



# HOLDING SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE: STUDENTS ORGANIZING FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

*A Forum Interview with Bertha Rodriguez, Manual High School Junior*

A month after coming on board as a volunteer youth leader at the Colorado Progressive Coalition, Bertha Rodriguez is already an integral part of an effort to overcome racial inequities at her own Manual High School. The Denver school district's move to divide Manual into three academies last year, according to Rodriguez and other students involved in the Coalition's Students 4 Justice initiative, has resulted in both racial segregation and limited choices for students. Bolstered with growing skills as an organizer and advocate, Rodriguez is holding the school accountable for its actions.


 *How did you get involved in Students 4 Justice?*

**BR:** Students 4 Justice organizes at East, West and Manual High Schools. I joined about a month ago. I found out about it from other students, then I went to a lunch meeting that they had organized and joined. We are fighting for racial justice in the schools. We are helping students have a voice, by organizing, getting the word out, trying to get students to go to meetings.


 *What issues are you currently working on?*

**BR:** Last year, Manual High School divided into three small schools — Leadership, Arts and Culture, and Millennium Quest. Leadership is focused on business; Millennium Quest is science and medicine; and Arts and Cultural Studies is arts and language. But some students are not in the right schools. Some students aren't even interested in the arts, but they were put in that school. You are supposed to be able to choose, but they just put you where they want to put you or where they have room. They don't really take time to get to know students well enough to put them in the right school. And if you are an English Language Acquisition (ELA) learner, you don't have a choice. They put all the ELA students in Arts. Leadership is mainly black. Arts and Culture on the third floor is mainly Hispanics. The second floor is mixed. So it's all messed up. The first and second floor students can't even go up to the third floor, because it's considered trespassing and you can get a ticket. We are more segregated than before.


We're also working on the bell schedule and the tardy policy. We don't have any bells in the school, but they give you detention if you are late. Now they give you an after-school detention right away because they say that in-school detentions don't work.

 *What motivates you to be involved and stay involved?*


**BR:** You feel like you are doing something, like you are making a difference. It is good for students because we are actually doing something for ourselves. Everybody wants that feeling. Some of us have been in this longer than others. We all feel different about why we are involved, but we all feel it's time to step up and tell them about what needs to change.

 *What do young people need to do this work well?*

**BR:** The staff at Students 4 Justice supports us. We also need the people from the community to support us, to say, "I know and understand what you are doing." Our teachers need to support us more. Right now they say, "Why are you in Students 4 Justice? You're not going to get anywhere with it." We need encouragement in the school — somebody to tell us, "You are going to do it." I think they enjoy putting us down. If they cared, they would make sure we are learning. They would take the time to help us.

 *What lessons would you want to share with others who are engaged in this work?*


**BR:** I would say be strong, because there are people who will put you down. But if you believe in what you are doing, you need to work for what you want. You'll have to work really hard if you want something changed. You have to work up to it, get others involved and get their ideas. It can't be something where you just want things to change but you don't get involved at a deeper level.

 *The relationship between students and teachers seems to be a strong motivating factor for your involvement.*

**BR:** The school is not getting students prepared for the real world. In my freshman year, the teachers took the


time. They asked us what we wanted to do and told us about college. In my sophomore and junior years — I'm a junior right now — they don't care if we go to college or not. We don't have discussions about after high school. They just want to have you sit in class, and move you out.

The teachers don't care what we have to say, that's why I got involved. But the group, we support each other, but we all think differently. We work together as a group and bring different things to the group. Just one person couldn't get a meeting with the principal or organize a meeting, but with a lot of us, we get that meeting. We all know different teachers and are in different schools, so we can use that.

 *What prevents young people from being involved in school change?*

**BR:** One thing that makes it difficult is that not every student knows about Students 4 Justice. So we need to do a

better job of getting the word out. Also, I think that many students don't really feel like it will make a difference, so I guess that makes it difficult. If you give a young person a chance to talk and you give them respect, they are going to feel like, "It matters what I have to say." I think it's important for everybody to work together.

 *What would you say to convince educators and school reform leaders that young people can and should be involved in school reform?*

**BR:** We are young adults. We can give you respect. We are able to understand the issues. We can think for ourselves. It's our education. If we have a say, it will make a difference. We would be more into school, we would be more open to learning. If we don't like the way something is run, or the way we are being treated, we are not even going to try. If you are happy doing something, you are going to be good at it. 