Raise Their Voices

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By fostering political agency, schools can ramp up students' civic knowledge and engagement.

What does the development of a young person's political agency look like, and what role can schools play in this process? Our research team recently considered these questions as part of a five-year study of schools and youth empowerment that involved more than 400 high school students from five different states (Seider & Graves, 2020).

Political agency—an individual's belief in their ability to effect social or political change—matters because it is one of the strongest predictors of a young person's civic engagement, political interest, and attention to current events (Beaumont, 2010). Scholars have also theorized that political agency can transform a young person's understanding of social or political issues into a commitment to social action and engagement (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

The Class of 2019 at Blackstone Academy. Photo courtesy of Blackstone Academy.

One of the young people we observed during our study was Adriana,[1] a student at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, whose parents had emigrated from the Dominican Republic shortly before she was born. As a 10th grader, Adriana described how empowered she felt by the opportunity to lead a community meeting at her school talking to her classmates about the 2014 police killing of African American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Following this experience, Adriana explained, "A lot of people might feel like they can't do anything [about social problems], but, in reality, you can do something. It might be just in your community, but it's better to do something locally than to do nothing at all."

One year later as an 11th grader, Adriana cited her participation in Blackstone's community improvement projects as having strengthened her feelings of political agency as well. "Usually teenagers feel like they can't really do much because they're so young … but there's so much opportunity out there," she said. Finally, in completing her senior social action project a year later, Adriana explained that she now felt empowered to engage in challenging social and political issues beyond her high school building. "My friends and I, whenever there's a march near us, we've been trying to go … just to help with making a difference and making the movement. So honestly wherever I see I can put my voice in, I'm gonna put my voice in."

Adriana's steady growth in political agency over four years of high school was representative of the experiences of many of her Blackstone Academy classmates as well. In fact, Adriana and her classmates demonstrated steeper growth in their political agency than did their peers across the broader sample of schools we studied. So exactly how did Blackstone Academy contribute to their students' growth? What are the takeaways for other educators committed to fostering their own students' political agency?

Students at Blackstone Academy in Rhode Island conduct a mock trail using courthouses in Providence and volunteer judges and attorneys to help decide the case. Photo by Christy White.

Positioning Students as Knowledge-Holders

Blackstone Academy is a nonprofit, public charter high school serving youth in three working-class Rhode Island cities. Located in an old factory building, the school has a student body of just 350 students. More than 80 percent of these young people come from low-income families, and the majority have parents who immigrated from South or Central America.

Once a month on Wednesday afternoons, the entire Blackstone Academy community convenes to learn about a topic selected and led by rotating groups of students. In recent years, topics have included bullying, feminism, micro-aggressions, Islamophobia, and autism. One Blackstone teacher said the meetings facilitate "a whole schoolwide conversation. So it's not limited to one teacher's classroom or an honors class. … And I think that shapes the whole school culture because it leaves the students to preserve and protect the culture."

Blackstone Academy students use their political agency to participate in a 2019 Global Climate Change Strike in Providence, Rhode Island. Photo courtesy of Blackstone Academy.

In the community meeting focused on Islamophobia, the students leading the meeting shared video clips with their classmates that illustrated some of the stereotyping and discrimination experienced by Muslims in the United States. Destiny was one of the young people leading this presentation. She explained in an interview that a main goal for her was teaching others how, in her view, "terrorists are nowhere close to being Muslim. If you are a terrorist, you are not Muslim because Allah has nothing to do with violence. He wants nothing to do with violence." She continued: "A lot of kids came up to me and my teacher [afterwards] and said that was amazing to learn about. Just seeing how different it was from what they grew up thinking."

This experience was an empowering one for Destiny and her co-presenters because they had the opportunity to influence the beliefs and attitudes of their classmates about an important social issue. Likewise, the rest of the student body had the opportunity to see their peers taking on this leadership and instructional role. Psychologist Albert Bandura (2006) argued that such opportunities for youth to influence their school community increase their belief that "political systems are also responsive and influenceable" (p. 30). Educators and school leaders can create these types of learning experiences to position students in the role of teacher and knowledge-holder in their own schools and classrooms.

Skills for Social Change

Service-learning experiences are another powerful way to introduce young people to specific skills involved in social-change work, expose them to adult mentors committed to such work, and offer practice in carrying out the work themselves. At Blackstone, academic classes end early two days a week so that students can spend the last two hours of the school day working with faculty on service-learning initiatives, which the school calls community improvement projects. Students are required to complete at least four of these semester-long projects prior to graduation, and they can choose projects that speak to their interests, such as housing and homelessness, poverty, health and well-being for teens, or the environment.

In a recent housing and homelessness project, for example, Blackstone students learned about issues of affordable housing within their city and then participated in a successful campaign led by a local organization to prevent utility

companies from shutting off the heat during the winter months for families behind on their bills. Students worked on a phone bank, calling people in the community, hearing their stories, and encouraging their participation in an upcoming community meeting with the utility company.

The teacher leading the project noted that the students felt connected to the campaign because it was an opportunity to make an impact in their own local community: "I think they like being outside the classroom and like still being in their community. We're not taking them to a community that they don't know or they're not familiar with. We're going back into their own communities." Learning experiences like this one deepened Blackstone students' feelings of political empowerment and belief in their own ability to effect social and political change.

Effecting Change in School

For many young people, their school community feels as much—or more—like their "real" community as does their neighborhood, county, or city. Because of this, school is an important place for students to see a direct impact of their efforts to effect change and invoke political agency.

Independent projects in the upper grades at Blackstone often focus on improving the school itself. In 11th grade civics, for example, Blackstone students work as a group to identify a policy in the student handbook with which they disagree, and then engage in the organizing and advocacy work necessary to challenge the policy. The Class of 2017, for example, aimed their sights on changing the school's technology policy, which prohibited the use of smart phones, tablets, and headphones during the school day.

Over several weeks, these students researched the effects of technology on student learning and developed a proposal for a "media pass" that would allow students to use personal-technology devices at certain times in the school day. They sought buy-in from the rest of the student body and created a presentation for the school's faculty and staff. Debates arose about issues such as whether the media pass should be usable during lunchtime or how Blackstone administrators should keep track of students who had lost their media pass privileges, and the civics students had to come to a consensus on how to address those issues in their proposal.

Ultimately, the civics students made their pitch to change the technology policy at the school's monthly faculty meeting. "In summary," a young man explained at the end of the 20-minute presentation, "the technology policy is outdated and incorrect, particularly in regard to tablets. So the media pass allows the use of phones and headphones at certain times. … And it helps us prepare for college, because in college you have more freedom to decide what you want to do." Faculty members applauded their students' efforts, promised to consider the proposal seriously, and ultimately voted to try out the proposed technology policy for the remainder of the school year. If things went smoothly, the faculty promised the change would become a permanent one (which it did, until a few years later when Blackstone's adoption of a 1:1 Chromebook initiative necessitated new updates to the policy).

This learning experience was deeply empowering for many of the participating civics students. "Being able to make change here, it does impact my future because I believe if I can make change within a small group, I can make change over a big group throughout a long period of time," said one student.

Effecting Change in the "Real World"

Senior year is a fruitful time for students to exercise in the "real world" the knowledge, skills, and capacities they have spent four years developing. At Blackstone, a yearlong social action project allows seniors to research any social issue about which they are passionate. They then proceed through a series of steps that include writing a research paper, interviewing people in the community, working with an organization, and carrying out a project that seeks to address their chosen topic.

One Blackstone student, Marco, who had immigrated to the United States as a middle schooler, chose to focus his senior project on the challenges facing English learners. Marco interviewed English learners across the city about

schooling practices that had and had not been helpful to their learning and compiled this information into a resource guide for educators across the city. "My major goal was to make teachers aware of what is more effective for ELs because I'm an EL too," Marco said. "But I feel like some strategies that maybe teachers don't know about would have helped me more. And I feel like if they were aware of it, they would do something about it."

As part of his senior project of helping to serve the community, a Blackstone Academy student conducts a lesson for elementary school students at a local elementary school. Photo courtesy of Blackstone Academy.

Marco sought through his senior project to have a tangible effect upon the English learners coming up behind him in primary and secondary schools across the city of Pawtucket. The effects of his project were further amplified when Blackstone's executive director, Carolyn Sheehan, arranged for Marco to testify before a state congressional committee about the importance of protecting funding for English learners in the state education budget. Though he had arrived in the United States only six years earlier with just a few words of English, Marco graduated from Blackstone Academy with a deep sense of having contributed to the success of English learners across his city and state. When schools and educators develop opportunities for students to effect change in the world, they empower them to be leaders.

Leave the World Better Than You Found It

Children's Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman (1992) once observed that, "Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it." In these words, Edelman reminds us of an essential goal underlying the work taking place in K–12 schools across the United States. However, for young people to actualize Edelman's vision of education, they must not only possess civic knowledge and skills, but also a sincere belief in their ability to effect social and political change. By sharing several of the promising practices taking place at Blackstone Academy, we have sought to offer actionable takeaways for—and also to ignite the imaginations of—K–12 educators committed to developing the next generation of engaged and empowered citizens.

References

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Endnote

[1] All students in this article are referred to by pseudonyms.

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