

Inspiring Student Activism

By Danny Papa, K-12 Supervisor of Art, Technology Education, and Social Studies, Jefferson Township Public Schools



“Does slavery still exist today?” This is the single most important question I ever asked my 8th grade students. The discussion in my classroom that day sparked a student abolitionist movement as 30 students decided to serve a cause greater than themselves. After learning about modern-day slavery, my students founded a non-profit organization to raise awareness in schools about human trafficking. The students created videos, a website, made presentations, and formed partnerships with law enforcement and government agencies. The students’ work was recognized in the

United States Senate; their efforts even created an opportunity to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security.

The International Labor Organization estimates that 24.9 million people globally were forced into one of many forms of modern-day slavery in 2016. Human trafficking is the third largest international crime and at the rate of growth could soon eclipse drug and weapons trafficking. According to the Polaris Project, “Although slavery is commonly thought to be a thing of the past, human traffickers generate hundreds of billions of dollars in profits by trapping millions of people in horrific situations around

the world, including here in the U.S.” It is undeniable that this issue is a relevant, current, and real concern that is threatening our world daily.

So, what does this issue have to do with New Jersey schools? When my students learned about human trafficking in class, they immediately identified how this crime directly impacts students of their own age and recognized they could even be at risk. Fueled by passion and empathy, these students seized the opportunity to research exactly what the warning signs and risk factors of human trafficking are and vowed to increase awareness in New Jersey and beyond. They created the organization Project Stay Gold

and have been an essential part of the anti-trafficking movement in New Jersey since 2011.

Young people possess a unique sensitivity to injustice which motivates them to make a difference. Further, there is a unique level of engagement when students feel connected to the content being taught and are, therefore, motivated to take action. In this case, students were inspired to advocate for change because they identified this crime as directly affecting them and their generation; they understood they could be the voice of the voiceless. We must harness this authentic passion within our students to not only increase engagement, but to create a lifelong desire to examine their own roles in bettering society. As educators, we have a responsibility to recognize these passions in our students and empower them by offering the support they need. There are three key concepts to remember when empowering students who have the desire to advocate for a cause:

1. Passion is contagious. Do not underestimate that students listen when we speak; therefore, they may also identify with the issues and causes we are passionate about. Further, how we deliver the content we teach can spark immediate passion within our students. Are we giving students opportunities to investigate issues they are curious about? Do we promote inquiry-based learning?

Are we intentional about providing time for students to participate in rich discussion about topics relevant to them? It is moments when students are investigating, inquiring, and discussing relevant issues that their passions will surface.

2. Listen carefully. When students communicate, it is essential to listen to the heart behind their words. Students will not always know they have the ability to impact society in meaningful ways. Understand students possess creative thinking, which could be the foundation of the next great movement that could impact society. We should also remember learning is a two way street. As we listen to our students, we must recognize there is much to be learned from them as well. It is in building those relationships with our students based on mutual respect that they become comfortable advocating for the causes in which they believe.
3. Facilitate and Support. Once we have identified students who are excited about moving forward with a project or passion, we must do everything we can to continue to empower them. Students need educators to break down barriers and open doors they cannot on their own. Collaboration between school resources and student ideas can establish an effective project.

Be careful to keep students at the center here; we do not want to overshadow or influence their progress so that it is no longer student led. Authentic learning occurs when students take action and share the knowledge they have gained. Supporting our students in fulfilling their goals is paramount to their success.

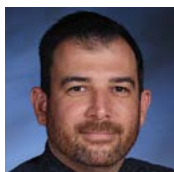
The experiences students have in adolescence shape who they become later in life; therefore, if they can identify causes for which they feel passionate about early on, they will continue to advocate for themselves and others beyond their time with us. Many of the students who founded Project Stay Gold have taken their activism to their college campuses and workplace. Many of these students have been so inspired by this work that it has influenced their career paths. Some of my students are studying journalism and have expressed the desire to write to expose human trafficking. Others are majoring in economics and want to own businesses that promote slave-free products. As student activism is shaped by genuine learning experiences, students discover their purpose which could ultimately define the course of their lives. Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world." As education awakens passion and purpose, our students start to see themselves as we see them: history makers and world changers.

References:

The Polaris Project: <http://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/facts>

The International Labour Organization 2017 Global Estimates of Modern Day Slavery

About the Author



Danny Papa is the K-12 Supervisor of Art, Technology Education, and Social Studies for Jefferson Township Public Schools. As a social studies teacher he founded the nonprofit organization, Project Stay Gold to raise awareness about human trafficking. Danny was named the 2013 History Teacher of the Year by the NJ Council for the Social Studies. Mr. Papa testified on behalf of his students before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs "Combating Human Trafficking: Federal, State, and Local Perspectives" in September of 2013. Danny is currently serving as the co-chair of the Education Committee and an Executive Board Member for the NJ Coalition Against Human Trafficking. Projectstaygold.org njhumantrafficking.org Twitter: @dpapa77