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# We Were Fighting for Self Determination and Power: Black High School Student Activism and the Black Power Movement

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# We Were Fighting for Self Determination and Power: Black High School Student Activism and the Black Power Movement

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WE WERE FIGHTING FOR SELF DETERMINATION AND POWER: BLACK HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

By

Dara Walker

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

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## **Introduction**

The Black Power movement expressed the anger and the hope of a young generation, in particular, Black students in American high schools. These students both vitalized and strengthened the demands of the movement through their various forms of protest against a second-class education. Their direct action represented something bold; it showed America that students could use their role in educational institutions to take the goals and struggles of the Black Power movement and develop creative and organized responses to change that very institution. My research focuses on the movement's philosophies and their role in shaping the ideas and activism of high school students during Black Power era, which merged subsequent to the passive resistance of nonviolent protests initiated by Dr. King. It also explores the idea that black high school students strengthened and emboldened the movement's goals through their political activities within school walls.

High school textbooks may have a paragraph or two written about the Little Rock Nine, but what about the experiences of black high school students during the 1960s and 1970s? What about those who led boycotts and strikes within their schools to ensure that the country actually fulfilled the promises of *Brown v. Board of Education*? What conditions led to their activism and in what form did their direct action take? In Part One of my thesis, I answered these questions through an extensive literature review and interviews with former black high school students during the Black Power movement. To fully understand the literature before me, I explored the Black Power philosophy as expressed by two Black Power organizations, the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as a foundation for black high school student protest in Part Two.

## **Defining Black Power within the Context of this Research**

Before exploring the diverse ideologies of SNCC and the BPP, it is essential to provide a definition for Black Power within the context of this paper. According to Stokely Carmichael, also known as Kwame Ture, and Dr. Charles Hamilton,

It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations. It is a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society.<sup>1</sup>

When Carmichael coined the slogan, he understood that the call for Black Power grew out of the urgency and desire for immediate and long lasting changes in the treatment of oppressed people.

## **Part I: The Philosophies of Two Black Power Organizations**

### **The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**

SNCC believed that it was essential “to help powerless people make political gains without creating new sources of oppression.”<sup>2</sup> The organization wanted oppressed groups to understand that they had the power to break the backs of their oppressors without waiting for a messiah to come to their rescue. This meant teaching others how to lead themselves. SNCC also believed that fear, not inability, stood in the way of black southerners’ organizing efforts against racism.

To break through the self-doubt barrier, SNCC organizers helped Lowndes County, Alabama citizens declare their collective power through electoral politics. Carmichael explains, “The black people of Lowndes County and SNCC then began the hard work of building a legitimate, independent political party with no help from anyone else. [...] In

March, 1966, SNCC and blacks in Lowndes County created the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) with the immediate goals of running candidates and becoming a recognized party.”<sup>3</sup> SNCC’s ideology of breaking through fear allowed the black of Lowndes County to decide that power did not reside in the broken promises of the Democratic and Republican parties, but within the ideals of Black Power.

SNCC successfully organized a Black, independent political party despite the efforts of southern segregationists. While all of its candidates lost the election, the effort provided a framework for the black community's future political struggles.<sup>4</sup> According to Peniel Joseph, “LCFO candidates for sheriff, coroner, tax assessor, tax collector, and three Board of Education slots tallied impressive voting blocs, providing a glimpse of New South politics.”<sup>5</sup> (170). SNCC leaders did not necessarily believe that the electoral process would remove the “second-class” label from blacks, but they believed that the oppressed should know that they had Black Power in every sense of the phrase.

SNCC’s ideology of helping “powerless people make political gains without creating new sources of oppression” proved that, through organizational skills and black people’s anger towards inequality, changes with the white power structure were possible. As stated earlier, the development of the LCFO provided a framework for political organizing; SNCC’s organizers in Lowndes County believed in the power of the people. While this was not entirely a new concept, the Black Power philosophy emboldened the meaning of power for the people. The black citizens of Lowndes County learned how to resist racism as a collective despite the fact that they did not win seats for their candidates. As Black Power became the mantra of the late 1960s and 1970s, a new organization formed to further the ideals of the movement.



## **Black Panther Party (BPP)'s Philosophy**

In 1958, Paul Robeson challenged black activists to help the masses see that they “have the power to end the terror and to win [...] peace and security throughout the land.”<sup>6</sup> Robeson said that this task required coordinated action. He also urged black leaders to plan a program of action with new militancy, “boldness and determination.” In 1966, several community activists and organizations responded to this charge, including the Black Panther Party.

Founded by Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and David Hilliard in Oakland, CA, the Black Panther Party's (BPP) ten-point program best defined its ideology:

1. The freedom to determine the destiny of the black community.
2. Full employment for blacks.
3. An end to the robbery by the white man of the black community ('white man' changed to 'capitalist' by 1969).
4. Decent housing for blacks.
5. A relevant education for blacks.
6. Exemption from all military service for blacks. (In 1972 this was changed to a demand for free health care.)
7. An immediate end to police brutality against blacks.
8. Freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons. (In 1972 this was changed to a demand for an end of all wars of aggression.)
9. Black defendants to be tried by only a jury of fellow blacks. (In 1972 this was combined with the demand for freedom for all black prisoners so it would be one issue.)
10. A UN-supervised plebiscite to determine the will of black people as to their national destiny.<sup>7</sup>

The BPP's program reflected its revolutionary and Marxist ideals.<sup>8</sup> They believed that oppressed groups should embrace their constitutional right to bear arms for self-defense against U.S. repression. The party also believed in the black community's self-determination and right to a quality education not defined by Western thought.

Before the split in the BPP, much of its ideology emerged from the beliefs of Huey P. Newton. Joseph asserts,

He analyzed the situation of blacks in America from the perspective of dialectical materialism, the Marxist-derived philosophical approach that deals in opposites, or the connection between the positive and the negative. In Newton's eyes, particular contradictions that flourished under capitalism produced both horror and hope: urban poverty elicited its contradictions by forcing bright, articulate young blacks to pursue a life of crime for lack of better options.<sup>9</sup>

The Black Panther Party developed Newton's philosophies into the Ten-Point Platform and survival programs.

These survival programs served as relief from structural violence until the oppressed found long-term solutions. Such programs included the Panther's Free Breakfast for School Children Program, health services, free medical clinics, testing of sickle cell anemia, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and liberation schools.<sup>10</sup> The liberation schools sought to combat the very problem that still exists today, the hegemonic education given to children of color.

The Black Panther Liberation schools grew from Point 5 of the ten-point program. Regina Jennings explains, "Panther teachers ... taught us from an Afro-centric perspective, whereby the needs and interests of African people determined our perception of the world. The void I used to fill with drugs was now filled instead with a pure and noble love for my people."<sup>11</sup> (Payne & Strickland, 85). The liberation schools taught students about class struggle and oppression. Echoing Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, much of the Panther principles surrounding education focused on pedagogy for liberation in place of oppressive learning.

Throughout my research, I explored the ideologies of two of the most influential and popularized Black Power organizations. Each group's struggle against oppression proved to be essential to black high school activists who sought to refine student activism and goals. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party embodied the goals of the Black Power movement. They took the framework of their forerunners and

created a blueprint for their agenda against all forms of oppression. SNCC and BPP believed in the power of the people and the people's ability to resist oppression in all its forms collectively and creatively. Through their ideologies and activism, both organizations challenged the next generation to take up the fight, learn from the organizations' downfalls, and refine the blueprint.

## **Part II. Black High School Activists and the Black Power Blueprint**

SNCC and the Black Panther Party's community work, activism, and ideology served as a blueprint for black high school student activism during the movement. While both SNCC and the BPP encouraged all members of the black community to actively resist oppression, the high school students emboldened the Black Power ideology through their demands and activism within the walls of their schools.

Most studies of black high school activism discuss the roles of students as limited to assisting their peers at university across the country. However, black high school students did not simply play "follow the leader". As Gael Graham explains, "Every issue that concerned college students engaged some high school students as well. Racial integration, for example, was particularly divisive."<sup>12</sup> High school students were already conscious of the inequality that existed in their schools and communities.

As they saw the day-to-day direct action of the Black Power movement, students understood that their role within the educational system could only complement and embolden the movement outside of school walls. Activists of the Black Power movement no longer sought integrated schools. Now, students worked to change the conditions within the

school walls.<sup>13</sup> Essentially, high school students carried out the footwork to bring about the changes and demands of the movement.

While some college students believed that high school students were not capable of leading organized nonviolent direct action, other students embraced collaboration efforts with their high school counterparts.<sup>14</sup> (Graham, 208). For example, although SNCC initiated the Hyde County boycotts of 1968, the high school students took over the daily organizing operations.<sup>15</sup> Students wanted to define their role within the movement on their own terms. In an interview with writer Aldon Morris, Cordell Reagon explained, “Well, demonstrations were going on in Nashville. There were some high school students who wanted to participate and wanted to do something, cause we thought it would be fun if for no other reason. We didn’t have any politics, but we wanted to do something.”<sup>16</sup> (208). It was that “do something” attitude that created the black high school activist tradition in the 1950s and thereafter.

### **Conditions that Created Black High School Student Activism**

During the mid 1960s, America witnessed the growing militancy of the black community. The country did not recognize the political rights of black people, nor did the country seek to uphold any of its constitutional promises until 1964. Congress did not pass the Voting Rights Act until 1965, and even then it has been legislation that Congress must renew every twenty-five years. Graham asserts, “The demands made by minority students for changes in the school practices obviously can not be considered outside the context of increased militancy among minorities as a whole and the racial dynamics of the communities in which the unrest occurs.”<sup>17</sup> Black students understood that their daily experience in American high schools represented their unequal status in this country. While students

strengthened and vitalized the movement, the movement also encouraged them to demand more from the white educational power structure.

As a black student in the Black Power era, youth rarely learned about black history, politics, and culture through the public school system. Students understood that the lack of black history in the curriculum served a cynical purpose for the white power structure. N.K. Jamal, a black high school senior, confirms in 1970,

Most of the youth now entering, or who have entered the school system within the last five years, realize by the time they become freshmen in high school, that there is something very wrong with their education. The problem for them is to find out what is wrong, and then to try to analyze and finally to correct those wrongs.<sup>18</sup>

Through this process of critical thinking, black students concluded that they had to act on their own behalf. That is what they heard everyday from the Black Power movement: self-determination, self-actualization, and power to all people. Jamal goes on to explain,

Education was not about the subjects of English, Math, and History, which were 'taught,' but rather about the workings of the system. Hypocritical education under false pretenses. The education we all received was actually about the subtleness of the structure that was educating us, the why of this subtleness, and the useful purposes we might later serve to the system.<sup>19</sup>

Black students realized that the western education they received would not prepare them to develop their communities nor arm them with knowledge about their people.

Black students faced racism from white teachers, students and an extra dose from administrators daily. Rather than encourage their black students to apply for college, school counselors encouraged students to join the armed forces. Dwayne Wrights reports, "Another member of the class of 1968, John Mitchell, indicated that although he was in enrolled in advanced courses, the school counselor did not encourage him to apply to college, but told African Americans to go to the armed services since the Vietnam War was going on then."<sup>20</sup>

With school counselors seeking to stifle their futures, black students could not afford to wait

for their college counterparts to move and act. Daily events such as these raised the consciousness of these students.

Even on the football field where whites revered black students for their superb skills, coaches disrespected and used black athletes. In some cases, high school football coaches would allow black players to carry the ball to the 99<sup>th</sup> yard line and send in a white player to make the touchdown.<sup>21</sup> These events expressed the malicious nature of school administrators who was responsible for preparing students for the real world. Unfortunately, black students found that the real world was much like life inside the walls of segregated schools.

To stifle black students' chances of graduation or acceptance to college in the post *Brown*-era, schools created tracking systems. Graham writes, "The most important of these [school policies] was the use of 'tracking,' assigning students to pre-collegiate or general diploma pathways based on officials' perceptions of a student's life trajectory or skill level."<sup>22</sup> School officials defined a student's ability to succeed by skin color. Administrators usually placed black students in remedial classes that would never help them fully realize their potential. Black youth recognized this inequality and began to organize their peers for to make change.

While conditions within the schools warranted black student activism, so did the conditions in the neighborhoods. Inequality within America manifested itself in many ways. For example, white flight led to highly segregated areas while discrimination in employment guaranteed that blacks would earn less than whites would. With drugs pushed into communities as a tool of neutralization, students saw the talents of their communities go nowhere. N.K. Jamal points out, "On the school block, pimps coax the little girls as they walk past. [...] Further up the block gangs of boys and girls giving one boy the

shakedown.”<sup>23</sup> Explaining that the school environment complemented the goals of the school system, Jamal confirms, “We began to see a set, noted formula. [...] The method? Soothe the student. Pull the kid out of the hard realities of life and push him up the path that leads into the soothing world of Mother Goose.”<sup>24</sup> While drugs kept some members of the black community from actively resisting oppression by neutralizing them, schools sought to do the same through Western indoctrination, or distorting African American and African history.

Although these conditions created black student activism, some sources believe that college students and Black Power organizations were the sole reason for unrest in the schools. According to the principal of Oak Park High School in Michigan in 1968, “The growing militancy on the college and university campuses across the country, also, must have had a certain appeal to high school students and was bound to filter.”<sup>25</sup> Few principals did not seek to recognize and understand their role in the oppression of black students.

Did school administrators believe that students were incapable of critically thinking about inequality in public schools? Consider the statements of other principals, “We’re near a college and the unrest there is lapping onto our campus.” “Black Panthers started it.” “We have gotten along very well and would have gotten along better in the absence of outside-agitators and stupid publicity given to a bunch of punks by the television, newspaper, and radio media.”<sup>26</sup> The Black Power movement definitely energized black students for change, but so did the conditions within the schools. Even the 1968 study of social unrest in public high schools noted that only five percent of reporting principals could prove that groups such as Students for a Democratic Society were visible in their schools.<sup>27</sup> However, black high school students were able to recognize and struggled against hegemonic philosophies of the American education system. The Black Power movement provided these students with the

necessary tools to express their discontent with the status quo while students provided the movement with evidence of conditions that warranted immediate changes.

### **Black High School Students Respond to Inequality in Public Schools**

The work of the Washington, D.C.'s Modern Strivers best expresses the mood and goals of black high school student activism during the Black Power movement. According to "Basic Principles of Eastern's Freedom School," "Last year, we, the Modern Strivers, wrote a new Student Bill of Rights, instituted two new courses at Eastern, staged a cafeteria boycott, established a wall of respect, staged a school walkout because of a school policy, and conceived a new educational system, a freedom school."<sup>28</sup> Within one year, these students managed to do what it demanded of the school administrators. They embodied the legacy of the Black Power movement through their creative protest methods, organizational skills, and most importantly, through their sense of urgency.

With the young voices of Kwame Touré, Fred Hampton, Bobby Seale, and Huey P. Newton surrounding them, the oppressive conditions in schools repressing them, and the harsh realities of life in segregated neighborhoods struggling to define their futures, black students had to respond with their own growing militancy. Through direct action such as protests, strikes and boycotts, freedom schools, manifestos, and Black Student Unions and other organizations, black students expressed their resistance to educational inequality.

Through manifestos, black students served notice to school administrators. In 1968, black students at York High demanded that all students and school officials respect the solitary black custodian by referring to him as Mr. Spells rather than "Frank," and to show him the same respect shown to white custodians.<sup>29</sup> Graham illustrates,



But as Black and Brown Power ideologies surged into public high schools in the late 1960s, students of color seized the initiative hacking out their own racialized spaces through demands for representation among teachers and administrators, a restructured curricula that would celebrate their history and culture, and even the spice of their own food.<sup>30</sup>

Students demanded courses in Swahili and soul food in the cafeteria.<sup>31</sup> They recognized that the power of the movement gave them hope to demand better and the belief that better was even possible. Here, students shaped the ideologies of the Black Power movement to fit the context of their daily lives.

In response to student protest, administrators began a suspension and expulsion campaign for leaders of collective resistance to their oppressive policies. According to Graham, “In Trigg’s words, now, however, ‘We’re ... demanding an end to all disciplinary suspensions and expulsions. In New York, 95% of these are black and Puerto Rican. All pigs [police] and narcs [narcotics agents] out of schools. Abolish identification cards. End the tracking system, [...] and power to run the schools.’”<sup>32</sup> Later, in 1969, Parker High School students demanded that the school replace the morning song, “The Star Spangled Banner” with “Lift Every Voice and Sing”<sup>33</sup> (Dans, 147). High school activists no longer sought the integrationist American dream. They wanted real equality in its most concrete form.<sup>34</sup>

Black high school football players at York High resisted racism from their coaches. Dwayne Wright contends, “During the fall of 1967, several black varsity football starting players boycotted the team because of the discrimination and favoritism practiced by the York High coaching staff. As a result of their nonparticipation, York High suffered eight losses, with only two wins in the 1967-68 season.”<sup>35</sup> Students were not only creative with this form of protest, but successful as well. As the results of the season show, administrators

at York High had to think about its treatment of black athletes. In the end, administrators responded by changing ending these practices.

Integration of American schools usually demanded that blacks integrate into white schools. However, in 1968, Hyde county students boycotted their classes to demand that whites integrate predominantly black high schools instead.<sup>36</sup> Black students decided that if integration had to happen, it would be on their terms. They understood that part of the integration debate included an image of black schools as subordinate because of the “inherent inferiority” of the black community rather than the inadequacies of funding and other resources.

Molded by community conditions and Black Power philosophies, student demands called for the recognition of their history and culture. Graham explains, “In one case in 1969, students disrupted a board of education meeting to demand that their Detroit junior high school and a high school on the same grounds be renamed after Malcolm X.”<sup>37</sup> Although the board dismissed this demand in 1969, today stands a charter school named after Malcolm X in Detroit, Michigan. Students were able to connect the ideas of self-determination, equality, and power to their daily lives. On those grounds, they were able to use their collective strength to help the same movement that contributed to student activism.

Since school administrators virtually ignored black student demands that called for representation of the black culture, student activists took the initiative to create the change they argued for so vigorously. For example, “Students in Academy High School, in Erie, Pennsylvania, preempted their principal’s opposition by creating an after-school course on minorities history and identified two teachers to lead it.”<sup>38</sup> Another case in point is the New York City Black High School Coalition that “established a number of liberation classes,

which were taught by both students and black educators. [...] Academic subjects included Maoism, the works of Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and ‘Religions of Men and Women in the Liberation Struggle.’<sup>39</sup> Other examples include activism in Washington, D.C. and New York High schools.<sup>40</sup> These student initiatives embodied the goals of the Black Panther Party and SNCC liberation schools and contributed to the foundation for current Black Studies programs.

Black students carved out a space for themselves in their schools. Through Black Student Unions and other student organizations, black high school students channeled their militancy into collective activism. Central High students in Peoria, Illinois describe the purpose of these unions, “We wanted to change the ideas, the way things were about the school, how blacks were being treated.”<sup>41</sup> These students wanted to shape the consciousness of their peers who were unable to understand what J.K. Jamal said about education in the hands of the white power structure.

In 1968, students at Oak Park High School in Oak Park, Michigan created SCORE, the Student Congress on Racial Equality, modeled after the nation chapter of CORE.<sup>42</sup> In 1969, Montclair High’s black students in New York established a Black Student Union with the permission of the school principal.<sup>43</sup> This was an interesting accomplishment since school administrators typically viewed Black Student Unions in the high schools in the same light of Black Power organizations, as black racist group.<sup>44</sup> Despite this perception of student unions, black students used these organizations as a vehicle for their demands.

Persistence, determination, and the “do something” attitude carried black students’ demands for justice a long way. As a part of the black activist tradition, it is not rare to find hundreds of people marching in harsh conditions. The legacy of the Civil Rights movement

speaks to this very fact. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that Detroit students tolerated a few raindrops to ask the school board for money to develop their schools. Graham acknowledges, “The sober demeanor of Detroit students, who marched to the board of education meeting in the rain, convinced the members to allocate more than a million dollars to improve the schools [...].”<sup>45</sup> Detroit student’s presented their case to the board as they expressed the belief that it was the board’s responsibility to provide students with the resources necessary for success.

As student demands became more radical in the eyes of administrators, principals and school officials began to consider different methods for handling students. Graham confirms, “When the school board instructed students of Long Island’s Malverne High School to ‘follow procedures’ in response to their request for more black faculty and staff and an investigation into the alleged discriminating in the honors society, they concluded that the board had no intention of acting.”<sup>46</sup> In the tradition of the black movements, black students did not stand down. Instead, “they then stepped up the pressure by staging a sit-in with three hundred black students in the school’s lobby; 137 of them were arrested when the principal called the police, but in the end students won more than half of their demands.”<sup>47</sup> This sit-in strategy highlighted students’ organizational skills, as they demanded the hiring of faculty members that resembled the student body.

## **Interviews**

### **Interview with Malik Yakini**

Through email correspondence, I interviewed Malik Yakini, a Black Power student activist during the movement at Post Jr. High, Cass Technical High, Mumford High School, and Eastern Michigan University. Below are my questions and Mr. Yakini's response:

**1. Please name the high school(s) you attended along with the years attended.**

I attended Cass Technical High School from January 1971 - August 1973. I was a member of the Black Student Caucus for the first 12 -18 months that I was at the school. The leadership of the organization were mostly seniors who graduated by June 1972. The primary leadership was Carl Edwards, Keith Mickens and Darnell Yelder. Other key members included Laura Lee Ross aka Sherikiana Aina, Jemetta Boyce and Joann Gabay. I have lost touch with most of them, but Keith Mickens is currently a union organizer [...]. Sherikiana married an Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima and lives with him in Washington D.C. [...].

**2. How would you describe student activism within your schools during this time? Activism includes any form of protest or proactive activities directed towards change in school policies.**

During my first semester at Cass, the Black Student Caucus conducted a walk-out as part of a citywide protest by the Black Student United Front. Frankly, I don't recall what the specific issues were. I was involved in other activities such as the creation of a Black student information center in the school where we organized and made available books, newspapers and other information on Black history and the

Black freedom struggle to students. I also wrote at least one article in the school newspaper urging the adoption of Black history classes.

**3. What role did you play within these situations or activities?**

I was involved in other activities that could best be described as underground activities. Myself and another student liberated keys to the main office and to the chemistry labs. We used those to enter the office of the Assistant Principal William Koloff and obtain proof of his surveillance and harassment of Black student leaders. [...].

In August 1973, I transferred to Mumford High School for my last semester. There I was involved in the Black Student Association lead by Darrin McKissic. That organization focused primarily on consciousness raising, bringing in speakers such as Michael "Pili Sababu" Humphrey and Kwame Atta. Pili was a former Mumford student activist and a member of the Congress of African People (CAP). Kwame Atta was a member of the Pan African Congress (PAC). I graduated in February 1974. We graduated a month late because of the teacher strike in September 1973.

This may not be within the purvey of your research, but my student activism began at Post Jr. High School which I attended from January 1969 - January 1971. Some teachers at the school had a profound impact on me including Ronald McCombs, Melvin Peters and Mr. Allen Cheeks. A former post teacher, Henry Fagin, who by that time was assistant Dean of Student Affairs at the University of Detroit, also had a profound impact. I was involved in multiple walkouts at Post demanding things such as an end to the Viet Nam War, Black History classes, and removal of police from the school etc. We also protested the conditions under which

standardized tests were given, the killing of Black students at Jackson State University, the lack of Black images in the hallways and lunchroom, and the lack of student power in decision making. I personally removed and burned every American flag in the building. We were also highly influenced by a local community organization called Uni-Com (United Community) led by Larry Nevels, and the city-wide Black Student United Front of which Gregory Hicks was a leader. I also organized a library housed in my bedroom called the Peoples' Library. It included Black radical books that I liberated from a local bookstore, and made available to my classmates.<sup>48</sup>

**4. I am interested in knowing if the Black Power Movement played any role in the protest strategies of your high school activism. If yes, how so? This includes Black Power philosophies, organizations, events, etc.**

Of course we were influenced by and part of the Black Power Movement. My activism started in the eighth grade, in 1969, after listening to the speech "Message to the Grass Roots" by Malcolm X that my eighth grade social studies teacher Ronald McCombs played for us in class. I have never been the same since. Malcolm had a profound impact on several of us in the class. Specifically, his advocating self-defense, struggling outside of the rules provided by the oppressor, not being concerned about odds and internationalizing our struggle were ideas that deeply penetrated my consciousness. I began to read "Malcolm X Speaks" and anything else that I could get my hands on by our about Malcolm. His thoughts and example shaped how I moved/move through the world.

I was also profoundly influenced by the H. Rap Brown's autobiography "Die Nigger Die," Eldridge Cleaver's "Soul on Ice," and the weekly editions of "The Black

Panther." I was influenced by the writers of the Black Arts Movement, many of whom I was exposed to in the book "Black Voices" which was required reading in Melvin Peter's ninth grade English class. (I attended Post Jr. High School for the eighth and ninth grade, and began high school in the tenth grade.)

I grew up in Detroit in the 1960s, and the 1967 rebellion left an indelible impression on my young mind. I witnessed the transformative power of rebellion, and the military response of the government. I began to frame our struggle not as a mere civil right struggle, but as a war of national liberation. I was attracted to the more militant aspects of the Black Power Movement. I was convinced that the type of fundamental changes that needed to occur in American society would not be accomplished peacefully or through the tame traditional civil rights organizations such as the Urban League or the NAACP. By the time I was 14 years old, I was a Black Power advocate.<sup>49</sup>

## **Interview with Gregory Hicks**

### **1. What high school did you attend and for what years?**

1969-1971. I think, I have not really thought about this in years. The actual years could be off by a year or so. I attended several high schools all within the Detroit Public School System. The majority of my time was at Cooley High school. I graduated from Northwestern High School. I was part of a group of African American students who organized others students into an organization called the Black Student United Front (BSUF). The approach was to use the energy and curiosity of our fellow students and bridge their interests with other events surrounding them. In the schools we fought for "black studies" and a balanced presentation of history including the formal inclusion of African American



history. In the community we ran community organizations designed to create recreational alternatives for young people. We also emerged as a supportive arm of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The League was composed of normal working class people fighting against speed-ups and racism in the manufacturing industry. They were most often the parents and relatives of our fellow students who were working in Detroit's auto plants. We participated in their organizing drives oftentimes circulating newspapers at the plant gates so that activist workers involved as part of the League would not be singled out and disciplined by management for their organizational activities. We also push a hard line against drug trafficking within the schools as well as some of the emerging gangster or anti-social behavior of some of our fellow students. From our vantage point we admired and trumpeted the cause of African independence around the world and used this as a source of pride and motivation to organize around conditions at home.

**2. How would you describe student activism within these schools during this time? Activism includes any form of protest or proactive activities directed towards change in school policies.**

As you can see from above, we adopted a broad definition of student activism. We were concerned about conditions within the school and educational policy, but we did not limit ourselves to school activity. Aside from the daily organizing activities the two most impressive parts of BSUF activism involved (1) the coordination of a city wide organization, 18 components within the 22 high schools and 12 or so components at the Jr. High level. Each of the components published a monthly school specific newspaper. The central organization (BSUF) published a quarterly city-wide newspaper. We sponsored at least two city-wide black student conferences culminating into a coalition with black parents and teachers. It is at this point that I was introduced to Mr. Peters and Mr. Chapman; both were

new teachers at Post Junior High School. They along with others were very supportive of the cause of black students and the community. (2) Flowing from this student, teacher and parent coalition we help organize an organization called "Black Parents and Students for Community Control". This organization was in response to a discussion on school governance. School districts from around the nation were under pressure to improve educational opportunities for black and other minority students and some management type of development, the concept of school decentralization. School decentralization was an effort to return local control of educational resources to people within the community.

This resulted in the subdividing of local school districts into smaller decentralized school boards. With the cooperation of a few academic types, we collected demographic data on Detroit and devised a plan for decentralizing the district. The plan was to create as many "black friendly" decentralized districts and locate supportive black parents to run in the local elections in hopes of gaining real control of the schools. Needless to say, this was a good effort, but the power structure in charge of educational resources really had no real intention of giving students and black parents real control. The powers of the decentralized boards were limited and the final decision to hire and fire school personnel was part of the central board's responsibility and not extended to the decentralized boards. This notwithstanding was a great effort to utilize some advance technology and apply it to a public policy debate. We created maps based on our demographic research long before the popular period of computer assisted mapping. We organized meetings in the community and gave testimony to the school decentralization commission of our plans.

### **3. What role did you play within these situations or activities?**

I started out organizing at Post Jr. High upon graduation I enrolled at Cooley High. Cooley High was in the midst of a radical racial transition in its student population. When we started at Cooley it was majority white. As many of the whites abandoned the city and the school system, Cooley quickly became majority black. I along with several other students organized a African students club pushing for Black History classes at Cooley. We later marched with some 500 students from Cooley High (northwest Detroit) down to the central school board to advocate for Black history, better conditions within the school, better teachers, etc. We demanded the creation of a Martin Luther King, Jr. room in Cooley's Library. We raised money and gave it to the school to remodel a small study room in the Library. Following this organizing campaign, I was kicked-out of Cooley High School. I never actually had the opportunity to see the completed MLK room, but was assured by other students and parents that the room was remodeled and it commemorated the life and spirit of Dr. King. Later, I became a member of a seven member city-wide volunteer student board of the BSUF. I was also Youth Director of a community based community organization in northwest Detroit called UNICOM (originally called University-Community, as we started off fighting for community or neighborhood access to recreational facilities on the campus of the University of Detroit. We later reworked the name to stand for United-Community as we took on more non-university issues and opened an office off-campus and an African Restaurant. As a final note, I indicated I attended several high schools. This was not uncommon for the leadership of black student organizations at the time. The Board of Educations unofficial policy was to attempt to break-up as many of our small organizations

as they could and transfer us to other schools within the district. This did not work, in fact this facilitated our ability to organize city-wide.

**4. Do you still have copies of the student paper and the mission statement of the student organizations?**

Sorry I do not have copies of the BSUF materials. There is a collection at Wayne State University Ruther Library on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Inside of this collection maybe some of the BSUF stuff. I know the collection is indexed so attempting to determine if there is BSUF materials inside should not be difficult.

**5. What role did the Black Power movement play in the protest strategies of your high school activism?**

As a young student we were most impressed with the developing global situation with emerging African nations breaking away from colonial rule combined with leaders like Malcolm X. The black power movement was not a direct influence as so much as our reaction to racial discrimination, the lack of black history in the schools and our immediate fight to protect ourselves as white residents attacked and beat us on our way to and from school. I was a student at Post Jr. High and later Cooley High School in northwest Detroit. Northwest Detroit was undergoing a racial transition from white to black. Additionally, on the community side, we were fighting to gain access to community resources like recreation facilities and tutorial assistance by instructors from the University of Detroit.<sup>50</sup>

## **Conclusion**

My research of black high school student activism may contribute to solving the problems of public school curriculum. Consider that teenagers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century feel isolated and alienated from the learning process in public schools. This is a problem that requires us to think about the concept of teaching in a new way. Imagine if students attend an American history class and the topic of the day is “The Black Power Movement.” The teacher may ask the question, “Who is Stokely Carmichael?” or “Describe the Black Panther Party’s Ten Point Platform and Program.” Students may look and answer with a resounding “huh?” This is even true of history courses here at Eastern Michigan University. We must grapple with this reality.

Now, imagine this same class in a Detroit high school, but instead of the teacher reading an out-dated description about Carmichael or the Panthers, he/she would allow students to read newspaper articles about the Black Student United Front, a citywide high school coalition in Detroit during the 1960s. This information may peak students’ interests in American history.

This information may also influence the way instructors think about teaching in a culturally relevant way. The instructor that is prepared to use such critical information to engage students in learning history must recognize that this topic, along with cultural teaching aides, could change high school students’ world view. Students will find that their forerunners experienced the same inequalities they still face in 2008. Students would see that their predecessors created a high school activist tradition that still exists today.

My research may serve as a blueprint for such course lessons. Such a course may allow scholars to collaborate with high school teachers who are interested in helping their

students learn about history in a culturally relevant way. Through the interviews and literature review, I recreated a different picture of American life through the diverse perspectives of my narrators.

### **Further Research**

There are several issues that I did not have the opportunity to explore. The greatest of these is the inclusion of female narrators. To some degree, they may have had different experiences. Their viewpoint could have shed light on various issues within school walls that I did not explore. The inclusion of sample curriculum from textbooks that are currently used in public high schools would have provided concrete evidence of the lack of Black Power history. Instead of looking at the issue on a national scale, I would focus on one specific city. Finally, a wider study may include research on black high school student activism as it relates to Students Rights and the Anti-War movement

## *Appendix A*

### Statement of Demands

We, the Black Students of William Penn High School ... dedicate ourselves to the purpose of insuring a well-rounded curriculum for the students of William Penn. In order for this to come about, we demand the following:

#### Article I.

Section 1. *Black History must be mandatory for all students at William Penn.* (By Black Teachers.)

Section 2. More Black teachers must be hired. Especially in areas such as 1) gym teachers for boys and girls; 2) head coaches in sports; 3) teachers in the arts and sciences...

#### Article II.

Section 1. Better counseling for Black students must be brought about.

Section 2. Black counselors must be hired.

Section 3. Scholarship services must be [made available to] all Black students. They should be told about them at the beginning of the year and at the time of application to colleges.

Section 4. Black college representatives must be scheduled to talk to Black students during every school year.

#### Article III.

Section 1. Black recognition must be made in areas such as: 1) heads of school committees; 2) more Black students in school societies.

Section 2. No discrimination in school plays, the best people must be [given] parts, no matter if there are color differences in the lead roles.

#### Article IV.

Section 1. More respect from the personnel in the main office.

Section 2. Black cafeteria personnel such as cooks and people in serving line.

Section 3. Black guest speakers in assembly program must be scheduled.

Section 4. Black minister[s] must be considered for the baccalaureate services.

Section 5. School holiday should be given for the commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death.

#### Article V.

Section 1. We want the Temple report implemented.<sup>51</sup>

## *Appendix B*

### Student Demands from Citywide Protest

1. Complete courses in Black history
2. Inclusion in all courses the contributions of Black person.
3. Black administration for schools in Black communities.
4. More technical and vocational training.
5. More Black teachers.
6. Repair of school buildings in Black communities.
7. Holidays on the birthdays of such Black heroes as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, W.E.B.DuBois and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
8. Insurance for athletes.
9. Use of Black businessmen to supply class photos and rings to Black schools.
10. Better food.
11. Military training “relevant to Black people’s needs.”
12. More required homework to challenge Blacks students.<sup>52</sup>



## *Appendix C*

### The Ten Point Plan

1. **WE WANT FREEDOM. WE WANT POWER TO DETERMINE THE DESTINY OF OUR BLACK AND OPPRESSED COMMUNITIES.**  
We believe that Black and oppressed people will not be free until we are able to determine our destinies in our own communities ourselves, by fully controlling all the institutions which exist in our communities.
2. **WE WANT FULL EMPLOYMENT FOR OUR PEOPLE.**  
We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every person employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the American businessmen will not give full employment, then the technology and means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.
3. **WE WANT AN END TO THE ROBBERY BY THE CAPITALISTS OF OUR BLACK AND OPPRESSED COMMUNITIES.**  
We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules were promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people. We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of our fifty million Black people. Therefore, we feel this is a modest demand that we make.
4. **WE WANT DECENT HOUSING, FIT FOR THE SHELTER OF HUMAN BEINGS.**  
We believe that if the landlords will not give decent housing to our Black and oppressed communities, then housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that the people in our communities, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for the people.
5. **WE WANT DECENT EDUCATION FOR OUR PEOPLE THAT EXPOSES THE TRUE NATURE OF THIS DECADENT AMERICAN SOCIETY. WE WANT EDUCATION THAT TEACHES US OUR TRUE HISTORY AND OUR ROLE IN THE PRESENT-DAY SOCIETY.**  
We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of the self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and in the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else.
6. **WE WANT COMPLETELY FREE HEALTH CARE FOR ALL BLACK AND OPPRESSED PEOPLE.**  
We believe that the government must provide, free of charge, for the people, health facilities which will not only treat our illnesses, most of which have come about as a result of our oppression, but which will also develop preventive medical programs to

guarantee our future survival. We believe that mass health education and research programs must be developed to give all Black and oppressed people access to advanced scientific and medical information, so we may provide our selves with proper medical attention and care.

7. WE WANT AN IMMEDIATE END TO POLICE BRUTALITY AND MURDER OF BLACK PEOPLE, OTHER PEOPLE OF COLOR, ALL OPPRESSED PEOPLE INSIDE THE UNITED STATES.

We believe that the racist and fascist government of the United States uses its domestic enforcement agencies to carry out its program of oppression against black people, other people of color and poor people inside the united States. We believe it is our right, therefore, to defend ourselves against such armed forces and that all Black and oppressed people should be armed for self defense of our homes and communities against these fascist police forces.

8. WE WANT AN IMMEDIATE END TO ALL WARS OF AGGRESSION.

We believe that the various conflicts which exist around the world stem directly from the aggressive desire of the United States ruling circle and government to force its domination upon the oppressed people of the world. We believe that if the United States government or its lackeys do not cease these aggressive wars it is the right of the people to defend themselves by any means necessary against their aggressors.

9. WE WANT FREEDOM FOR ALL BLACK AND OPPRESSED PEOPLE NOW HELD IN U. S. FEDERAL, STATE, COUNTY, CITY AND MILITARY PRISONS AND JAILS. WE WANT TRIALS BY A JURY OF PEERS FOR ALL PERSONS CHARGED WITH SO-CALLED CRIMES UNDER THE LAWS OF THIS COUNTRY.

We believe that the many Black and poor oppressed people now held in United States prisons and jails have not received fair and impartial trials under a racist and fascist judicial system and should be free from incarceration. We believe in the ultimate elimination of all wretched, inhuman penal institutions, because the masses of men and women imprisoned inside the United States or by the United States military are the victims of oppressive conditions which are the real cause of their imprisonment. We believe that when persons are brought to trial they must be guaranteed, by the United States, juries of their peers, attorneys of their choice and freedom from imprisonment while awaiting trial.

10. WE WANT LAND, BREAD, HOUSING, EDUCATION, CLOTHING, JUSTICE, PEACE AND PEOPLE'S COMMUNITY CONTROL OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY.

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are most disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpation, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.<sup>53</sup>

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- 1 Kwame Toure and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 44.
- 2 Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 2.
- 3 Toure & Hamilton, 106.
- 4 Carson, 233.
- 5 Penial Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 170.
- 6 Paul Roberson, *Here I Stand*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 90.
- 7 Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 5. See Appendix C for full version.
- 8 Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, (eds.) *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: a New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 29.
- 9 Joseph, 219-220.
- 10 Ibid, 243-244.
- 11 Charles M. Payne and Carol Strickland (eds.), *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 85.
- 12 Gael Graham, *Young Activists: American High School Activists in the Age of Protest*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 5.
- 13 Ibid, 57.
- 14 Ibid, 208.
- 15 Ibid, 40.
- 16 Aldon Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 208.
- 17 Graham, 229.
- 18 Marc Libarle and Tom Seligson. (eds), *The High School Revolutionaries*, (New York: Random House, 1970), 28.
- 19 Libarle, 30.
- 20 Dwayne Wright, "Black Pride Day, 1968: High School Student Activism in York, Pennsylvania," *The Journal of African American History* 88 (2003): 153.
- 21 Graham, 42.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Libarle, 29.
- 24 Libarle, 30.

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25 I.G. Hendrick and Reginald Jones (eds.), *Student Dissident in the Schools*, (Boston: Houghlin Mifflin  
Company, 1972), 230.

26 Beatrice M. Goodridge, *High School Student Unrest*, (Washington: National School Public Relations  
Association, 1969), 3.

27 Hendrick and Jones, 3.

28 Diane Divoky (ed), *How Old Will You Be in 1984? Expressions of Student Outrage from the High  
School Free Press*, (New York: Avon Books, 1969), 187.

29 Wright, 154-155.

30 Graham, 5-6.

31 Graham, 57.

32 Graham, 121.

33 Dionne Dans, "Chicago High School Student's Movement for Quality Public Education, 1966-1971,"  
*The Journal of African American History* 88 (2003), 147.

34 For more student demands and manifestos, see Appendixes A and B.

35 Wright, 154.

36 Graham, 40.

37 Graham, 57.

38 Graham, 58.

39 Graham, 131-132.

40 Henrick & Jones, 71; Gudridge, 2; Divoky, 187

41 Libarle, 53.

42 Hendrick & Jones, 232.

43 Kenneth Fish, *Conflict and Dissident in the High Schools*, (New York: The Bruce Publishing  
Company, 1970), 16-17.

44 Graham, 58.

45 Graham, 133-134.

46 Graham, 59.

47 Ibid.

48 Although this answer reflects Mr. Yakini's junior high school activism, I included this information  
because it represents the longevity of his activism.

49 Malik Yakini, email to author, March 10, 2009.

50 Dick Gregory, email to the author, January 6, 2009. Although Mr. Hicks answered this question as  
"no", I included it because this answer provides a different perspective for a potential foundation for student  
activism.

51 Wright, 157.

52 Dans, 145.

53 The Black Panther Party <http://www.blackpanther.org/TenPoint.htm> 27 February, 2009.

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