

10 WAYS YOUTH CAN ENGAGE IN ACTIVISM

Our country has a long history of youth-led movements that brought about significant social change. Young people have advocated for child labor laws, voting rights, civil rights, school desegregation, immigration reform and LGBT rights. Through their actions, the world has changed. Because young people often have the desire, energy and idealism to do something about the injustice they see in the world, they are powerful agents for change.

Our work in education helps students examine implicit and overt forms of bias and discrimination and as a result, educators often feel a responsibility to provide students with the structure, opportunity and tools to do something about the injustice they see in the world. Transforming students' feelings of anger, sadness and hopelessness into concrete actions that can make the world better is a vital teaching opportunity. Voting is one way to get your voice heard but there are a myriad of ways young people can make difference.

Below are ideas for bringing social activism into the classroom and outside of the school walls. These are lifelong skills and attitudes that teach students about citizenship and that there is something you can do when faced with injustice. The strategies can be acted upon individually, organized together as a group and young people can join with a larger effort that is taking place locally or nationally. The tactics also bring opportunities for students to read, write, research, think critically and talk with each other.

1. EDUCATE OTHERS

As students learn about an issue they care about, their natural instinct is to share their new knowledge and insight with others. Encourage this by providing live and online opportunities for them to teach others, including their classmates, younger students and adults in their lives. This can include school assemblies, community forums, teach-ins, peer education programs and social media forums. Include opportunities to share the information in interesting ways (written, art, theatre, etc.) and they should also give other students the chance to explore their own thoughts and feelings about the topics. Youth who want to know more may be more likely to learn from another young person.

2. ADVOCATE FOR LEGISLATION

Change comes about in a variety of ways and one of these is through legislative change. For example, the primary advocates for the DREAM Act have been young people known as the DREAMers, who have a personal investment in the issue. With your students, provide opportunities for them to learn about the history and impact of legislative change like the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#). Help them analyze proposed legislation in relation to their goals and assess the extent to which it will have an impact. They can study research that examines the extent to which legislation impacted injustice. Have students push for legislation by working with other groups with similar goals, building coalitions and [writing letters](#) to their legislators to advocate for specific local, state and federal laws.

3. RUN FOR OFFICE

Student government provides a chance for students to have a positive impact in their school and learn about how government works on a small scale. It gives youth the experience to reflect on and consolidate their own positions on important school issues, learn how to communicate those positions, build relationships with others and become a good listener in understanding constituent (i.e. other students) needs. It is also good practice for the future in getting involved in politics. Elected positions are not the only way to get involved; students can also become involved in groups like the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), peer mediation or other task forces that are working to improve their school.

4. DEMONSTRATE

Marching in the streets enables students to express themselves while meeting and connecting with other people who feel passionate about the same issues. Demonstrations and protests can be uplifting and empowering and can help students feel like they are part of a larger movement. In preparing to attend a demonstration or protest, have students consider what their goals are in attending the event and think through what message they want to convey. They can create posters, prepare songs or chants and practice symbolism (i.e. lying dead) that convey their thoughts and feelings. They should consider whether they want to go individually or organize a group of students from their school to go together, make transportation arrangements and ensure that safety concerns are addressed.

5. CREATE A PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN THAT INCLUDES SOCIAL MEDIA

There are many ways to develop or participate in a public awareness campaign. Educating people about an issue in order to inspire change can take place in school, in the community and online. Creating signs and posters using art and photography can be very effective as can videos and live speeches; these are all useful skills that young people can learn. In recent years, the use of social media to raise public awareness has been largely driven by young people and is a useful vehicle for raising issues and effecting change. The use of blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr, videos, memes and online petitions are just a few examples of how words travel fast online and can incite quick and effective action.

6. DO A SURVEY ABOUT THE ISSUE AND SHARE THE RESULTS

Understanding what people think and why is helpful in bringing about social change. Students can learn more about public opinions on issues by participating in surveys themselves and also reading about them. They can also create their own surveys. Using paper surveys or [online surveys](#), students can gain insight into how other students in their school or the larger community feel about an issue. This is useful in organizing others and addressing their concerns and needs; at the same time it builds math, critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

7. RAISE MONEY

Raising money is a concrete way for students to contribute to community or national efforts to address injustice. From organizing a bake sale around a local issue to fundraising on a larger scale for a national concern like racial disparities in the criminal justice system, raising money helps students feel like they are part of something bigger and backs the cause. Fundraisers can include selling items, auctions, entertainment, sponsoring events and more.

8. WRITE A LETTER TO A COMPANY

Students can reach out to companies or organizations that they feel have done something unfair or biased. This is a small act but can be an important experience for them in making a difference. For example, if students want to change the ways toy companies use gender role stereotypes to package and sell their toys or games, have them write letters to toy or video game companies and explain why they think their

practices are biased. In crafting a well-written letter with evidence and a clear statement of what needs to change, students learn useful skills in persuasion and at the same time, it has made a difference.

9. ENGAGE IN COMMUNITY SERVICE

In addition to organizing and advocating on a large scale, students should be encouraged to engage in community service on issues they care about. For example, if they are concerned about the stereotypes and violence directed at homeless people, in addition to advocating for legislation or attending a demonstration, students can also donate their time to help out in a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. Serving the people who are directly impacted gives young people firsthand knowledge of the situation, deepens their understanding and builds empathy.

10. GET THE PRESS INVOLVED

Help students understand that bringing publicity to their issue amplifies the message, gets more people concerned and potentially has a greater impact. They can write a press release, do an interview, write an op-ed in their local paper or invite a reporter to see what they are doing and write something about it. This sharpens their own message and serves to bring that message to a larger group of people.

ADDITIONAL ADL RESOURCES

- ADL Advocacy Center, www.adl.org/action-center/
- Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories About Bias and Injustice, www.adl.org/education-outreach/curriculum-resources/c/helping-students-make-sense.html
- Current Events Classroom, www.adl.org/education-outreach/curriculum-resources/c/current-events-classroom.html

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