

STATEMENT BY THE PHILADELPHIA STUDENTS UNION

On May 17th, students walked out of school in what became the largest walkout in Philadelphia history. Thousands of Philadelphia students participated in this action as they marched down Broad Street from the School District Building at 440 to City Hall. For that day, the city of Philadelphia bore witness to the power of the growing student movement.

Shortly after this action, the Mayor called for a meeting with the students of Philadelphia. He told students what we have all been hearing for too long, that the sacrifice must be “shared”.

To the powers that be, who have asked students and teachers to “share” the sacrifice: we have given up enough. This is a continuation of decades of disinvestment from public education in Philadelphia. Teachers already pay hundreds of dollars out of pocket for supplies for their classrooms. What sacrifices will students have to make? With a budget that cuts resources like counselors, students will sacrifice our access to financial aid and assistance with college applications. Students will have to sacrifice arts, music, sports, and all the elements that make school a place for learning and personal growth.

However, schools are not being asked to sacrifice their school police. With teachers managing classrooms at maximum capacity and school police as the only other school resource, how can we expect schools to be places for learning? We have seen the dramatic growth of the school-to-prison pipeline nationwide in conjunction with budgets that gut school districts to their bare bones. We, the students, have no other option but to fight back against the wave of austerity that is facing public education across the nation. We will win, because we have to.

What kind of future is there for us if we don’t win? Those of us that don’t succeed in school will be pushed out. Those of us that can’t get a job after school will become further marginalized. Twenty-three schools are set to be closed in Philadelphia. Of the affected students, 81% are Black, 11% are Latino, and 4% are white. Ninety-three percent are low-income. The future that is being planned for us is a nightmare vision akin to the Jim Crow era, where those without an education and no job will be funneled into the growing prison system, a system that certainly does not lack funding. Is this the future that we want? Is this the future that Philadelphia wants?

The resounding answer that we have heard from students and allies has been: No. Despite what appears to be a grim outlook on the state of education in Philadelphia, we have seen an outpouring of support from allies. In spite of the conditions we face in our public schools, we were able to continue our work in the struggle for quality public education. The Philadelphia Student Union is a member of Journey for Justice, a nation-wide coalition fighting against school closings. As members of the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools, we were victorious in winning a pilot program for Restorative Practices in 10 Philadelphia schools, a major step towards closing the school-to-prison pipeline. In May, we traveled to Chicago to show solidarity with students, parents, teachers and community members that faced school closings in their city. We continue to work with our partners and allies nationwide to defend public education and show our elected officials that we are a powerful force.

We have no other option but to fight back against the systems that oppress us and the larger forces that attempt to privatize our education and push us out. As students, we are organizing to demand a higher quality of education than what we have been handed by the powers that be. Young people have always been on the front lines of change. During the fight for Civil Rights, the Student Movement launched forward when four youths were arrested for demanding service at a segregated whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C. In today's fight for the right to a quality public education, we will again show the nation that the power of young people will outweigh the power of money and greed. We will continue to fight, because we know that the future that lies ahead is not an option.

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