

United we learn: Group born from Meeks' protest launches video

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Lali Watt of Wilmette (right) was among the members of United We Learn that responded to the Rev. James Meeks' (center) invitation to visit Fenger High School in Chicago. "What we found was a principal and teachers who were putting their hearts, minds and imaginations into trying to fix things," said Watt. (File photo)

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Alyssa Topping realizes she had a privileged education at Glenbrook South High School. But Topping makes a poignant observation on a new video that tells of the toll of school inequities through the eyes of suburban and Chicago teens with vastly different experiences.

"Even if you are the most motivated person in the world, and have all the support from your family, you can only go as far as what is physically there for you to do," said Topping.

"If there aren't the Advanced Placement classes, you can't do them. If there aren't the honors classes, you can't do them. And if you have a textbook from 1994, then that is what you know. It is just a matter of fact."

The North Shore grassroots organization, United We Learn, produced "The Education They Deserve" out of a recognition that finding solutions to the school resource gap hinged on getting more people to care, or at least realize the economic folly of shortchanging the young people whose productivity will shape the future.

"If we gave (these kids) the kind of education they deserve, all over the state of Illinois, they could super-charge our economy basically," observes Wilmette resident Lali Watt on the video.

"There is no reason for (Illinois) to be 48th in funding. We are killing ourselves and we are killing our future and it is not right."

Watt, a founding member of United We Learn, served as executive producer on the video, which will be screened at 7 p.m. Sept. 16 at Northwestern University's McCormick Tribune Center, 1870 Campus Drive, Evanston.

High schools take part

Students from New Trier, Glenbrook South and Evanston Township High School participated in the video, along with teens who attend or attended Chicago schools, including Fenger High School, Senn High School and Kenwood Academy.

Adella Bass, a former Fenger student enrolled at Truman College, speaks of the embarrassment of scoring a 13 on the ACT exam. "I felt kind of embarrassed, but I really didn't feel it was my fault. I felt it was their fault. We didn't have any books. We rarely got homework. It wasn't about my having a learning disability or anything like that. I just was never taught what I was supposed to be taught. When I got into college, I felt like I'd been cheated."

United We Learn was spawned when State Sen. James T. Meeks, D-15th, orchestrated a peaceful but attention-grabbing protest in early September 2008. Thirty buses of youngsters and parents, mostly from the Chicago's South Side, arrived at New Trier High School's Northfield campus to fill out registration forms and "enroll" in some of the richest and highest-performing schools in the state.

During 18 months of meetings, the group delved into the nitty-gritty of school funding, worked to educate people who attended their meetings and paid a visit to Fenger High School.

Not pinpointing blame

Watt stresses that the point of the video is not to point fingers.

"When we were at Fenger, we found the principal and teachers were passionate about their jobs and were putting their hearts, minds and imaginations toward trying to fix things," said Watt. "The problem is, they have so many issues they are trying to deal with and kids with so many deficits. It is really hard for people to succeed."

As for the students, "What you will see is people who come across as equally intelligent, equally engaged, equally hard working who, depending on where they go to school, have starkly different outcomes."

Information on the screening and a short video clip is available on the United We Learn website, unitedwelearnil.org.