



Five Steps for Starting a Human Rights Club by Monisha Bajaj (University of San Francisco, USA)



Dr. Monisha Bajaj is one of the leading scholars on human rights education in the United States. In 2014, her research team launched a human rights club for newly arrived refugee and immigrant youth at a public high school. In this article, she captures best practices for starting a human rights club at your school and explains how this club can help prepare students to be global citizens who organize for social change. Pocket these ideas for Human Rights Day on December 10—and beyond.

Introduction

Separated from her family, Seng* barely escaped human traffickers after fleeing political violence in Myanmar as a teenager. By the time Seng received asylum in the United States, she had already lived in two countries. Seng became active in the human rights club at her school as a high school senior and used the information to make sense of her migration experiences and current realities. About the club, Seng says, “Every week, every activity, every field trip, we learn something. I learned that a lot of people are fighting for human rights. It is a great club, and I’m really happy to be in it.”

In the United States, human rights activists have a strong legacy, ranging from abolitionists and civil rights leaders—like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ella Baker and Rosa Parks—to leaders of movements for women’s rights, workers’ rights, immigrant rights and LGBT rights.

High schools are ideal sites for preparing youth, like Seng, to be global citizens equipped with human rights knowledge. Forming a human rights club at your high school can allow students to engage with historical and present-day issues, and to organize for social change. It is important not to just present doom-and-gloom examples of human rights violations week after week, but to also highlight how individuals and communities are fighting for their rights every day, all over the world. Presenting human rights as an active force for social justice is the key to a successful and inspiring club.

Five Steps

Here are five steps for starting a human rights club.

1. The setting: Find other teachers who are willing to support club activities, and identify a club advisor. Network with teachers who are running

successful human rights clubs in other schools. If your school has a Gay-Straight Alliance, Model United Nations, Amnesty International or a Global Film Club, think about how you might work together with these groups to get interested students involved. Find a time and place for the club to meet.

2. The content: In our club, we have approximately 30 weekly sessions per year. Some sessions focus on human rights knowledge (7 sessions), others focus on examples of violations and fulfillment of human rights (7 to 8 sessions), and more address individuals organizing for social change and involve a student-led campaign around a particular human rights issue (15 sessions). Field trips, guest speakers and films can also be great ways to introduce examples of human rights activism. Some great early activities to establish human rights knowledge include:

- Having students create their own list of basic rights and comparing it with the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR). A plain-text version of this is at: www.eycb.coe.int/comasito/chapter_6/pdf/1.pdf
- Showing the short documentary *The Story of Human Rights* to students and discussing it with them.
- Asking students to create human rights collages with media images that reflect a right from the UDHR.
- Identifying violations and fulfillments of the UDHR.
- Taking the human rights temperature of the school and developing action plans for addressing issues that are identified, such as bullying, bias, lack of safety or disproportionate forms of school discipline.

3. The pedagogy: Participatory activities and community building among the participants are essential. In each club meeting, consider running a short check-in (10 minutes), a fun ice-breaker (15 minutes) and an activity / film / lesson plus discussion (45-50 minutes). You can find a variety of sample team building exercises on-line.

4. Media and film: Be careful not to traumatize youth by exposing them to media that are too advanced or graphic for their level. In our club, we focus on examples of individuals taking positive action for human rights. Some good films that we

found appropriate for high school students include:

- [Freedom Riders](#)
- [Girl Rising](#)
- [La Cosecha](#)
- [The Lady](#)
- [Persepolis](#)
- [Student-produced films of Global Action Project](#) in New York City
- [Teaching Tolerance film kits](#), such as [Selma: The Bridge to the Ballot](#)
- [War/Dance](#)

In the case of long films, we broke up watching them over two to three club sessions to allow ample time for discussion of each segment. We also chose films that showed students' home cultures and backgrounds as a way for them to "see themselves" in the curriculum.

5. Action: It's important to not just teach *about* human rights but to also teach *for* human rights. Whether it's writing letters, educating the school community about pressing issues or organizing or participating in a campaign—our students helped organize an immigrant rights march around the neighborhood of their school—speaking up about injustices is an integral part of human rights education.

A human rights club can be a great venue for students interested in local and global issues to learn about universally agreed upon principles that guarantee basic dignity and rights to all people. It can be one way to build empathy, foster solidarity and spark a lifetime of activism for positive social change.

Additional resources:

- The [curriculum](#) and [resource list](#) of *Advocates for Human Rights*
- [Amnesty International's educator resources](#)
- The [programs](#) at *Coexist*
- The [educator resources](#) available from *Facing History and Ourselves*
- "Teaching About Human Rights," a special issue of the publication *Radical Teacher* that includes an article on [our human rights club](#)
- The [films](#) and [teacher-facing resources](#) from the *Upstander Project*
- The [resources](#) and [curricula](#) offered by the *Speak Truth to Power Initiative* of the *Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights*

**This student's name has been changed.*

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- This article is available on-line at: www.tolerance.org/blog/five-steps-starting-human-rights-club
- Underlined hyperlinks can be accessed on-line.

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	<p>Southern Poverty Law Center www.splcenter.org</p> <p>The <i>Southern Poverty Law Center</i> (SPLC) is a non-profit organization that combats hate, intolerance and discrimination through education and litigation. The SPLC was founded in 1971 by civil rights lawyers Morris Dees and Joseph Levin Jr. to ensure that the promise of the civil rights movement became a reality for all. Since then, they have won landmark legal victories on behalf of the exploited, the powerless and the forgotten. Their lawsuits have toppled institutional racism, destroyed some of the nation's most violent white supremacist groups and protected the civil rights of children, women, the disabled, immigrants, migrant workers, the LGBT community, prisoners and others who face discrimination, abuse or exploitation. Check out their website to learn about their current campaigns, resources, publications and view their online "Hate Map" that shows the location of hate groups in the US.</p>
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