

Student Climate Strikes: A teacher's reflection



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I have been to plenty of protests. Not a particularly unique statement, many of us have been to protests of one kind or another in our lives. It may as seem fairly banal to say that after attending many protests and rallies, I had begun to feel hopeless, cynical; to tire of a process that seemed adrift in a sea of apathy and rarely produced tangible or lasting results. The return was diminishing. Even as a young person things like Amchika, The Million Man March and Stonewall Riots were inspiring stories from the past; cultural markers of development. Then came our turn. We eagerly took to the streets worldwide to Occupy Wall Street and join with Idle No More. Yet something happened, actually, nothing happened. The rich continued to get rich, the poor poorer and the environment, equity and the other goliath issues of our day seemed to topple over us. The small (but strong) group that I see now still fighting hard are Indigenous peoples, who have a fierce, incendiary tradition of resisting colonialism and capitalism that goes way beyond the 1960s. Yet, things seemed to get worse, the climate continues to careen towards disaster, wealth inequality soars -- Donald Trump is president, still. We pushed on, enraged as we were, most of us got jobs because we needed to support ourselves (or tried to), and started to get tired, disengaged and disenfranchised. Even if we don't want to admit it, it happened. Maybe this is just what they call "millennial burnout." Maybe we are a generation that failed.

This is not about us though. This is about a new generation. One that I have seen a new side to this Friday, March 15. Yes, we have caught hopeful glimpses, but today, at the Global student's climate strike I have truly seen this generation's spirit. "Fridays for the Future" is a movement started by Greta Thunberg. A 16 year old Swedish student, her demonstration outside her country's parliament and speech at COP24 (the 2018 United nation climate Change Conference) have not only garnered her a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, but more importantly have started a movement which has spread to over 100 countries.

Student protests on March 15th took place in Vancouver in the courtyard outside the Vancouver Art Gallery. It's a familiar location to anyone who has protested in Vancouver. I can still see the tents and signs that covered the ground as Occupy broke out. The plaza has been redone and paved in what is hard not to see as a deterrent to homeless campers and protests alike. Yet the first thing I see as on approach is a chalk message in bright pink, "F* Trudeau," all caps. The adrenaline; the butterflies are still there. What's different are the people here. The elders are there, the old folks who have been doing this since their youth and are now seasoned, silver-crowned vets. The hippies and the anarchists usually have a presence, The Green Party has a banner too. But today, these are the minority. It is immediately obvious that this is a youth movement. Students from kindergarten to Grade 12 cut classes for the afternoon to be here. In fact, like Greta Thunberg, they are the organizers of the event as well. Aside from some minor mic problems, it goes off without a hitch. Students from across every circle and group are in attendance outside the VAG. The numbers swell as organizers lead an effective march through downtown, with well-planned stops and chants. Tellingly, adults in suits and ties everywhere stand by and watch from office windows, from sidewalks, from cars. Some snap photos (and news feeds are predictably clogged

later, after the fact), some laugh and point, others show frustration or support with the marchers. Most just get out of the way. A respectful truce between the peaceful students in their civil disobedience and police officers, who keep a neutral and well-organized border street traffic and the march.

This is the first protest I have attended as a teacher. I recently graduated from my Bachelors of Education and started working as Teacher on Call in the Vancouver School District. I am happy to say that I recognized more than a few faces in the crowd, though I won't say who in case there are parents and educators who do not share my support of this movement. Yet, here are students who are taking time to learn about current events and politics, who are learning to organize and to plan events; here are students who are writing poems and songs, creating artwork and slogans with great talent and wit. Most importantly, here are students that are engaged and active, passionate and scared about their future and the planet. Far from punishing these students, I believe schools ought to support students by signing permission slips and organizing rides for students that want to join future events like this. Certainly, this is as worthy an educational opportunity as any museum or movie field trip. I hope that teachers will also challenge their students to make personal and community responses as class projects. I can see opportunities for creative writing, art and design, journalism, essay, op eds, school clubs, tech programs based in sustainable energy, geography, biology, law, Indigenous studies and so much more to become engaged with this sort of movement as part of the day to day classroom. Sorry kids, you can try to tell us that you just wanted to skip or take a chance to yell and be loud, but now we know that you care.

More than once over the course of the afternoon this old cynic was brought to tears of sadness. After all, we have brought the Earth and our

children to this point, that they must fight to even have a future. More often there were tears of pride that these children have done and are doing this. And let us not forget tears of hope, because for the first time in a while I felt that too. Hope for the future. Hope born from the humbleness visited upon you when your students teach you a lesson; how's it done -- why it's done. I can't express enough how proud I am of all of you. I want you to know, too, that although many of the battles you have will be against adults like me, that some of us, many of us, will be there to support you and help you as best we can. This fight belongs to all of us, after all.

The next student strike will be held on Friday, May 3 at noon. Find out more at fridaysforfuture.ca.