

# **Fighting for the Souls of Our Schools: Understanding Youth Leadership in the 2016 Boston Student Walkout Movement**

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**Authors:** The Community-based Research Practicum team at the University of Massachusetts, Boston: Mariette Ayala, Sheetal Gowda, Katelyn Kelly, Andrew King, Jeffrey Moyer, and Mark R. Warren

**Collaborators:** Boston-area Youth Organizing Project and Youth on Board

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## About this Report

This report presents the findings of a collaborative research project between a research team at UMASS Boston and two youth justice groups in Boston: the Boston-area Youth Organizing Project and Youth on Board. Professor Mark R. Warren led the UMASS team, which consisted of five doctoral students: Mariette Ayala, Sheetal Gowda, Katelyn Kelly, Andrew King, and Jeffrey Moyer. Andrew King served as project coordinator. The research team is housed in a university course called The Practicum in Community Based Research. The practicum is designed to offer apprenticeship training in community-based, collaborative research to PhD students.

The project was conceived and designed by this collaboration. However, the UMASS team conducted the research and writing of the report. We continue to discuss our findings and analysis with our partners, and this process remains ongoing. As such, this report should be considered a work-in-progress. We hope it will stimulate discussion about the important role that youth leaders play in the struggle for educational justice. The UMASS team (and not our partners) is solely responsible for its contents.

We would like to thank our partner organizations and their staff as well as the Department of Public Policy and Public Affairs at UMASS Boston that supplied funds and other support for the project.

We would like to express a special thank you and appreciation to the youth leaders who led the walkouts in Boston and agreed to participate in this research. This report and the learnings contained therein rely on their commitment and leadership.

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Contact: Mark R. Warren  
Department of Public Policy and Public Affairs  
McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies  
[mark.warren@umb.edu](mailto:mark.warren@umb.edu)

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## I. Introduction

This report is the result of a collaborative research project undertaken by students in the Practicum in Community Based Research under the direction of Professor Mark R. Warren at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The purpose of this research project is to study how Boston youth emerged as leaders of the Spring 2016 BPS student walkout and how these young people understand and experience their leadership roles in the broader movement for educational justice during and since the walkout.

The research was conducted in partnership with two youth organizing groups in Boston who have helped youth develop their leadership skills: the Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP) and Youth on Board (YOB). We consulted with youth leaders and adult staff from these community partner organizations every step of the way in the design and conduct of the project.

During the spring of 2016, Boston Public School (BPS) students led large-scale walkouts from their schools in protest against proposed cuts to the BPS budget. Several thousand students walked-out of schools in March 2016, and about 800 walked out that May. In response, Mayor Marty Walsh rescinded some of the proposed cuts, particularly to the high schools where most of the walkouts occurred, although the majority of cuts were made. The walkout was organized and led by young people themselves, with the support of key adult allies.

A particularly strong group of high school student leaders and activists emerged out of this historic walkout movement and went on to exercise their agency and apply their new skills in the victorious ‘No on 2’ campaign, a grassroots effort which challenged a corporate-backed initiative to lift the cap on charter schools in Massachusetts. The momentum from the walkouts continues today as the youth continue to organize around educational justice issues. This project represents an opportunity for the walkout leaders to “tell their stories” in this powerful historic moment, and reflect on their experiences through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

In our research, we examined how student leaders launched the conversation around the proposed budget cuts amongst Boston public school students; mobilized and spread their message within and across schools; organized a historically large student demonstration on the Boston Common; and ultimately gave youth a voice in their education. A core focus of this research project was to understand how young people emerged as leaders through the walkout as well as their understandings and perceptions of their leadership roles in the BPS walkout and subsequent organizing efforts.

Through dialogue with our community partners we developed the following research questions:

1. Our over-arching research question—How did young people understand their emergence as leaders in the education justice movement as a result of the walkout and subsequent organizing efforts?
2. How has participation in organizing affected or impacted students individually and collectively?

3. What has been the impact of the walkouts and their aftermath on student experiences in schools?
4. How did school-based factors, administrators and /or teachers support or hinder young people's efforts?
5. What has been youth organizers' experience working with adults in the walkout movement and subsequent organizing campaigns?

## **II. Research Methods**

Our UMass Boston research team conducted all phases of this research process – planning, design, data collection, and data analysis – in close consultation with our community partners, Boston- area Youth Organizing Project and Youth on Board. Our partners both signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that gave our team permission to conduct the research and observe their meetings and events.

First we held preliminary research planning meetings with partner staff and youth leaders to discuss the research design and data collection and analysis strategies. Our partners then helped our team identify 13 key youth leaders of the walkouts to participate in the study. Interview participants include both youth under the age of 18 and young adults over 18, all of whom represent a variety of racial and gender identities. We personally contacted interview participants via phone, e-mail, or social media.

The team developed interview questions with consultation and feedback from youth participants in our community partner organizations. We then conducted 13 in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to explore students' experiences participating in the 2016 school walk out and the broader educational justice movement. Each of the interviews was conducted by two UMass researchers; one served as the interviewer while the other took observational notes. Interviews generally lasted 60-90 minutes and took place at the offices of one of our partner organizations. We often provided refreshments for participants during the interviews. All interview participants signed a permission form indicating that they were willing to be interviewed for this project, gave permission to use their real names in this report, and were willing to have the interviews recorded. Youth participants who were over the age of 18 signed an adult consent form; parents of youth under 18 signed a parent consent form and youth participants under the age of 18 signed an assent form.

The team also conducted three one-hour focus group interviews with approximately 6 participants in each group. The focus groups consisted of students from three different high schools (Snowden, Excel, and Boston Day & Evening Academy) who were involved in various levels in the walkouts and related activities. The goal was to understand how student leaders and their high school peers' school-based experiences were affected by the walkout. Focus group participants all signed the appropriate permission forms and were provided with refreshments. We also conducted a focus group interview with two key adult organizers who supported the youth through mentorship, and by playing supportive roles in the organizing of the walk out.

Lastly, we collected and examined supplementary, publicly shared artifacts to contribute to our understanding of the organizing movements. Some examples include flyers, website videos, Facebook events, and tweets.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and then transcribed either by a member of the research team or by a professional transcriber. The team then used the qualitative analysis software program MaxQDA to help analyze the data and identify key themes and lessons that addressed the above research questions. The resulting thematic framework was used as the basis for this report.

It should be noted that there are some limitations to this research. We collected data from a relatively small number of youth leaders, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and perspectives that exist among BPS students who participated in the walkout. The fact that interviewees were selected by recommendation of our community partners may bias our results since we did not interview youth leaders who are not affiliated to these groups. What is special about our study is that we interviewed youth leaders at a high point of youth organizing. The experience of youth leaders during more “normal” times may well be different.

### **III. The BPS Walkout**

At 11:00 a.m. on March 7, 2016 a reported 3,500 students walked out of their schools to protest proposed cuts in the Boston Public Schools budget. More than a thousand of those students marched to the Boston Common where they joined their peers from across the city before crossing Beacon Street to the State House and then marching past City Hall to Faneuil Hall Marketplace.<sup>1</sup> These students rallied together to denounce anticipated program cuts and the expected loss of teaching positions. Rally speakers called for more resources for public schools, not less, to improve and strengthen public education in Boston.

The idea of the walkout started with a group of young women who were students at Snowden International High School. While attending a conference at Harvard University, a young woman from Snowden raised the issue of the proposed budget cuts with her peers during a breakout discussion. As she recounts:

We were basically talking about issues that we see in our community and how we would want to improve them. And we were all in separate groups and we were talking about the issues but no one knew about the budget cuts . . . and these were all students from BPS. . . .that’s when we came up with the whole walkout idea.

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, Jeremy C. (March 7, 2016) “More than 1,000 Boston students march to protest cuts”. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/03/07/bps-students-protest-monday/oxUrL40G9vujR2TkmmcsN/story.html>

We have to do something about it. We have to stand up and basically get our budget set up so that it works for us.

The three young women posted a call for a walkout on Facebook and it spread like wildfire. Other BPS students began to meet to discuss ways in which they could organize to gain the attention of public officials who controlled the future of the Boston Public Schools. Several of these young people were already active in the Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP) whose office was located close to Snowden. Youth leader Michael Jones describes how the BYOP office became the hub for organizing the walkout:

The meeting space we were using at first was the Copley library. That's where me and the other guys and then the women from Snowden met. And we also realized we're gonna need a place where we can be for long hours in order to like take notes . . . So the meeting place then shifted from the Copley library to BYOP and BYOP has kind of been where everything has been happening so far.

While participants had different experiences and levels of involvement with youth organizations, the core leaders identified the Youth Organizers United for the Now Generation (YOUNG) coalition, a collaborative between BYOP and YOB, as a space which provided youth a supportive environment to prepare for the walkout. According to youth leader Gabi Pereira, the adult staff at these organizations supported youth to make decisions for themselves:

BYOP let us hold a lot of the walkout meetings in their space and provide a very friendly youth ran space. . . it's always young people talking, it's always young people setting the agenda, and I think that's very important because if those spaces are going to be for supporting young people in achieving their concerns or their ideas, it's very important that young people are taking every position in that process.

While the original walkout flyer was designed by students at Snowden International, students from other schools involved in the walkout used different methods to help spread word about the walkout and its goals. Student leaders printed hundreds of fliers to pass out around their schools, created Facebook groups and chats, and leveraged other social media platforms. While student outreach methods varied, youth leaders kept the walkout movement's image and message uniform. Youth leader Anthony Englert describes how he heard about and got involved with the walkout movement:

I first got started with the walkout in the middle of French class when I heard a couple of friends who were just chatting together "Oh did you hear about the walkouts going on next Tuesday?" . . . I didn't have a clue at the time, but when I went home I did a little research on social media and found this one walkout page. I found that there were two different ones, so I just started to consolidate

between the two groups and I ended up going to one of the first planning meetings on the following Sunday. And from that point, I just got involved and just kept it up.

On the day of the walkout, some students, like those who attended Snowden or Boston Day and Evening, marched out of their schools with the support of many of their teachers and administrators. In other schools, students were actively discouraged from walking out by their administrators. When students from Boston Day and Evening Academy walked out, they tried to call out Madison students as they marched past the school on the way to the T station:

Like when we were walking past it, we were like, “Yo come on, support and everything.” And the administration came out and they were just like making sure nobody got into the building, nobody was like saying too much, telling us to get off like the property but we were on a public sidewalk and we were protesting. You can’t really tell us not to do that. We were hollering at them like, “Yo, come on, come support.” And they were just like, “Nah, they’re not letting us out, they’re not letting us out. It’s not cool.”

Many of the participants described the scene when they first arrived on the Boston Common with great excitement. Because the student organizers had put a great deal of time and effort into planning the walkout, it was all the more empowering for them to watch group after group of students arrive, providing them with a sense of great satisfaction and accomplishment . Erik Lazo describes the inspiring scene:

The most memorable was when we stopped at the gazebo. I remember going up the stairs and . . . everybody just amalgamated into a circle around it, just looking up. It was awesome because I could see lines of people this way going all the way. One in front of me, one behind me and just like this entire stretch, this ocean of students. It was like, whoa. Faces I didn’t even know and faces I did know, too. That was especially awesome.

While the majority of the student leaders spoke to the success of the walkout and the support that they received from both their peers as well as adult supporters, some of the participants expressed their frustration with some negative encounters. While the majority of students gathered peacefully to have their voices heard, Jahi Spaloss says some students got into fights with each other.

Some of the students in the crowd were involved in gangs, which unfortunately some of those rival gangs were also a part of that crowd and that created some tension . . . So, I think at least three fights broke out between rival gang members throughout the crowd but they were also dismissed very quickly by some of our peacekeepers and such.



Given the recent tensions between police and youth of color protesting for black lives around the country, some walkout organizers were worried about how the police would respond to the youth rally. For the most part the police remained restrained and sometimes even expressed support for the marchers. Jahi, however, recalls an incident of harassment:

A police officer came up to me and a few other students behind me during the demonstration and said, “If I really wanted to, I could just pepper spray you guys and just arrest you for assault and battery just now and there’s nothing you guys would be able to do about it.” And then after that he even egged on some of the students to hit them, to hit him first, to see if they really got the balls. He’s like, “If you really got the balls, hit me right now. I’d love to fight one of you kids.”

These challenges, however, did not take away from the overall feelings of success and accomplishment among the walkout leaders. Gabi reflects on lessons learned during the walkout:

This is probably the most peaceful protest we have ever seen. I thought a very important lesson that I learned was with everything that's happening today – police brutality, I think it’s very important to give people a chance, but also try to make that connection with them, because we also had street workers there that were acting like peacekeepers – to the police from the youth peacekeepers, and I realized that not all the world is against us. There are people out there in the shadows who support us, quietly.

The walkout received widespread media coverage, including mention in the New York Times. The mayor responded immediately. He met with walkout leaders and the next day announced that he was restoring the majority of the budget cuts to the city’s high schools. The proposed cuts to the rest of the system, however, would remain. Walkout leaders were pleased that they had defended their schools through an exertion of youth voice and power, but continued to be concerned that the proposed cuts would harm their younger brothers and sisters’ education. They organized a second walkout on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016, calling for the restoration of all funding for Boston Public Schools. About 800 students walked out this time, a smaller number than before, but still impressive because students made the effort and took the risk to rally in solidarity with younger Boston students. Youth also worked in coalition with adult groups in the Boston Educational Justice Alliance (BEJA) to speak out against the budget cuts at school committee meetings and town halls.

Eventually, the school committee and city council voted for the remaining budget cuts, but the walkouts proved to be an historic moment for the youth and education justice movement in Boston. While some youth had been active in BYOP and BSAC prior to the walkout, the action launched a new generation of youth leaders. Many became active in the Save Our Public Schools campaign to oppose a corporate backed

ballot initiative that would have raised the state cap on charter schools. Youth leaders knocked on doors and spoke out at rallies, and ultimately played an integral role in defeating the measure in the November election. In protest of the election of Donald Trump as president, hundreds of students walked out for a third time in December, raising their voices against Trump’s racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-public school agenda and the climate of fear it has promoted among marginalized students.

#### **IV. Youth Leadership**

A remarkably strong and talented group of BPS high school students across the city emerged organically as leaders of the walkout movement, and have gone on to lead a broader educational justice movement in the city. These young people took on a range of different leadership roles before, during, and after the walkout, supporting each other and drawing out each other’s leadership abilities. We found that in the walkout movement, youth leadership was enacted and understood in range of ways that tended towards non-traditional, collectivist and distributive models of leadership. In this sense the walkouts were ‘leaderful’ and decentralized, resembling other youth-led movements like Black Lives Matter. The YOUNG Coalition activated its networks to spread the word about the student walkouts and provided key supports, resources and leadership skills training to students organizing in the schools. Thus, the walkout in all of its planning and implementation phases served as a powerful leadership development process that empowered participants with new relationships and skills, and an increased sense of self-confidence and agency, all of which enabled youth to realize their capacity as leaders.

#### **Veteran leaders as mentors and supporters**

Key to the success of the walkout movement was a group of experienced youth leaders –the “veterans” – according to Luis Navarro, who applied and sharpened their leadership skills and leveraged their organizational resources and supports outside of the schools to recruit and organize students within the schools, and help develop their capacity as leaders. The veterans were experienced youth leaders who had been trained by youth organizing groups such as BYOP prior to the walkout. Therefore these participants already had organizing experience, skills, and knowledge that made them natural candidates for leadership in the walkout movement. But they did not just try to take leadership for themselves. The “veteran” leaders were aware of their role and felt an obligation to support and mentor a younger group of student leaders. They played a central role recruiting new organizers and mobilizing students for the walkout. Fania Joseph, one of these veterans and president of BSAC, puts it this way: “I ended up with a leadership role because I [already] organized a lot.” Edward Tapia, another experienced youth leader, describes his role:

I'm that bridge between activism and high school...I helped a lot with bringing students out of my school and informing students around my school about the walkout. And then I also helped organize and facilitate during the rally at the Boston Commons. We brought out about 200 students from my school alone.

Most veteran organizers understand their leadership role as a *supportive* one. They encouraged younger BPS students to come to walkout planning meetings, spread the word, and "have their voices heard." They then served as marshals and chant leaders during the walkouts. As Luis explains:

A lot of them see me as ...a veteran, so they were like okay we can go to him for any questions or if we're confused or we need help...so ...I was a support throughout the walkout... We were just the tools to teach them what to do in a march, what you should do, what you shouldn't do, who should be your allies, adult support just in case police officers come in contact... I decided to take my position as youth leader and give it to the youth that are younger than me and want to be in the game. So I'm kind of like retiring, giving up the "chant."

Ian McSorley, an experienced BYOP leader says, "...Because I'm getting older my job is to let the younger people speak...to let the younger people be protected and heard." Brian Foster reflected on his responsibilities as a recruiter and a source of guidance:

People were looking up to me for answers, coming to me like, "Hey when's the next meeting...? How do we interact with teachers when they say this? What do we do if they block doors?" ... I took the job very seriously. I recruited very great leaders who are now working with BYOP or volunteering in meetings ... I got a lot of people engaged. We built a great team.

Youth leader Rishka Pizarro-Reid discusses her skepticism of the term "leader" and emphasizes her practical support role:

So it was me just being someone as support... I'm a leader but ...I don't like having that title leader, because I feel like I have so much more behind it. So when you say leader, I think I'm just helping everybody else figure out what is really going on with Boston and their public schools.

Some veteran organizers perceive their transfer of leadership skills as "passing on the torch" to a younger cadre of activists who developed and *became* leaders through their participation in the walkout movement. As Ian explains,

I've kind of helped to pass down the torch; now there's two new coordinators for the YOUNG coalition so I'm stepping down from that and being more supportive.

Reflecting on the third walkout, Jahi explains that he wants the younger leaders to have a chance to make history:

I want to give this chance to younger people to actually mobilize and do what I did in the last two walkouts. I want to give them that glory as well. I wanted to show them that they actually have that power and especially because this is like probably one of the most important moments in our modern day history for this.

### **Empowering new leaders through training and skill development**

We found that participation in youth organizing groups provided BPS students with valuable leadership development opportunities before, during and after the walkouts. Participants often credited particular organizations such as BYOP, YOUNG, BSAC, or even a school debate team - as a source of their leadership skills. These opportunities included the ability to take part in planning meetings, speak publicly at events, speak on the megaphone during the walkout, lead chants and marches, testify at school committee hearings, and educate peers on the issues. This leadership training enabled students to gain new skills and experiential knowledge, and empowered them with a sense of self-confidence, assertiveness, and agency. Thus, youth were enabled to realize their potential as leaders –and to understand and value their leadership – through *practice* in organizing.

One of the new leaders, Erik Lazo, discusses the public speaking experience he gained through participation in walkout planning meetings:

... I'd be a leader of the walkout since I was very committed since the beginning and prior to the entire commotion. I went to many meetings... not just BYOP. BSAC and places in Jamaica Plain or random places I don't even know and I would speak, I would talk, I would even speak into the little committee meetings over there.

Erik recalls that youth organizers were given key tools that embodied and symbolized their leadership ability: "I guess what really symbolizes you as a leader is having the megaphone on you. That shows you hey, I have all the voice here." Gabi credits her school and her peers on her high school debate team for helping her discover the leader and activist in her. "I just want to say, my school specifically, a lot of the leadership comes from the debate league in our school. Once you are part of the debate league, you are seen as a leader." Gabi merits her emergence as a leader to her ability to take advantage of the various opportunities and platforms that came her way.

As a result of these development opportunities, the new youth leaders felt confident to plan and organize the walkouts, along with their veteran counterparts. Trinity Kelly describes the central role that trained youth organizers played in facilitating the walkouts:

All the leaders that were on the microphones and were chanting and were leading marches were all from BYOP. And we had been trained on how to handle certain situations. And for the second one, we played the entire leadership role. The entire second walkout was planned in the BYOP office by me and other student leaders.

### **A profound sense of responsibility**

Several participants stepped up into leadership roles out of a profound sense of responsibility to their broader community: Gabi described it as “representing” for her peers and community. She believed she would be doing a dis-service to her peers and community if she failed to represent them appropriately.

When I take leadership roles it’s like not a leadership. I don’t think of myself as standing up for others. It’s me talking with the community, holding all their ideas and perspectives. Any chance I get at a platform, it is my duty to make sure all their experiences are expressed, because a lot of them either don’t have the time...or they have family issues, and lack the family support and platform.

Along those lines, Michael Jones talks about his obligation to fight for more resources for public schools and to address critical issues facing them:

I got involved because of principles. I wanted full education for people. I wanted full resources, full advocacy for students also because of the fact that I want to be a teacher “when I grow up.” And I felt like the only way I can do that is by making sure that the resources that are here now don’t get cut for the future that I’m trying to create or be a part of. And the only way I can personally do that on my end is by being a part of creating that future and that’s how I got involved in the leadership position.

### **Walkout organizers become leaders in their schools**

Many of the walkout organizers, like Gabi and Trinity, subsequently became leaders in their high schools, if they hadn’t already been leaders. Brian describes how his mentees are carrying on this legacy of organizing at Excel High School:

The people I left the torch with, people like Trinity, Gabi, Malik who are now leading that school at Excel, the kids there are more radical and they’re hosting meetings at auditoriums without staff permission. That’s amazing, because kids back then wouldn’t even roam the hallways by themselves.

Trinity enthusiastically describes how other students in her school now view her and Gabi as leaders who they come to for advice, guidance and support, in the same way that she and Gabi looked up to Brian:

People from my school now view us as leaders... people want to do something about the injustice that's happening ... in South Boston High... So people will come to me and Gabi and ask us about ... issues that will happen to them. We definitely have served a role of leadership in that school in the sense of people coming to us for help with things that they don't know how to handle. Like how we used to go to Brian. So it's cool to take on the role that we always saw Brian in because we really looked up to him and now we have people looking up to us in the same way that me and Gabi looked up to Brian.

Gabi elaborates on this theme:

Before I was just a freshman in school wondering what the hell was on the third floor, and now I'm getting asked around the school my opinion on certain things, asking what can they do to help me... My leadership in the school now is very prominent... We have emerged as leaders, the student body really sees us now. Any little concern they have, they look to us, they tell us, "Hey, have you noticed this? Do you think we should do something about this?" A lot of expectation has been brought upon us. I've gotten asked beyond the student government, and I've developed more close relationship with a lot of my Deans, my principal, and my teachers.

### **Intersecting Youth Identities**

Student leaders in the walkouts say that intersecting identities of race and gender played important roles in their leadership experience. Many of the student leaders suggest that they came to be involved in the BPS walkouts because budget cuts directly impacted communities of color. They believe that a quality and equitable education is their best opportunity to break from poverty, marginalization, and oppression. Jahi Spaloss sums up this sentiment best when he says:

About 80% of BPS students are of color. Most of them come from very impoverished neighborhoods. So this is highly effective...to come into an educational facility that gives them that chance to rebound and bounce back to a better position in their lives, for not only them, but also their families and community.

In addition to being directly impacted by the budget cuts, student leaders believed now more than ever before that they needed to stand up together, as a unified movement,

to represent the struggles of marginalized students. Several students of color say that it was their moral obligation to represent and fight for issues related to educational justice, as communities of color would be the most affected by the proposed budget cuts. As BPS students of color they feel they embody the challenges and struggles faced by communities of color outside the classroom, and hence the importance of drawing the attention of public officials and citizens to these issues. As Gabi notes:

I represent various people of color, women in general, Hispanics, LatinX, young people, low-income families, and first generation of immigrant parents. So, in every platform that I am given a chance to speak, I must bring all those identities with me, and if I don't stand up for voice people's concerns, then I would be doing an injustice to the communities that I am part of.

Student leaders' racial identities allowed them to engage in critical dialogue with their fellow peers. Ian talks about communicating with his white friends, attempting to make them aware of the struggles of students of color. Michael explains how being a person of mixed race allowed him to communicate with students of all races and ethnicities. In fact, Rishka, who is of mixed race and bilingual, found background to be advantageous as she was able to reach out and communicate with a wider range of students:

I think as a mixed black person, it helped me a lot because I don't think I would be as wise and smart about certain situations if I wasn't bilingual. It helps a lot. Sometimes you'll run across a few Spanish people who do not understand what's happening but they want support. So, I love that I am able to help you understand what's actually happening. I can help us grow together. I can help us do certain things together.

Young peoples' gender identity also emerged as an important topic of conversation. Male and female student leaders are cognizant of the inequities in gender representation in leadership positions. Trinity and Gabi exemplify the central and powerful role that women's leadership played in the walkout and the intersectional nature of the youth justice movement as it seeks to combat patriarchy and adultism. Trinity and Gabi are quite conscious of their identities as women leaders in the movement as they have experienced sexism in organizing spaces. As Gabi explains,

There are a lot of men and underrepresentation of women. I think what happens is sexism gets in the way, and when you think of a leader and like an organizing group you think of a man...[but] it was started by women, by LGBTQ people, people of color, these communities started organizing, these were the people who started organizing. A lot of the organizing was by women...

Michael notes that often, in organizing, it is mostly men at the table. Several of the student leaders state that there needs to be greater representation of women leaders not just in America, but around the world. Trinity refers to the absence of women's voices in organizing, as well as the difficulty in being heard when present:

I'd say that the biggest thing that affects my experience is just being a young woman involved with trying to be a leader is difficult...In this society as a woman, it is hard to take a leadership role and get taken seriously. And there have been a lot of times that I have had in organizing spaces I felt were my space...when we open up, men will talk over me when I try to explain...will cut me off.

Trinity says that discussion forums and leadership spaces are hostile to women's voices and opinions and they are sexist in nature – imposing expected societal norms and behaviors on women. Gabi says that as she became more aware of her identity in these spaces, she realized how she had implicitly followed appropriate gendered behaviors. Initially, when students were called upon to take leadership roles, she looked to her male peers to assume those roles. But not anymore. She notes that most social movements historically have been started and led by women, and yet there is an underrepresentation of women in organizing leadership roles today. However, young women walkout leaders like Trinity, Gabi, Fania, and Rossy Santana insist that they will not be deterred by patriarchy in their struggle for educational justice. Gabi says that the obstacles women face only make her more determined to assert her role:

Young people are not really given platforms...You have to think of intersectionality – Women aren't, and women of color aren't [given opportunities]. Your sexuality plays into it...It impacts me a lot. People are stunned...This Latina woman is taking a stance in a leadership role, where did she come from? ... It teaches me to have a harder experience freely organizing because of racism, sexism. That's okay. It makes me even more passionate and willing to be the first one to jump up. It's trained me to say my opinion on the spot.

Trinity explains how her gender identity motivates her to fight against sexism in youth organizing spaces:

But it also gives me like the motivation to succeed more because I do want to prove people wrong. There needs to be more women leaders. We need to have more representation of women leaders in the world, in America ... You need to take action, you need to speak up for yourself and show the world how powerful women are. ... So having to identify as being a young woman in this world has really affected my experience in a learning way... It's just been a learning experience... I feel very proud to be a leader and a woman and a young person.



Male peers in the walkout movement try to be inclusive and provide an equitable opportunity for women to be an integral part of organizing efforts. Most of them acknowledge their position of privilege as males, which makes it easier for them to be heard and respected in organizing. Several of the more experienced male leaders assert that they have made conscious efforts to mentor their women comrades in BYOP and BSAC, providing them with the support and scaffolding necessary to become leaders in the movement. In fact, Brian takes great pride in how his protégés Trinity and Gabi have grown into the roles of being leaders at YOUNG. Furthermore, Michael mentions that he has been inspired by black feminists, and believes that black feminism is the best method to challenge existing institutional structures and dismantling oppression:

I did a black feminism case on the debate team. If you get a chance to read it by Alexander Weheliye called *Habeas Viscus* and it talks about black feminism. It is not the only way of dismantling oppression, but the best way. It takes work from Angela Davis, ...bell hooks, and it is self-love that makes change in the world...It allowed me to create a narrative about who I am, or whom I am trying to be, but it got me involved in philosophy and politics.

While female leaders have been inspired by other activists, feminists, and adults in their life, they themselves have inspired a new generation of girls who are willing to actively engage in movements related to social and educational justice. They admit that the process of leadership in organizing was not an easy journey. There have been negative and positive outcomes, but it has been a journey of learning and self-discovery. Trinity, Gabi, and Fania believe that they have encouraged young girls to stand up and speak for themselves, and show to the world their inner strength, perseverance, and collective power. Fania notes that if there is one thing that she learned from the election results in November 2016 – it is that women have to strive harder to be heard and accepted as leaders:

As a young lady, I see that females get treated differently from males. A guy, as soon as they want something, they get it automatically...this whole election, with Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, they were afraid of Hillary becoming president. I mean that's really crazy...I learned something, to be ambitious and get it. I persevere through a lot of things in life because if you don't persevere and fight for what you want, you won't get it, because perseverance is key.

Our research revealed that youth leaders became more aware of their individual identities through the walkouts, which had varying yet significant impacts on their organizing experiences. In some cases, students' racial or gender identities made them feel marginalized in activist spaces and in some cases participants' identities also empowered them with a sense of purpose and ability to connect with those for whom they are fighting. Participating in organizing, coupled with political education, has made most of the young people aware of whatever privileges they have and more sensitive to the

needs of other students with varying abilities from diverse backgrounds. This commitment to self-awareness and social consciousness has helped youth build a diverse, multi-racial educational justice movement with strong women leadership.

## V. Impacts of Walkout

### **Youth assert their collective voice in politics**

Many student leaders viewed the BPS walkout movement as a response and challenge to Boston's adult-run political establishment, which they believe has chronically underfunded public schools as part of a larger assault on the city's low-income youth of color. The BPS walkout brought together thousands of young people from a diverse array of backgrounds and schools, allowing them to march and chant in unison, stand in solidarity with each other and amplify their collective voice. Boston youth organizers viewed the walkout movement as an expression of their collective power as young people –what they often termed “youth power” – to influence critical education policy decisions that directly impact them, and hold the Mayor and other city officials accountable.

Student organizers came to view the 2016 BPS budget cuts as part of a broader system of intersecting issues that includes the underfunding of the city's public schools, the privatization of public education through charter schools, the creation of a school-to-prison pipeline, and the perpetual neglect of Boston's youth of color. They see an adult controlled city establishment making decisions and policies that directly affect youth, while excluding and silencing youth voice. Brian Foster points out that politicians make decisions that negatively impact youth while excluding their input:

That's also a problem that we have in society is that we're always brushed aside. You know, this is our education you're playing with.... you might be behind the desk making the policies, but you're affecting our lives and this is what we're saying about it. We're not content with this, listen to us.

Jahi also discusses the marginalization and exclusion of youth voices in the political process,

Unfortunately we live in a society where everything is actually determined by your age and your social status in the world. Naturally no one is ever gonna necessarily listen to a high schooler about political issues that they believe in, regardless if they actually know what they're talking about or not.

Student leaders, who were knowledgeable of school budget cuts and their impacts on their schools, helped their fellow students realize that they should have a voice in determining the education policies and decisions which directly affect them. An Excel

High School student says that BPS students are now critical of anti-youth education policies and political structures,

We're not just gonna sit by and see these policies that because it's been happening so long and these structures have been here for so long that we're not just complacent with it. Now we're questioning it. We don't like it. This is our learning environment. We're gonna change it so it suits our needs.

While discussing the city's political machine, Michael Jones contemplates how to dismantle what he sees as an oppressive system:

Philosophically, even after understanding that I have a place in the world, that I have power, ... what should I do with that power? And this was before the walkouts. I looked at politicians with that philosophical view, like if I want to break the machine of what's oppressing people, how do I do it...?

Michael goes on to emphasize the importance of centering the voices and participation of young people in politics:

I have a place in politics, people of color have a place in politics, youth especially have a place in politics because that's another narrative we broke down, that politics are only handled by adults....At the end of the day, you want the people who are most affected by it talking about it. You want allies but you don't want an ally ...being the only ones talking about. You don't want the allies being the only ones canvassing. You want to have something like what we did.

### **Bridging youth through marching and chanting**

The first walkout event was especially pivotal in instilling a sense of collective youth power among the BPS student body. The walkout brought together thousands of young people, building strength in numbers, and allowed them to chant in unison, literally amplifying their collective voice and demands for fully funded, quality, public education for all BPS students. The walkout unified an extremely diverse spectrum of youth across different schools, grades and age groups. According to one Snowden student:

I honestly felt really united. It wasn't just students from different BPS schools ...It wasn't like oh this team against this team in sports. Like it was really more ...us in all different types of schools, all different types of places that we come from and it was like a moment of one big family just coming together to prove a point that we as students have a huge voice and a huge impact on what we really want. And it felt awesome.

Gabi recalls an inspiring scene of solidarity between middle school and high school students during the first walkout:

At the first walkout, we had a lot of middle schoolers there. That was fascinating to me 'cuz I thought that it was only a problem high schoolers would identify and understand. b\But we have middle schoolers who know the correlation between the fact that our budget is cut short a billion dollars every year and that they know that's why they're losing their favorite history teacher, and that they would walkout against their parents and against their teachers who are telling them not to, and stand in solidarity with other high schoolers.

Luis remembers the electrifying feeling he had when he saw thousands of youth in motion during the first walkout:

You could see rows and rows of youth still coming in and we was like, “Yo! this is crazy.” We didn’t expect like 5,000 students to come out. We didn’t expect all of Boston...and not just Boston public school students but students in general to come out... and be part of this historical moment of youth power... it was all ... young people ...the prime of young people in Boston ... And it silenced...a lot of adultism in this city and state that goes on.

This bridging of youth through organizing, marching and chanting strengthened connections between students and amplified their collective voice. According to Gabi, youth are deeply empowered by chanting together:

We all know the experience of being a young person, in this generation and society, regardless we'll be there together; and when we are together like our voices can't be shut out and I think that's why chants are so powerful. When youth are chanting together, it just goes to show that youth listen to youth. It's shown across all platforms and experiences.

The walkout movement created a sense of solidarity between youth from diverse backgrounds and schools. Gabi goes on to describe how networks and relationships were strengthened among students and organizers:

I don't think a single young person left after the walk out, went home, went back to school the next day or the following week without knowing people, connecting with other people, knowing that they have people to go to if they ever have a problem and knowing that other young people will back them up if they if they want their voice to be heard within their schools and everywhere. I think that was that was the most important part.

### **Youth Power: holding public officials accountable**

Through participation in the walkout movement, youth organizers and student leaders developed a sense of their individual agency, gained a better awareness of power relations and school budget issues, and most importantly came to realize their collective voice as a student body. They realized their power to influence decision-makers, hold city

officials accountable, and ultimately shape school policies that impact their everyday lives. Luis explains how the walkout “broke the silence” surrounding youth marginalization in the city:

So I felt this walkout definitely broke the silence. We ain't gonna stay silent anymore. We're tired of schools being shut down, and us being silenced and nobody doing anything but taking our money and using it for other things and not funding our education system which we really care for. Which the walkout showed...

A Boston Day and Evening Academy student discusses how the walkout forced political leaders to listen to young peoples' voice and opinions:

I feel something that we accomplished is that we proved to teachers and the leaders of the city and to ourselves that we have a voice. A lot of times students don't feel like they have a voice individually, but when they seen all those dozens of kids out there, the dozens of students, we proved to them and ourselves like we actually have a voice, we have a say, we have people who support our cause. So I think that was important to accomplish.

Michael emphasizes how the walkout gave young people a platform to speak out and exercise their collective power:

If you don't think you have power and you start speaking, if you see that these budget cuts were happening and you think you can't do anything about it but then somebody gives you a microphone, somebody gives you one of those reflecting vests saying you got to be a marshal, you're gonna make sure that these people are safe, that's your power, that's your duty. That's the change that you just made.

Michael says youth are the future leaders:

And that's why it's so important to me and so important for other people to realize those walkouts were necessary not only to stop like the past from affecting the future but also the fact that it gave these students the reality that this is what we can do and it also gave the world the reality that this is what power comes from, youth comes from, the future that's coming.

The walkouts were successful in capturing the attention of city officials and lawmakers, holding them more accountable, which in turn led to them meeting with student leaders and negotiating budget cuts with student organizations. According to Luis, the walkout was “definitely grabbing [Mayor] Marty's attention and telling him it's not adults, it's the youth that are speaking up.” Edward notes that the walkout has led to more meaningful engagement between youth and public officials:

Well we for sure got the city's attention, which was mainly what we wanted. And then the district started planning meetings with students to talk about budget. I feel like the whole purpose was to get these adults and city officials to listen to us.

Participant Khalid Mohammed suggests that the walkout movement has allowed him to reimagine his relationship with government and may be a gateway for more civic engagement among students.

It was really cool because for me growing up, you view government or your councilors or just people who are up there who do legislation ... and then seeing that you can march yourself to the State House or ... People can go see the mayor, people who are your peers, having the mayor come to your school is crazy.

A student from Boston Day and Evening Academy points to the potential voting power that the youth movement can leverage to hold politicians accountable:

There was like 5,000 kids out there ... so that's probably like 2,000 people who can vote and now you know if they come out this much, then how many more will vote. So I think it proves the point that they're actually a group of people we should be concerned about because they have power...

Young people have become conscious of the fact that they are part of a movement that is larger than themselves, and many continue to exercise their newfound confidence and power through organizing within their schools and other efforts such as the Save Our Public Schools Campaign. An Excel student describes the new sense of solidarity among BPS students following the walkout:

If me and Trinity or Alazay and Edward right now decided to walk out, I'd walk out knowing that all of them would walk out with me... I know if we ever decided to do a demonstration, most of my grade I can count on them walking out or just being part of the movement.

Another Excel student elaborates on this shift from a passive student body to an organized student body that will speak out against injustices:

Walking out of school ... has impacted the way that students view things and I think that we know that we have power now. I mean, without us there wouldn't be anything. I think we all realize that... We built a community of people that won't submit because the power dynamic is different now.

Students speak out in their schools now:

So when situations happen in my school or in other schools, I think people are just like, "No, we don't have to take this." Like years ago, I think people would have taken it. But people don't take it anymore. And my school knows that... if there's

something wrong and we want to change it, we're gonna take action. And I feel the staff...that's what scares them.

Some youth leaders are developing political consciousness and want to continue to build a radical student movement to challenge the powers that be. According to Eric:

You learn how to learn and it's awesome. Because I felt before any of this activist stuff...that the world revolved around me. I was my own main character in life. ... But afterwards, I'm interconnected with other people's lives... Inter-rooted with the minds of other people and then you start getting this idea of "I hold the mind of the revolutionary" and it's empowering... then you realize that other people hold this mind, too. Everybody has the mind of the revolutionary and that's the point of the...Student Organization Movement.

We found that the BPS walkout and the resulting educational justice movement challenged the city's political status quo, exerted public pressure on the mayor and school committee, and has begun to shift power dynamics so that BPS students have more voice and influence, which they hope will lead to access to fully funded, quality public education. Luis sums up students' sense of newfound power: "I'm respected by my own peers for being that voice to help bring out other voices that always wanted to yell but couldn't because they were silenced."

### **Personal Empowerment**

Through participation in the walkout, student leaders developed a sense of agency, self-confidence, and personal empowerment. Student leaders went on a journey of self-discovery, became aware of their rights as students, developed a sense of solidarity towards their peers and communities, and found purpose in their own individual lives. The walkout movement provided student leaders with the opportunity to build networks and establish relationships with peers, not only within their schools, but also with students from other schools in Boston and beyond. This environment provided the ideal setting for once shy and quiet students to blossom into confident and vociferous student leaders, striving to establish a fair and equitable education system. Rishka describes how she opened up:

I just started with BSAC in my sophomore year. It has made me open my shell a little more because I was the shy type of person, and I really wouldn't be talking the way I am right now without BSAC. They put me in front of the people. I can now talk in front of groups. I am more invested in the work and more outgoing than what I used to be...It made me want to be more invested in the work...It's important people see how important students take their education.

Anthony notes how he was able to overcome a personal tragedy through his engagement in organizing efforts. He notes that working towards alleviating others'

challenges and difficulties gave him a sense of being empowered – and allowed him to overcome his own grief and sorrow:

It just showed me that I can do something with my life. At the time before the first walkout I was in a bit of a rough spot with my life processing some stuff as a close friend of mine had passed away...in some sense the walkout was a means of consolidating with myself on that, and just helping to support other people. Making sure that they were not as depressed as I was, or making sure that they would not have to suffer like I did.

The momentum created by the BPS walkouts made student leaders aware of their individual as well as collective power. Most student leaders suggest that they were humbled by the enormous level of support they received from their peers, despite a few dissenting voices in their schools. Several of them say they were humbled by the faith and trust their fellow students placed in them, and motivated even more to further the cause of educational justice. They felt reassured about their purpose and goals when they witnessed thousands of students “packing up the Commons,” chanting in unison in one voice. Jahi describes how that collective power motivated him:

It’s because of that moment. That’s my drive. They are my drive. You know, they give me a reason to keep moving forward because what they’re showing me is that what I’m doing and what they’re doing is creating a lot of change and is progress to a moment where everyone can actually see a point in their life where they can say they accomplished something, where they can see victory, that we actually made different changes that no one else said we could, that no one can take away from us.

Brian recalls the unwavering support he received from his peers when he was not allowed to “walk the stage” during his graduation, and how empowered he felt when his peers stood by him. In his words:

Their children told them who I was and what was happening, the injustice and it was just a lot of love and that’s when I realized how powerful organizing can really get you. This networking, where you have a lot of people who are supporting you and some people that don’t even know you, and they understand your story, that was just very powerful.

As noted above these student leaders will not wait on the sidelines for change to happen. They believe the movement was not just about protesting, but being educated about the injustices that impacted their daily lives, and engaging dynamically to bring about change. Several youth leaders discuss the importance of being conscious of the world they live and operate in, and the moral obligation to “call out injustices” when they, or their peers and communities are subjected to inequitable treatment. Michael talks about continuing this work as a future teacher:



If I'm not happy with how I view politicians or how I view politics. One of the ways I can change that... [is to] get into the education field which most politicians come out of in the sense that I teach these kids. You know, this is what history is, this is what politics really is, this is what you could do. Then I could help breed at least, not control or brainwash, but I can help these kids understand they have a place in politics and then I can at least then be happy with future generations saying I taught that politician, that (he/she) listened to me.

The walkouts have made students conscious and aware of their rights and in turn prepared to advocate for themselves. Previously, they had only heard and read about the importance of self-advocacy; but now, as an outcome of the walkouts, students are prepared to do it. One student at Snowden says she became a strong self-advocate:

I remember in our freshman year, they used to tell us like advocate for yourself...if you don't get the grade you deserve or whatever the case may be. You need to speak up. And didn't really think about that until after the walkout because like once you see how many kids can speak up and how you can make a change by speaking up, it's just like okay since I did that, I can do the small stuff in school. Like okay, my grade is this and I think I deserve like better.

Another empowering quality that student leaders possess is their ability to learn from each other. In fact, student leaders attribute their success to their ability to work with students and adults from diverse backgrounds, while simultaneously mitigating challenging and difficult situations to achieve established goals. Erik talks about the increase in his ability to negotiate social situations:

You learn so much. You learn how to learn and it's awesome. Because I feel your level of intelligence could greatly increase. I'm not even sure why. I guess it's because there's so much human-to-human interaction. Like that's something that school or even your parents don't teach you about, is how to like deal with certain social situations that like you'll suck at first but like after a while, you'll like learn how to like adapt with like different social environments. Like that helps you at your house and school.

Participating in the walkouts led student leaders to take ownership of their schools. They take great pride in identifying with the school they go to, the communities they are part of, and the city they represent. The increased sense of agency and empowerment among youth leaders has led them to engage in other organizing activities concerning educational and social justice issues. Edward mentions his elevation to being a representative on the student body of Excel, for example, and Jahi refers to his deposition at the State Senate on issues related to cyber privacy. As noted above, many youth organizers became involved in and leaders of the No on 2 Campaign to stop the lifting of the cap on charter schools, and several student leaders express with exhilaration

the successful outcome of the referendum. Gabi talks about becoming the “youth face” of the No on 2 Campaign:

I found myself being recruited to a lot of panels and a lot of spaces where there was going to be adults talking about the problems that young people experience, but there were going to be no young people, I found that young people telling me that you need to talk, you need to let them know.

In conclusion, as students reflect on their own personal journey planning and coordinating the walkouts, they express increased levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy, agency, and motivation. Several participants have traversed the distance between being shy, quiet students to empowered and inspiring youth leaders. Youth leaders believe they are now equipped with the skills and capabilities to lead social justice movements and fight for change. Rossy sums up her journey to finding her “inner me:”

At the beginning of high school, I would grab a book and just sit around and read, which I still do. But it was because I didn’t feel like if I went out there and I really spoke against things or like supporting things, I really thought that no one would listen, that it wasn’t important or that maybe somebody else came up with the idea before I did. But participating in organizing and the walkouts was definitely like, I found an inner me I never thought I had.

## **VI. Adult Relationships**

The youth leaders in the walkout movement navigated through a complex web of adult relationships in their activism work. Participants received a great deal of support from key adults supporting the YOUNG network, while often facing resistance and skepticism from those outside this sphere. The youth often framed the resistance, skepticism, and barriers that they faced from adults as “adultism,” when adults questioned their knowledge, experiences and skills.

### **Adultism**

Several youth leaders made a point of describing their understanding of adultism. Erik Lazo, a first-time organizer for the BPS student walkouts, defines it this way:

It’s where adults think that they’re better than the youth because they’re at this higher point where they can see much more than the youth because of experience.

Erik goes on to describe his ideal form of knowledge transfer, a circle in which both adults and youth can exchange knowledge on an equal playing field. This equal playing field is what many of the youth leaders sought when approaching administrators and public officials, and in some cases the youth feel they were dismissed or completely

ignored. When meeting with the Mayor, many of the youth in the room reported that they had no opportunity to speak and instead felt lectured to. Conversely many of these same youth reported that a similar meeting with BPS Superintendent Tommy Chang and other school committee members was successful because they were given the opportunity to speak on their experiences. Gabriela recounts her perception that she was invited to speak on panels but feels like she was not actually being heard by the adults present:

20% of the time that [they] are adultist is on panels, and I am sure they don't mean it, just like we don't mean a lot of things we say; it happens, it slips. They would have me on the panel and it would be [only the] adult men speaking.

A number of youth interviewed for this project did not use the term adultism or adultist to describe their negative experiences with adults, but almost all report some pushback or skepticism from adults in their walkout activism. This resistance takes several forms, but there is a unifying factor among many of the examples. During the walkout, many of the youth were fighting against perceptions that they were not speaking for themselves and were instead being directed by the adults around them or the teacher's union. Some of the youth such as Brian Foster reported hearing this perception from Mayor Walsh himself. Countering these adultist misconceptions and emphasizing the role of youth-led strategy and messaging in the walkouts was a common theme among interview participants. Beyond any specific instances of adultism that the youth cite, this perception of adults in power delegitimizing and questioning their work was a motivating factor in both their organizing work and in telling their stories in these interviews.

When facing adult opposition, youth leaders learned to lean on each other for support and understanding. Many of the youth came into organizing through peer relationships, and these leaders have continued to develop and work with each other through the adversity they faced. A participant in the Excel Focus Group testified to the idea the best support for this work comes from fellow young people:

The only people who have our backs is each other, the youth. At the end of the day, it's us against basically everyone else because no one will understand our struggle and will just think we're a bunch of kids [who] don't know much.

While walkout leaders reported being supported and respected by adult staff of BYOP and BSAC, several youth leaders described negative encounters with adults in other activist groups they worked with. Veteran organizer Brian Foster speaks at length about his experiences working with adults in intergenerational alliances:

I've met some really horrible adults who don't care about the youth whatsoever. They care about pushing a narrative and they have their own agendas to use the youth. Through my experiences, I met a lot of great adults and at the same time a

fair amount of adults who don't seem to care about the youth. That's one thing that [youth are] still struggling with right now, constantly fighting adultism within meetings [and other organizing spaces].

Brian's thoughts on how adults within organizing spaces can take over is echoed by other youth leaders as well.

### **Adult Support**

Although they found some adults to be obstacles in their work, young people were emphatic that in most cases they received a great deal of support from adults both inside and outside their movement. Every participant reported feeling supported by their adult allies in the walkout movement. When combined with the context from the adult staff interview, the interview data strongly suggests that the adult supporters within the BPS walkout movement effectively walked the tight balance between facilitating logistics for the walkout and supporting the youth while not suppressing or co-opting their voices. Many of the youth leaders cite specific examples of the adult allies successfully playing dual roles as counselor and facilitator. In fact, they doubt the walkout and related campaigns would have been successful without their support.

Adult staff members of the youth organizations, such as Jenny Sazama and Najma Nazy'at, have many years of experience working with youth and have helped many cohorts of young people develop as leaders and change makers. Young people credit these and other adults with helping to ensure the success of their organizing efforts. Rishka Pizarro-Reid described it this way:

Adults complete us. Without them, where would we be? Because there's certain things that adults can do that youth [can't], due to age difference. I feel like without Jenny, without Maria, without Najma, without the whole gang I don't know where we would be.

In the eyes of youth leaders, the adult staff's effectiveness comes from their willingness to stand back and allow the youth to lead. Many of the participants report the staff asking them what they would need to be successful and serving as a helpful resource, which allowed the youth to work together and focus on their message. For instance when the students told the adult allies about their plans to hold a walkout, the adults were very receptive and supportive and offered to help spread the word and leverage other supports for them. Youth organizer Brian Foster reinforces this vision of adults' role like this:

I'm [going to] mention some names like Monty, Najma, Jenny [and Carlos]. They are some amazing people. They're hip, they know and understand what adultism

is. They understand that oppression towards the youth exists. They don't brush it off like every other adult.

Beyond the adult staff members of the youth organizations, the youth report getting support from many other adults. These include the teacher's union and the Massachusetts Lawyer's Guild, who provided peacekeepers and monitors for the walkouts to prevent any negative encounters with police. According to Luis Navarro, youth leaders clearly appreciated the support:

I know the lawyer's group was out there in case people were to get arrested, they'd be right there [to help] them. Adults definitely played a good role in that, in just being like a watch. [They were] not really trying to be the face of a movement or trying to lead it but more helping us lead.

The youth also reported receiving verbal support from other sources, including people they met on the street who recognized them from media coverage of the walkouts.. Jahi Spaloss described one such interaction:

Last spring, I was on the train on my way to my night class and a parent [with their child] recognized me and walked up to me on the train. The mother was so grateful and shook my hand. She said that had I not organized those two walkouts, her son wouldn't be still in the school that he's in right now. She said she was grateful that there are compassionate young people like you out in the world who will go all out and continue to make change for those who don't necessarily believe they have that power.

## **VII. School Experiences: Back Up and Backlash**

While youth organizations played a critical role supporting the walkout organizing from the outside, much of the walkout organizing activity took place inside the schools. Student leaders emphasized the extent to which many educators and peers in their schools greatly appreciated and supported them in their quest. Others however faced barriers, as some teachers and administrators openly disagreed with their goals or tactics, discouraged them from walking out and/ or threatened them with suspensions or harsh school disciplinary action on the days leading up to the walk out and afterwards. Despite threats of backlash, most students that we interviewed were not deterred from their cause.

### **Support Leading Up to the Walk Out**

Many BPS educators encouraged student leaders and supported their efforts. While these teachers could not display their support publicly, they cheered their students on behind the scenes and in the classroom. In addition, many teachers worked with student leaders to make sure they maintained good academic standing while they

organized. One youth involved in multiple activist groups around Boston talks about the support she got from one teacher.

I left in the middle of my AP Biology class, where at that time I had like a B-. It was barely a B- because the teacher rounded up from a 79 to an 80. So that was amazing. But I was not doing very well. I was only passing because she would help me out and make me re-take and re-do assignments that other teachers wouldn't give me the opportunity to do.

Some school administrators talked openly and honestly with students about the budget cuts and how they affect their schools, which helped encourage some students to get involved. Michael gave an example of how teachers and educators at his school helped encourage activism.

My school is a heavy advocate of student voice and student advocacy. So the principal gave us the lowdown. We had an assembly that told us what was happening so it helped me cement my ideas even more of like I need to get involved and do something.

Other students at Michael's school were motivated in this way too and took leadership roles in the walkout. Although administrators and teachers at schools like Michael's supported the students, others did not.

### **Opposition Leading Up to the Walk Out**

As student organizers were planning the walk out and administrators began to learn about their plans, some school administrators tried to deter them. In some schools, they threatened students with suspension, while in others they warned students about the academic ramifications that could affect them as a result of participating. While administrators could not penalize students for their views or their stance, they could take action against them for missing classes, exams, assignments, and content for the time that they were away. Anthony Englert voiced his frustration with schools that were discouraging and preventing students from walking out.

I know that some administrations at other schools are far harsher, and some of their actions were technically illegal in terms of locking students in the building and preventing them from getting out, which you could argue is a fire safety hazard among ten other things. I still can't understand why those administrators behaved like that, because hey, it is your school getting cut.

Although Anthony could see why administrators might be concerned with absences, in the end, the students were fighting for the school's budget.

Your students are trying to do something about it, why are you trying to stop them? They have their reasons: attendance, performance, looking good as far as

the state. Some guy just looking at spreadsheets going through and looking at how these schools are performing and just seeing this random burst of absences from classes won't look very good. I can understand that, but at the same time it's your budget at stake.

Some students worried that they would suffer academically for walking out and missing classes. Many of them continued to push forward, however, because they felt that the benefits outweighed the consequences. Apart from unexcused absences, students reported other types of opposition. Rossy Santana explained how she felt emotional opposition from one of her administrators.

When I was walking out, the moment I was walking out, our principal was like "Oh." My principal told me personally like, "Are you walking out?" and I was like, "Yeah, I kind of am." And then she like gave me that look like oh, like a shame or something like that.

Rossy felt shamed for standing up for something she felt passionate about. In addition, she was bothered by the fact that someone that she expected to be fighting with her, shamed her. Edward also commented on the actions of his principal. "The headmaster herself was sending out emails to parents and guardians telling them about the dangers of walking out and protesting and how they would mark them absent for a day if they walkout, which is like a walkout at 1:00 p.m.."

When educators presented barriers for student organizing, young people relied on parents and family members for support. An Excel student gave an example of their mother's support.

My mom agreed with the walkout. She agreed with what I'm doing. She really got upset at like the administration, how they were kind of like holding us back. She really got upset at that. And she said that if she got a phone call from anyone telling them I can't do it, she would come up to the school and like yell at them.

No matter what supports are in place, some forms of opposition could not be trumped. On the day of the walkout, some educators locked the doors and would not let students exit the school. Jahi explained: "I received a lot of calls from many different students from different schools where some of the administration was actually ordered by the superintendent to lock the school, lock the kids inside, the doors, to lock the doors inside and not to allow a single student to leave."

Despite these obstacles, students persisted and found strategies to get around them and walk out. According to Fania, "Students from different schools were calling my phone and telling me that they were getting locked in, so they could not walk out. I would tell them to call the fire department so they can let them out, and they actually did it and they came."

## **Combating Opposition During the Second Walkout**

When students' demands from the first walkout were not adequately addressed, they decided to organize a second walk out to keep the pressure on the administration. This time, they thought ahead and put an action plan into place in order to help youth demystify threats from educators and gain more awareness of their rights. Youth organizers made sure to get information about students' legal rights to them. Jenny Sazama, explained some of the actions youth took to make this happen.

We were much more organized for the second walkout around getting lawyers. On the second walkout, we had their rights right and a legal sheet on an app. We had basic stuff for them. One of the other things that happened was the superintendent sent out this thing saying, which I thought was great, saying we're encouraging young people to not walk out, [but] we really appreciate your activism and you will not be suspended.

## **School Experiences After the Walkout**

As a result of the walkouts, the youth not only succeeded in getting budget cuts mostly restored for their schools, but they also won the respect of some educators who had previously opposed their efforts. According to one Snowden student, "I feel like they respect us in terms of like speaking out for what we want, what we demand. They congratulate us in a way." It was a meaningful experience for young people to see some of the educators that gave them push back turn around and congratulate them. Another student from Snowden made a similar comment.

They probably view us as more powerful and responsible and they notice that we're focusing on more than just us. We're focusing on the bigger picture. We were thinking about our siblings or our nieces and nephews. We were also thinking about teachers, like what's gonna happen to them, what job are they gonna have. We were focusing on everybody because everybody was a part of this. The school system is not only students. It's more than just students.

Other students had negative experiences when returning to school. Despite their efforts, they could not win the favor of administrators. Students like Brian Foster dealt with the ultimate repercussions of the walkout. Brian was not allowed to walk across the stage at graduation.

And towards the end of the school year, they wouldn't let me walk the stage. I still went otherwise. I went over and I worked with a few adult organizers to help me prepare for this moment. When I went over there, the same day of graduation I was texting all of my friends. I made group chats – and this goes back to the whole networking I was doing now in school and people supported the idea – and I was like, "Listen, I'm not asking for much but when you're in there in the



graduation ceremony, just mention my name and say that it's not fair," the fact that it's not just me but there were also other great student who were denied this as well.

Although a few students like Brian faced a heavy penalty, most students were able to fight for their values and have a positive outcome. In the end, no student reported that school backlash caused them to regret their decision to walkout. The walkouts empowered students and turned them into transformational leaders for the community and their schools.

## **VIII. Views of Public Officials - Supporters, Superstars, and Snakes**

Youth leaders expressed strong views about public officials. They respect public officials who support them and not those who opposed them. In their own words, students see supporters as superstars and opponents as "snakes."

### **Supportive Public Officials**

Youth leaders hold some political officials in very high regard, such as Boston's District 7 City Councilor Tito Jackson, warmly referred to as "Tito" by the youth. Jackson represents many of the city's low-income, predominately Black neighborhoods, including Roxbury and parts of the South End, Dorchester and the Fenway. Rossy Santana is very thankful for the support of city councilors, especially Tito:

The city councilors have been great. Tito Jackson has been great when it comes to helping the youth and youth endeavors and that's amazing. So in terms of that, I am very thankful and impressed.

Rossy appreciates how much Tito Jackson makes the effort to show students he cares. Many youth shared the same sentiments as Rossy. Anthony Englert talks about how much youth leaders feel they owe Tito.

Yes, we've worked a lot with Tito. He has been a big help, a big supporter. He has occasionally attended meetings in support, and to give us some feedback on what was happening. We owe a lot to him. He helped hook me up with a lot of resources and studies and with some of the budget information, which I am in debt to him for.

Erik Lazo says that youth appreciate Tito because they see how hard he works. "I still don't see change but I see people actually working, like Tito Jackson...they're actually working hard for us, with us." Similarly, Ian McSorley said, "Tito Jackson has mad love not only for BYOP and what BSAC believe in but the walkouts and everything else."

Youth leaders spoke well of other political officials too, ranging from school committee members to city councilors. Some youth had been working and organizing for so long, that they compare past politicians to current politicians. For example, Riska Pizzaro- Reid, a junior at Boston Community Leadership Academy, expressed her thoughts about the last Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, who recently passed away; Menino had been in office for 21 years before he was succeeded by Marty Walsh.

If you can't see how important it is to me, then why be the mayor of the city, if you're not invested in us. It's more of like Mayor Menino, he's gone but he did the best; he was the best. No one can compare to him. And that sucks. If Mayor Menino was here, he would not let certain things that happened to us this year happen at all. Like budget cuts would have never happened. And that is a true fact and I know that.

### **Oppositional Public Officials**

Participants were often critical of the Mayor's education policies. Youth such as Rishka had several opportunities to interact with the Mayor through the walkout. Trinity Kelly laments her and other youth leaders' meeting with the mayor, claiming that he didn't listen to them.

We had a meeting with the mayor right before the walkouts to talk about the budget cuts...The mayor did not listen to us the way that I think people had planned.

Brian Foster describes what he saw as inconsistent responses from the mayor:

One thing would have to be that literally two days after that walkout, the mayor came out after talking so much shit about the youth – I apologize – after talking so much stuff about the youth saying that we were misguided, that the unions were behind it; two days later he proposed a plan to do \$5 million reimbursement from BPS to put it into high schools to lessen the impact of it.

The youth argue that one of the major impacts of the walkout was the ability to express themselves, and give voice to populations in urban Boston neighborhoods who do not normally have a say in government decisions. Therefore, the youth did not respond well to the comments the Mayor made about them not being the true leaders in the Boston Public School Walkout. Trinity sums up the young people's feelings of resentment when she mentions, "What our mayor has constantly been saying to us is we're misinformed about our own situation."

### **Future Elections**

Many young people did not have the opportunity to vote and elect the current mayor to office because they were too young. When the next election comes around,

however, most of the youth who are involved with the Boston Public School walkout will be of voting age. A number of youth have already decided which political candidates they would favor in upcoming elections. In fact, the walkout has led some youth to begin preparing for the elections. According to Jahi Spaloss,

And then ever since then, I think after that walkout, that's what really broke Marty Walsh for any type of like reelection. That was like the day the city actually was wondering, "Do we really still want this man as our mayor." Maybe his first term should be his last term.

Some youth see the lack of support they feel from the Mayor as a reflection of the support they will deny him in the future. Brian Foster states his concerns directly.

The mayor can ramble on about how much he enjoys, not enjoy but how much he supports public education and that's one of those things where it's like you can push that story but I'm not gonna believe you until I see money going into public education. Because when you say you're for public education and then the year of the ballot starts and then you say that you're for charter schools and then you switch your mind, that's one of those things where it's like I can't put my trust in you. I can't vote for you if you're not going to stick to your word, basically.

### **The Change in Views of Public Officials Over Time**

Although students express strong views critical of Mayor Walsh, they also show a nuanced understanding of the politics of the situation. Gabi Pereira realized the governor had a hand in the situation: "When I first saw Marty Walsh as the bad guy because he was the one saying no more money for BPS, but then I gained more information. That is like at a state level, so it's like Gov. Baker - we need to go after him next." Youth leader Michael Jones came to understand how politicians act out of self-interest:

I now understand how politics work when a politician realizes what's going on in the city or the movements, that they have to keep, you know, either "power" over the people or keep favor, with the people. They have to then switch to what the people want.

Some youth believe that the Mayor's shift to oppose lifting the cap on charter schools benefitted the youth. Despite where Mayor Walsh stood on this issue, however, some youth still did not trust him. As Luis explains,

When he first ran, we did mayoral forums. He would always tell us that he wanted to work with the youth, that he's going to work with the youth. and then seeing his time as mayor and how he would act that was like yeah, he's going back on his word. And I felt disrespected as a young person.

In the end, the youth support the politicians who have a sense of urgency in their passions and support their cause. They are highly critical of those, like Mayor Walsh, who they feel disrespect them and fail to support public education in Boston.

## **IX. Connecting movements**

Before the walkout movement began, veteran youth leaders had been involved in other organizing campaigns and social justice movements. These included organizing efforts for increased school funding, youth leadership development, women empowerment, and participation in socialist organization activities. Several students had participated in a yearly “Listening Project” where they interviewed BPS students about their experiences with school discipline and handed out information about student rights at train stations. These veteran organizers were able to use their connections and experiences to help inspire the newer leaders in the movement.

New youth leaders involved in organizing the BPS walkout have gone on to participate in a number of other social justice movements. For the veteran organizers, the walkout was a way to further apply and sharpen their leadership skills and to help nurture a new cohort of youth ready to fight on these issues. For those youth with little previous exposure to organizing, the walkout allowed them to get their first experience in the supportive environment offered by the veteran youth and adults involved in this movement. The youth leaders got involved in a variety of other campaigns after the walkout, some of which were closely related to educational justice such as the Save Our Public Schools (SOPS) ballot initiative campaign. The walkout movement allowed all of the youth leaders to build skills and make new connections, and this experience spurred many youth to continue engaging their peers long after the walkouts ended.

### **Save Our Public Schools Campaign**

Soon after the Spring 2016 walkouts, Massachusetts played host to a larger battle regarding charter school funding that would serve as a forum for youth leaders to extend their organizing work. Question 2 on the Fall 2016 ballot would have provided for the expansion of charter schools within the state by raising the cap on the number that could be approved each year. The Save Our Public Schools (SOPS) formed to oppose the initiative by launching the “Vote No on 2” campaign. Nearly all the youth involved in the budget walkouts participated in some organizing for SOPS, and for most this was their first involvement in large-scale organizing around an election. The leaders saw charter school expansion as draining funds from already underfunded public schools, and viewed their activism for SOPS as a defense of the imperfect yet fundamentally valuable Boston schools that they had walked out of months earlier. Young people studied the issue and found, according to Anthony Englert, that large-scale adoption of charters undermines public education:

But the issue with that is [the education budget] does not increase proportionately, so you are going to have less money going to your schools overall if you spread it out. Charter schools still do not perform up to snuff as compared to public schools...[Charter school scores] are far more inconsistent [and] there are far more highs and lows than there are consistent schools, which you see with public schools. And it is nothing personal against charter schools, but until they develop further, it's harmful.

Youth organizers involved in the Save Our Public Schools campaign helped in a number of different ways, including door knocking. The youth did door knocking in Boston and many communities around the state; and they felt inspired and connected to the larger movement. A few young people took on big public roles in the campaign, including Gabi Pereira, who served as the face of the youth involvement on this issue; she did media appearances and served as a leader to those involved in this organizing. According to Gabi:

[During the summer] I did canvassing every day of the week for about 2-3 hours, I did calls with numerous voters. Then I somehow ended up as the youth face of the No on 2 campaign, speaking out at every rally. Anything that had to do with it, I was there, I was at every rally sharing my experience.

This organizing was hard work but youth leaders were able to support each other through the experience. They drew on increased knowledge of school budgets that came from working on the BPS walkout, and a confidence that they were fighting for their peers at school. Ultimately the ballot measure was voted down by a large margin, something that gave the youth leaders hope on an otherwise disappointing election night. Victory on this campaign has further motivated many of the youth to continue organizing beyond SOPS. Rishka Pizzaro-Reid spoke about her feelings on election night when she saw fellow leader Gabi at the victory party on TV:

Because I was at home and I was screaming. I was like “Yes, Gabbers,” I was like, “You did it, we got it!” It was just such a relief. Even with Trump being president, I don't even care. No on 2!

### **Anti- Trump Organizing and Other Post-Election Events**

While delighted about winning on Question 2, youth leaders were alarmed by the election of President Donald Trump in November 2016. None of the youth reported being directly involved in campaigning for a candidate in the presidential race, but many were shocked and scared by how such a candidate could win. Almost immediately after this election, the youth leaders began to organize efforts to protest both in Washington D.C

and locally in Boston. As we interviewed young people in early November 2016, the youth were discussing efforts to resist the incoming administration. The youth leaders worked with college groups to organize another walkout on December 5<sup>th</sup> in which students called upon Mayor Walsh and Governor Baker to help protect education in Boston and resist the Trump agenda.

Many of the youth organizers connected with the national Women's March, and youth leaders such as Gabi and Rishka planned on traveling to Washington for inauguration day protests as well as the national Women's March the next day. The youth leaders hoped that Trump's election would mobilize resistance on the ground and raise political awareness among young people across the country. Trinity Kelly describes the power of the anti-Trump organizing moment:

The anti-Trump rally that happened a few days ago was huge and so many young people were there and also took leadership roles in that, [and] it just like it made me want to cry. I was so proud to be a young person in that moment. And I think that young people are really, really, really stepping it up. I mean, we're always the people to lead revolutions and I think that right now in America, I think there's a revolution happening or it's bound to happen.

Trinity credits the walkout movement with getting her involved in organizing and expanding her worldview so that she could be leading this new movement. Other youth also discussed participating in the Boston Women's March, and as more experienced protesters, they were critical of the way the predominantly white protestors marched:

You know how a march is supposed to be - passionate, like this is what we're fighting for, listen to us? And they were just like there walking, just talking to each other. And then if they saw something interesting, [they would] take their phone out and record it.

Many youth became involved in other causes beyond the anti-Trump organizing. They participated in a fall Listening Project where they surveyed BPS students on their experiences with school discipline. They planned a sit-in to protest harsh disciplinary practices and students spoke out at school assemblies regarding concerns of retaliation for participating in activism. Youth leaders face a challenging environment from the school administration in trying to advocate for student causes, and continue to fear retaliation for speaking up. One student says BPS is afraid of student activism:

Student leaders get targeted all around BPS schools for things like this. You know, it's really scary to staff members, and BPS in general is just scared of student leaders. They don't know how to handle it. So they handle it with trying

to push us out. I felt for a long time like this school was literally trying to push me out.

## **X. Challenges Faced by Youth Leaders**

Student leaders described challenges that they faced both within the context of the student walkouts as well as in their academic lives.

Although student leaders received a lot of support from their peers, they did also sometimes feel a lack of peer support and saw this as the largest challenge they faced when planning and executing the walkouts. Many spoke to the ways in which they felt as though they had to convince their peers of not only what they were doing, but the reason for which they were doing it. Being heard and taken seriously was very important to these youth leaders. They were concerned about students who either disagreed with their message and approach or those who participated in the walkout for the “wrong reasons.” According to one Excel student:

Everyone was like judging me. It was like why did you walk out? It’s like y’all just look for like any reason to just walk out. I mean, they were the ones that walked out with us just to go home, you know.

Rishka says a few students came to the walkout to cause trouble:

And then we had distractions of certain people weren’t actually at the walkout for the walkout. Certain people were there because they couldn’t fight in school so they wanted to fight at the walkout.

Ultimately, the youth leaders focused on the message they were trying to deliver and the overwhelming success of the walkout, which overshadowed these concerns. According to Rishka:

But even that little negative part didn’t hurt me. It was like okay there’s that but look how many people actually came out today.

Student leaders also faced personal challenges – like legal status and even homelessness - and responsibilities – like taking care of family members or the need to work one or two jobs - that sometimes interfered with their ability to organize.

According to Jahi:

And outside, most of the kids don’t even necessarily have a regular kid’s life. You know, most of them have to either take care of the family or have to learn to be

independent. Some of these kids even work one to two jobs, will stay out to like 11:00 at night, and still trying to bang out school work.

Jahi goes on to highlight the immigrant experience:

They have personal responsibilities going home and starting the day. And some of these students are immigrants as well. You know, they come here for prosperity . . . they come here for better opportunity and not only that but to them, it's like this is like one of their gateways to actually making it somewhere where life can be comfortable for not only them but also for their family and their community around them.”

One student also talks about

homelessness. A lot of people don't have a stable home. It's surprising, we have a large number here. And you wouldn't really know unless you had like some type of connection with that student.

The youth leaders believe they face challenges to organizing but also challenges to getting a good education. They feel their schools lack adequate resources and facilities and they have safety concerns as well, all of which creates an unsupportive environment that hinders many students' success. While the majority of the students spoke about the strain on resources at their school, some spoke to the conditions of the schools and facilities. Their complaints ranged from the unappetizing food provided, to a lack of proper resources in restrooms, to the infrastructure of the buildings. Some of the youth leaders at Boston Day and Evening Academy also spoke to the issue of school safety and the ways in which the school was going about addressing the concern. While students at Boston Day and Evening identified the security present at their school as a problem, they also understood the reasons for the security presence. One student at Boston Day and Evening Academy said, “I think that the biggest issue I have is on those days where they have searches and you walk in through the door and the first thing that happens to you, you get patted down. I understand why they have it, but I don't feel like it isn't as big as an issue as they try to make it seem sometimes.” Another Boston Day and Evening Student responded; “I think it is a very big issue. It's because a lot of students here carry weapons and drugs. So, the fact that they're searching means that they really don't want it in the school, which no school should actually have weapons and drugs in it.” Additionally, youth leaders interviewed also identified other challenges surrounding the student walkout as issues with miscommunication within the organizing, negative police relations as well as activism burnout.



## **XI. Conclusion**

The Spring 2016 BPS student walkouts represented an historic event in the history of youth organizing in Boston. The walkouts brought together thousands of BPS students in solidarity and gave voice to low-income students of color who are typically excluded from policy decisions. A group of strong leaders emerged out of the walkout movement and asserted themselves as the key agents determining their own future. The walkouts were organized and led by young people who understand that they are an integral part of a movement that has challenged conventional notions of organizing and protesting; those that are conceptualized, planned, and coordinated by adults. They believe they are at a momentous time in history, where students have taken an active role engaging in policy debates and struggles that directly affect their futures. Young people supported each other to take on a range of leadership roles in this social movement, and enacted a form of leadership that was collectivist, and distributive in nature, breaking with conventional, individualist notions of leadership.

Youth organizations outside the schools provided critical supports and resources for walkout organizing in the schools. Through participation in the walkout movement youth were empowered with new leadership skills and organizing experience, a deepened political analysis and critical consciousness. Participants became aware of their collective voice, agency and power as change makers by marching and chanting together, speaking out, and holding city officials accountable on decisions that directly impact youth. Walkout organizers received a lot of support from educators and peers inside their schools but they had some important opposition to overcome as well. Many have become respected student leaders in their high schools. Participation in the walkouts laid the groundwork for youth to become key leaders in the broader educational justice movement in Boston, exemplified in the critical role they played in the Save Our Public Schools Campaign victory and beyond.