

Reading One: What Is a Student Union?

Student unions are multi-school, multi-issue groups that organize students within a given geographical area.

Student unions have been in the news in the last few years because they've won some significant victories. The Providence Student Union is one prominent example. PSU organizes students in Providence, Rhode Island, on issues such as police violence and the "right to education." It operates outside of the student government structure of any individual school.

A 2020 article by journalist Julia Rock for Teen Vogue [outlined](#) some of the group's history:

The student union has [successfully organized campaigns](#) to expand the free bus pass program for students, design and pilot ethnic studies courses in schools, and convince the state to allocate funding for repairs to school buildings, among other measures.

The PSU formed 10 years ago, when students organized to resist proposed changes to their schedules. They walked out of school and rallied on the steps of the Providence School Department, chanting, "[What kind of power? Student power!](#)" That protest helped draw local attention to the tenuous situation in the city's high schools, which had been plagued by [high dropout rates and poor standardized test performances](#). It also created the infrastructure for students to organize in schools across the city.

The PSU is one of a number of student-led organizations in the city working to implement reforms under the framework of educational justice. Other groups, including the Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM) and the Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE) are working with PSU on reforms to increase student safety and opportunity. This work of planning rallies and walkouts, giving speeches, and writing letters has turned a generation of Providence students into savvy and powerful political organizers.

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/rhode-island-students-fighting-right-education>

The Providence Student Union also [won](#), through its organizing, a pass/fail term that was implemented during the pandemic. They [stopped](#) the closure of a local high school in 2013 that the community was fighting to retain. And their campaign for "counselors not cops" in schools gained enormous visibility and support among lawmakers.

Researcher and activist Scott Warren [interviewed](#) Providence Student Union student organizer Emma Jewett for a 2021 article in The Forge about some of the lessons the students were taking away from their "counselors not cops" campaign:

"[Emma Jewett:] [W]hen the cops are beating up kids in our schools, when they're instruments of state violence that are walking our hallways and intimidating Black and brown students and students with disabilities, it's not a complicated issue to say these people need to get out....

So, it's mostly a matter of taking things from the personal to the political and then making people believe that their voices matter. It's very easy to become what my generation calls a doomer and think that nothing we do will ever change anything.

No one is going to listen to us. And that's why the success of this action is so important.

I've found that people like the superintendent, they really want to do whatever is easiest, so it's just a matter of me making what I want to do the easiest path. If keeping [officers] in our schools is easier because it's the status quo and doesn't require a change, then make the status quo unlivable. Make there be walkouts. Make there be op-eds. Make them constantly get in trouble publicly for not doing this thing, and then they'll start to change.... That's the point of organizing, to make the status quo so unlivable for those in power, they have to change something....

I'm at my school for two more years. So if I want to get anything done, I have to get it done in those two years. We have an urgency that a lot of adults honestly just don't have. Because if you work at a nonprofit, you can be working at the nonprofit for the next 10 years. And then you're thinking on the scale of a decade, and I'm thinking on a scale of the next two years. So, when I want to plan an action, I'm not going to set a date six months in advance. I'm going to set a date two months in advance at the absolute latest and work my butt off to get it done because then I can do another thing in another two months."

<https://forgeorganizing.org/article/make-status-quo-unlivable>

The Providence Student Union's campaigns demonstrate the power students can have when they come together around issues they care about and put pressure on decision-makers for change.

For Discussion

1. What most struck you about the reading? Do you have any questions about it?
2. According to the reading, what are student unions and what do they do?
3. Of the campaigns that the Providence Student Union has undertaken, which ones sounded most interesting to you? Why?
4. Student organizer Emma Jewett argues that the way to create change is to make maintaining the status quo uncomfortable for those in power—so that a change in policy is the easier option for them. What do you think of her approach?
5. What tactics does Emma Jewett mention as a way to pressure decision-makers? What do you think of these tactics?
6. Emma Jewett suggests that high school students may have more urgency when organizing than adults, since these students may soon be graduating and leaving their schools behind, leaving only a limited window of time in which they can create change. Do you agree or disagree with her statement?
7. What are the pros and cons of organizing young people who may only be at a school for a short period of time?

Reading Two: The Power of Student Unity in Seattle and Philadelphia

Providence is just one example of a high school student union. Philadelphia and Seattle also have powerful student unions.

In an article published by Teen Vogue in April 2023, Seattle Student Union leader Natalya McConnell [told](#) the story of how her organization formed and what the issues it has taken on. She wrote:

In December 2021, Franklin High had to close because of threats of violence. Then, in January, Seattle students returned from winter break with COVID-19. Thousands of cases were reported in Seattle schools in just one week, including 63 at Franklin. With other Franklin High students, I created a petition calling for better COVID safety measures in the school, and students shared it widely on social media. Within a few hours, the school district agreed to switch Franklin to remote learning for the rest of the week.

But we weren't done. Students organized a demonstration at school district headquarters. Soon, the district had granted our second demand, providing N95 masks for all students and school employees. At the demonstration, I collected student contact information and formed a group chat with those who wanted to become more involved. The demonstration had kick-started a youth movement across Seattle.

Within a couple days, a group of students, ages 12 to 17, met and discussed a name for the organization we wanted to build. Seattle Students for Covid Safety? Seattle Students Demand Covid Safety? What if we wanted to fight for more than Covid safety? After all, young people face a lot of problems. We then came upon the perfect name: Seattle Student Union. The name does not limit us to a particular issue, and it highlights the source of our power: unity.

Over the next year, our group staged protests advocating for gun control, stood against the overturning of Roe v. Wade, marched in solidarity with teachers on strike, and fought to keep cops out of Seattle schools. The group took time to establish a structure and reach out to more students.

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/washington-state-assault-weapons-ban-students>

On November 8, 2022, a student shot and killed another student at Ingraham High School in Seattle. In response, the Seattle Student Union gathered grieving students and began pushing the Seattle City Council to increase mental health funding for schools and organizing for stronger state gun control laws. As Natalya McConnell [continued](#):

We gathered students across Seattle, connecting with the news media and focusing students on a concrete demand....

Student presence and the demands of our fellow gun control advocates could not be ignored. On March 8, the ban on the sale of assault weapons passed the state House; on April 8, the bill passed the state Senate. A few weeks later, April 25, Governor Jay Inslee signed the assault weapons ban into law.

I am so proud of this victory. We hear of one horrific shooting after another, but lawmakers only offer “thoughts and prayers” instead of removing the perpetrator: guns. If Congress won’t pass a federal assault weapons ban, students will keep fighting to do so at the state level. Earlier this year, Illinois became the ninth state to ban these destructive weapons; now Washington is the 10th. We’re making it known that, with aggressive organizing, students have the power to protect ourselves and reduce gun violence.

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/washington-state-assault-weapons-ban-students>

The Philadelphia Student Union Was founded in 1995 by students concerned about the poor quality of their education. According to the “Mission and History” page of their website, the student union [focuses](#) on “education justice organizing and leadership development.”

This includes:

- Youth-led chapters inside schools, where members develop specific campaigns to address problems in their schools which impact them directly such as over-policing in schools, establishing restorative justice programs and addressing problems with the school building.... [Chapters] also facilitate discussions on current events and broader social justice topics to encourage ongoing connections between what is happening within the school and what is happening in communities across Philadelphia as well as the rest of the country.
- Citywide meetings where members from across the city participate in training on how to become facilitators and organizers on issues that impact students throughout Philadelphia....
- Arts and Cultural Programming where members learn about the history of how arts has been used by social justice movements, both in the US and throughout the world, to tell stories of injustice and as a means to challenge those in power to address these problems.

<https://www.phillystudentunion.com/our-mission-and-history>

In 1996, the Philadelphia Student Union organized a 2,000-student city-wide student [walk-out](#) to demand \$15 million in school funding, [implementing](#) restorative justice practices in West Philly high schools (which reportedly decreased violent incidents by 70% between 2007 and 2010), [winning](#) a less punitive discipline system, dress code accommodations for gender nonconforming students, and a 2014 [die-in](#) in support of #BlackLivesMatter.

While other cities may not have groups that call themselves student unions, a variety of other areas are home to multi-issue student groups that organize around similar topics. Examples include [Oakland Kids First](#), a city-wide coalition of youth organizations that has recently [worked](#) to lower the voting age in Oakland, the statewide group [Californians for Justice](#), or the [VOYCE Project](#), an alliance led by students of color in Illinois.

In each case, young people have been able to bring together their peers and push for improvements that directly affect their lives as students.

For Discussion

1. What most struck you about this reading? Why?
2. Do you have any questions about what you read?
3. What are some of the ways that student unions in Seattle and Philadelphia have organized to make change? What examples stood out most for you?
4. Does your school have a student union or something similar? Would you be interested in getting involved in one?
5. If you were responsible for starting a student union where you live, what issues would you focus on first? How would you go about getting the attention of decision-makers?