

**“Black, Proud, Beautiful, Relevant, Yours”:
The Student Voice in Detroit’s Education Debates, 1965-1972**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

BACHELOR OF SCIENCE WITH HONORS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

April 3, 2013

Advised by Professor Penny Von Eschen

Dearly beloved,

we are gathered

here today in . . .

. . . detroit, michigan: home of the ‘motown sound’/gm/ford/chrysler/rats in the kitchen and roaches in the bathroom/no heat in winter & nothing cool when the summer comes/pistons pounding out a DRUM beat . . . ‘do you take’ . . . ‘to love and cherish’ . . . woodward avenue/junkies, whores & little kids on the way up to take their places/a dime bag to get the day over with . . . ‘and do you take’ . . . ‘to have and to hold’ . . . the day shift, afternoons, midnights—at least 8 hrs with the devil in hell/rouge, chevy, fisherbody (makes dead bodies), budd, eldon gear & axle, dodge main, jefferson, iron foundries & speciality forge foundries/monsters that eat alive & spit out bloody hands/feet, pieces of skin and bone/& with regularity—A DEAD BODY!!! . . . friday nite . . . get that check/carry it home to the crib (with wife and kids), then get out on the street: get fucked up (reefer, jones, coke, ups & downs, johnnie walker black & red) try to freeze your head/can’ t think about the shit starting all over again on monday/ . . . ‘and now a message from our sponsor’ watch TV/listen to the radio/read papers/they all say ‘buy this, get that & YOU TWO can be a success’ /damn, brother, sister, a success in this motorized, computerized, iron & steel jungle is just staying alive!!!

in sickness and in health

detroit, michigan/any city

for better or for worse

my/our home

until DEATH

do us part.

-b.p. Flanigan, “The Ceremony,” 1972

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks go to Professors Derek Peterson, Penny Von Eschen, and Christian de Pee for all their comments and edits over the past year and a half. Also to Rachael, Ashley, Taylor, Bobby, and Zack: thank you for listening to me talk about Detroit non-stop, and for teaching me grammar and fixing so many of my mistakes. My family has been invaluable in this process and in supporting my education in general, particularly my parents Tom and Peg Convery. I owe so much gratitude to the librarians of the Bentley Library, the Labadie Collection, and Reuther Library for all their help and expertise. Last, the help and support of my 398/399 classmates has made writing this thesis bearable, and their company and conversation has kept me from giving up and dropping out several times.

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INTRODUCTION:

The Role of Students in Detroit

People moving out, people moving in

Why? Because of the color of their skin

Run, run, run but you sure can't hide

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth

Vote for me and I'll set you free

Rap on, brother, rap on.

-“Ball of Confusion (That’s What the World Is Today),” The Temptations¹

A crowd gathered at Clark Park in Detroit on April 25, 2012. Passersby and community activists alike formed a mass with high-school students on this Wednesday morning, just a few weeks after Spring break. At the center of the commotion stood a 17-year-old girl with a megaphone. Raychel Gafford stood on the side walk across the street from her school, Western International High, as the leader of a massive student walkout and protest. Shouting to the teens holding up camera phones and reporters taking notes, she demanded that listeners begin “to fight for quality education and to protect our school system.” The district had just announced the closing of nearby Southwestern High School and with it the overcrowding of Western with all the closed school’s students. This merging meant to Western students that the already scarce learning resources would be spread thin, and the quality of education would suffer. With “public education under

¹ Quoted in *Black Student Voice*, October 1970, Volume 1 number 1, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

attack,” Raychel and her classmates had walked out of classrooms and refused to return until their demand to keep Southwestern open was met.²

Soon the Detroit students made national news, and Detroit’s debate over school funding and school control intensified. In December of 2008, the school district was officially declared in a state of financial emergency, allowing the state government to place an emergency financial manager in control to “balance the district’s budget, pay its bills, manage the spending, and establish strong and reliable financial systems.”³ In the years following, state appointed emergency financial manager Robert Bobb (who served until 2011) and the Detroit School Board focused their efforts on budget cuts and saving the district money through privatization and school choice. The students of Western, as well as their peers from Southwestern High and Denby High, actively protested these changes to their schools and denouncing their perception of the school board “making money off of our students,”⁴ placing themselves at odds with the district administrators. After several weeks of protest, Western students eventually closed their Clark Park Freedom School. The 2012-2013 school year began with schools closing and merging as planned, but student action and the general unrest surrounding the education system in Detroit persist as the same questions continue to be raised one year later.⁵

Less than 50 years earlier, many of the same debates surrounded Detroit Public Schools. The city’s population reached its peak in 1952 with 1.85 million people but by 1960 had shrunk to 1.67 million people. The schools continued to fill with a young and

²“Raychel Gafford speech at Western, 4/25”, Our Voices Southwest Detroit, accessed 9 September 2012, <<http://ourvoicesouthwestdetroit.tumblr.com/>>.

³ Michigan Department of Education, “Detroit Schools in Financial Emergency,” 8 December 2008, <<http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140--204714--,00.html>>.

⁴“Raychel Gafford speech at Western, 4/25”, Our Voices Southwest Detroit, accessed 9 September 2012, <<http://ourvoicesouthwestdetroit.tumblr.com/>>.

⁵ “Detroit High School Walkouts at Southwestern High, Western High Look to Stop School’s Closure”, David Sands, accessed 9 September 2012, <<http://huffingtonpost.com>>.

increasingly black student body, but the tax revenue for the city and school board shrunk as auto decentralization and white flight pulled so many to the suburbs of Southeastern Michigan and out of the city proper.⁶ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Detroit's school board faced financing challenges and shrinking budgets similar to those that forced the closure of Southwestern High in 2012.

Histories abound on the struggles of Detroit through the twentieth century, both in written form and in popular memory. As a center of American industry, Detroit boomed during the early years of the automotive industry and the Second World War. Immigrants and migrants alike sensed opportunity and prosperity and settled into homogenous neighborhoods in a diverse city.⁷ Then something – or some things – went wrong, and the jobs and security that seemed once guaranteed became elusive. Racial divisions, already part of a discriminatory city infrastructure, intensified and spurred violence, most notably the great riot of July, 1967. The city became a ghost town of abandoned homes and decaying buildings in many areas. This is the popular narrative of Detroit and the storyline remembered by modern Americans.

This simplified version of the story, though, overlooks the lives of those who remained in Detroit as well as their challenges and accomplishments. Although the white population of Detroit shrunk by 23.4 percent in the 1950s, the nonwhite population (which was primarily African American) increased.⁸ The classrooms of Detroit's public schools continued to fill and even overflow with students as the baby boomers reached

⁶ Darden, Joe T. et. al, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 19.

⁷ For more on the migration of black southerners to Detroit, see Joyce Shaw Patterson, "Black Automobile Workers in Detroit, 1910-1930", *The Journal of Negro History* 64 no. 3 (1979): 177-190.

⁸ Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 3.

school age. The strain this placed on schools, whose funding dwindled as the flight to the suburbs continued, helped to shape the school board's conversations and campaigns for decades to come. Particularly throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a liberal leaning school board concerned itself with keeping Detroit schools funded despite the city's shrinking tax value.⁹

Historians of education have paid close attention to the debates of school boards and politicians. The most extensive history of Detroit schools, Jeffrey Mirel's *Rise and Fall of an Urban School System*, focuses on elected officials and interest groups as the key influences on the development of city education. Mirel reports school board elections meticulously, observing how the shifts in representation mirror the shift in the city demography. He characterizes the 1960s by a liberal-labor-black coalition that took power beginning with Remus G. Robinson as the first black member of the Board of Education in 1955.¹⁰ Educational historians have examined the documents and papers of these school board members as well as those of superintendents Brownell and Drachler, and the historiography thoroughly investigates these limited political players involved in urban education in Detroit's most tumultuous decades. Elected officials and those involved in administrative decisions over the schools are reported as the primary actors in school reforms and changes in most history books chronicling Detroit schools.

Scholars and historians of Detroit typically focus their discussion of community members on the role of parents and have further limited this scope to a dwindling population of white parents. The segregation of Detroit residents beginning with the Great Migration of the 1930s created school districts divided by color lines. The school

⁹ Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-1981* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 402.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

board approved a controversial desegregation plan in 1970 that involved a long-term goal to redrawing school lines while busing students to integrate white and black populations more immediately. This, along with a more authoritative plan by Judge Stephen Roth in 1972, drew criticism and condemnation by parents, especially those in primarily white outer-city neighborhoods and suburbs. In Warren, large numbers of voters supported campaigns opposed to the busing of students from the white suburb into black Detroit schools.¹¹ Because parents and adult community members voted, paid taxes, and made up a group of vocal critics, most scholarship and history has recorded their opinions and actions.

Scholars have paid less attention to role and voice of students at a high school and junior high level. Although educational policies affected students most, making them privy to a unique viewpoint of the school system, historical volumes have rarely included or explored their voices in education debates. While historians are apt to note the proliferation of student vandalism and protests including walk-outs and sit-ins, they don't often cite the large collections of student newspapers and letters that proliferated in Detroit schools particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Looking at the frustration of the students, voiced repeatedly between 1965 and 1972, Jeffrey Mirel noted "unrestrained hostility and naked aggression"¹² but never fully characterized this aggression as it organized and developed into a city-wide movement.

This thesis will evaluate this notable period in Detroit's history and add to the current literature by taking a new angle and illuminating an often forgotten social group. The student voice in educational politics grew loud during the 1960s and culminated in

¹¹ David Riddle, "Race and Reaction in Warren, Michigan, 1971-1974: *Bradley v. Milliken* and the Cross-District Busing Controversy", *The Michigan Historical Review* 26 no. 2 (Fall 2000), 19.

¹² Mirel, 366.

the formation of several organizations that brought together high-school students from almost every junior and senior high in the city limits. The teenagers' demands in Detroit Public Schools and the issues they highlighted differ from those focused on by the school board of the past and historians of the present. Much like Raychel Gafford and the students of 2012 Detroit, the role of youth cannot be overlooked in how it responds to and generates changes in the institutions of society.

The years 1965-1972 mark decisive years in the history of Detroit, particularly in the changing demographics of the city and the schools. These years are marked by busing controversies, student vandalism, and heated political battles over funding. The teenagers of Detroit, as the recipients of public high school education, had their own sets of opinions on the state of their schools. Beginning in the mid 1960s, they vocalized these opinions in new and increasingly organized ways. They were not always unified in their complaints, but their critique of public education centered on topics of educational inferiority. The schools, they argued, prepared them only for lives of servitude and unskilled labor while indoctrinating them into the culture of white America. Students had opinions about individual teachers and administrators as well as a broad demand for more control over their own classes.

For students growing up in Detroit, the late 1960s and beginning of the 1970s provided an education in radical politics beyond the school room. Along with Harlem and Oakland, Detroit acted as a base for northern militants and civil rights activists. The Detroit branch of the NAACP remains the largest since its inception in 1912 and was one of many groups that addressed the issues of racism in the industrial city. Black Christian Nationalism, the Republic of New Afrika, Uhuru, and the League of Revolutionary Black

workers each came into being during the late 1960s and functioned as radical organizations founded by black Detroit residents.¹³ Many notable leaders in civil rights and Black Power have connections to the Motor City: Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Grace Lee Boggs, Albert Cleage and many more. The political scene of Detroit during the 1960s was one of active conversation and diverse ideologies that influenced the students coming of age during this period. These local activists as well as national leaders are referenced repeatedly by students as inspiration for their own activism.

The shape that these student protests took changed over time and can be divided into three phases. Initially, protest acts were small and sporadic. Teenagers in the city used many tactics to demonstrate their discontent with the school system, including vandalism and damage to school property. In 1966, with school newspapers already circulating student criticism of educational policies, a walkout of Northern High School became the first large-scale, student-led protest. Letter writing campaigns to board members demonstrate how many problems students and citizens alike identified within their district as they voiced specific complaints and criticism. As tensions increased and funding dwindled, protest activities increased in size and frequency until they could not be ignored by the school board or the city press. Students stood up at their respective schools, reiterating and expanding the faults they found in their school buildings, faculties, and curricula.

As these first student protests brought students into contact with each other on a city-wide level, they also caught the attention of many community groups and took on a larger purpose for the city's activists demanding educational reform as part of varying

¹³ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2006), 53-55.

platforms and causes. Students were joined by many adult community members invested in the public school system, and the second stage of student protest during the years of 1967-1972 saw an increase in calls for community control of the school district. The students participated in the community control movement, hoping for more autonomy over a school system that would serve the needs of the neighborhoods, and in doing so they were both influenced by and united with local activists. Parent groups formed the first partners for students as family units came together to discuss issues and create agendas. Religious leaders also had a huge impact on student organizing, lending their churches and ready-made faith communities as support in the creation of freedom schools and student groups. Reverends Albert Cleage and David Gracie met with students personally as well as advocated for them publicly.

Labor activists, particularly those involved in the revolutionary union movement, also influenced student protestors as they became more united and organized. Black workers at auto plants like Dodge Main and Eldon Avenue had formed alternative unions to protect rights that the UAW overlooked. In conjunction with many revolutionary unions at individual plants, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) formed, which would later become the Black Workers Congress as endorsed increasingly radical and socialistic views. The LRBW appointed member Mike Hamlin to work with high-school students who formed the Black Student United Front, and the two organizations combined youth and adults in a community effort to unite black people in Detroit.

Finally, years of activism helped the teenagers of Detroit Public Schools to identify collectively as black youth, and in this shared experience and solidarity they re-

framed their entire discussion of education in the city. In this final stage of development, students focused less on the issues that initially spurred them to action and more on their own role in a global struggle, understood after years of local protest. In later student publications, the teenagers in Detroit began to draw connections between their own struggle as black urbanites to those issues pursued by Black Power groups and Black Panther leaders. They expanded their own struggle in solidarity with those of South Africa and Mozambique where colonialism maintained its grip. As black people in America, the students found themselves in their own colony – the ghetto – and Black Nationalism was a way for the youth of Detroit to cultivate pride and community.¹⁴

Recognition of unity and solidarity became a focus of conversation among student activists, and among the radical circles in Detroit, teens maintained an independent youth movement focused on their age and status in the community. They began to look at themselves as not just adolescents but as the future of their city and their society. As the next generation, students gravitated to issues of youth, particularly issues of education, and considered themselves part of a global student movement. The students in Detroit advertised their growing newspaper, the *Black Student Voice*, as being “Proud, Black, Beautiful, Relevant, Yours.” This tagline summarized the goal of student activists: to unite black teens in the city and empower them to fight a real and relevant student struggle. Their heightened sense of community led to a strengthening of unity and the realization of the power of youth.

A history of Detroit student protest truly expands beyond the city limits in an era of expanding globalism and growing sentiments of Pan-Africanism. While this thesis

¹⁴ Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 197.

explores only sources from a particular location and time frame, it fits within a larger narrative of Third World solidarity within America. It belongs to a collection of scholarship that investigates the calls for self determination and community control in black and minority communities. Beyond that, it explores educational history from the viewpoint of students, often over-looked despite their value to historians as they represent a bracket of society that is coming of age and absorbing and reflecting on the discourse of the time. Students in Detroit between 1965 and 1972 reacted to a unique set of circumstances presented to them, and their responses were rooted in their own environment and upbringing in the Motor City, surrounded by activists and community members who shaped their growth. Still, some of the major underlying issues in Detroit – racism, suburbanization, and economic inequality – were and are anything but unique and can be identified in almost any urban landscape.

In many ways, Detroit functions as a microcosm for historians studying race, industry, and urban development in the twentieth century. Its rapid industrialization and population growth transformed the city into a diverse metropolis including European ethnic groups, a Hispanic enclave, as well as a significant African American population. “Detroit has gone through virtually every significant economic and demographic change that Americans associate with large industrial cities,”¹⁵ and these changes helped shape the city in ways similar to Pittsburgh, Chicago, or other northern cities. Detroit history can represent American history during this period, as both are characterized by race politics, capitalism, and consumerism. The topics discussed in national narratives can also be found in the local story of Detroit students.

¹⁵ Mirel, xiii.

Youth not only represent the future, they also provide a window to the past. The pervasive nature of civil rights and protest culture in mid-twentieth century America molded teenagers into activists and militants. The students of Detroit high schools during the 1960s and 1970s produced as well as consumed the popular culture and political discourse of their era. Like the students of Western High today, the youth of the past saw itself and schools under attack and spoke out in defense of education, making their own sets of demands while affirming that the teenage voice mattered. Understanding the role that the young played as protestors, community members, and active black citizens reveals how relevant each social group is in the shaping of the past and the molding of the future.

CHAPTER ONE:

Speaking Out

When you live in a poor neighborhood, you're living in an area where you have poor schools. When you have poor schools, you have poor teachers. When you have poor teachers, you get a poor education. When you get a poor education, you can only work in a poor-paying job. And that poor-paying job enables you to live again in a poor neighborhood. So, it's a very vicious cycle.

-Malcolm X, 15 March 1964 in Harlem¹

I have a dream this afternoon that one day right here in Detroit, Negroes will be able to buy a house or rent a house anywhere that their money will carry them and they will be able to get a job. Yes, I have a dream this afternoon that one day in this land the words of Amos will become real and 'justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.' I have a dream this evening that one day we will recognize the words of Jefferson that 'all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' I have a dream this afternoon.

-Martin Luther King, Jr., 23 March 1963 in Detroit

In its biweekly newsletter to school employees, the Detroit Board of Education published a recap of 1964 while asserting its goals for 1965. Successes included building projects, millages passing, and strides forward in school integration. The district made further plans and worked to extend programs and continue building, spending many years building and renovating school buildings for a growing school-age population. A main

¹ Quoted in *Black Student Voice*, volume 2 number 6, February 1969, Underground Newspapers Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

focus of the school board's attention at the start of 1965 was "securing of additional funds to upgrade the quality of education for all pupils," and indeed many more issues of *Detroit Schools* worked to educate school employees on the importance of millage proposals and other funding battles². The Board of Education's seven members articulated clearly their plans for Detroit and addressed the educational challenges of an urban school system in the 1960s and 1970s

The students of Detroit junior and senior high schools during this time period had their own opinions on the state of their schools and the challenges at hand. Their voices, recorded in student publications, personal correspondences, and newspaper coverage of protests, reveal concerns for the schools that differ from those of the school board and school administrators. While the Board of Education spent the years between 1964 and 1972 working to maintain and increase funding for the schools and to integrate a racially divided city, the student activists of the inner city schools brought up other issues. As they began their protests in the mid 1960s, culminating in several school walk-outs, students spoke out against racist teachers, administrative brutality, a curriculum of indoctrination, and the tracking system.

Students and school board members alike readily identified many of the issues plaguing their district. The school board discussed budgeting issues extensively beginning even before 1964. The majority of Detroit voters rejected a 1963 millage item on the city wide ballot in November that would maintain school funding for the growing enrollment. The district administrators became frustrated by this lack of support for schools as they campaigned and promised voters that the passage of the millage would

² Detroit Board of Education, *Detroit Schools* volume 25 number 9, Folder 3 Box 88, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public Schools Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

only renew the current tax levels. This failure, and the failure of other funding initiatives, drove the district to look elsewhere for the schools' financial support, "since Detroit's assessed valuation is decreasing." The school board warned that the schools would be in a sorry state "unless there are increased funds from the State or the Federal government. These are not now in sight, but school officials will keep working to this end."³ Students identified a similar lack in funding, although with a less articulate plan for solving the budget crisis of Detroit schools. Polling data shows that the parents of school age children and black citizens were much more likely to vote in support of millage increases, placing education as a priority. Still, while black children made up the majority of students by 1964, the majority of active voters were white and unlikely to support public schools.⁴

These population patterns in Detroit and surrounding areas, as well as the decreased tax base resulting from them, contributed to the city's concerns for years to come. The migration from the city to the suburbs resulted in uneven development of government services, including education. The causes of this suburbanization are many and include social phenomena like racism as well as economic factors including auto industry decentralization.⁵ Those who moved out of Detroit between 1952 and 1980 tended to be wealthy, well-educated, and white, leaving the central city "home to hundreds of thousands of poor and unemployed people... pitted against the suburbs in a

³ Detroit Board of Education, *Detroit Schools*, volume 24 number 7, 6 December 1963, Folder 2 Box 88, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public Schools Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴ Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-1981* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 266.

⁵ For a thorough history of Detroit housing patterns and urban development, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

classic American pattern of uneven urban development.”⁶ Those who worked in education noted this change in “socio-economic mixture” of the schools, using this euphemism to allude to the concentration of poor black families in public schools.⁷ Education in Detroit, along with other city services and social structures, underwent drastic changes during this time period, and the student protests of 1964-1972 reflect these shifts.

In regards to the financial problems that the school district faced, students often admonished the board’s management of fiscal challenges. A common theme of student protest was the villain-ization of those in power within the educational system, from teachers to administrators to the board members. This mentality carried over to their insistence that the board was not doing enough to collect and distribute funding to the schools. The criticism was often vaguely directed, and when writing about unemployment and money woes, one teen group wrote that the schools, “as bureaucrats, should know that money doesn’t grow on trees!”⁸ Even as they agreed with the board that the budgetary challenge was an important one facing the schools, teen protestors and critics placed the fault on the adults in power rather than on uncontrollable population patterns.

High-school students regularly disagreed with the board on spending choices for the school system, and they saw the mismanagement of schools apparent in uneven and unjust spending. The physical school buildings, particularly in the inner city, stood in

⁶ Darden, Joe T. et. al, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 28.

⁷ Frank D. Angelo letter to Ronald Lippit, February 3, 1970, Box 8, Frank D. Angelo Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁸ *High School Blues*, Spring/Summer 1975, High school underground press in Detroit, Michigan, American Radicalism Vertical File, Michigan State University.

near ruin by the late 1960s. Built thirty or forty years earlier, many schools did not meet the needs of the current residential distribution, student body size, or educational practices. For the school board, this meant a new school building project, proposed in 1963 and launched a year later. This overlapped with a previous period of construction from 1956-1965 that had constructed or repaired 82 schools throughout the city, including 6 senior high schools (grades 10-12).⁹ Still, “the overall picture in Detroit from the Great Depression to the 1960s was one of large-scale and persistent racial inequality in school construction and renovation”¹⁰ as the school board limited the larger and more expensive renovations to majority white city areas. In one case at Northern High School, whose students were over 90% black, a proposed “building C” was left in idle construction for 7 years causing students to question if “When the Bd. of Education says that they cannot complete Building 'C', this simply means that they are not concerned about the academic level” of the school.¹¹ The students frequently opposed the school board’s plans to improve educational facilities, believing these plans to be insufficient, and they continued to demand better schools and classrooms and a re-prioritization of construction plans.

The economic issues caused by migration to the suburbs came with a redistribution of racial demography. By the 1960s, the inner city was composed of mostly African Americans, and the school population in particular was largely black, the white and other ethnic groups of the city remained in ethnic enclaves and homogenous neighborhoods. These residential patterns perpetuated a history of spatial segregation in Detroit that began with migration and immigration to the city during the 1920s and

⁹ Board of Education , *Detroit Schools*, volume 28 number 2, 28 November 1967, Folder 1 Box 89, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public Schools Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁰ Mirel, 275.

¹¹ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

1930s. Famous neighborhoods of the city that arose during the early twentieth century include Poletown and Hamtramck, where Polish and Eastern European immigrants settled and Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, home to black migrants from the South. The composition of neighborhoods changed over time, but most remained homogenous as in the example of 12th street, which in 1951 was almost entirely Jewish but rapidly changed to a majority black neighborhood by the time of the infamous riot in 1967.¹²

Residential segregation in Detroit divided schools along racial lines during the 1960s and 1970s so that the administrations functioned separately and often unequally depending on location and race of the children. The school board was aware of its diverse population as an entire district, as well as the segregation of these ethnic groups into different neighborhoods and schools.¹³ To an extent, the board worked for integration beginning in 1965 as it adopted a “comprehensive program for an integrated school system.”¹⁴ This involved hiring more black teachers and instituting personnel policies to prevent racial discrimination in the assignment of teachers and support staff. To integrate students, the district redrew school lines and began busing between schools and even between districts, drawing criticism from many groups who stood opposed to this “forced integration.”¹⁵ These efforts had a minimal effect on the problem of racial segregation in schools, which was based largely on neighborhood segregation and long-standing restrictive housing policies in Detroit.

¹² Steve Babson, Dave Riddle, and David Elsil, *The Color of the Law: Ernie Goodman, Detroit, and the Struggle for Labor and Civil Rights* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 377.

¹³ Detroit Board of Education, *Detroit Schools*, volume 26 number 2, 14 September 1965, Folder 3 Box 88, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public Schools Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁴ Detroit Board of Education, *Detroit Schools*, volume 25 number 9, 29 January 1965, Folder 3 Box 88, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public Schools Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁵“As We See It: A Hard, Narrow Course to Help those in Need, *Detroit Free Press*, 14 May 1964.

Students similarly identified segregation as a source of inferior education in Detroit, but they also often aligned themselves with the critics of integration, particularly integration by busing. For the militant students engaged in protest activities beginning in the 1960s, the school system was separate and unequal according to race lines. As the districts busing program took off in the 1969-70 school year, so did protest activities including picket lines, student fights, and bomb threats. Several seniors at Coolidge High School brought in knives as “self-defense” against the black students being bused into their school in March of 1970.¹⁶ For some militant black students and members of the Black Student United Front, busing between neighborhoods resulted in “community destruction” and was not a solution but another problem.¹⁷

Rather than integrating schools, many students preferred to maintain current school boundaries and neighborhood compositions. The problem with segregation, according to these students, was that through patterns of racial divisions, the district and city officials allocated more resources to white students than black students, thus resulting in a lower quality of education for children of color. The neighborhoods themselves were segregated along racial and ethnic lines partially due to patterns of settlement but also as a result of years of restrictive housing covenants and *de jure* segregation. Many housing policies created by local government beginning in the 1930s blocked black residents in Detroit from moving into certain “defended” neighborhoods that white Detroiters fought to keep white. As the city limits expanded during and following World War II, the civil rights struggle to also expand the private housing rights

¹⁶ Charles J. Wolfe, Memorandum: Incidents, 1964-1970, Box 2 Folder 6, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁷ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

of African Americans was blocked at every step by neighborhood covenants that discriminated against black home buyers, preventing them from moving to predominantly white neighborhoods. The housing choices were especially limited for poor black residents who “remained confined in the decaying inner city neighborhoods that had long housed the bulk of Detroit’s black population.”¹⁸

It is no wonder, then, that the beginning of student protest began in these inner city schools, where learning conditions were as dismal as housing environments. Teens at Northern, Central, Western, and Northeastern high school recognized the shared struggle which students faced at these different schools and began to organize and stage large protest activities. One young activist, Marcus, identified the solidarity felt between students at these large inner city high schools with so many minority students “not getting the quality education we deserve”. These schools were run down and using outdated materials, and Marcus called his fellow students to action, saying, “Students need to talk about where we are going. And then not just stop at talking. Actions speak louder than words – what are we going to do about it?”¹⁹ The uneven housing development in the city led directly to uneven school development, and the students left in the oldest schools protested the inequality of opportunity that resulted from segregation in Detroit. Still, students rarely called for integration, and instead demanded better resources and the same level of education present in suburban communities.

The school board’s desire to integrate schools came, in part, from a belief that mixing students of different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds would help those students from “culturally deprived” neighborhoods. In most occasions, the term

¹⁸ Sugrue, 188.

¹⁹ “Education at Northeastern High,” *From the Pen*, November 1967, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

“culturally deprived” was used by the school board as a synonym for “black and poor.” It was an educational disadvantage to be black in Detroit, according to the school board, and programs like busing were meant to help assimilate these students by “transporting children outside their immediate neighborhood, utilizing services of public and non-public agencies, and promoting good human relations.”²⁰ The student voice disagreed with this view, and preferred to keep black children in black neighborhoods. The nationwide Black Power movement that asserted, “the struggle is for independence, not separation-or assimilation”²¹ was matched by the voices of Detroit students who declared that “the revolutionary struggle in the Detroit Public School System” demanded that black students unite, not separate, in order to win their independence.²²

The student voice in the debate and discussion of educational policy in these issues was very often different and dissenting from that of the school board. Still, most school politics did not take these students into account, even when they brought up new issues and a new perspective on how to affect change. While the board focused on building and integrating, students identified curricular problems in their educational experience, particularly as they demanded a greater attention to African and African American studies. Students also criticized the system of tracking that separated students based on aptitude, directing them to higher education or more often vocational studies. Finally, the students took their opinions to the streets as they staged several large and noticeable protests that created a class of militant and activist students who would

²⁰ Detroit Board of Education, *Detroit Schools*, volume 23 number 18, 17 May 1963, Folder 2 Box 88, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public Schools Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

²¹ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2006), 120.

²² Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

continue to engage in demonstrations through the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.

Teachers and administrators made themselves a common target of early student protest as the power figures with which teenagers interacted most directly. In a cartoon titled “The Adventures of James Anthony”, the Black Student United Front told the story of their formation by showing the struggles of the fictional James against his racist teacher, Miss Horotopski. When the teacher’s “whining voice cracks a sharp command from the front of the room,” the students fight back against many school problems, including “blatant racism from both white students, white administrators, and white teachers” and “uncle Tomism” of black teachers. Following his shouting match with the incompetent Miss Horotopski, the character is sent to the principal who warns him against getting “uppity” and causing trouble.²³ In this comic, the militant student group depicts teachers and administrators as their greatest adversary in fighting the deteriorating conditions of their schools, and the simple act of fighting the racist faculty is an act of protest and progress.

By 1970, students were beginning to make concrete demands for changes in the staffing of schools. The group of “Concerned Parents and Students of Mumford High,” a nearly all black high school on the northwest side of Detroit, asked that the board give them “qualified black teachers,” and that “for every three teachers that leave Mumford, we want two qualified Black teachers to replace them.” Besides asking for a teaching staff more representative of the racial composition of the school, the students and parents wanted greater review and monitoring of the teachers to ensure higher quality

²³ “The Adventures of James Anthony,” Black Student United Front, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

instruction.²⁴ Another group, in 1971, wrote in their newspaper *The Rebel's Voice* about the “administration and many teachers consciously promoting racism by their actions.” For this group of students from high schools across the city, the faculty was giving white students preferential treatment and greater attention and care, and therefore a better education. Again, students demanded in these situations that white teachers be replaced by black teachers and that the youth be given a role in teacher evaluation and hiring decisions.²⁵ Students focused much of their criticism on personnel choices while their school board paid little attention to these specific critiques.

Besides these complaints about staffing of schools, teen activists found fault in the classes and lack of education they claimed to receive from Detroit Public Schools. College students across the United States at this time were organizing what Martha Biondi titled *The Black Revolution on Campus*, and a major goal of this movement was the development and redevelopment of black studies curricula.²⁶ Similarly, a national movement began to create black schools and cultural centers in areas like Harlem and Brooklyn emphasized African ancestry in children’s education.²⁷ In Detroit, the push for black studies was especially prevalent in the junior and senior high schools and was being vocalized most vehemently by the students themselves. Taking ideas from their university student counterparts, student activists began demanding that “a Black studies curriculum be instituted in these schools consisting of not only Black history but of such

²⁴ “List of Demands from the concerned parents and students of Mumford High,” April 1970, Box 8, Frank D. Angelo Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

²⁵ “Students vs. Students,” *Rebel's Voice*, volume 1 number 1, November 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

²⁶ Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 174-211.

²⁷ Konadu Kwasi, *A View From the East: Black Cultural Nationalism and Education in New York City* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

courses as Afro-American literature, political education, etc.”²⁸ Students asserted their belief that education should enhance the personal formation of students, and black studies taught the value of African and African American intellect and contributions in the history of the world. “When black African civilization was ‘filling the world with amazement,’ said Henry Highland Garnett, the Anglo-Saxon, ‘abode in caves underground, either naked or covered in the skins of wild beasts,’”²⁹ and to study from this angle was empowering and attractive to black students living in Detroit in the 1960s and 1970s. Instituting black studies was one of several ways student activists hoped to reshape and better their educational experience.

Perhaps an even greater concern for many students was the tracking system used in Detroit high schools. Tracking, or the “process which is used to categorize students, and then to channel all of us into either ‘vocational’ or ‘business’ courses, or into the College prep program,”³⁰ was frequently the source of student disapproval. The most experienced teachers taught the students placed into the advanced track, while general track students were only expected to get by in academic courses and were pushed into work study programs that set them up for work right after high school. In 1965, the Board of Education, in collaboration with the Detroit Police, initiated a Youth Service Corps, “to offer poor youth the opportunity to earn money through police-related employment” and to keep students out of trouble after school hours.³¹ The participants in this and many other vocational programs also experienced the general track, and rather than focus on

²⁸ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

²⁹ William Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 35.

³⁰ “Road to Nowhere”, *Down the River*, September 1972, High school underground press in Detroit, Michigan, American Radicalism Vertical File, Michigan State University.

³¹ Detroit Police Department and the Neighborhood Service Organization, *Detroit's Youth Service Corps*. June 1969, <<http://www.eric.ed.gov.proxy.lib.umich.edu/PDFS/ED047046.pdf>>.

academic subjects they were often steered to consider work opportunities. Poor students, euphemistically termed “culturally deprived” because of their upbringing in similar urban neighborhoods and cultural backgrounds, were expected to finish high school and move on to work that did not require college. Tracking/vocational programs expedited the transition from school to work by placing teens in jobs with the police and other corporate partnerships before graduation.

For students in or observing the general track and its curriculum in Detroit, these vocational opportunities indoctrinated their participants into a capitalistic and oppressive society as a key step in the creation of a submissive working class. One student group, “The Rebels,” placed tracking as their primary issue when they published their official platform. These teens declared that “tracking is the name of the system where students are put into courses because of tests which are biased along sex, class, culture and race,” and asserted that tracking perpetuated a two class system in America: “an owning and controlling class and a working class.”³² Industrial Detroit was a prime example of this separation between the workers and the owners, and for the students growing up in the city, the stark contrast between corporate power and factory work would have been visible in everyday life. Besides pushing general track students toward servile careers post-graduation, students found fault in the testing methods that determined tracks. The general track was disproportionately black in comparison to the regular school populations, and socioeconomic background was a major determinant of success on these “aptitude” tests so that wealth coincided with placement in the higher track. Instead of assessing individual ability and capacity of each student as he/she progressed through

³² “The Rebel’s Platform,” *Rebel’s Voice*, volume 1 number 1, November 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

school, the school system placed students in a track beginning in seventh or ninth grade (when middle school and high school began, respectively), virtually unable to switch up into the more difficult academic courses. The tracking system determined what the future held for high-school students, and they remained vocally opposed to its implementation in their district, though the school board was silent on the issue and preferred to discuss other educational challenges.

For young people living in the city, academic achievement was inhibited not only by the curriculum but also by the ubiquitous presence of drugs in the inner city. Several of the largest student groups involved in protest called on school and city officials to do more to stop the spread of drug use and sales in and around schools. Students suggested that corporate and political leaders were to blame for “the fact that drugs are more available than grass,” and said that as “more youth are turning to junk as a way of getting high... the man is overjoyed.”³³ The students who wrote for these underground newspapers saw drug use in their peers as an impediment to gaining quality education and improved opportunities. Like most other problems in Detroit schools, students blamed the city and national power structure for bringing drugs in and allowing them to be spread so thoroughly in urban communities. This was another issue the activists identified as racial inequality and discrimination, linking “the overt and covert practices of racism” to “the outrageous soar in drug traffic”³⁴ while demanding action from those officials both on the school board as well as city council who were culpable.

³³ “Bad Dope, Who Wins?,” *Rebel’s Voice*, volume 1 number 1, November 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

³⁴ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

While drug use worked as a covert and illicit controlling force in student life, the Junior ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) program functioned openly to train upright citizens. For the militant students in Detroit, this training was in fact a form of indoctrination into racist society as the military worked to recruit urban youth to serve and die for the country that oppressed and discriminated against black people every day. The presence of police and military in the schools created a hostile environment in the high schools, and students complained that it felt more like a prison than a center for learning and education. Those militant students who were most active in protests and interested in other activist movements in the city declared that "students have the right to end high school complicity with the war machine" in their high school bill of rights, likely written in late 1969.³⁵ Still, the school district took great pride in its military affiliation. In its "Image of the School" from Chadsey High School, several teen boys are pictured "in military training and good citizenship,"³⁶ showing how differently the school board viewed its educational priorities and tactics as compared to the students.

School board publications of the late 1960s describe a radically different Detroit than the one described by the students' laundry lists of complaints and demands. In a seven year period of *Detroit Schools*, sent to school employees, and *Detroit School Life*, sent to student households, the district never mentioned tracking or drugs at all and wrote in short articles about the Junior ROTC program only to praise it. In an attempt to satisfy calls for black studies programs, the schools offered several Negro Heritage assemblies at select senior high schools in September of 1965 and each school year spent a week in

³⁵ "High School Bill of Rights," undated, Box 8, Frank D. Angelo Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

³⁶ Chadsey High School, *Compass presents the Image of the School in the year 1963-1964*, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

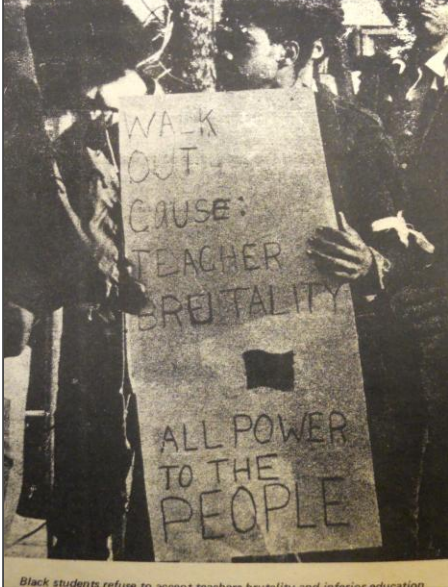
February focusing on Negro History. Still, the district preferred to espouse a policy of disregard for race, creed, and color that was in conflict with student interest in Black Nationalism and racial pride. Student protestors in the 1960s and 1970s spoke out in favor of hiring black teachers for black schools rather than taking a color blind hiring policy. Integrated staffs and schools were, as mentioned earlier, a concern for the district, but the board's focus was different from the students. The Detroit School Board took little notice of direct demands from student groups to fire or discipline specific teachers and administrators for racist attitudes and actions towards students.³⁷

In the absence of school board attention, the student protests relating to these various school policies grew in both magnitude and frequency. Before the formal creation of student protest groups and underground newspapers in 1969, city papers and internal memos identified student "disturbances" that would later evolve into more organized and vocal dissent. Deputy superintendent Charles Wolfe was responsible for documenting disturbances and filing incident reports for the district as a whole. His regular memos to the school board detailed fires, fights, bomb threats, and vandalism at all schools K-12, but most commonly at the high schools. These incidents grew more frequent and more extreme, and in one particularly long report in March of 1970 Wolfe described bomb threats to three senior high schools in a one week period as well as a knife fight in response to the new busing program.³⁸ By the end of the 1960s, the school district had clearly grown concerned by the elevated number of disturbances at many of Detroit's

³⁷ *Detroit Schools and Detroit School Life*, 1962-1969, Boxes 88-89, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public Schools Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

³⁸ Charles J. Wolfe, Memorandum: Incidents, 1964-1970, Box 2 Folder 6, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Figure 1 Student at Northern Walk-out, printed in *BSV* Oct. 1970



high schools, and these disturbances would crescendo into a larger protest movement across the city.

By 1969, the “incidents and disruptions” in high schools so concerned school officials that the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare commissioned a study of Detroit. The report revealed 137 serious disruptions within a single school year, over half of which were “racial

in nature.” In categorizing these disturbances, the nationally funded study found that many were acts of protest over school regulations, political events, or police presence on school grounds. The study also looked at student unrest in the metro-Detroit area and Chicago and found a “problem of secondary school unrest.”³⁹ While this study only documented the 1969/1970 school year, it reflects a general unrest that began several years earlier and was approaching its peak in Detroit by the turning of the decades.

The Northern High School walk-out of April 1969 marked the first of several large events during this early phase of student activism. The walk-out was in direct response to the staff’s decision to cut an article from the student newspaper, *The Northern Light*, that asked “why Black students are still being taught ‘white is right.’” The student author of the article, senior Charles Colding, quickly spread the news of this offense on student free speech and organized his peers into a rebellion.⁴⁰ Approximately

³⁹ Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 9 March 1970, Washington D.C., Box 2 Folder 6, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴⁰ *Northern High Black Student Voice*, volume 1 number 2, September 1969, Box 5 Folder 3, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

2300 students walked out of their home periods on April 7, 1966 and assembled at a park across the street to discuss the changes they would demand in their school and in the school system as a whole. Never before in Detroit had so many students come together in a united act of protest against the school administration, and this first large scale protest would be declared retro-actively the beginning of a Black Student United Front daring to fight the broken school system.⁴¹

In this walk-out, students demanded attention and proved to be an important additional voice in the educational debates of the 1960s and early 1970s that would not be silenced. In the day and week following the walk-out, a freedom school was established at nearby St. Joseph Church under the supervision of Reverend David Gracie and Wayne State professor Karl Gregory. This and consequent freedom schools created by students and community members in Detroit alluded to the schools set up by and for African Americans in the South beginning in 1964. At the Northern Freedom School, later re-named the Black Freedom School, students had control over what and how they were being taught.⁴² The students at Northern also took their time out of school (the walk-out came right before Easter break) to articulate a platform and list of demands. Though the students did not choose a name for their movement in 1966, the Black Student United Front that formed later would claim the walk-out as its origin. Amongst the early demands were that Principal Carty, a supporter of censoring the student paper, be fired for his racist attitude and actions. The students also demanded that one of the police officers stationed at their school, a Mr. Lucas, be removed and not allowed to work

⁴¹ Black Student United Front, *Black Student Voice*, volume 1 number 2, March 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

⁴² "Freedom School Re-opens," *Northern High Black Student Voice*, volume 1 number 2, September 1969, Box 5 Folder 3, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

at any Detroit school. The most pressing concern for the students, though, was that students be made a part of educational decisions.⁴³ While their specific personnel requests were met and both Carty and Lucas were re-positioned, the students would continue to fight for a greater role in the schools as they expanded their platform in the ensuing years of student protest.

In the summer following the Northern walk-out and freedom school establishment, Detroit experienced a mini-riot indicative of the civil unrest and violence to come. On Kercheval Street on the East Side of Detroit, racial tension became unbearable in August 1966 as several young black men argued with police late at night. Much like the students who were critical of police power, the instigators and participants in the Kercheval incident fought back against the racist officers who had reprimanded them for standing in the street while being black.⁴⁴ The more infamous Detroit riot occurred a year later and was led by young people as well. The Detroit Rebellion of July 1967 began at an after hours, illegal bar on Twelfth Street but its impact expanded beyond the immediate neighborhood, affecting the lives of many Detroit residents, including high-school students. The causes of the riot are many and debated, but the central theme of discontent and disagreement between black citizens and white police was present in 1967 just as it had been in 1966. Young and unemployed, many of the rioters were, in a disorganized and destructive way, demanding an end to the current power structure of their city.⁴⁵ High-school students on summer break learned from these civil disturbances, and the National Guard set up base at several Detroit Public Schools.

⁴³ Black Student United Front, *Black Student Voice*, volume 1 number 2, March 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

⁴⁴ Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 135-142.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 155-217.

Returning to school in September, teen protestors rebelled against the authoritarian state of public schools. These protests came in many forms from the organized to the haphazard, and each focused on feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Following the example of the students at Northern High School and developed by years of frustration and complaint, a variety of disturbances marked the 1967-1968 school-year as a time of protest and activism. Students returned to school after the greatest riot Detroit had ever seen and soon began causing civil disturbances of their own. The fall semester featured vocal protests that made headlines in the *New York Times*, where education editor Fred Hechinger described students, along with local activists, as “incontrollable community forces” influencing educational politics in Detroit.⁴⁶ In January of 1968, high-school students joined with university students to protest the Vietnam War at a conference in Chicago. These students also made their voices heard locally, organizing antiwar teach-ins and rallies at and around their schools.⁴⁷ More protests continued into the next year, with new students joining the struggle and new voices reshaping debates. At Cooley High School, the entire student council resigned in protest in February of 1969 after having their Malcolm X seminar shut down by the school administration. In this situation, the student leaders were trying to “function as a responsible group concerned in the welfare of Cooley” but “wer given no responsibilities and therefore had no power.”⁴⁸ Shortly after, at nearby Ford High School, students staged

⁴⁶Fred Hechinger, “School Plan Prompted by Need for Aid and Local Pressures,” *New York Times* 8 Nov. 1967, Box 2 Folder 57, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴⁷ *High School Mobilizer to end the war in Vietnam*, number 4, January 1968, Labadie Collection, Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

⁴⁸ “Student Council Resigns”, *The Cardinal*, 27 February 1969, Labadie Collection, Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan. Note: Many student papers and student sources contain misspellings and grammatical errors maintained in this thesis.

a sit-in protest on the lawn. These teens, on May 29, demanded to be heard by the city leaders debating de-centralization of the schools into many smaller districts.⁴⁹

The following fall, student protest coincided with the New Year's classes. While some historians characterize this time period in Detroit schools as marked by "violent incidents, including shootings, stabbings, rapes, student rampages, gang fights, assaults, arson, bombings and bomb threats, extortion, and vandalism,"⁵⁰ this was also a period of thoughtful and peaceful activism by concerned students. When Ahmed Evans, a Cleveland Black Nationalist, was sentenced to prison in September 1969, students in Detroit marched out of Cooley High in protest. In the ensuing disciplinary actions, police were called in, and the activities that began peacefully turned violent in nature with several students arrested and more injured. Students attended the Parents Club meeting that followed this event and successfully instituted a school-community council, but this did not serve as a permanent solution as the teens at Cooley and other Detroit schools continued to face disciplinary action for their protest activities.⁵¹

Students by the end of the decade actively participated in their political and social landscape, and the frequent flare-ups of the student protest movement left the schools in a state of constant tension. At Quincy High School, a suspension of several football players led to an entire student body protest that cancelled school on October 25. Murray Wright High also had to cancel school for a day in November, because racial tension between students and the faculty had reached a dangerous level. The dawn of 1970 saw groups of students continuing to stage sit-ins and walk-outs, while other students continued to shut

⁴⁹ "Teen Power," *Son of the Daily Planet*, volume 2 number 7, March 1969, Box 2, Underground Newspapers Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁵⁰ Mirel, 333.

⁵¹ Frank D. Angelo letter to Ronald Lippit, February 3, 1970, Box 8, Frank D. Angelo Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

down schools by phoning in bomb threats at Ford, Pershing, and Mumford High Schools.⁵² Detroit's public schools had become a battleground, and individual issues of educational quality and current events, as well as the question of who would control the schools became increasingly contested and controversial. Students continued to demand greater power over their own learning experience, and school responses ranged from detention to police action against teen protestors.

When it began in the 1960s, Detroit high-school students' activism covered a variety of educational issues. Amidst the debates of school board, city government, and corporate interest groups who questioned what public education should look like, students voiced their own concerns. However, the board of education had little regard for the students' opinions in policy decisions. Instead, the school board continued to focus on budgets and integration while the teen activists coming of age between 1965 and 1970 were calling for curriculum changes and more control over their own classrooms and schools. The students' demands and criticisms were numerous and diverse, but the frequent calls for better facilities, better teachers, and a more relevant curriculum were consistently overlooked by the policy makers of the past, just as they have been by historians of the present.

In *The Metro*, a newspaper staffed by students from the major universities in Detroit including Wayne State University and University of Detroit, college activists observed a change in their younger counterparts. The teenage students of Detroit were shedding their apathy, showing concern for their own plight and becoming sympathetic towards other social issues. One article, "The Teeny Bopper as Activist," noted that teens

⁵² Charles J. Wolfe, Memorandum: Incidents, 1964-1970, Box 2 Folder 6, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

were beginning to “realize and use their power,” publishing underground papers, leading walk-outs, sit-ins, and marches for various causes.⁵³ The college students of *The Metro*, involved as they were in the anti-war and civil rights movements, saw and praised the newfound political awareness of high-school. Born out of years of frustration, by the time this article was published in 1968 the student protest movement in Detroit was already reaching full swing. In the years to come, students would form many community partners and develop their own role in service to the larger community. The call for student power and oversight of the educational process merged with demands for community control and continued criticism of the school board and city government. By the time the high-school student activism in the form of large protest events was winding down, these teens and the heirs of their movement were busy not only fighting for a better education, but were also redefining and reasserting what it meant to be young and black in Detroit.

⁵³ “Teen Boppers – No Longer Apathetic?,” *The Metro*, 16 May 1968, Underground Newspapers Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

CHAPTER TWO:

Creating Community

There is a terminology and ethos peculiar to the black community of which black people are beginning to be no longer ashamed. Black communities are the only large segments of this society where people refer to each other as brother - soul-brother, soul-sister. Some people may look at this as *ersatz*, as make-believe, but it is not that. It is real. It is a growing sense of community. It is a growing realization that black Americans have a common bond not only among themselves, but with their African brothers.

-Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power*¹

In a majority white neighborhood on the Northwest side of Detroit, Frank D. Angelo and his neighbors worked together on a community council that hoped to give parents and community members greater influence at Cooley High School. Angelo worked full-time as managing editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, but also maintained a commitment to Cooley High School through his many years as president of the parents' club and acting chairman of the community council. Along with many other parents of current and former Cooley students, he believed community involvement vital to maintaining "all that was supposed to be good in a school" located in a quiet, upper-middle-class neighborhood. However, by the mid to late 1960s, Angelo noted a change in the school and neighborhood where he was so passionately involved. The composition of the student body changed: "from 10 percent five years ago, the school is now at about 60 percent Negro." By 1969, Cooley was "a school that had been undergoing major

¹Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1967), 38.

population shifts, that no longer provided a reasonably stable educational atmosphere, and that found black students in the majority.” The community had changed drastically as a result of “white flight”, and the school had changed in turn, leaving the question of who should control the schools open to debate.²

As the racial demographic of Detroit changed during the middle of the twentieth century, so too did its schools and the communities that surrounded them. This change was evident in racial composition, and the participation of Detroit residents in education issues reflected and resulted from this shift from majority white to majority black schools. While parents and interested adults already played an active role in the city’s education system, the 1960s and early 1970s saw a unique era in which calls for community involvement turned to demands for community control. A rise in the number of parent groups at schools and an increase in school-community councils broadened the range of people involved in school decisions. The sense of community for school activists was often drawn on racial lines, but class and occupation status also shaped community boundaries, both in terms of school district lines and imagined borders between social groups. Community control in segregated Detroit meant keeping black teachers at black schools and white teachers at white schools. For some educational critics, it meant abolishing the central school board and instead having smaller, local school boards comprised of local community members, a goal that was achieved in 1970. The power to make educational decisions was shifting and potentially up for grabs, and for the residents of Detroit’s changing neighborhoods, community control would move the power from white to black hands.

² Frank D. Angelo letter to Ronald Lippit, February 3, 1970, Box 8, Frank D. Angelo Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Student activists, like their adult counterparts, saw a greater need for community control in the management of schools and the school district. Their cries for control echoed those of labor interest groups and black nationalists while adding a new dimension to the debate. This chapter will examine how high-school students defined the communities and what role students expected these communities to play in the administration of schools. Teens in classrooms witnessed the rapid change in school composition that Frank Angelo noted, as well as the change in school funding and resources. Their activism developed in response to these changes, with students recognizing the importance of neighborhood and local environment in creating a quality education system. The views of these youth at times reflect the views of many adult Detroit residents, already present in the historiography, but also diverge from these popular conceptions of community and control. The question of who belongs to which community during the period of 1965-1972 remained open ended, allowing students and their parents to seek more political power over the school system for these ambiguously defined groups.

Despite the pressing questions of community and belonging, the debate over school control and governance in Detroit began long before 1965. Jeffrey Mirel charts politics and reforms in Detroit schools from the beginning of the twentieth century in his book *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System*, identifying the major players in structuring a school system for a growing city throughout the first half of the century. Since 1880, Detroit schools had a central board elected by the city at large. For many years Protestant, upper class reformers were the most active participants in school politics “resulting in elite control of the school system” as they determined most educational

decisions from the curricula to the school board elections.³ Over time, these elites were joined by organized labor in using their influence to determine who would serve on the school board and what policies that board would legislate. By the eve of the Great Depression, Detroit schools were a model of educational superiority in a working class city, with high attendance rates and graduates who could go on to comfortable and stable jobs.⁴

The depression, the Second World War, and the Great Migration changed the Detroit landscape and, in turn, its public schools. The tax value of Detroit property was declining, and in 1966 the city government was running a deficit. The school board focused on millage renewals and state aid to keep the schools funded and continue building projects and renovations, but student protest increased with the deficit. Funding cuts were unavoidable, but teen activists declared dissatisfaction with a distant and detached school board making the decisions surrounding these cuts.⁵ As the student protests became more organized and sophisticated, the teens made it increasingly clear that they did not consider the school board, the superintendent, or individual school administrations their allies.

After the chain of walk-outs that began at Northern High in 1966, student protesters began to organize themselves within their schools and across the district. The Black Youth Liberation Movement (BYLM) formed in 1967, with student members representing almost every inner city senior high school. By 1968 they were publishing a newspaper semi-monthly, vocalizing new concerns and re-iterating old ones in each

³ Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-81* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

issue. The BYLM represented the most radical students in Detroit until its dissolution in 1969 and was heavily influenced by the contemporary Black Power movement. The main goal of this organization, and the succeeding Black Student United Front, was to bring students from all across the city together to “Unite and Fight” for their schools and their city.⁶ It was this and other radical student groups that carried on the protest movement within Detroit through the early 1970s.

As they organized themselves across the city, these student activists and budding revolutionaries came into contact with various other interest groups and organizations in “Detroit’s radical circles”⁷ including labor organizations, Black Nationalists, socialists, communists, and many more ideological movements. By 1972, several groups functioned as partners to the youth, supporting their organization and fostering a community aspect to the student protest so that its participants were no longer just students and its interests no longer just educational. The alliances formed between students and parents, churches, civil rights and Black Power activists, and radical labor groups shaped the discourse between teens and the tactics used in their movement. It also added a new dimension to their platform as BYLM and BSUF, along with other, smaller student groups, joined the call for community control of the schools and self-determination for African American communities⁸.

The first and most natural partners of high-school students in Detroit were parents, who often formed their own organizations and councils to discuss the state of schools. In assessing the problems within Detroit schools over the years, the school board

⁶ Black Youth Liberation Movement, *Black Student Voice*, vol. 1 no. 3 Underground Newspaper Collection box 1, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁷ Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

and policy makers repeatedly insisted that parental involvement was lacking. The Great Cities program, piloted in Detroit in 1959, called inner city Detroit children “culturally deprived” and saw a need for the “involvement of parents and the community in the educational programs of the school.”⁹ These city leaders failed to recognize and appreciate the active role that so many parents, as well as other community members, took in the education of their children, particularly during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Frank Angelo represents a community of an earlier era in Detroit, one that had begun its migration to the peripheries and the suburbs beginning in the 1950s. Besides being almost entirely white¹⁰, the original members of the Cooley High School Parents Club and later the Community Council came from a similar socioeconomic class, one of white collar workers and stay-at-home mothers. Frank worked as an editor for the Detroit Free Press, and his friend Ronald Lippit was a school administrator as well as a parent. Angelo and colleagues comprised a parents’ group that corresponded frequently with A.L. Zwerdling and other school board members and government officials. They wanted a say in staff appointments and, in their early years, supported Superintendent Samuel Brownell and the liberal-labor coalition school board’s policies, particularly the policies against vandalism and profanity.¹¹

At Mumford High, located near the Eight Mile/Wyoming area of the city, home to a majority black population since the 1940s¹², the formation of a parent group looked

⁹ “For Culturally Deprived Children: The Great Cities Project in Detroit”, *Detroit Schools*, May 31 1963, Volume 23 number 19, Box 88 Folder 2, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public School Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁰ Frank D. Angelo to Ronald Lippit, February 3, 1970, Box 8, Frank D Angelo Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹¹ Samuel Brownell letter to Frank D. Angelo, January 12, 1965, Box 8, Frank D Angelo Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹² Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 24.

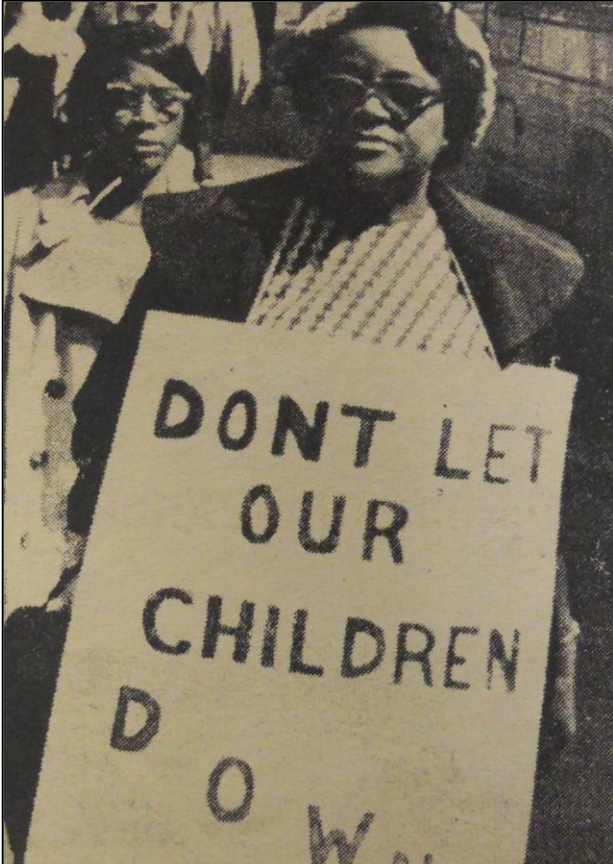


Figure 2: Parent protestor, printed in *BSV* Oct. 1970

very different. In 1970, the parents and students together sent out a list of demands focused on student and community rights. Included were items concerning curriculum (“We want Afro-American Lit to replace English”), as well as discussion of staff appointments (“We want Mr. Sandweiss and Mr. Wolf removed from our school”). Like the parents at Cooley High School, these “Concerned Parents” of Mumford High demanded a voice in the administration of their

children’s school.¹³ The specific issues, addressed by drastically different groups of parents in the city, demonstrate a shift in the role of parents in the city. Angelo and the other upper-middle-class white parents allied themselves with the school board to assess the needs of the school, while the parents at Mumford chose their children as partners in protest. While the friends of Frank Angelo praised school board programs and criticized student vandals and trouble makers, the Mumford parents and students wanted a change in the educational system and the school board that ran it.

Student protesters usually responded positively to parental involvement in educational debate and discussion. In 1970, after the students held a sit-in at their high

¹³ List of Demands from the Concerned Parents and Students of Mumford High, April 1970, Box 8, Frank D. Angelo Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

school on May 5, parents and children began a letter-writing campaign to school board president Remus G. Robinson. A main goal of the campaign and of subsequent appeals to the school board was to improve school facilities. This concrete goal allowed student cooperation with parents, whom they saw as allies as they were being similarly ignored by the city government. In a joint letter with her mother, Rosemary Baker wrote, “to tell you how bad Western High is. It is nasty and very raggedy old school,” and argued that with “all the taxes you take from my parent you should be able to build a new school.”¹⁴ Eventually, the Western High students would be invited to speak before the board and articulate their demands for a better education, with parental involvement cited as instrumental in the success of this campaign.¹⁵

For the leaders of the Black Student United Front, a student struggle could not be separated from the struggles of their parents and elders. In addressing general and systemic problems of racism in American culture, particularly Detroit, the radical students and authors of the *Black Student Voice* sympathized with the plight of adults trying to make a living in a racist environment. The militants of BSUF urged their readers, consisting of students at almost every senior high school in Detroit, to think of their own cause for educational equality and self-determination as part of a larger struggle. “In the past,” the students wrote, “Black student movements have seen fit to adopt the attitude that our struggle has been that of an isolated one, restricted to isolated schools.” Instead of this attitude, the BSUF tried to unite all black students, first in Detroit but eventually around the world. They also wanted to link their own battle for

¹⁴ Rosemary and Kizer Baker letter to Remus G. Robinson, May 15, 1970, Folder 44 Box 2 Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁵ Board of Education meeting minutes, May 12, 1970, Remus G. Robinson Papers folder 67 box 2, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

quality education with “the struggle waged by our parents in the factories, hospitals, and other places of employment across the city, state and nation.”¹⁶ Identifying their parents as oppressed members of the working class, students found solidarity across age lines and expanded their issues beyond classrooms and school buildings.

Less commonly, students saw parents as authority figures allied with teachers, administrators, and police and, therefore, enemies. These students saw their protests as part of a larger fight that was less concerned with educational policy and more interested in the rights of youth. Some groups of student activists incorporated “an end to 'ageism'” into their political platforms. These young people wanted rights, “due process of law in courts, schools, home, and all other institutions. We demand protection under the law for all youth, especially the very young who are beaten by teachers, administrators, police and parents.”¹⁷ This characterization of parents as adversaries of students can be found in some student writing, but is far less common than criticism of teachers and administrators or even of political figures and school board members.

As they advanced and organized their protest activities, Detroit teenagers found allies beyond their own homes and families. Representatives from all groups within the city participated in the call for community control that became increasingly prominent beginning in 1966.¹⁸ Giving autonomy and self-determination to a community required defining its members, though membership was often fluid and changing during these political discussions in Detroit. While students asked for control over their education as a whole, sometimes they considered each individual school its own small community.

¹⁶ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

¹⁷ “The Rebels’ Platform,” *Rebel’s Voice* Volume 1 Number 1, November 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁸ Mirel, 305.

More often, though, the community was a city-wide entity that crossed the attendance boundaries drawn by school officials. From the student perspective, anyone who might listen to and advocate on behalf of the youth voice was a part of the community that deserved to control its own educational system in Detroit, and these allies ranged from ministers to militants in a city with a broad spectrum of political and ideological beliefs represented.

Religion worked both as a means of social organization and as an institute of faith, and as such it helped to mold the activism of Detroit during the twentieth century especially for student protestors. In *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit*, Angela Dillard shows the influence of church leaders in the development of Detroit's civil rights movement as well as its more radical ideas. Beginning with early labor struggles, protestant ministers led their flock beyond the church walls to champion collective bargaining and unionization. After World War II, this early movement continued to influence protestors and activists who advocated on behalf of a new range of issues. The leadership of Reverend Charles Hill and Reverend Albert Cleage had a notable impact on their congregations. These preachers promoted "intergenerational transmission" of political activism, as well as "reflection and continuity" between an early era of Detroit's labor struggle and the later activism of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹ It was this history of strong religious leadership that helped to shape the student struggle in years to come under the guidance of national and local religious figures.

One of the most famous religious leaders to come out of Detroit was Malcolm X, but his influence on the youth of the city began after his move to the East Coast and involvement with the Nation of Islam and lasted long after his death. Nicknamed "Detroit

¹⁹ Dillard, 7.

Red” and hailing from Lansing, Michigan, Malcolm X went on to become the foremost figure in the national Black Power movement. His death by assassination in 1965 turned him from leader to martyr, and the youth of Detroit were quick to adopt him as a hero. In 1970, Cooley High-school students sponsored a Malcolm X assembly commemorating the fifth anniversary of his death and published a “History of Malcolm X,” a biography that resembles hagiography in its praise of the fallen hero. The students were militant in their demand that the school board give them a holiday dedicated to assemblies and workshops exploring Black Nationalism and the teachings of the slain Muslim leader every year on February 21. The appeal to honor Malcolm X went beyond Cooley High, as the students of Northern, Northwestern, and Central matched this interest in writings and deeds.²⁰

Students of the Black Student United Front found themselves particularly drawn to the religious life of Malcolm X and his international interests. Once they began publishing the *Black Student Voice* in 1968, the Black Youth Liberation Movement featured Malcolm in nine out of the first twelve issues. Starting in the January 1969 issue, a multi-series biography of Malcolm X provided space for student writers to eulogize their slain “Brother Malcolm” as a “Black shining prince.” Detailing his conversion to and later split with the Nation of Islam and the creation of Muslim Mosque, Inc, the articles referred to Malcolm X by his later name El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz. His travels to Africa and his pilgrimage to Mecca made Malcolm X an international star. For the students in Detroit, his life provided a model of a young black man who could come out of urban Michigan and inspire millions across the globe. In a poem, the students write

²⁰Black Student United Front, *Black Student Voice*, volume 1 number 4, 11 February 1970, Frank D. Angelo Papers box 11, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor Michigan.

“Truly you were MY BROTHER/ And brother of all Black mankind,” demonstrating their sense of unity with this religious leader and advocate of Black Power.²¹

Christian religious leaders also encouraged students to take a Black Nationalist approach to their struggle. In 1953, Reverend Albert Cleage, Jr. took over the pastorship of Central Congregational on the west side of Detroit, soon rising to local fame as a political activist in the religious sphere. The church’s work with the poor of the community politicized Cleage, and in 1967 he launched the Black Christian National movement, putting up a large painting of a black Madonna in his church and renaming it the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Besides making his church open to black militants, Cleage was a vocal advocate of liberation of black communities, “a nation within a nation” in the United States.²² The Black Christian National Movement gained national fame, as did Reverend Cleage, and his presence in Detroit’s revolutionary circles as well as his leadership role within his own church spread Black Nationalism’s ideologies from the secular sphere to a specifically Christian context.

Reverend Cleage made school politics a main focus of his editorials in the *Michigan Chronicle*, the newspaper of the black community. Cleage’s weekly column, “Message to the Black Nation,” expressed his views on various issues in the city, while prioritizing the state of Detroit Public Schools. When writing one week in 1967 about the “complete chaos” threatening junior high schools in the city, Cleage demanded that the school board hire black administrators for the inner city schools. Advocating on behalf of the students and supporting those who had already taken action, he summarized the “situation throughout the city,” characterizing Detroit as a place where students and

²¹ Black Youth Liberation Movement, *Black Student Voice*, volume 2 number 3, January 1969, Underground Press Collection, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor Michigan.

²² Dillard, 304.

parents alike spoke out against the inferior conditions in the public schools. In Cleage's opinion, these conditions could only be fixed by black power in black schools, by community control, and by combating so many years of white leadership that had left the city in its current, sorry state.²³ In years to follow, he would frequently lend his political clout and support to the more radical students as they organized their protests, and he was not alone among Detroit's religious leaders in acting as an ally to the students.

When students first walked out of Northern High School in 1966, they found their biggest ally and source of support at St. Joseph's Church in the Reverend Gracie. The walk-out itself was poorly planned and disorganized, but the students were quickly welcomed to the nearby St. Joseph. There, they hosted the Northern High School Freedom School for a few days. As the student struggle became more organized, the students again turned to this church. In 1969, they re-opened their freedom school and rechristened it the Black Freedom School. The school operated after normal school hours and offered classes in political education, self-criticism and evaluation, and comparative black history. It also included a community night each Thursday with adults and teens sharing classrooms as they took different courses in black studies subjects.²⁴ This alliance with the church and Reverend Gracie helped organize the students and link them with the community members who taught the classes offered at the Black Freedom School. Reverend Gracie was later selected by the school board to sit on a panel investigating school needs, a panel that was inspired by the general unrest of students across the city.²⁵

²³ Albert B. Cleage Jr., "Black Administrators Must Put Kids First," *Michigan Chronicle*, 11 Nov. 1967.

²⁴ Black Student United Front, "Freedom School Re-opens," 1969, folder 3 box 5, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

²⁵ *Detroit Schools*, volume 26 number 19, 29 April 1966, folder 3 box 88, Detroit Board of Education/Detroit Public Schools Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

For Detroit's teenage protesters, their struggle concerned liberation and justice, and religion fit very naturally in their revolutionary rhetoric. Liberation theology rose in popularity in Latin America amongst Catholics beginning in the 1950s, and in Africa theology played a similarly important role in the liberation of colonized people. South Africa's "Black Theology" resonated with university students of the 1960s and 1970s as it emphasized a relevant faith with "the historical contingency of blackness and the enduring necessity of liberation" for a people oppressed by apartheid and overt discrimination.²⁶ Black Theology for students in Detroit likewise linked the struggles of discriminated people with a suffering and liberating Christ. The naming of the Black Youth Liberation Movement in 1967 called to mind this global struggle for liberation, and though the organization would later favor a more secular rhetoric of a workers' revolution, it began in the St. Joseph basement, hoping to "bring the unawakened to full awareness of the culture of Black people" and continued to allude to religious themes and symbols in the years to come.²⁷ For young activists in Detroit, as for oppressed people around the world, religious leaders and emerging spirituality of liberation supported their struggle.

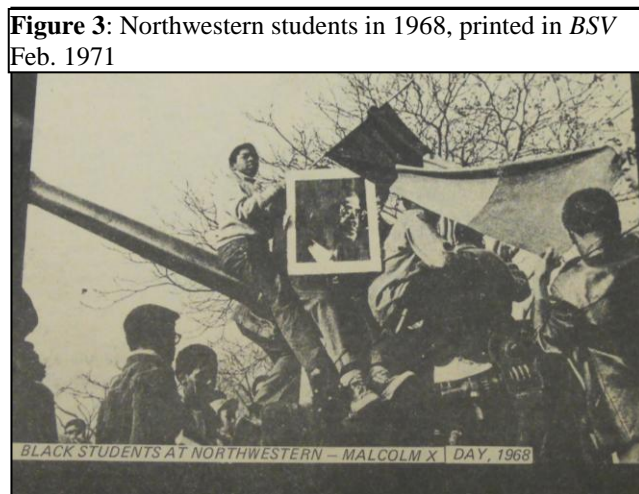
Civil Rights activists, like religious leaders, had a strong presence in Detroit at the start of student organization in 1965. As previously mentioned, the Detroit NAACP was one of the largest branches of the national organization in the country, and its use of political protest and lobbying contributed to much of its success. The teens in Detroit who participated in the Northern walkout or the Western High sit-in learned their

²⁶ Daniel Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 80.

²⁷ Black Youth Liberation Movement, *Black Student Voice*, volume 1 number 3, December 1968, Underground Press Collection, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor Michigan.

peaceful protest methods from the active civil rights community in their city, as well as from stories around the nation. These tactics mirrored hallmarks of the modern civil rights movement as epitomized by Martin Luther King Jr.'s march on Washington in 1963. That same year, Reverend King came to Detroit for a Walk to Freedom, "a rather dignified and eloquent testimony to the city's apparently mature and responsible climate of race relations."²⁸ This, along with national headlines of the Civil Rights movement throughout the 1950s and 1960s, had a lasting effect on the young generation as "younger blacks were more likely than their elders to have been affected by the civil rights movement of the preceding years. They had a stronger sense of black identification than their elders did."²⁹ By following the example of civil rights protesters, the students of Detroit proved obstinate and inflexible. In April of 1966, the NAACP hosted its annual "Fight for Freedom" dinner, honored school board president Remus G. Robinson, and gave him a standing ovation as he urged the students to end their boycott of Northern High School.³⁰ In its earliest days, student protest in Detroit proved too extreme for the mainstream civil rights leaders who students described as "Uncle Toms" complicit in the perpetuation of inequalities.

The teens also co-opted many ideas from college student protests, particularly the work of Stokely



²⁸ Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 132.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 330.

³⁰ "As We See It: NAACP Shows Courage, Setting a Good Example," *Detroit Free Press*, 26 April 1966.

Carmichael and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The student leaders who organized the Black Student United Front regularly quoted Carmichael and his co-author Charles Hamilton from their book *Black Power*. Just as SNCC created freedom schools across Mississippi during the “Freedom Summer” of 1964, Detroit students set up a freedom school at Northern High School and later set up alternative education programs and assemblies across the city. Their struggle to be heard and to change the way their schools functioned followed examples set for them by the Black Power Movement, and students believed that “the way to political change is through power. This is the nature of the black power movement exemplified by Stokely Carmichael in that term.”³¹ The young leaders of student protests on a national scale were noted and remembered by the even younger student activists in Detroit as the high-school students emulated this national example.

Perhaps one of the most important driving forces in Detroit has been industry and the role of organized labor. The Revolutionary Union Movement and the radicalization of black autoworkers shaped the rhetoric and purpose of student activists beginning in 1968 and continuing through 1972. As complaints about high schools evolved into an active and organized protest effort, the teenagers involved came into contact with other activists in the city and merged their own cause for improving education with that of black workers who protested for equal and better work environments. The relationship between students and radical workers decidedly changed the nature of student protest in Detroit, moving it into the realm of radical protest and revolutionary ideologies.

³¹ Black Student United Front, *Black Student Voice*, volume 1 number 4, 11 Feb. 1970, box 8, Frank D. Angelo Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor Michigan.

The origins of the Revolutionary Union Movement stem from Dodge Main, an automotive plant in Hamtramck, an incorporated city within the city of Detroit composed of a large Polish-American population. In the spring of 1968 – two years after the students of Northern High school staged their walk-out – workers at Dodge Main went on strike. Conflicts between black and white workers were typical occurrences on the factory floor, and racial tension in the workplace was high. Black workers at Dodge Main founded DRUM, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. DRUM functioned as an alternative to the UAW, a union that would fight for the black workers who comprised an increasing percentage of the automotive work force. Soon, other factories in and around Detroit added to the DRUM family, including Eldon Avenue (ELRUM) and Chrysler’s Forge plant (FORUM). Each RUM published its own newsletter highlighting occurrences at the various base factories, but the issues and priorities of union members focused on working class solidarity and unity of black workers.³²

The growth and change of the Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit has been well researched by historians, particularly by Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin in their book, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*. This movement history claims DRUM as the beginning of a movement of black labor that would reorganize into a city-wide League of Revolutionary Black Workers and then the international Black Workers Congress. Like the students, socialistic workers placed education among their top concerns. Similar to the students’ view of schools as a place of indoctrination through education, workers saw their jobs in the factories under mostly white foremen and superintendants as forced assimilation and a perpetuation of slavery’s conditions. In both factories and high

³²Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying: a Study in Urban Revolution* (Cambridge: South End, 1998), 1-90.

schools, black people found themselves in “a struggle to control conditions,” where financial interests were “opposed to the welfare of the workers.”³³

Shortly after the organization of the Revolutionary Unions, students and workers began to develop and solidify their relationship based on connections between the two groups’ backgrounds and goals that were apparent early on. The first proponents of community control were concerned parents, like Frank Angelo and the mothers who founded the Black Women’s Committee in 1969. These mothers and fathers were all advocating in favor of “the protection and care of our children”³⁴ and creating a more active role for parents and community members. The parents who made up the PTAs and community councils of the 1960s were often employed by or derived income from the manufacturing sector. Many of the students who made up the most active members of the BSUF were likely children of auto workers, and some were children of RUM organizers and members, and so they were more fully exposed to the black worker union movement in Detroit.

Besides being parents of student protesters, laborers in Detroit engaged in radical politics fashioning themselves into teachers and mentors to the youth. In a 1970 interview, DRUM leader and LRBW founder John Watson emphasized “that it is absolutely essential that the workers have some sort of support outside the factory.” Workers recognized the importance of community and thus attempted to integrate their own goals with those of related organizations. Watson worked on this mission of community involvement as editor of the Wayne State University newspaper, *The South*

³³ League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), “General Policy Statement”, 1970, Text-fiche, *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), part 4 reel 1.

³⁴ Black Women's Committee, *BWC News*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1969, Text-fiche, *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), part 4 reel 1.

End, where he positioned himself as a liaison between college students and laborers.³⁵ Similarly, fellow LRBW founder Mike Hamlin functioned as an advisor to the high-school students who had organized the Black Student United Front. The League defined the role of students by saying they should “have a working class outlook but that their primary task is to study and organize in their own terrain which is mostly on campuses of high schools and colleges.” Some members, believing that students “should leave their campuses and organize workers,” contested this view, but the LRBW reaffirmed the importance of school and a standardized education for its young affiliates.³⁶

Student organizations, particularly the Black Student United Front, responded positively to the relationship between themselves and organized labor. Like the radical black workers of DRUM and LRBW, black students saw themselves as oppressed by a racist ruling class and trapped in a system of structural violence. Corporate involvement in schools was “designed to further the oppression of Black students as personified by the programs of Chrysler Corp. at Northwestern, Michigan Bell Telephone at Northern, and all other programs that act to decrease the acceleration of Black students.”³⁷ These programs placed students in internships as part of their studies, and students saw this placement as part of a tracking system that set some students on an accelerated path to college while the rest took general courses and graduated only to obtain manual labor jobs, if any job at all. For students downriver (just south of Detroit), tracking was a tool

³⁵ John Watson, interview in “To the Point of Production”, *Radical Education Project*, 1970, Text-fiche, *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), part 4 reel 3.

³⁶ John Williams et. al, Letter to the membership of the LRBW, July 1970, Text-fiche, *Black Power Movement*, (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), part 4 reel 1.

³⁷ Black Student United Front (BSUF), *Black Student Manifesto*, 1972, Text-fiche, *Black Power Movement*, (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), part 4 reel 3.

of industry and part of corporate corruption, as they explained in their *Downriver* underground student paper:

Tracking doesn't begin in the schools; it begins in the offices and the plants like the ones that are all over Downriver. Business and industry continually need new workers to run the presses, to type the letters, to make the steel that keeps the money coming in. they also need new superintendents and executives to oversee the operations, so nothing fouls up (like people demanding more pay or better working conditions).³⁸

The plight of workers resonated with many students because they saw themselves victims of the same corporations.

Their association with labor movements gave student protestors access to resources that advanced their own cause. When BSUF began publishing a newspaper, called *The Black Student Voice*, each school involved in the movement published its own edition. These early editions were typically two standard size pages folded into a booklet. But with the help of Mike Hamlin and John Watson, students were soon publishing their more elaborate paper at 179 Cortland Street, where the original RUM newsletters were printed. Beyond these material assets, the workers acted as teachers to young protesters as they developed into revolutionaries. Students recognized their dependence on the LRBW, admitting that "in order for the BSUF to progress and therefore the Black student movement in Detroit and throughout the country to progress, to insure protracted struggle (linking Black students to Black workers) and activity and not to be issue oriented, crisis-oriented, or student orientated, an analysis, ideology and an in depth study is of utter

³⁸"Road to Nowhere", *Down the River*, September 1972, High school underground press in Detroit, Michigan, American Radicalism Vertical File, Michigan State University.

gravity.”³⁹ Radical students saw radical workers as a resource and a support for their own developing movement.

In an effort to entrench community relations and establish community control, radical labor groups were among the high-school students’ most important partners. While parents groups, civil rights leaders, and religious figures supported their initial acts of protest and the beginnings of student organization, affiliation with workers helped students push their activism further. The youth saw their futures in factory jobs under racist supervisors, just as their present situation in the classrooms was oppressive and controlled by racist teachers and administrators. In solidarity with the oppression of the revolutionary workers, radical students organized themselves across district boundaries and created a “United Front” to fight the injustice in their own school system as well as any other injustice they might encounter in Detroit or around the world. Their partnership with radical labor organizers represented students’ belief that the schools themselves were run like factories in which they were the oppressed workers as well as a mishandled product directed toward a bleak future of continued oppression.

The most common goal of students and their community partners was gaining community control over schools and educational policies. It took student protesters time to articulate what was meant by community control, and their position on the subject reveals how their community partners influenced their view. Attorney Ken Cockrel, a prominent figure in the Revolutionary Union Movement, was later elected city councilman, increasing his notoriety among activists in the 1960s. In a speech given January 30, 1970, Cockrel articulated the meaning of community control embraced by the

³⁹ BSUF, “Report on the Black Student United Front to: The members of the executive board of the LRBW from: the executive board of the BSUF”, 1971, Text-fiche, *Black Power Movement*, (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), part 4 reel 2.

League of Revolutionary Black Workers as well as the Black Student United Front. Speaking in support of State Senator Coleman's bill to decentralize Detroit Public Schools and create community based school boards, Cockrel focused on the goal of "organizing people around the concept of taking power...by whatever means necessary." Beyond cultural expressions of Black Power, Cockrel and the radical students of the BSUF were determined "to take power over that system you find yourself in. And that's how we relate to repression."⁴⁰ Community control, then, meant replacing the power structure that governed the schools so as to make the educational system more relevant. The consensus amongst student protestors and community partners was that "an end to Central School Board control" and the formation of smaller, decentralized boards with youth representatives sitting on them would achieve this goal.⁴¹ These proposed boards would ideally be more representative of the local neighborhoods needs and desires as well as the changed racial composition of many areas of the city. In April of 1969, Senator Coleman Young proposed a de-centralization bill for Detroit schools, and it was passed by the school board the next year, but students and adults continued to grapple with the ideas of community and control in the context of public education.⁴²

For the inner city youth, community was often defined not only by neighborhood, but also by race. The formation of the Black Youth Liberation Movement and then the Black Student United front demonstrate the shifted racial composition of the inner city schools, which, by the late 1960s, were mostly black. What began around 1965 as isolated protests in schools across the city became a unified effort by black students to

⁴⁰ Ken Cockrel, "From Repression to Revolution," speech to Detroit Newsreel Anti-Repression Conference, 30 Jan 1970, < <http://libcom.org/library/repression-revolution-speech-kenneth-v-cockrel> >.

⁴¹ "The Rebel's Platform," *Rebel's Voice*, volume 1 number 1, November 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

⁴² Mirel, 335-342.

make education relevant. This meant making schools meaningful to the students, as well as fashioning them into “a relevant community institution.”⁴³ This organization of student protest meant an expansion of community boundaries to unite all inner city black students by a common interest and cause.

The initiation of student protests caught the eye of community members from parents to workers, and it was the influence of these adults that pushed the student movement forward and helped organize it into a “city wide Black Student United Front.”⁴⁴ These allies to the student movement shaped the development of the protest movement as students took on community causes and expanded their platform and demands. Just as the community took interest and became involved in school affairs, so did the students demand a greater say in the happenings of their communities. The partnerships between students and parents, students and religious leaders, and students and labor between 1967, when the Black Youth Liberation Movement first formed, and 1972, when the Black Student United Front ceased publication of the *Black Student Voice*, organized the student movement and added to its causes. It also created a sense of community for high-school students at different school campuses, fashioning a city-wide movement and a heightened sense of unity based on shared struggle.

⁴³“Northern High Parents and Community confront Board of Education,” 1969, folder 3 box 5, Remus G. Robinson Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴⁴ Black Student United Front, *Black Student Voice*, October 1970, Volume 1 number 1, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

CHAPTER THREE:

Building Solidarity

Wherever death may surprise us, it will be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, reach some receptive ear, that another hand stretch out to take up weapons and that other men come forward to intone our funeral dirge with the staccato of machine guns and new cries of battle and victory.

-Che Guevara, 16 April 1967, in Havana¹

In 1971, student leaders drafted and published a “Black Student Manifesto,” articulating the causes and concerns of student protest while expanding the movement into new political and geographic spaces. The teen authors included in their pinnacle document many of the issues at the heart of their student struggle: poor facilities, racist faculties, an unjust tracking system, and several other forms of “intolerable conditions we as black students are confronted with!” After 5 years of organizing, the students leading the Black Student United Front no longer limited their criticism to educational matters. The influences of community partners and radical ideologies introduced students to an array of issues that they then incorporated into the manifesto. Besides voicing criticisms against the school buildings and curricula, the students were now spearheading a “black student struggle,” concerned with local, national, and global affairs. Through their political education, the Black Student United Front and its collection of militant youths learned to define themselves by race, age, and status and use these identifiers to transform

¹ Quoted in *Black Student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

the protest movement into a forum for any and all issues concerning student activists and radicals.²

Creating the *Black Student Manifesto* was a multi-draft process undertaken by members of the BSUF that built on the philosophies of revolutionary groups with diverse interests. As a result of these outside influences, the student views show little focus, jumping from organized crime to the war in Vietnam in one list of complaints.³ Under the advisement of League of Revolutionary Black Workers founder Mike Hamlin, the students pursued a radical agenda beginning in the early 1970's. This meant incorporating socialist and even communist ideas into newspapers and demonstrations by the students.⁴ The manifesto reflects these views through students' mention of the "racist, anti-union, anti-communist propaganda" in schools as part of their criticism of Detroit education. They also list themselves, as the BSUF, along with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Republic of New Afrika as some of the "political, social, and cultural organizations in Detroit,"⁵ placing student protest alongside larger movements rooted in socialism and African Internationalism.

The later period of student protest, beginning with the organization of the *Black Student Voice* as a city-wide paper in 1970, explored revolutionary rhetoric and ideas ubiquitous in everyday conversations and intellectual discussions in Detroit. Student participation in this discourse led them on paths of self discovery, on which they journeyed together through their writing and activities. In an "experiment in

² Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying: a Study in Urban Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 1998), 76.

⁵ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

consciousness transmission,” some students drew and published cartoons in *Community Capers*, exploring the many issues their surroundings presented to them. A single issue discussed, in picture form, capitalism, workplace safety, the dangers of smoking, ecological issues, popular culture, wage slavery, and more.⁶ The scattered and seemingly unrelated nature of these contributed cartoons demonstrates how diverse high-school students’ interests had become by the comic’s first issue in 1971. It also demonstrates a growing consciousness of the role organized student protest played in a wide array of social causes, and the confidence these students had cultivated in their own efficacy and ability to enact social change.

The *Black Student Manifesto* revealed plans for a Black Student Congress. Through this nationally inclusive event, the BSUF leaders would solidify their movement locally while expanding the revolutionary student discourse all over the country. The creation of this congress would also help the students clarify the purpose and direction of black student protest. To some, the diverse causes that *Community Capers* and other student publications discussed and debated were unfocused and a hindrance to the most central causes of the student protest movement. Amidst a “whirlpool of political confusion amongst Black students,” the BSUF and a Black Student Congress offered a framework of “political guidance and direction” to the numerous black students of varied beliefs and ideologies. On a local level, that guidance could be attained by wider dissemination of the *Black Student Voice*. The *BSV* laid out a political plan to revolutionize all students in Detroit and keep them united in working for the same struggle for black control over black communities in the city. The more peripheral causes

⁶ Surrealist Multimedia Co-op, *Community Capers*, volume 1 number 0, Box 1, Underground Newspaper Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

that created “political confusion” were all those that did not demand an end to white control of city power structures from schools to apartment buildings. In the end, the student leaders of the BSUF concluded that “all roads must lead to revolution,” and for a successful revolution, they needed all of their peers to get on board. With the manifesto, the students articulated a desire for greater unity amongst students, to be achieved by grouping all students into the city-wide Black Student United Front. Unity of message, of ideology, and of organization, the students believed, would help their protest movement to grow beyond scattered protests and local issues.⁷

Besides growing and recruiting within Detroit, the *Black Student Manifesto* laid out a plan to expand nationally, as the Detroit teens recognized themselves as part of an American context of struggle. The Black Student Congress planned for the summer of 1971 would be the second gathering of high-school youth that the Detroit teens had been a part of, the first taking place in Cincinnati in 1969. The Black Youth Congress invited adult speakers from all across the United States to inspire the gathered youth and lead workshops for the education and advancement of black communities. In Cincinnati, Detroit teens (along with Detroit college students) gathered with other young people to learn about the liberation of black people and to help establish a National Communications Center.⁸ This conference likely served as a model for the plans of the Black Student Congress to take place in Detroit, with several key changes.

According to the *Black Student Manifesto*, the Detroit students’ congress would invite only students, not just youth in general. The protest movement in Detroit stemmed

⁷ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

⁸ “Black Youth Congress Formed,” *Black Student Voice*, volume 2 number 13, 2 June 1969, Box 1, Underground Newspaper Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

from educational issues, and even as the movement grew and expanded its platform, education remained its foundation so that only fellow students were equipped to discuss and propose solutions to the challenges black students faced in Detroit and other cities in America. Additionally, the Detroit Black Student Congress was initiated by and planned by a student group with loose supervision and assistance from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. In contrast to the Cincinnati conference, where youth were invited to learn from and join an adult movement, Detroit teens called on their peers to serve as leaders and initiators of their own movement.⁹ Although discussed in the *Manifesto* and advertised in the *BSV*, the Black Student Congress was repeatedly pushed back and the planning proved rather difficult. In the end, it was not widely attended by any students outside Detroit.¹⁰ Still, the desire for unity with other high-school students outside Detroit was a result and reflection of growing interest in the struggles of black students regardless of location.

As the student protest movement in Detroit organized itself into a large movement with thousands of teens involved, these teens grew to recognize shared experience and describe themselves based on a collective identity. A student at Chadsey High wrote, “We all share a common identity. We are all going to a school that is not training us in our own in interest.”¹¹ This view was likely shared by student activists at high schools across Detroit, as high-school students discussed the challenges they faced within the social structure of the city and their own smaller communities. Embracing their youth and

⁹ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

¹⁰ “Chronology of Major Events of the LRBW,” in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 1.

¹¹ “Dope at Chadsey,” *Rebel’s Voice* volume 1 number 1, November 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

occupation as full-time students, teen activists considered themselves budding intellectuals. The dissemination of the *Black Student Voice* shared a message of unity among students, brought together by their age and position, and this unity allowed them to struggle against racist society and oppressive school system. The sense of solidarity written into articles and commentaries of student protestors in Detroit expanded to many contemporary communities engaged in struggle, and as the *Black Student Manifesto* proposed, “We as students should continue to push forward in search of ‘quality education’ but not as a long range goal. It is clear that our long range goal is that of power for the masses of Black and other oppressed people.”¹² This shift in purpose came with a shift in consciousness that the young protestors articulated in the later years of their movement.

The solidarity cultivated by student activists began with their self-understanding as the youth and therefore future of society. Though in partnership with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and other adult activists, the students of Detroit remained their own interest group separated by time and experience. They were continuously identifying themselves as “young,” “youth,” and “students,” reminding their larger community of the value that their age and status offered. Embracing their age and status, the protestors also claimed competency and the ability to make their own decisions and determine their own futures. “High-school oppression” came from adults telling students what to do and indoctrinating them into a corrupt system, and student protestors rejected this norm, claiming power for themselves. Student organizers insisted that the school

¹² Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

board, administrators, teachers, and community at large listen to the youth voice and consider its value.¹³

As students, these protestors placed themselves in a class of intellectuals and scholars, though they were not yet decorated by degrees and honors. Students in the Cold War era are remembered for their role in protests and in shaping political debates, and the teens in Detroit were a part of this larger movement. At the University of California at Berkeley, administrative bans on political activities on campus sparked student protest and a larger Free Speech Movement in 1964 that remains part of the school's legacy. In 1968, these Berkeley activists were joined in the spirit of protest by New York University students who staged sit-ins and strikes against the offices of admissions and academic affairs. 1968 marked a year of "global disruption" as students in West Berlin, Prague, and Paris also staged noted demonstrations demanding, in general, a freer and more open society.¹⁴ Around the world, college students were taking their education outside the classroom and refusing to be ignored in their demands for change.

College campuses in Detroit offered easy access to mentors and examples of student leadership and activism. Wayne State University was the largest institution of higher education in 1960s and 1970s Detroit, with its main campus located just north of the city center. Catholic schools like the University of Detroit, Mercy College Detroit, and Marygrove College all brought together even more young adult students in the city and fostered a culture of intellectual activity directed toward social change. The college students in Detroit were demographically different from those at Berkeley and NYU,

¹³ "Who Are We?" *High School Blues*, spring/summer 1975, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁴ Jeremy Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 164-212.

though, and their particular brand of activism was, therefore, different. Wayne State's student population drew from black communities in and around the city, and the writers and editors of the official university paper, *The South End*, reflected this in its concern with local issues of race and racism. Detroit college students also participated in national campaigns and organizations like the Students for Democratic Society (SDS), founded by their peers at the University of Michigan.¹⁵ The presence of these college students provided the high-school activists with a link to a global protest movement in which students played a large role.

Youth provided a platform of solidarity for the Detroit students, one that they hoped to expand in the aforementioned student congress. Historian Martha Biondi describes this time period in America as “an era of youth revolt,”¹⁶ and young people were invigorated by their age and experience to join the revolution in its many forms. In Detroit, high-school students believed themselves uniquely capable to solve the educational problems they identified locally, and they regularly criticized administrators and school board officials, calling them “old” and even “ancient,” and therefore of little help to the problems of youth. While the adults in charge had never “solved these problems and there is no indication that they will be solved because the old methods don't work on either the old problems or the new ones,” the teen leaders of the protest movement proposed new ideas and solutions.¹⁷ While they were influenced by and worked with adult organizations, the young protestors belonged to an even lower rung on the ladder of society as minors without full citizen privileges. From their unique vantage

¹⁵ Johnny Grant, “SDS,” *South End* volume 27 number 59, 20 January 1969, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

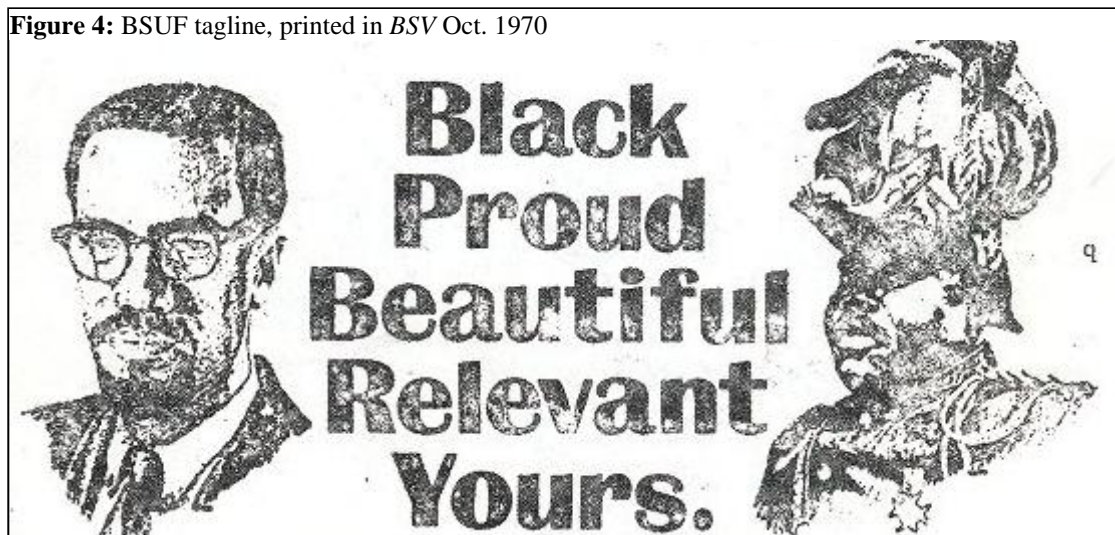
¹⁶ Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 27.

¹⁷ “Hey Teach!”, *Rebel's Voice* volume 1 number 1, November 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

point, they identified a set of issues and challenges in their schools, their city, and society that were not always addressed by older generations. This expansion of concern from the local and immediate, ie the Detroit Public Schools, to national and even global issues was itself a hallmark of the new generation’s recognition of globalization and international solidarity, discussed later in this chapter.

In the *Black Student Voice*, the BSUF’s paper continued to disseminate ideas of the *Black Student Manifesto* and organized activities in semi-monthly issues, student activists summarized their collective goal to be “black, proud, beautiful, relevant, yours” for their readers and fellow students in Detroit. This tagline highlighted and ordered the

Figure 4: BSUF tagline, printed in *BSV* Oct. 1970



priorities of the students by the 1970s: namely to represent their readership’s shared identities and act as a relevant voice of the movement. The slogan first began to appear regularly in the volumes of the “official organ of the Black Student United Front” in 1970, and by organizing and uniting around a common cause, teen protestors recognized common characteristics, and the first of these was race.

From its inception, the student protest movement in Detroit Public Schools recognized the racial nature of student struggle, and though in certain places the protest

activities included white students they were led by and predominantly participated in by the mostly black student bodies of the various high schools. Particularly in the inner city, the student protest movement was assumed to be a black student movement, and naming student organizations the Black Youth Liberation Movement or the Black Student United Front was not meant to be exclusive, but rather inclusive. The schools that served as hubs to the BSUF and protest in general also boasted predominantly black student bodies. Northern, Cass, Cooley, Central, and Western were five of the most important senior high schools in the formation of student activists, and each of these published individual versions of the *Black Student Voice* before the students came together and created a city-wide paper.¹⁸

Racial solidarity was more than recognition of the changing composition of Detroit schools. For the student radicals it was also an assertion of pride and unity with a greater movement of Black Power. The national movement emphasized that black communities needed to be autonomous, rather than governed by white political and civic leaders. With this message in mind, Detroit students demanded community control of their school, meaning local school boards with black representatives in black neighborhoods to replace one central school board and its primarily white members. This message of Black Power went hand-in-hand with youth power as the BSV declared, “Black youth, the world is yours; take it!”¹⁹ Educators and historians have sometimes characterized the tactics of student protest in this era as “unrestrained hostility and naked

¹⁸ “Formation of the Black Student Voice,” *Black Student Voice* volume 1 number 2, March 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁹ *Black Student Voice*, volume 1 number 2, March 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

aggression”²⁰ because the teens endorsed Malcolm X’s belief in liberation by any means necessary. In order to take power, black students in Detroit would do anything from staging a walk-out to calling in a bomb threat, but the intent was always to get attention from school administrations to advance a larger agenda of community control and student control.

Black Nationalism also influenced the teen activists in Detroit in the 1960s and 1970s and contributed to the *BSV*’s emphasis on the racial nature inherent to the student protest movement. This ideology saw African Americans as a nation within a nation. The students of Detroit recognized this truth in their own lives, and in 1969, Northern Students, influenced by the discourse of Black Power and Black Nationalism present in their community, staged a revolt and demanded that a black, red, and green liberation flag replace the American flag raised by their school each day.²¹ Racial identity, for these young protestors, superseded and even replaced nationality. From their perspective, the tenets of Black Nationalism made perfect sense and could be proven by their own experience. Students wrote about “the ugly face of Americanism as seen through the Black colony,”²² so that the resistance against white control was a resistance to the imperial power of America. Black Nationalism, along with Black Power, helped Detroit teens articulate a new kind of patriotism and loyalty to their racial background over their country of origin.

In declaring “I’m Black and Proud,” students were spurring each other into action against an oppressive system. Acknowledging that a declaration of pride is not enough to

²⁰ Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-1981* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 366.

²¹ Georgakas and Surkin, 76.

²² “Back and Regroup,” *Black Student Voice* volume 1 number 2, March 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

solve the problems of their racist society, the *Black Student Voice* writers were translating that change in attitude to a change in action. They declared that “Black Pride is necessary if it leads to Black Love which leads to Black Unity that leads to the desire for Black Power which finally leads to the ultimate solution to our problem: the Black Revolution.” The student struggle for Detroit’s protesting teens was a racial struggle and they used the rhetoric of Black Power to empower themselves. Besides its impact on individual worth, a mantra of black pride worked as a uniting force for the students. In their quest to “unite black students,” the leaders of the BSUF used common ethnic heritage and the shared experience of living in racist America to foster their own movement. In this way, black pride was both a result of growing student protest and sustenance for the movement as it grew and changed.²³

“Black is beautiful” was part of the student message, and the teenage leaders professed strength and dignity in the face of oppression and adversity. For teens especially, body image and appearances play a role in relationships with others and self, and affirming the image of young black men and women was an assertion of self-worth. Detroit teens adopted natural hairstyles, acting on their declaration that “black is beautiful,” and criticized white fashion, calling it “imperialistic, capitalistic, racist fashion.”²⁴ One student paper, *Omega*, berated society for its beauty standards, particularly as they led to judgment and disunity between students. The student authors saw that the images of “cool” and “beautiful” being advertised to them as America’s youth left teens to compete with one another to look the best, so that “in the end we are

²³ “Pride is Not Enough,” *Black Student Voice*, 12 October 1968, Box 1, Underground Newspaper Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

²⁴ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

all by ourselves, without any real friends or values besides a martini and a pressure-ugly job.”²⁵ True beauty, these students argued, was embracing your heritage and joining together with your peers. The message was one of empowerment, passed from student to student, as the teens fortified their cause and their unity.

Black Power as it took form in the United States is often remembered as a political movement, but for most black Americans, it fit into the realm of culture and everyday life. In his history of the Black Power movement, William Van DeBurg explains that “black culture *was* Black Power. By asserting their cultural distinctive via clothing, language, and hairstyle and by recounting their unique historical experiences through the literary and performing arts, cultural nationalists sought to encourage self-actualization and psychological empowerment.”²⁶ Detroit was part of this cultural movement, exposing high-school students to the ideology beyond the political arena. Growing up in the home of Motown and soul music artists, teenagers celebrated in music and style their race and heritage. Issues of the *BSV* regularly sampled song lyrics from the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye just as they quoted Stokely Carmichael’s speeches and paraphrased Malcolm X’s philosophy. Van DeBurg showed how Black Power disseminated a cultural message of empowerment in America, and this was certainly in the case of Detroit as evident in the Detroit student movement. Teens discourse focused just as much on popular culture and social life as modes of liberation as they worked towards political goals by advocating for black leadership and community control.

²⁵ “Living Human,” *Omega* number 4, High school underground press in Detroit, Michigan, American Radicalism Vertical File, Michigan State University.

²⁶ William Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 171.

Just as they called themselves “Black, Proud, and Beautiful,” the students were determined also to be relevant. First and foremost, the authors of the *Black Student Voice* wanted their black student movement to be relevant to the paper’s audience, those black students living and learning in Detroit. Though the paper did not cover news stories the way the *Detroit Free Press* or *Detroit News* might, it did present stories of life in the city and cover topics of interest to the students. In their editorials on drug use in the city, student authors recognized their particular environment and its challenges. In its criticism of unpopular teachers and administrators, the *BSV* invited new readers to join in critical discussion as well as a larger movement to take control of the educational system. While the student governments of Detroit high schools held little authority or decision making power, the student activists would make themselves relevant by identifying student needs and taking action, typically in the form of protest events, to see those needs addressed by the school system.²⁷

The scope of the student struggle expanded more globally when students took an interest in international affairs, deeming these also relevant to their condition in Detroit. Although the initial protest events, such as the Northern walk-out, responded to local events and the state of Detroit education, the students began in their publications to discuss broader issues of civil rights and liberation. By 1972, these young authors wrote in their papers just as much about the state of affairs in Vietnam, South Africa, and other nations as they wrote about their own district and city. Uniting on a local level as young, black activists led the students to realize a greater purpose in a global landscape and a responsibility to respond to injustice anywhere. While adult radicals, activists, legislators,

²⁷ “Student Council Resigns”, *The Cardinal*, 27 February 1969, Labadie Collection, Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

and scholars discussed and debated Cold War ideologies and interventions, teenagers in Detroit added their own dissent and dissatisfaction with US policies. As a fairly unified voice, these students spoke out in solidarity with a growing Third World movement in opposition to the conflicts of capitalism, communism, and imperialism around the world.

The war in Vietnam, a cause of many groups' action and dissent during the 1960s and 1970s, became an important focus of the Detroit high-school student protest movement. In 1967, students published the first issue of the *High School Mobilizer*, a paper dedicated entirely to anti-war articles and organizing. As part of resistance to the war, teens posted anti-draft flyers, invited speakers to their schools and communities, and hosted student forums to discuss resistance. In each of these and other activities, school administrations blocked the anti-war student group and made organizing and recruiting difficult.²⁸ Still, the student resistance to the war continued as long as the government continued to draft their classmates, peers, and community members. Particularly as young African Americans, the students stood firm in their opposition to the Vietnam War, observing that black soldiers were being drafted and killed in numbers disproportionate to their actual numbers in the American population. By 1970, they had formed a Student Mobilization Committee that did more than just publish the *Mobilizer*. With an anti-war referendum on the November ballot, high-school students came together with Wayne State University students to organize a march across Detroit, encouraging the city to support an end to the war.²⁹ These students were going beyond the issues of their own classrooms and schools and engaging in protests of global proportion.

²⁸ *High School Mobilizer*, January 1968, Labadie Collection, Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

²⁹ Student Mobilization Committee, Antiwar Protest Flyer, American Left Ephemeral Collection, Archive Services Center, University of Pittsburgh.

For some student organizers and activists, the situation of the Vietnamese resembled their own struggle. While the Viet Cong fought the white imperial powers of France and the United States, black people in America lived under an oppressive system of racial discrimination. Most issues featured in the *BSV* reminded students of this perceived similarity, as their tag-line read, “Genocide against the Vietnamese by Fascist War – Genocide against Afro Americans by Racist Law!”³⁰ Similarly, national leaders of Black Power and black politics drew connections between anti-colonial war and the fight for greater autonomy in the black community. In the analysis of Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton:

Young men left the USA, traveling 10,000 miles to a country they had never heard of before, actually believing they were sacrificing their lives to advance democracy, to advance history, when in fact they were fighting against themselves. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the case of Africans leaving Los Angeles to go fight in Vietnam or Iraq for US imperialism and having to fight the army of US imperialism in Los Angeles.³¹

In opposing the war in Vietnam, black Americans and black students in Detroit reaffirmed their commitment to liberation, including in that goal the liberation of all people oppressed by racist and imperial regimes.

The students discussed the topic of US interventionism beyond Vietnam and criticized government policies that interfered in the problems of other nations. They particularly found fault in American involvement abroad and reluctance to address domestic issues. These teen activists proposed that racial inequality and economic injustice should be primary concerns taking precedence to Cold War conflicts. The

³⁰Black Youth Liberation Movement, *Black Student Voice* volume 2 number 4, February 1969, Box 1, Underground Newspaper Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

³¹ Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1992), 196. Note: Los Angeles was one of the first branches of the Black Panther Party, and because of his experience there Carmichael uses the city as an example of a national phenomenon.

members of Detroit Youth against War and Fascism, regularly advertised and supported by the Black Student United Front, criticized the Nixon administration's aggression in Laos and its ignorance of the plight of factory workers in Detroit and other industrial centers.³² The students of Detroit were part of a larger group of militants who "sought to understand the African-American condition through an analysis of global capitalism, imperialism, and Third World liberation,"³³ and their regular analyses of international politics and current events demonstrate the role teens played in the greater protest culture of their time.

The black students of Detroit took great interest in African de-colonization, which began in 1957 with the independence of Ghana from the British Empire. The last African nations to receive freedom got the most attention from student activists, who vocally supported US aid and intervention for the freedom of these states. While FRELIMO, the Mozambique Liberation Front, fought until 1975 for liberation from Portugal, high school students on the other side of the globe pledged their support and questioned the lack of involvement from the American government. In a 1977 article in *From the Pen*, a Marxist student paper in Detroit, students celebrated the eventual victory of FRELIMO but did not forget the lack of action on the part of their own government to lend its support to the cause of liberty abroad. As the students observed, the US intervened only in situations that would support a larger goal of accumulating wealth and power for an American upper class of consumers and controllers.³⁴ The students in Detroit were eager

³² "...And Now Laos," *Cooley High Black Student Voice* volume 1 number 11, 5 November 1970, American Left Ephemeral Collection, Archive Services Center, University of Pittsburgh.

³³ Robin D. G. Kelly, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 62-63.

³⁴ "Time is Running Out," *From the Pen* issue 1, November 1977, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

to support the causes of liberation abroad as they criticized colonialism and imperialism on the African continent.

The plight of blacks in South Africa was perhaps the most offensive abuse of human rights according to the black student activists in Detroit, and they frequently cited the apartheid regime as an example of racial oppression that mirrored America's own racist law. Again, they found fault in the US government's role in international affairs, because of American "corporate involvement in racist South Africa and the United States' ruthless domestic practices against its non-white populace." As the white population of South Africa denied rights to the black population, so did the US government infringe upon the rights of black students and their communities. In both instances, "the roots of our oppression stem from the dehumanizing practice of imperialism, capitalism, and racism."³⁵ The grouping of these three evils (imperialism, capitalism, and racism) declare the teenagers affiliation during the Cold War era as they aligned themselves firmly with the Third World, or more accurately dis-aligned themselves from the First World of American capitalism. In a manifestation of the growing sense of Black Nationalism, the students showed solidarity with the sharers of an African heritage, and a simultaneous rejection of the myth of black inferiority.³⁶

The memoir of Godfrey Mwakikagile, a Tanzanian scholar and historian, helps show how pervasive the sense of African Internationalism was in Detroit in the 1970s as the author observes African culture appropriated and discussed in the city's intellectual circles. Born in colonial Tanganyika, Mwakikagile came to Detroit in 1975 to study.

³⁵ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

³⁶ "Exploring the Lies They Taught Us," *PAR Newsletter* volume 1 number 1, November 1967, Box 2, Underground Newspapers Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

When he arrived, there was already in the city a strong sense of Pan-Africanism, related to the Black Nationalist idea of racial unity. As the young African student reflected, “Probably more than any other city in the United States with a predominantly black population, Detroit was a hotbed of political activism that has not been duplicated anywhere else in the country.”³⁷ Those students who began the high-school protest movement in the 1960s and their successors helped to create and grow this activism, born out of a sense of African unity as preached by Malcolm X and understood from their own experience. Teen activists noted and commented on African current events because of their understood solidarity with all black people, and they also hoped that this unity might advance their own cause, putting “the plight of 30 million African Americans into the international arena.”³⁸

The students in Detroit found many heroes for their cause and their movement, and these were not limited to local or even national activists. In several issues of the *BSV*, the students bolded and immortalized the words of Che Guevara spoken to the UN: “Wherever death may surprise us, it will be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, reach some receptive ear.”³⁹ Guevara was born in Argentina but went on to gain fame as a leader in the Cuban revolution, and then as a supporter of African liberation and de-colonization in general. Like Che Guevara, the students in Detroit felt called to global involvement and prolonged struggle. The Chinese communist and revolutionary Mao Zedong also inspired the teenagers as they fought for freedom in various arenas.

³⁷ Godfrey Mwakikagile, *Relations between Africans and African Americans: Misconceptions, Myths, and Realities* (Dar es Salaam: New Africa Press, 2007), 69.

³⁸ “Malcolm X,” *Black Student Voice* volume 1 number 2, March 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

³⁹ Black Student United Front, *Black student Manifesto*, June 1971, in *Black Power Movement* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 2003), text-fiche, pt. 4 reel 3.

Although the Black Student United Front and the majority of student activists were not overtly communist in their rhetoric or goals, they respected the Chinese revolution as they understood it and saw Mao's government as fostering "love in China...because people are concerned about people."⁴⁰ As they looked for international examples of freedom and racial justice, the students found heroes in these men and other people who promoted egalitarian societies and rejected established conventions and power structures.

The scope of the student protest movement in Detroit grew large by 1972, the year the *Black Student Manifesto* was published and the height of the Black Student United Front's relevance and membership base. Besides their concerns about educational quality, the teens had placed on their political platform the causes of black autoworkers, the demand for racial equality across America, and the struggle of all colonized people around the globe. The various student papers of the early 1970s highlight numerous other issues, from women's rights and gender equality to the struggles of Detroit's growing Hispanic and Latino population.⁴¹ In each of these perhaps disparate topics, the student protestors, activists, and radicals identified inequality and injustice. In a demonstration of unity and solidarity, Detroit teenagers made themselves into advocates for each other and all other oppressed people. "Black, proud, beautiful, relevant, yours," the student movement had grown into a powerful force of change in the lives of its participants, and one observer noted a student transformation from "apathetic teen boppers" into activists who "realized and used their power."⁴²

⁴⁰ "China," *Changeover* volume 1 number 2, November 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

⁴¹ *Down the River*, 1972 September, High School Underground Press Collection, American Radicalism Vertical File, Michigan State University.

⁴² "Teen Boppers – No Longer Apathetic?," *The Metro*, 16 May 1968, Box 2, Underground Newspapers Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

The early years of school protest and student organization in Detroit built the movement up into a platform for a variety of interests, as well as a scaffold on which teens could find unity and utility. One student leader summed up the perspective shared by many of his fellow activists in 1972:

I'm a student at Chadsey and I've been involved in forming a lot of movements at Chadsey for the struggle and liberation of black people, and then on to other people. We formed a Student Union at Chadsey and we got 9 students to come out of 1700 students. The school has formed the students by and large into being pacifists. When you get there they will sure as hell try to make you a pacifist. The education there teaches you what they want you to know and not what you would like to know. Why is it that American History only teaches you about the King and Queen, Capitalism, and wars? Why don't they teach you the culture of the people? The same questions pertain to Afro-American history. The administration has stopped trying to mold me into what they want me to be. What they are doing now is to eliminate me by some suspension over any BS they can find. I've committed my life for the liberation and struggle for black people and for all the people, so I will not be demoralized into their system.⁴³

This example illuminates the experience of Detroit teens determined to struggle against inequality and injustice in their schools, communities, and world. As student protestors made headlines and caused concern for school board members and administrators, the students attempted to articulate their own struggles as citizens of Detroit and the world. In their movement to change education, students had changed themselves into a generation more aware of their society and its challenges, so that the greatest and most lasting products of Detroit's high-school student protest movement were the student protestors themselves.

⁴³ "Chadsey," *Rebels' Voice* volume 1 number 3, January 1972, High School Underground Press Collection, American Radicalism Vertical File, Michigan State University.

CONCLUSION:

The Legacy of Student Protest

I hope you hear inside my voice of sorrow
And that it motivates you to make a better tomorrow.
This place is cruel nowhere could be much colder.
If we don't change the world will soon be over.
Living just enough, just enough for the city!
-Stevie Wonder, "Living for the City," 1973

On March 23, 2013, in another grand display of student protest, teens walked from Cass Park in Midtown Detroit to the Wayne County Jail. In cloudy and cold weather, high-school students marched the 1.3 miles to “stand up for education and say no to incarceration.”¹ Carrying signs demanding “college-prep, not prison-prep” and “no peace with police in schools,” students referred to the “school-to-prison pipeline”, the reality that many students in poor educational systems end up graduating to a life of crime and punishment. In particular, today’s teens continue to criticize state and city spending, questioning the allotment of two billion dollars for the prison system in the 2013-2014 state budget. Governor Rick Snyder appointed a new Emergency Financial Manager for Detroit in March 2013, and EMF Kevyn Orr has continued slashing school funding to solve the budget crisis in Detroit Public Schools. The teen activists who led and participated in the March 23 protest recognize this government action as an attack against their schools. The budgets of the state and city government, students say,

¹ “Detroit YOUTH Takeover,” Harriet Tubman Center for the Recruitment and Development of Community Organizers, <<http://tubmanorganizing.org/YOUTHVOICE/march>>.

prioritize the incarceration of black youth above their education.² A new body of scholarship and discourse question the role prisons play in creating a just and safe society. With African Americans being arrested and imprisoned at such high rates, incarceration is seen as *The New Jim Crow*, perpetuating a history of legal discrimination along racial lines.³ High-school students are adding to this research with their own reflections, based on a shared experience in an urban school system and racially segregated Southeast Michigan.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline March came a year after the Western International High walk-out and both demonstrated the importance and value of a student voice in educational politics. Groups of energetic youth were able to orchestrate news-worthy demonstrations and articulate demands for better funding for better schools. The march in 2013 is unlikely to result in changes to the state budget, and the walk-out in 2012 did not stop Southwestern High from closing and overcrowding Western. Still, each instance got the attention of city politicians, journalists, and activists. The youth activism also served as education in itself as students have learned theories of social change and a greater awareness of local and state government while writing about their cause for news sources and social media. Although they do not reference it, today's teens are also drawing on a rich history of youth protest in the city of Detroit with its roots in the black student protest movement of 1965-1972.

As policy makers from Washington, DC to Lansing to Detroit seek solutions and plan for the future, they often ignore the persistent voice of students. In the 1960s and

²Gus Burns, "Youth to protest Detroit's 'school to prison pipeline'," 20 March 2013, <http://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/index.ssf/2013/03/youth_to_protest_detroits_scho.html>.

³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

1970s, the Detroit School Board and city government navigated through difficult economic times and population changes and focused on mileage renewals and school integration to solve its problems. The students recognized these issues and others, criticizing the curricula of the junior and senior high schools as well as the attitudes of many teachers and administrators. Black students in inner-city schools were often opposed to integration and instead favored local community control over schools and a disassembly of the central school board. Student activists demanded time and again that their voices be heard, in the form of student government and student newspapers and even in the less organized forms of student protest that included vandalism and unrestrained hostility. The number of incidences of unrest in Detroit schools during this era points to the discontent of the student bodies, and the newspapers and flyers some teens left behind articulate the various reasons for this discontent.

The protests in and around Detroit Public Schools fit into a culture of protest and political activism. This tradition of protest and political movement is continued through the teen activists' interactions with their community and emphasized the importance of community control. Student papers often mentioned their parents and the struggle of black people for fair conditions and a relevant workers' union. Other radical thinkers and community organizers in Detroit influenced and directly aided the student cause, giving them access to facilities for Freedom Schools and printing machinery and providing a political and social education. As the students referred to and depended on their community for support, these different interest groups also praised the student protest movement in their own publications and utilized the youth movement for their own causes. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers in particular hoped to advise the

teen protestors and considered the BSUF a subsidiary of their own organization. The 1970 film entitled *Finally Got the News*, made by the LRBW, features high-school students as it discusses the history of black oppression in the United States, from slavery on the plantations to wage slavery in the plants.⁴ For the students and their community partners, the personal was the political. Everyday experience in schools, factories, and segregated Detroit contributed to the ideological formation of the young protestors.

The high-school student protest movement of 1965-1972 developed over time and can be divided into three separate phases. The first is characterized by a growing atmosphere of discontent and different acts of protest against the poor conditions of schools. Protest came in various forms, as discussed in chapter one, including but not limited to vandalism and destruction of school property, marches downtown, letter-writing campaigns, and student writing. Once the students began to enumerate their complaints against the district, they organized, and this formation of a Black Youth Liberation Movement and Black Student United Front constitutes the second stage of student protest. The influences of community partners like parents, pastors, and unionists defined which issues the student leaders would discuss and incorporate into their platforms. The concept of community proved important for the protest movement as students and adults alike demanded community control of the schools and self-determination for black communities. In the last phase of the movement, this sense of community was elaborated and expanded. Students sought to understand themselves as a social and political group, expanding their organizational goals beyond Detroit.

Initially, student protest was a direct response to educational politics in Detroit and the numerous shortcomings of public schools, but the later stage of student protest

⁴ Stewart Bird, Rene Lichtman, & Peter Gessner, *Finally Got the News* (Detroit: Newsreel, 1970).

expanded student concerns to a global scale. The *Black Student Manifesto* and issues of the *Black Student Voice* after 1970 discuss Third World solidarity, Pan-Africanism, and the desire to expand the Black Student United Front on a national scale. Tyranny in the form capitalistic and imperial forces forged links from the students in Detroit to oppressed people around the world, and they used current events like the Vietnam War and South African apartheid state to launch commentary on this racist and un-just oppression. Student activists included in their umbrella of solidarity all people of color and had strong opinions on US involvement in international affairs during the Cold War era. Rejecting their own racist nation, student leaders supported a Black Nationalist approach to national identity and aligned with black people in the ghettos of urban America as well as those declaring independence in Africa.

The sense of solidarity with each other and all oppressed people that became central to student discourse in the 1970s left its mark on Detroit schools. The era of the student protest movement drew to a close around 1972 with a decrease in student underground paper publication and circulation. Still, the students were changed by years of activism and politicization, so that the results of the movement included a heightened sense of solidarity amongst Detroit teens who viewed themselves as “Black, Proud, Beautiful, Relevant, Yours.” The support for Black Power and Black Nationalism amongst these students grew with their organization into a Black Student United Front, and racial identity was a strong uniting factor for the young protestors. This unity of students in Detroit became the most important means to educational reform, and together the students found power in protest. The administration, students said, were “revolt-paranoid. As were the slave owners” and feared this unity. By keeping students silent

during study hall, the administration recognized that “if even half of the students in the holding rooms revolt, there would be nothing they could do to stop it.”⁵ Recognizing their similarities and shared experiences, students in Detroit united around a collective identity that shaped their rhetoric and ideology.

High-school student protest in Detroit has a long legacy as teens continue to demand a greater voice in educational policy. From 1965-1972, the means of protest consisted primarily of walk-outs, sit-ins, and marches beginning with the Northern High School walk-out of 1966.⁶ The Western International walk-out in 2012 and the School-to-Prison Pipeline march in 2013 utilize the same tools to communicate similar goals of better school facilities, curriculum changes, and more student power over school decisions and educational policies. A more in-depth history of Detroit student discourse would likely fill this gap from 1972 to 2012 with more stories of student discontent and activism reflecting contemporary issues and challenges. Although the ideas of the Black Student United Front may have ceased to circulate in published form after the early 1970s, the sense of activism fostered by this movement and in the schools maintained momentum. A poem written by a Mumford High student in 1989 provides a glimpse of a continued and further developed feeling of Pan-African identity:

Color me purple
With ancient robes
of Egyptian queens. Africa.
Color me black,
color of skin and spirit.
Don't be deceived, precious Africa,
color me gold
for particles

⁵ “Holding Rooms,” *Rebel's Voice*, volume 1 number 3, January 1972, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

⁶ “The Walk-Out and a Need for Unity,” *Cass Student Voice*, volume 1 number 1, April 1969, Underground Newspapers Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

they stole.⁷

The poem goes on and describes ways in which the African continent was exploited by imperialism, ending with the speaker's sense of solidarity with "the continent my ancestors/ were torn from."⁸ This one example suggests a possible continuation of the racial solidarity that black students cultivated decades earlier through the student protest movement.

Youth history provides a new lens through which history can be studied. In the case of Detroit student protestors, current events and popular ideologies were regularly incorporated into the movement and reinterpreted for a practical approach. High-school students absorbed the radical and revolutionary politics of the city and found solidarity with laborers in Detroit while also studying international events and seeing themselves as part the world's colonized and oppressed people. In their cultural references, student papers show how pervasive different ideas were in 1960s America. The words and wisdom of political figures like Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Martin Luther King, Jr. made it into copies of the *Black Student Voice* and other underground papers with some regularity. Historical references to Sojourner Truth, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and slavery in America also reflect the ideas and topics being discussed in Detroit during this time period as teens received an education from their experiences with family and friends in Detroit just as they learned from their schools' black history presentations and American history courses. Understanding teenage activists in Detroit leads to a better understanding of life in the city more generally through these students' discussions of the realities of drug use in the city, poor housing conditions, economic disparities, and racial

⁷ La Trina Garfield, "Find me in Africa," *Style! Mumford's Literary Magazine*, 1989, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁸ *Ibid.*

segregation. Detroit teens absorbed the ideas and ideologies around them, and student histories can reveal those ideas that were most important for those growing up in the city.

In the article that launched a two-thousand-person walk-out, Charles Colding questioned his teachers and the educational system in Detroit. The student protest movement that grew out of inferior school conditions continued to ask similar questions, and as it grew between 1965 and 1972 these questions grew louder and demanded an answer. “Why are Black students receiving an inferior education?”⁹ Students found the answer was complex, deriving from systematic racial oppression and social inequalities that stretched beyond Detroit and resulted in a global struggle against imperialism, capitalism, and racism in many forms. By becoming part of this struggle and engaging in student protest, Detroit teens recognized their own power as black youth and left a legacy of student activism reflected in current events and contemporary experiences.

⁹ “In the Beginning,” *Black Student Voice* volume 1 number 2, March 1971, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

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