fundraising for those in need, and more.

Waldorf education in particular has a storied history and connection with social change and advocacy according to [Torin Finser, PhD](#), professor at Antioch University New England. He speaks in his article [Beyond 100: A return to the social justice roots of Waldorf Education](#) about several schools with roots in social justice. Rudolf Steiner created the first Waldorf school with social change in mind, which is why the Stuttgart school was accessible to girls, was tuition free, and was meant to educate, primarily, the children of factory workers.

Finser also cites several Waldorf schools around the world with distinct social justice missions in their founding, including a school in Nepal created for orphans and the children of people with leprosy and a school in New Zealand that uses Māori principles to teach in the first-nation tradition.

Waldorf schools may be particularly primed to help student advocates based on pedagogy and history, but all educational organizations have the opportunity to empower student advocacy. No matter how students choose to get involved, if they do choose to do so educators can help them

strengthen their voices, their actions, and their allies to be effective change agents for important issues facing society.

Photo Credit: [Kimberton Waldorf School](#)