

GUIDE FOR HIGH SCHOOL ACTIVISTS

The following supplement is for high school members of the Young Democratic Socialists. We encourage reading this in addition to the more comprehensive [YDS Chapter Organizing Guide](#), which is available upon request.



Getting Started

Generally, organizing an activist group in high school can be a lot tougher than in college and beyond. High school students tend to be less politically informed and less politically active than their college-aged counterparts, and certain restrictions (not living on campus, people continually having classes all day, hard-ass administrations) make it more difficult to organize clubs and chapters or to put together well-attended events. Nevertheless, it can be done, and as a starry-eyed YDS activist, you should make it your mission to enlighten your fellow students in an environment where there are fewer competing voices than later on.

Requirements for starting up a chapter vary widely from school district to school district, from public to private, etc. If at all possible, it is extremely advisable to get your club recognized by the school, as this can get you the precious classroom space, resources (TVs, computers, tables) and name recognition that you need. When attempting to form a chapter, keep the following in mind:

- First, YDS is **not** a partisan organization. We are sponsored by a recognized non-profit organization, so we organize around political issues but are not a political party. Make this clear to your administration at all times, as most schools are hesitant to allow partisan groups, especially if there is no club of right-wing Young Businessmen, for example, to counteract your socialist fervor.

- Second, strength comes in numbers. A single committed leftist presenting a proposal to a principal may be ignored, but ten or twenty or thirty students are unlikely to be. The more people you have to launch the chapter, the more credibility you will have in the eyes of both your administration and peers. If you are rejected at first, going around to your classmates and circulating a petition is always worth a shot, and can frequently be effective. Appealing for help from sympathetic teachers and other respected adults in the community can also give your group more weight with the administration. If the principal needs clarification on who we are and what we do, the YDS national office would be glad to call and explain our function to him/her. Organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) may also be able to assist you in challenging your school's decision on legal grounds, if you feel your group is being unfairly discriminated against. While the goal is always to build a strong, large, diverse group, don't be discouraged if only a few people participate; even a handful of dedicated activists can make a difference.

If your principal has posters of George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan in his office (they probably won't, but you get the point) and/or your school district's rules are restrictive, you may be prevented from becoming an officially recognized group. Should this happen, you should figure out the specific reasons why your group was denied, and if appropriate, complain (loudly) to everyone. Make it clear that you think this is an injustice, but then still carry on as an informal club. Although you might have problems organizing events on school grounds, you will still develop an activist community and be able to have more influence and run some independent campaigns.



Reaching Out

Although you may have memorized the key works of Karl Marx or the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. by heart and can critique capitalism with your eyes closed, most high schoolers have not. In fact, most high schoolers have no idea about what socialism is as a political philosophy and need to be educated on the most basic level. Even those that have some conception of socialism tend to think of the Soviet Union, fur hats, gulags, and the devil. This is part of the

perception we are trying to change, but this means that yelling "Long Live Socialism!" in the halls will not be a good recruiting tactic. As such, while discussing and refining your understanding of democratic socialism within your group, it would be wise to keep your activism focused specifically on certain issues and progressive campaigns instead of broadly resisting capitalism as a system. After taking positions on issues, you can explain how they are part of a socialist vision of society, but make sure people are clear on your positions before bringing out the "s" word.

In general, high schoolers' understanding of politics is basic, and excessively complex or theoretical analyses of an issue will make you seem like a showy know-it-all. We suggest becoming familiar, both personally and within your group, with some of the history, theory and practice of democratic socialism as outlined in other YDS materials. Doing so will help you more effectively communicate your unique points of view to others. Learning from each other can be exciting, empowering and fun.

Suggested Issues & Campaigns

There are a couple issues which actually may be more relevant and easier to organize around in high school than they are in college. These include:



- **Counter-Recruitment.** Military recruiters aggressively target public high-schoolers, particularly in poorer neighborhoods. Clauses in the No Child Left Behind Act have also mandated that schools make students' information available to military recruiters. Convincing young people that joining the military may not be the best decision to make is one of the most important things activists can do, and can fundamentally change peoples' lives.

As it stands today, the ranks of the military are disproportionately filled by low-income recruits who are merely seeking job training and/or a means to pay for college. A disproportionate percentage of these economically disadvantaged youth are people of color. Conducting a counter-recruitment campaign (whether by leafleting, teach-in, inviting of antiwar speakers, or nonviolent protest) can not only present the antiwar message in a powerful way but also counterbalance the misinformation of military recruiters to help students make an informed decision about their lives. Groups like the War Resisters League and the American Friends Service Committee's Youth and Militarism campaign will be glad to help you. Remember that challenging military recruiters and wanting more money to be spent on education instead of war doesn't mean you are "against the troops." Counter-recruitment efforts can also be used to demand a more democratic U.S. foreign policy that favors human rights and the environment over corporate profits and imperial domination.

- **Supporting LGBTQ Students.** The high-school years are a period of great emotional and physical change, and it is crucial that we help create a safe space that is nurturing for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students, in addition to those questioning their own sexuality. These students are often subjected to cruelty by homophobic students or even teachers, and have to deal with abuse ranging from verbal threats to physical violence. If the school environment is not open and safe for the free expression of their sexuality, LGBT students may feel isolated from the rest of the community, and from each other. If your school already has a Gay-Straight-Alliance or similar group, then YDS should act in solidarity with them and if not, then YDS could either launch a campaign to found one or incorporate support for LGBT students into its own activism. It is important to understand that supposedly "nonpolitical" issues such as bullying and harassment can often take on sexist, racist, classist or homophobic implications. As a group in support of universal equality, YDS should use its strength to stand behind the victims of such abuse and raise the issues of discrimination in the school community.
- **Standardized Testing.** Particularly in public schools, there is a growing trend towards dehumanizing education and basing performance on test scores, instead of quality teaching or in-depth knowledge of meaningful subjects. This creates a fundamentally boring and intellectually empty system that does not



teach students relevant life skills, as teachers are forced to spend much of their time teaching solely to prepare students for tests. Honestly, very few people like standardized tests. Even your teachers and administrators may support you in taking a more holistic approach to education and methods of tracking student achievement. Launching a campaign to inform people about what the Bush Administration and provisions of the No Child Left

Behind Act are doing to education in America will resonate with both students forced to fill in those dreaded bubble-sheets all day and teachers seeking a freer curriculum.

- **Comprehensive Sex Education.** The extreme social conservatism of the Bush Administration has led to a shift away from a comprehensive and honest sex education about contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and issues surrounding teen relationships toward a heavily propagandistic abstinence-only program. This program is both wildly ineffective (studies show that states with abstinence-only education have higher rate of teen pregnancy and STDs than states that educate about contraception) and blatantly misleading, spreading unscientific lies about condom use and imposing upon young people a false morality that dictates that premarital sex is always unacceptable. The United States is even expanding these programs abroad to places like sub-Saharan Africa, where the lack of emphasis on and lies about contraception are possibly exacerbating the horrific AIDS crisis. If your school has abstinence-only education or if the Christian Right is pushing for it, YDS should speak out to the administration or at school board meetings and support students' rights to be factually informed about sex-related issues. YDS should stress that comprehensive education is not only more effective at reducing sexual activity for minors than abstinence-only education, but also protects those that do decide to have sex by teaching them how to do so safely.

- **Economic Justice.** The broad issue of economic justice is central to a democratic socialist understanding of society and is an excellent focus for YDS chapter activists. Economic injustice can express itself in many ways, depending on the environment in which you go to school or the town/city you live in. It is a



well-known fact that public education in America is badly under-funded, particularly in urban districts where the facilities are crumbling, the resources outdated or nonexistent, and the classrooms overcrowded. Schools are now cutting music, art, and gym classes in an attempt to free up funding for more basic education. YDS should lobby for a more equitable distribution of educational funding and should steadfastly oppose any proposed cuts to the education budget, perhaps drawing a parallel

between the insane amounts of money spent on the military's imperial wars abroad and our money-starved schools. Additionally, many school employees, like janitors and food service workers, are not paid wages they can live on with dignity and are sometimes prevented from unionizing. Food service contractors like Sodexo are particularly bad on workers' rights and have been the target of successful campaigns by YDS in the past. Chapters should research the situation that exists in their school and support employees that feel they are being underpaid or mistreated. Almost all public school teachers belong to unions that frequently mobilize to win better wages and benefits for their members and to improve the educational system overall. These teachers and other school employees could benefit from support by student groups like YDS. Finally, many schools do business with companies (such as for school uniforms or other clothing) that exploit workers in the Third World and use sweatshops to produce their goods. YDS can launch a campaign to get the school to switch to worker-friendly industries as have hundreds of high schools and colleges throughout the U.S. (Ask us about how to run a mock sweatshop fashion show, a fun and educational event that can attract a wide range of people.)

- **School Safety, Racial Profiling & the Criminal Justice System.** Across the country, some school administrations and local police departments have instituted a series of repressive measures to deal with a perceived (more hype than reality) increase in violence in our high schools. Responding to fears about gang activity, a series of school shootings (such as Columbine), and criminal behavior in general, some schools have taken on prison-like qualities that can undermine the rights of students while unfairly and disproportionately affecting low-income students and students of color. A number of

these “tough on crime” and “zero tolerance” policies, such as having police officers patrol campuses, increasingly harsh punishments (including expulsion) for non-violent behavior, and infringements on the right to hang out in groups of more than three, have made attending school a more difficult experience. This growing criminalization of youth doesn’t necessarily make schools any safer nor does it reduce high school drop-out rates. Efforts to stop “gangs” have often relied on racial profiling, made worse by sensational media coverage and right-wing scapegoating. Despite the fact that violent crime has generally been on the decrease for many years, our country continues to pursue racist, class-biased and often counter-productive policies of mass incarceration that have resulted in a prison population of over 2 million; there are now more African American men living in prisons than there are attending colleges and universities. Instead of relying solely on police and punishment, schools should offer greater counseling to students, train conflict resolution peer mediators, promote multiracial dialogue, and address persistent issues of overcrowding and bullying that make schools a less safe and enjoyable space for learning. YDS high school chapters can get involved by working to provide positive alternatives to gangs by getting local governments to budget funds for youth jobs, after school programs and other healthy community activities. YDSers can organize against specific instances of racial profiling in schools, and educating your peers on their rights and responsibilities as students.

- **Local Issues.** Unlike college students, high schoolers generally have stronger ties to the local community, having lived in the environment in which they go to school for years. Thus, they do not have an outsider’s perspective on community issues and may have as much credibility as other activists in the area. If a corporation is polluting the land, or gentrification is pricing tenants out of affordable housing, it makes sense to educate people about it and push for action. Of course, the race/class/gender/environment of your school and community will determine what issues are the most relevant.

These are just some of the issues we have thought would lend themselves naturally to high schoolers; of course other issues pertaining to women’s rights, the environment, etc. are also possible to mobilize around. Above all, if you contact the YDS office with details about the situation at your school and/or in your community, we would be glad to give you suggestions about the best issues to tackle and the ways to go about it. We can provide you with literature and talking points, and point you to the best websites and books on every issue, as well as hook you up with relevant organizations and speakers in your area.



Getting the Word Out

- If **tabling** is allowed in your school, invite organizations relevant to your campaign to run a table during school events or before/after school. These tables will have gimmicky buttons, t-shirts, and shiny objects to attract students. Once their attention is captured, there will be informative literature and articulate activists that can talk to them about the issue and information on how they can get connected with the campaign. Labor unions, antiwar groups, women’s organizations, environmental groups, gay-rights groups, organizations that protect our civil liberties and civil rights among those who are often eager to reach out to young people. Alongside these groups, you can set up your own YDS table and perhaps invite a local YDS or DSA activist to help you out.
- **Teach-Ins** and **speakers** are a good way to educate people. If your school has a mandatory lecture series set up, try to invite progressive speakers to it and see if the school will schedule them. If you can get a

classroom or a space for an entire day, you can invite many different speakers that can run workshops for students. If this is impossible, after-school, lunch, and all-school assembly time are all good times to set up, provided you get the news out to people that exciting people are coming in. Alternatively, a large, confident chapter can organize a teach-in on its own with students giving speeches, and organizing discussions and workshops on the topic of choice. You can even challenge conservative students to a debate on a controversial issue if they are willing to deal with your mad socialist knowledge.

- There are many national **days of action** for various causes, be they antiwar or gay rights advocacy. Organizing events on these days makes the group part of a national movement and can often be combined with events already going on in the community.
- Printing an **alternative newspaper** is a good way to get your views out to other students, whether the school lets you use its computers to print it or you have to do it at home. Make sure it isn't filled densely with boring news, however; talk about exciting things that happen in school, and be funny, artsy and creative. Setting up a **blog** or **website** is also a good idea, and get your views out beyond your school community if they are well presented.

Difficulties in High School Organizing



One of the major differences between high school and college students is that most high school students can't vote (because they are under 18), and thus often feel alienated from the political process. That being said, political campaigns are some of the best ways to energize people and get them to think about issues. Political campaigns are always in need of volunteers to knock on doors in neighborhoods and make phone calls, and are glad to take high school students. Working on an exciting progressive campaign will help you meet other activists and can make a concrete difference.

This is best done when there is a truly progressive candidate around, not a right-wing corporate politician, and it is important to make sure that your activism doesn't stop when the election season does. It is also important to remember that YDS is nonpartisan and does not do any electoral work as YDS, so you should get together with political campaigns or other organizations that are helping out to do your work. Organizing mock elections can excite people that are normally apolitical and can be a fun thing to do that is very educational. They also tend to attract local media that are overjoyed to see that kids are excited about politics, so you can perhaps present your socialist politics to the community-at-large.

At some point in your organizing, you will almost certainly begin working with older activists, either from college groups in the area or professional activists. While most are delighted to help you out, sometimes they can adopt a patronizing attitude, treating you like a small child instead of a passionate, intelligent activist. Make sure you let them know that you are a young adult deserving of respect, and make your voice heard as loudly as anyone else's. That being said, it's always good to have older, more experienced activists around that can mentor and support individual YDS members or chapters as a whole.

At this age, most students are still living with their parents, and are thus subject to the rules that their parents impose. While some parents are very supportive of activists and think trying to change the world is a positive thing, others can be evil tyrannical overlords (just kidding, mom and dad!) that seek to prevent their children from being active or attending conferences and protests. This is something to keep in mind when organizing,

but it is important to understand that even though some people may be restricted from being active with your chapter, by exposing them to democratic socialist politics you have laid the foundation for them being active in the future.

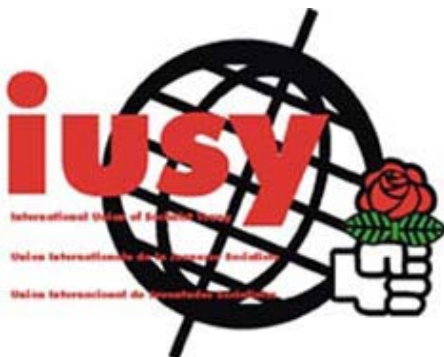
Things to keep in mind when talking to parents are that just because YDS has “socialist” in their name doesn’t mean that we are insane longhaired radicals with fantasies of storming the Capitol. We seek to create concrete improvements in peoples’ lives. Usually all but the most restrictive parents can be brought to reason if you have a good grasp of the issue you are discussing and explain why it is important that you be allowed to organize around it.

Again, if you are having parental issues, you can call the YDS office and we can give you some tips tailored to your particular situation.

SUCCESS STORIES

Activism in high school is not always easy. It can feel lonely or pointless at times, but take heart! Although you don’t have to change the whole world all at once, any action taken and any word that is spoken is better than silent complicity in the injustices of poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, environmental destruction and militarism. The most dangerous thing in times of crisis (like now) is not just that right-wing extremists and greedy corporations are in control, but that many people of conscience remain keep quiet and do nothing to stop them. And besides, students as young as you **have** changed the world before. Here are just a few more recent examples of the countless social justice victories high school students in the U.S. have won:

- Compelling testimony by young people based on their personal experiences of discrimination convinced Massachusetts legislators to pass a landmark **Gay and Lesbian Student Rights Law**. High school students, with the support of the Lieutenant Governor, spoke at hearings, met with individual lawmakers, organized a massive letter-writing campaign, and held rallies and candlelight vigils that raised public support for a law that aims to "provide all students with a safe and supportive public education."
- In 1996 over 2,000 students walked out of their high schools and demonstrated at Philadelphia’s City Hall to demand increased school funding. This action helped to convince city council to give an extra \$15 million to the schools. In 2000, on Martin Luther King Day, a group of 25 Philadelphia Student Union members organized an overnight hunger strike at the State Office Building to protest discriminatory school funding policies. This helped to get two bills introduced that provide a real opportunity for major school funding change.



In general, students across the United States have been successful at getting their school to purchase only non-sweatshop clothing, making their campuses more environmentally sustainable and eco-friendly, decreasing racism, sexism, and classism in their communities, and challenging unjust wars and imperialism on all fronts. You should keep in mind that by joining YDS, you are part of the International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY), an organization that is fighting for justice in all corners of the world. IUSY also happens to be the largest political coalition of young people on the planet, so you will be standing in solidarity with other progressive youth globally.

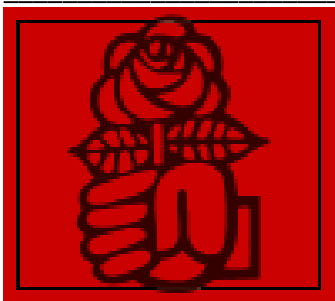
Graduation Issues

It is very important for activists to make sure their work is continued after we leave high school and move on in life. Thus, you should actively reach out to freshmen and sophomores to introduce them to the organization in a friendly way, so that there is continuity and so your group is not dominated only by older students. Groups composed mostly of upperclassmen can be intimidating for younger students that are just trying to find their place in high school, so going out of your way to encourage them into joining and creating an approachable and open organization is important. A YDS chapter should be more than a clique, although close ties and solidarity between activists usually develop after working and fighting for justice together.

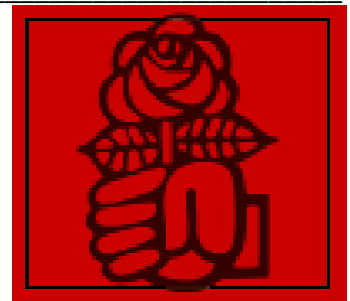
Another important thing for recent high-school graduates is that they jump into the YDS activist scene in college immediately, either by organizing a chapter or joining an existing one. The most successful YDS chapters in college are the ones that have been together for years and have an experienced leadership core. They have good team chemistry, know their own strengths and weaknesses, and know the best way to run events and campaigns on campus. If you let us know what college or university you will be attending, we can put you in touch with progressive faculty members and see if other YDS members are in the area to help you. The college years are some of the most productive for activists, and it would be a shame to lose a year or two to inaction.

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By identifying yourself as a democratic socialist and recognizing the injustices inherent in the capitalist system, you have already taken the first step to changing society. Now is the time to put theory into practice by working to build a stronger progressive movement for social and economic justice. A better world is possible only if we agitate, educate and organize. High school students have much to contribute to this struggle. Onward!



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****Don't forget to check out our main organizing guide for additional important information****