

Take Action and Make an Impact

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It can be difficult to learn about environmental issues without feeling like you can't make a difference. One way to break this "cycle of despair" is to teach students the skills to make a difference on a local scale, in an issue that matters in their own lives. This could be the lack of shade on the school grounds and how hot it gets or the giant lake that forms in between the school buildings when it rains so they end up with wet shoes. Maybe it's the lack of bike parking at school or the fact that they don't feel safe hanging out at a local park. By teaching students to be both researchers and activists, you can help them to develop the skills of effective civic engagement, to feel hopeful, and to feel capable of standing up for their rights, and our environment, in the future!

AGES: High School

INTENDED OUTCOMES: Hands, Heart

SUGGESTED SUPPLIES:

- Computers with internet access
- Butcher paper, markers, post-its, etc. for brainstorming and organizing ideas, tasks, goals, and timelines

SUGGESTED STEPS:

- Explain to students that, together as a class, they are going to get to select an environmental issue on which they want to have an impact and make a difference. You will give them the skills to do this, but it is going to be their mission – and their accomplishment.
- Support students in brainstorming environmental issues that affect their own lives. One way to do this is to have them walk through their daily routines and note all of the places that they interact with the environment (it impacts them or they impact it) from when they wake up until when they go to bed. (They can even do this for different seasons, as their routines and interactions with the environment may be different depending on the time of year.)
- Help the class (or small groups) to choose a topic they want to work on, from the list that they have created.
- Help them to do background research on the issue, making sure that they cover all perspectives, including voices that are often marginalized (for environmental issues, this typically includes people of color, those of low-income, and indigenous people).
- They may want to collect their own data to help them understand the issue and/or the best, most effective action that they can take. This is where you get to help them learn the skills of research! For example, if they are interested in reducing food waste at school, it may be helpful for them to: conduct a waste audit of the school's trash cans at lunch; design a survey to understand where students get their food; interview dining and custodial staff on their systems; etc.
- Once they understand the issue, students can create an action plan for how they want to make an impact. Help them set a S.M.A.R.T. goal (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound)

for the overall project (e.g. reduce food waste going to landfill by 50%). What different things do they need to do in order to meet the overarching goal? Schedule meetings with key staff, develop and implement an education campaign, order supplies, etc.? Guide them in working backwards to set intermediate deadlines and to assign specific people to each sub-task.

- Be sure to celebrate each small wins and to discuss and debrief any setbacks. Activism is not a straightforward process and real results take patience, commitment, and time!



TIPS AND TRICKS

- The steps described above, and the idea of teaching students to be researchers, comes from the Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework. This framework is based in social justice and teaches students the skills to be involved in shaping the policies and decisions that will affect their own lives. Critical to YPAR is the idea that youth are experts in their own lives and that youth and adults can and should work together as equal contributors and creators of knowledge. You can find more information about YPAR, including sample activities and suggestions on how to set up successful adult-youth partnerships, here: <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu>
- Working collaboratively with adults and other students can be challenging for youth. Take time before they even select a topic to do some group building with students - look up “team building” activities and debrief them with a focus on the different roles that students take, who’s voices are heard, and how we make sure that everyone feels supported. If you want, create a list of agreed-upon “norms” or rules to govern or remind the group what is necessary for them to be a high performing, inclusive team. Revisit these as necessary throughout the project.
- The scale of project described above requires time - ideally regular in- and out-of class time over the whole year. For a mini version of “take an action, make an impact,” have student select and research an environmental issue, then pick one action they will take related to that issue. Have them document their action and share with the school or class.



Relevant Standards

SS09-GR.HS-S.4-GLE.1, PE09-GR.HS-S.3-GLE2