

The Forum Club: A Model for Political Organizing in Public High Schools

by Alan Singer with Michael Pezone

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Abstract: Many new teachers are afraid that if they involve students as political activists, they will jeopardize their jobs. This article examines a model independent student group chartered by the Student Government that sponsored student-led forums on controversial issues, prepared reports on school finances and presented them as testimony at public hearings, wrote position papers for publication in local newspapers, and organized student and community support for a school-based public health clinic.

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I am a former New York City high school teacher and a social studies educator in the teacher education program at Hofstra University on Long Island, New York. I have also been a political activist identified with anti-imperialist and progressive causes for more than three decades. As the United States government and military prepared for a war on Iraq in January and February 2003, I spoke with classes and assemblies at a number of secondary schools and presented workshops on the war at staff development conferences in the New York City metropolitan area.

Many of the same questions were raised by audiences of teachers and students. Teachers worried about the issue of neutrality. They wanted to know, “Do we have the right to express our own point of view in class?” A few asked how they could involve their students in political action. Students wondered whether, “Once war begins, do we still have a right to protest against government policy?” In response, I

often discussed my own experience as a high school teacher organizing students in public schools to be political activists around different social issues. These included campaigns between 1978 and 1993 against cuts in school budgets, against U.S. military interventions in Central America, in opposition to apartheid in South Africa and racial violence in our community, and in support of reproductive freedom, abortion rights and condom availability.

Many new teachers are afraid that if they involve students as political activists, they will jeopardize their jobs. While I do not want to minimize this concern, I want to present a model that I was able to use effectively to engage students and that allowed me to remain employed. The Forum Club (Singer, 1994: 78-79; 1997: 79, 284) was an independent student group chartered by the Student Government that sponsored student-led forums on controversial issues, prepared reports on school finances and presented them as testimony at public hearings, wrote position papers for publication in local newspapers, and organized student and community support for a school-based public health clinic. Usually, the students who joined the club were from my classes, but they also involved their friends.

As a chartered student group, the Forum Club was entitled to some school funds, to do fund raising in school, distribute a newsletter and leaflets, hang up posters, make and sell political buttons, and to use rooms, copying machines and computers. It gave us access to other students, the ability to meet with parent groups, and the right to send speakers to classes to report on club activities. Students actually received community service credit for their political involvement.

Being an official student club also saddled us with responsibilities, but they were not onerous. Students had to abide by school rules. We had to be willing to discuss plans and handouts with school administrators and students had to get parental permission to participate in afterschool or weekend activities. We tried to get as much publicity for the club as possible on television and in mainstream and community newspapers. This generally gave the school good press and made it difficult to silence the students and me. Once the entire club appeared on the Dr. Ruth program to discuss their opposition to “parental consent” laws. On February 26, 1991 the *Village Voice* (15) ran an editorial endorsing the distribution of condoms in New York City high schools. According to the editorial, “The Board of

Education's recent hearings on condoms in the schools was a revelation. Not that the usual cast of characters at these events had anything new to add to this tiresome debate: AIDS activists and fundamentalists spoke the same lines they have so many times before. What was unexpected was the testimony from the kids. High school students stood at the podium, while parents applauded and teachers took snapshots. What the kids had to tell this disorganized, easily manipulated board is eminently worth repeating - and making the basis of our AIDS education policy."

Being a student club also meant that it had to have a clear educational purpose. Our educational goals included making reasoned decisions based on an evaluation of existing evidence, researching issues and presenting information in writing and on graphs, exploring the underlying ideas that shape our points of view, giving leadership by example to other students, and taking collective and individual responsibility for the success of programs. Significantly, all of these are part of the New York State Civics and citizenship standards.

To promote academic achievement, as well as to present their ideas, students continually put their ideas in writing. One collective essay was printed in *New York Newsday* on January 14, 1990. In it, the members of the Forum Club commented on a series of demonstrations and expressed disagreement with "the behavior of some of the pro-choice demonstrators at Saint Patrick's Cathedral." They felt it was "uncalled for and inexcusable to disrupt the mass and interfere with communion. We believe that the demonstrators who entered the church were wrong and hurt the ability of the pro-choice movement to win people over to our ideas on human freedom and the rights of Americans. However, we also believe that the newspaper coverage of events on that day misrepresented the pro-choice movement. Out of 5,000 people who demonstrated at Saint Patrick's Cathedral on that day, only 43 were arrested inside the church. Furthermore, only one person disrupted Holy Communion. Meanwhile, the media buried reports about another demonstration that took place on the same day. In New Jersey, 125 members of Operation Rescue, an anti-abortion group, were arrested at a health clinic. They had blocked the entrance to the clinic to prevent women from choosing to have safe and legal abortions. Six of these demonstrators had chained themselves together. We believe that on this Sunday, both the pro-choice and anti-abortion groups did

things that violated the rights of other Americans. What we don't understand is why the pro-choice group was singled out for the harsher criticism.”

Despite efforts to be responsible, the club and I were not completely protected from interference. On occasions when we invited a Sandanista mayor of a Nicaraguan town and a representative of the African National Congress to speak at the school, it was suggested that I help students prepare “fact sheets” that presented alternative views (though we never did figure out what an acceptable ‘alternative view’ of apartheid entailed). During a school wide campaign in support of reproductive freedom and condom availability we were asked to invite an anti-abortion speaker to balance a presentation by the National Organization of Women. Of course this gave me plenty of opportunity to discuss issues with students and they annihilated her in debate.

Once I was pressured to cancel a trip to Washington to participate in a demonstration, but the request was withdrawn when I threatened to take the issue to the newspapers. However, I was also willing to compromise and agreed to take a supportive school administrator on the trip to insure its educational legitimacy. I also always had typed lessons for the day after a rally because inevitably that was the day I would have an unannounced visit by central administration.

Many activist teachers are involved in outside political groups. These relationships sustain us during challenging political times. They also pose problems when organizing in schools. Since 1969, I have been a member of a community-based social action group. Initially, the group tried to organize in high schools and local colleges by creating chapters of the “Center,” requiring that chapter leaders join the central group and accept decisions made by its governing board, and encouraging all chapter members to participate in other “Center” activities. I know if you are an activist this model sounds familiar and in my view it rarely works well. Students, parents and teachers are always suspicious over why they have to join an outside group and abide by its decisions and school administrators are actively hostile.

The Forum Club, on the other hand, while never officially part of the “Center”, was always related to it. The “Center’s” newspaper discussed the activities of the Forum Club in the community. We often attended local rallies or community meetings that the “Center” sponsored or accompanied it to citywide or

national marches. The club organized the school band to march at “Center” street rallies and the “Center” staff helped the band and the club organize a demonstration attended by 5,000 students at City Hall. Sometimes, the “Center” provided students with free or subsidized transportation. It lent us a school bus so that thirty students could hear Nelson Mandela speak at Yankee Stadium in June, 1990. However, decision making always remained independent of the “Center” and with the students who were involved in the club.

My role as faculty advisor to the club meant I had to put the needs of the students and the club’s decisions ahead of my own views and the organizational needs of the “Center.” When students did not agree with my ideas, I had to back off. For example, in 1991, during the first Gulf War, the club decided not to participate in anti-war activities while troops were involved in military conflict. In addition, some demonstrations were potentially too dangerous. I did not bring students to a local rally against racial violence, even though the “Center” marched and I brought my own children, because I knew there would be hostile counter demonstrators.

Since I have shifted to the university, Michael Pezone, one of my former teacher education students has successfully used his own variation of the Forum Club model to promote student activism in an urban high school with a “law theme.” During the Fall, 2001 semester, in response to the destruction of the World Trade Center, the New York City Board of Education required all public schools to lead students in the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of each school day and at all school-wide assemblies and school events.” Mike’s students were confused about the law governing behavior during the flag salute and concerned with defending the first amendment rights of fellow students. They contacted the New York Civil Liberties Union to clarify legal issues and learned that participation was not required by law. They decided to monitor both compliance with the directive’s requirement that the Pledge of Allegiance be recited each day and freedom of dissent. They also circulated a questionnaire in the school that asked students about their opinions on the issues, encouraged students to behave respectfully and responsibly during the pledge, informed them of their legal right not to participate, and asked them to report violations

of the law. The next year Mike's students organized a student petition and protest against metal detectors that were making them late to class in the morning.

It is distressing, but not surprising, that as the United States prepared to attack Iraq during the early months of 2003, many students did not understand their right to disagree with and protest against government policies. Following the events of 9/11, government leaders with the support of the media used fear and innuendo to promote an uncritical patriotism. But active citizenship in a democratic society requires critical thinking and the constant questioning of authority. It never provides government officials with a "blank check." Uncritical patriotism means blindly rooting for the home team. This may be acceptable at sporting events, but not as a substitute for civic discourse. In my view, far greater than any potential threat to the United States from Iraq, was the threat to democratic institutions if teachers are afraid to explain their views and students and citizens are afraid to express disagreement with government policies.

I have not seen or heard from most of the students involved in the Forum Club's activities in at least a decade. But over the years I have learned about a few of them. One, a recent Dominican immigrant who barely spoke English when he was in my class, helped organize livery drivers into a union. Another became a leader at his college campus in a struggle to limit tuition increases at the public university. A third became a lawyer and activist in the local South Asian community. A fourth, after graduating from college and medical school, took a position at UNESCO that allowed her to promote public health around the world. Finally, one became an English teacher who works with recent Latino immigrants from Central America. I am not sure if their parents are happy with the choices they made, and I certainly do not take credit for them, but I believe their experience as activists in high school played a role in their later choices and validate these activities and this approach to organizing students for social change.

More than a century ago, Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, rejected the idea that education could be the force to transform society and resolve social ills. Instead, Durkheim concluded that education "can be reformed only if society itself is reformed." He argued that education "is only the image and

reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter. . . ; it does not create it” (Durkheim, 1897/1951: 372-373).

Most mainstream proposals for improving urban education in the United States assume that our society is fundamentally sound, but that for some reason, our schools are failing. Different critics target different villains: poor quality teachers, pampered, disruptive or ill-prepared students, the culture of their families, unions, bureaucrats, University Schools of Education, tests that are too easy, or inadequate curriculum. But if Emile Durkheim was correct, a society has the school system it deserves. Denouncing the poor quality of education is like blaming a mirror because you do not like your reflection.

Henry Giroux (1983) discusses teachers as the agents for change in schools and society, but I think he overstates what teachers can do. For me, the crucial players are the students in inner-city classrooms. Antonio Gramsci (Hoare and Smith, 1971), an Italian Marxist who died in prison in the 1930s wrote about organic intellectuals, people with roots in disadvantaged communities. Gramsci believed they were the key organizers for social change because they both infused revolutionary analysis and idealism with the spirit of the oppressed, and connected this analysis and idealism to a broader audience dissatisfied with the nature of society and willing to experiment with alternatives. Whether we identify them as students of color, members of oppressed groups, racial and ethnic minorities, or the children of the working class and poor, these young people have the potential to be future leaders in this broader struggle to promote change in our society and in our schools. It is our job as researchers, teacher/educators, and as classroom teachers, a very difficult job, to find ways to help them. I believe the Forum Club offers a model of possibility.

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