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North Shore activists ask affluent neighbors for help with school funding gaps

The grass-roots group, United We Learn, uses personal narratives in video to seek change



James Alford listens to a lecture at Northern Illinois University last week. Alford, who graduated from Kenwood Academy in Chicago in June, is featured in "The Education They Deserve," a video about educational inequalities in Illinois. (Lane Christiansen, Chicago Tribune / August 31, 2010)

By Lisa Black, Tribune reporter

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For one day, the disparities in Illinois public education were on graphic display when a feisty state senator bused hundreds of low-income South Side students to the wealthy North Shore to "enroll" them in some of the highest-performing schools in Illinois.

Sen. James Meeks, D- Chicago, drew a national spotlight on his call for education reform, but soon after the 2008 event, Winnetka and Northfield school officials had largely moved on, said Lali Watt, of Wilmette.

Long after reporters and television crews left, Meeks' message resonated with her and several other activists

no longer content to ignore financial and educational inequalities in public schools. Their group, United We Learn, will present a video at Northwestern University on Sept. 16 aimed at other North Shore residents who have the resources and clout to push for change.

The video, titled "The Education They Deserve," features interviews with students, teachers and parents from Chicago and the North Shore suburbs. The students share personal stories that contrast sharply.

"We are convinced there are plenty of really smart people who, if they decided it was a problem that needed to be solved, they would get it solved," Watt said. "It is the will and the desire to get it to happen."

United We Learn does not support any specific proposal for education finance reform and opposes shifting money from good schools to bad, Watt said.

What the activists want to do is show how all residents, not just those from impoverished communities, are affected by low-quality education. The state's budget, already in shambles with a \$13 billion deficit, will only worsen if officials don't take steps to strengthen the future work force, Watt said.

"If we in Illinois don't do something about this, your kid's future, your grandchildren's future, is bleak even though they may themselves have a great education," Watt said. "They won't be able to run businesses in this state and find employees that will do a good job."mconfsion-conviction-uestioned

Two years ago, Meeks transported about 1,000 students on 30 buses to New Trier's freshman campus in Northfield, where they filled out registration paperwork in a peaceful gathering. New Trier students remained in classes, but some joined Meeks' rally after school at a nearby forest preserve.

"It is good to know that our efforts on the North Shore were not in vain and that there are good people who want to see equality in education funding," Meeks, a pastor, said in a recent statement.

He was not involved in making the video but said he supports United We Learn. Last year, he arranged for the activists to tour a high school and library on the South Side.

"When Rev. Meeks came to New Trier, in all our classes we talked about it but never said much substantial about it," said Julia Weiss, 17, of Wilmette, now a freshman at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "I was curious about it but didn't know where to turn."

Weiss became involved with United We Learn after her friend Rian Watt mentioned that his mother, Lali, had begun researching the issue. She is one of the students featured in the video.

Recently, Weiss saw the video in a preview showing and said she was stunned to hear for the first time some of the other students' stories.

Adella Bass, a 2008 graduate of Fenger Academy High School, described her initial embarrassment after earning a 13 on her ACT — a score far below the highest obtainable mark, 36, on the college entrance test. During her senior year at Fenger, she studied from a fifth-grade textbook for an African-American studies class, Bass said in the video.

Fenger, a "turnaround school" whose leadership changed in 2009, no longer has textbooks fitting that description, said Monique Bond, Chicago Public Schools spokeswoman. She said officials have no record of what former textbooks were used, but thousands were discarded the summer of 2009 because they were out of date, damaged or inappropriate for the students' grade level.

Fenger drew national attention last year when one of its students, Derrion Albert, 16, was beaten to death outside a community center on the Far South Side.

"The violence is like one world," Bass, 20, said in the video. "The education is another world. And you can't take on two worlds when you are just living in one."

Fenger, whose student population is 98 percent low income, spent \$11,536 in per-pupil operating expenses during the 2007-08 school year, according to the most recent data available from the state.

Winnetka-based New Trier Township High School, by comparison, reported 2.5 percent of its students as low income and spent \$18,246 per pupil, according to state data.

"I think it is absurd that there are still such drastic differences," Weiss said.

"We have gotten the technology and moved forward culturally in so many regards, but this issue has gone to the wayside," she said. "Obviously, it hurts individual people, but it also will affect our country. It's going to hurt everyone."

The video also attempts to highlight successful students and schools as models.

James Alford, 18, a freshman at Northern Illinois University, said he took two buses and a train to reach Kenwood Academy in Hyde Park, where he graduated in June. The three-hour daily commute was worth it, he said, because he had little faith he could succeed at the closer Hirsch Metropolitan High School, where his friends attended.

"A lot of people who went there didn't last," Alford said. "They were always fighting because they were traveling into the neighborhood. The guys who lived in the neighborhood didn't like them. So they just stopped going."

He hopes to use his college education to help find solutions.

"I thought education was supposed to be the top priority in our country, but yet we really don't fund it and make sure everybody has access to a good education," said Alford, who worked as an intern for Cook County Commissioner Tony Peraica, a Republican.

"How do they expect my generation to lead the country, being doctors, lawyers and even politicians, if (students) don't have an education — if they can't write a basic paragraph?"

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'The Education They Deserve'

United We Learn, a grass-roots New Trier Township group, presents a screening of "The Education They Deserve" at 7 p.m. Sept. 16 at Northwestern University's McCormick Tribune Center, 1870 Campus Drive, Evanston.

United We Learn Web site: unitedwelearnil.org

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