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# Democracy & Education

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## Communities Fighting Inequity in Schools

A Review of *Lift Us Up, Don't Push Us Out!*:

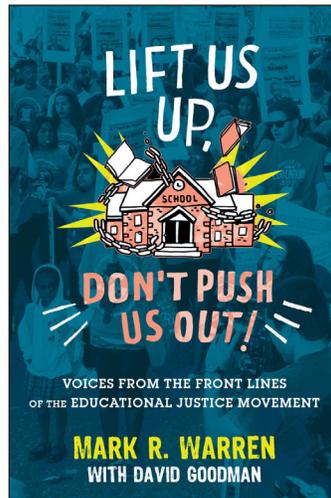
*Voices from the Front Lines of the Educational Justice Movement*

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**I**N MY 14 YEARS as an educator, I have stood in the front of many different classrooms. I have taught in public and private schools, in high schools and two-year colleges, in schools with generous budgets and ones with little. What I have learned in those years is that not all schools are equal—so not all students will leave public education equally prepared for adult life in our society. In *Lift Us Up, Don't Push Us Out! Voices from the Front Lines of the Educational Justice Movement*, Warren (2018) brings to light the stories of people who seek to reform public schools, particularly for students of color. Their circumstances vary, but their goal is the same: to lift up all schools to be safe and caring places where students are valued and prepared for productive adult lives. Their stories tell of the difficult road they have traveled and the need for alliances among citizens working together for educational justice.

The book is presented in four parts, each with the deeply personal stories of contributors who have identified what the author called “profound and systemic inequities and mistreatment of children of color in low-income communities” (p. xiii). The first part is “Building the Power for Change: Parent, Youth, and Community Organizing,” in which writers shared how they organized reform efforts in their communities to combat injustices they experienced or witnessed first-hand. Parents, students, staff, and activists who wrote for part one had very different stories: one is a mother and woman of color whose preschool son was pushed out of day care, one a young man who navigated high school as an



undocumented resident of the United States, and there are many others. All these writers have seen that youth of color do not experience public school in the same way as other youth; specifically, they are being pushed out of schools with high levels of disciplinary action, including suspension, that lead to high dropout rates and what many call the school-to-prison pipeline. To derail this pipeline, the writers here have joined with concerned community members to publicly

demand more just and nurturing schools in their neighborhoods that “lift up” students by means of restorative justice practices and positive reinforcement. This is part of a greater vision that, as contributor Pam Martinez stated, includes a “society rooted in economic, social, and political equity” (Warren, 2018, p. 42). This is a lofty goal for local activists, but that is the point of their stories.

Part two is “Broadening the Movement: Building Alliances for Systemic Change.” Here, five writers described the issues they found plaguing public schools serving children of color and how, through partnerships, they brought those issues to the attention of a wider public. As Joyce Parker shared, her local organization’s push for quality schools in Black communities of Mississippi was greatly advanced by partnerships with other local groups as well as regional and state organizations. “It . . . built collective power, in

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terms of having more voices than just a single organization” (Warren, 2018, p. 59). Jitu Brown wrote of the fight to keep a neighborhood school open in Chicago, beginning with a local group of activists whose hunger strike caught the attention of national networks and papers. With the help of local and national partners, this group not only kept their school open but also continued their fight for better schools through marches in Washington, DC. “We showed that unity rooted in self-determination builds a powerful movement that can win not only for black people but for everyone who is impacted by injustice” (Warren, 2018, p. 54). This unity, a means of achieving systemic change, is a critical tool in the stories of activists in part two.

“Educators for Justice: Movement Building in Schools, School Systems, and Universities” is part three of this book, which highlights the role of educators in making public schooling more equitable. In light of recent teacher strikes, in which educators have expressed their concerns not just for their own working conditions but also for the learning conditions provided to their students, this collection of stories seems timely. Beginning with the part’s first piece—“Teachers Unite!”—writers in part three demonstrate the power of school-cite organizing that includes teachers as change-makers within the walls of schools, not only through the empowering curriculum they craft in their own classrooms but also through the purposeful reform of school and district policies they seek to make more humane. The writers here also include a school board member Monica Garcia who, although she is not a teacher, is another example of someone seeking change from inside the school system. She wrote that the educational justice movement “is holding the adults responsible to fulfill their role of teaching, learning, and creating more opportunity for all, especially for those who have been left out” (Warren, 2018, p. 117). Being an educator myself, this part was impactful in pointing out that my own involvement in creating a fair and equitable educational system is not optional but rather my chosen responsibility. Vajra Watson echoed this as a member of higher education who ended part three by describing the responsibility of those in universities to prepare and partner with K–12 teachers as they empower youth who might otherwise be overlooked by or pushed out of schools.

In the final part of this book, “Intersectional Organizing: Linking Social Movements to Educational Justice,” writers described collective efforts to improve schools by “creating movements that intersect and overlap” (Warren, 2018, p. 156). In their description of working parents becoming activists for better education, Aida Cardenas and Janna Shadduck-Hernandez called for union support of “working parents to become school-based activists who can collectively achieve equitable education with a social justice agenda for all learners” (Warren, 2018, p. 146). Geoffrey Winder described how LGBTQ youth of color organize under the Genders and Sexualities Alliance as part of the larger effort to achieve equitable learning experiences for all students, explaining that “part of intersectionality requires being in solidarity even when it isn’t your direct life experience” (Warren, 2018, p. 161). This is a call to consider the challenges facing those living in

different social realms and to work for a better system of education where everyone is valued.

The purpose of *Lift Us Up, Don’t Push Us Out!* is to bring awareness of the inequitable educational opportunities that exist in our schools and to spur the movement to correct them. Writers Aida Cardenas and Janna Shadduck-Hernandez plainly state, “Our public education system is under attack” (Warren, 2018, p. 146), specifically from the privatization of schools that has become increasingly concerning with recent pushes for school choice. Warren (2018) himself stated that “there is a new urgency and a new energy for social movements to support one another and resist these attacks” (p. 165). While the author did point to the negative impact of the Trump administration and fallout behaviors of what he called the “right-wing movement” as one reason for this new urgency, he acknowledged that inequitable schooling is deeply rooted in American schools with no help from many years of high-stakes testing and support for charter schools. The effects of these are, of course, felt deeply in communities of people of color.

I find two strong and compelling themes in this book, the first of which is the power of community. Throughout this collection, writers explained how their goals were met not by their individual efforts alone but through the collective efforts of many. When faced with a deeply rooted problem like inequitable schooling, or perhaps racism, if we cut to the chase, it may seem insurmountable for one person to fight for change; however, the stories here give hope to those who would better our schools that this is not their burden alone to bear.

The second theme here is that of democracy. In the stories told here, there is a central message of democracy at work—a call for the public to recognize injustice and take action to correct it. “Self-determination, self-governance, and holding those in power accountable to the people are important components of realizing the democracy we all want and are trying to build” (Warren, 2018, p. 42). Dewey had a vision of schools as places that model democratic practice, serving as examples of how to dissent and correct injustice with the purpose of preparing our students for life in democratic society, and this sentiment lives in *Lift Us Up*. Elana Eisen-Markowitz highlighted this in her story, stating, “For better or worse, schools are often the places where people learn how to be in the world—they are reflections of the problems and the potential of our society” (Warren, 2018, p. 96). If partnerships exist among the adults and youth in seeking schools that value student of every color and social status, then we begin turning toward equity in schools and in our society at large. Monica Garcia wrote, “We are talking about investing in ourselves and investing in the pillars of our society in a way that protects our future. Building this movement is about securing our freedom and about building our nation” (Warren, 2018, p. 117). What better reason to lift up our students?

## References

Warren, M. R. (2018). *Lift us up, don't push us out! Voices from the front lines of the educational justice movement*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.