



Student roles in the Civil Rights Movement

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Throughout history, students have played a crucial role in the progression of the Civil Rights Movement. Sit-ins, one of the most prominent forms of student protests, involved organized groups of people going to “White Only” spaces in order to call out the failed promises of equality.

Even though the students who participated in the sit-ins were young and still in school, their actions exemplify the fact that anyone can take part in protests to make a change, regardless of their age.

The most well-known of these sit-ins took place in Greensboro, North Carolina. In February 1960, four Black college freshmen entered a white-only lunch counter at Woolworth’s and endured the resulting harassment in protest. The sit-in movement inspired other Black college students across the American South to also take part, forcing over 100 lunch counters to desegregate by April.

With over 50,000 students taking part in these peaceful protests, communities and businesses were forced to confront the injustice, and contributed to the momentum in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The birth of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization that led fights against segregation through grassroots movements, is another testament to the role of student protests in the Civil Rights Movement.

Thousands of Black voters across Southern states were successfully registered through SNCC’s continuous organized protests, finally giving representation to citizens whose voices had long been forced shut.

Student campaigning has been invaluable to the Black Civil Rights movement, playing an important role in both current and future civil rights advocacy.



photos (clockwise from top): Will Counts, Bill Hudson, Ed Jones, Uncredited, Matt Herron, Emile Pitre, Bill Hudson, Jack Moebs; graphics: Katherine Chen

Know your rights in protests

Samantha Henderson, VANGUARD CO-EDITOR

First Amendment gives you the right to peacefully assemble and freely express opinions and beliefs.



If you are arrested, talk to a **lawyer** as soon as possible. You do **not** have to talk to the police or government officials.

You have the right to **photograph** and **video** anything you see at a protest.



Current student protests around the world

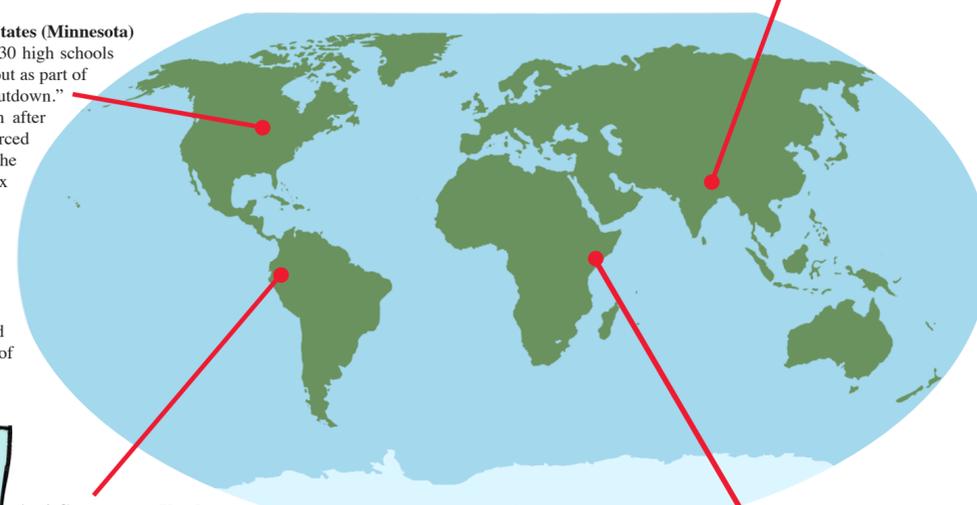
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Gen-Z Protests - Nepal

In September of 2025, Nepal's Generation Z population led the charge on a nationwide anti-corruption protest that resulted in a complete political regime change. Lasting for only about a week, these protests quickly turned destructive, as protestors clashed with military forces, and governmental buildings were set ablaze. Political debates, elections, and polling were all held on the messaging platform Discord as a result of the censorship of other social media platforms, concluding with former Chief Justice Sushila Karki becoming the first female Prime Minister of Nepal.

Anti-ICE Protests - United States (Minnesota)

In late January of 2026, over 30 high schools engaged in a nationwide walkout as part of student-organized "National Shutdown." The protests arose as backlash after Trump's administration enforced mass deportations that led to the deaths of Renée Good and Alex Pretti. Their walkouts and marches are not just symbolic gestures, but strategic disruptions aimed to force the country to acknowledge the human consequences of immigration enforcement. Since the protests, ICE has pulled 700 immigration agents out of Minnesota.



Anti-Government Youth Protests - Peru

Following the impeachment of conservative Peruvian President Dina Boluarte in October 2025, decentralized protests intensified to challenge social and economic issues. Even after fellow conservative José Jerí took office, people continued to rally against the government's instability and sharp uptick in crime. Amidst sustained public outcry, Jerí declared a state of emergency. Since then, protests and clashes between demonstrators and the government have continued, putting the seventh Peruvian president of the decade at risk of impeachment.

Gen-Z Revolution - Kenya

Ever since the summer of 2024, Kenya's young adult population has mobilized against nationwide issues. On June 25 of that year, hundreds of young Kenyans assembled at the Parliament Buildings in Nairobi. Despite the police's usage of riot equipment, protestors stormed the Parliament Buildings upon learning that a tax increase bill had passed. More than 20 people were killed, with many more injured, leading Kenyan President William Ruto to respond by pledging to not sign the bill into law. Calls for Ruto's resignation continued, forcing him to replace his entire cabinet with a mix of allies and opposition members on August 8th.

Timeline of American student protests

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1776 - Harvard Bad Butter Rebellion

A rebellion over rancid butter. But the butter left more than just a rancid taste in Harvard's students' mouths, quickly turning into the United States' first student-led protest. These tensions that soon evolved into larger questions about the student body's relationship with administration have been a defining feature of student-led protests since.

1963 - Birmingham Children's Crusades

Over 1,000 school-age children — ranging all the way from age seven up to age 18 — skipped classes to march on Birmingham's City Hall to engage the city's mayor on legalized segregation in Birmingham. Many of the children were arrested, sprayed with fire hoses, and attacked with police dogs. The crusade led President John F. Kennedy to publicly support federal civil rights legislation.

2006 - Walkout against immigrant policy

Driven by a proposed bill to make entering the U.S. illegally a felony, these protests in spring of 2006 saw events like "A Day Without Immigrants" bring business as usual to a halt. In Los Angeles county alone, 72,000 middle and high school students stayed home from school to protest immigration policy, and countless Latinx workers across the country stayed home from work, showing solidarity in their economic power.

1945 - Protesting McCarthyism and Censorship

Jumping nearly two centuries later, the Cold War has taken its toll on America and fears of the Red Scare abound. Started at Indiana University, the so-called "Green Feather Movement" targeted an attempt to censor a textbook mentioning Robin Hood due to his promotion of communist ideals. The students at Indiana University responded by dying chicken feathers green and spreading them throughout campus to represent the chicken feather in Robin Hood's hat.

1970 - Kent State Protest and Shooting

On May 4, 1970, the Ohio National Guard fired upon students protesting the Vietnam War, killing four and wounding nine. Resulting from President Nixon's announcement of expanding the war into Cambodia, the demonstration followed days of agitation and the burning of the college's ROTC building, leading to nationwide divisions about the war.

2018 - March for Our Lives — gun control related

This month eight years ago, 17 high school students were killed by a fellow classmate in Parkland, Florida. March for Our Lives was one of the largest youth protests since the Vietnam War, with some 800,000 protestors in Washington, D.C., and nearly two million worldwide. They demanded gun reform, and survivors of the shooting used this platform to call for legislation.

Free speech vs. student safety

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Public schools maintain a balancing act between protecting student free speech and upholding order. Under First Amendment Rights, public school districts cannot explicitly support or oppose the sentiment of a given student protest, however they must shut down protests that violate or threaten safety or traditional learning.

Princeton Public Schools sets out clear guidelines on student protests that are found in the student handbook. While the district acknowledges students' First Amendment rights to free speech and peaceful assembly, it states that walkouts, protests, and demonstrations are not school-sanctioned activities. Therefore, they are prohibited during instructional time or whenever they are deemed to interfere with school operations; violations of the Code of Conduct during protests can also result in disciplinary repercussions.

"Students definitely have freedom of speech, and we, in fact, encourage that, no matter where your political standing is. However, during instructional minutes, school rules apply, and that's where we come in," said PHS Principal Cecilia Birge.

The rules that PPS has established are similar to those in other school districts, with a common goal of balancing student protests with school safety. "Our role is safety. The communication piece to school admin[istrators] is really so that we are aware of how to manage the safety aspect of it," said Birge.

Yet, given these constraints, many student-led protests often result in disciplinary action for participating students. According to NJ.com, in 2022, an abortion-rights rally led by students at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey resulted in aggressive verbal disagreements, damaged public property, and acts of physical violence between students who supported abortion and those who opposed it. Following the incident, administrators vowed to punish students and urged adults to set a better example for the youth. The incident at Hunterdon revealed how quickly a protest can turn from peaceful to chaotic, especially when parties with opposing views collide.

"If a protest on campus turns violent, then we can suspend students, we can call the police, so its consequences can be more severe depending on how egregious the violation is exactly," Birge said.

Needless to say, not all student-led protests end in conflict. Some demonstrations have been successful due to their organization, structure, and how they were carried out. In 2018, the March for Our Lives movement led by students gained significant traction, drawing over one million attendees across hundreds of global rallies to demand better gun control policies. In the United States, protestors gathered in major locations like Washington, D.C. to promote their cause with nearly 2 million participants, making it one of the largest student-led protests since the Vietnam War anti-war movement in 1970.

Ultimately, the district's priority remains in education, and if students choose to campaign, they should at least communicate with the school for safety reasons.

"I suggest [students] come and see us ... I would require students to reach out to their parents so that parents understand why students are not in class," said Birge.

graphics: Katherine Chen