

OPINION

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A Proud Tradition of Student Social Activism

Youth lead in rallying for social justice

BY MARC H. MORIAL

When the nation's students march to protest gun violence in their schools, they are following in a proud tradition of student leadership in social justice in America.

By early May 1963, the series of civil rights protests known as the Birmingham Campaign had been ongoing for more than a month. National attention generated by Martin Luther King Jr.'s arrest – which resulted in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail – had begun to fade. It was only when the children marched that America's attention would be riveted, and stay riveted.

Images of school children – mostly teenagers, but some as young as 7 or 9 – attacked by dogs and blasted with firehoses dominated the front pages of newspapers and television news broadcasts. The Children's Crusade, as the student march was called, marked a stark turning point in Birmingham and galvanized the effort to pass the Civil



Rights Act.

The Children's Crusade is among the best-known student acts of social activism, but was by no means the first. In 1924, students at Fisk University staged walkouts to protest efforts by its white president to steer the curriculum away from liberal arts toward industrial education. In the throes of the Great

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Depression, the American Youth Congress formed to advocate for young people and led to the establishment of the National Youth Administration jobs program.

The student activism of the 1960s helped bring about the end of the war in Vietnam, lowered the voting age to 18,

and fueled the emerging movements for women and LGBTQ people. In the 1980s students successfully pressured their universities to divest from companies profiting from apartheid in South Africa. The rise of the internet has given socially-active young people a critical organizing tool, which they've used to elevate hashtags like #NeverAgain,

violence in our communities.

In 2014, the year 12-year-old Tamir Rice was killed by police while playing with a toy gun, black people died at a rate of about 17 per 100,000 people, compared with 10 per 100,000 white people. Black men are 17 times more likely than white men to be shot and killed with guns. In 2012, the year Marissa Alexander was jailed for defending herself against her abuser, black women were murdered at a rate two-and-a-half times higher than their white counterparts, 56 percent of them by domestic partners or boyfriends, and nearly 60 percent of them with guns.

With the committed help of our youngest Urban Leaguers, we will continue to fight for common-sense reforms like universal background checks, limits to magazine capacity and muzzle speeds, keeping guns out of the hands of domestic abusers and a strong federal gun trafficking law.

Our hearts are with the hundreds of Urban League youth who are marching and fighting for their own lives, not only in Washington, but in every community in the nation.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Supporting Black Male Teachers in the Classroom

Help me be there for my students

BY FRANCIS PINA

Does being me give me an advantage in my inner-city classroom? I often reflect on this question because every school year I learn from a handful of students that I am their very first black male teacher.

If we got 100 teachers in a room, statistically I would be one of just two black males in that room and one of 50 who will leave the profession within our first five years. I am now in my fifth year of teaching and I want to stay where I am.

I know that it's not my skin tone but my cultural experiences that give me the advantage. I develop close bonds with my students quicker because I grew up in the same Boston neighborhoods as most of them, and have had close bonds with diverse people of color since my childhood.

Boston Public Schools has a diverse



student body that goes beyond race. Someone white might be Albanian or Polish, someone black might be Haitian or Nigerian and someone Asian might be Vietnamese or Filipino.

I have known and been close to this diversity since I was a student at Boston Public Schools. At the same time, I am aware of my limitations. I am not a monolith of the urban experience and a Boston childhood has changed greatly since I was growing up in the city.

More kids come into my classroom having experienced trauma and are labeled with behavioral problems than when I was a student. Many more have parental-like responsibilities.

So while I may be a role model, an exemplar for my black male students, I still have the same challenges as many other teachers in my school building.

Challenges like trying to teach Brianna how to interpret linear graphs when she is constantly responding to Facebook drama on her phone. Like trying to engage Jeffery in a Desmos activity when he is tired, hungry, and did not eat the school lunch. Or the larger challenge of making algebra meaningful when

many of my students are struggling socially and emotionally.

Yes, my ability to bond, to develop relationships with my students is the foundation I need to have to support them effectively, both academically and with their social-emotional needs. With every interaction, redirection and teachable moment in the hallways or on the sidewalks, I strengthen my influence.

However, there is a price I pay, an invisible tax, to doing that work, a weight that's placed on me when I learn about a student's self-harm, a friend's murder, immigration status or eviction.

Many of the things I have learned about my students over the years keep me up at night. This is why I and other teachers like me need coaching to continue learning, deepening and reflecting on our own social-emotional competencies so we can understand how to respond and support our students' social emotional struggles.

Just like my students, I want a coach for my own social-emotional learning, a professional who would focus on how I am building my own social-emotional competencies, facilitating those of

my students and caring for myself. This coach could be a district-level position and could work with my school's teaching team so we could all reflect on our coaching and our social-emotional needs.

Our district could also create a social-emotional learning mentor-teacher role. This could be an opportunity for a teacher to get trained in supporting other teachers' practices.

If my own most basic needs are not being met, I will not be able to consistently achieve the goals I have set for my students.

I am reminded of Audre Lorde's words, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation." I do not want my self-preservation to come from leaving the profession. I want to be there for my black students, and for all of my students, for as long as I can so that I can continue to bond with them, influence them and carry them forward. For that to happen, I need a coach of my own.

Francis Pina is a math teacher teaches at Charlestown High School in Boston Public Schools.