

# SCHOOL YARD PROTEST



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## Lesson Summary

In this session, your group will look at the different ways that students have organised protests in their own schools against policies they considered unfair. It presents several case studies and asks students to engage in a creative exercise to consider how they could make change in their own schools, and what means they could use to develop a campaign.

## Learning Objectives

- To learn about the protests led by students at Pretoria High School and Isca Academy in Exeter, and to appreciate the different reasons behind these students' campaigns.
- To think about the relationship between students, teachers, and school authorities, and the ways that changes can be made in school.
- To reflect on how the visual 'brand' of a campaign can increase the attention it receives.

### United Nations Sustainable Development Links

- Quality Education
- Reduced Inequality

### Curriculum Links

- KS 3-5 PSHE,
- Citizenship

### British Council Core Skills

- Digital Literacy
- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Creativity and Imagination
- Student Leadership
- Collaboration and Communication
- Enterprise

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## Activity one: General discussion

**Requires:** White/black/smart board

**Preparation:** Write up the three questions on the board

- Begin the class by writing the following questions on the board and dividing the students up into small groups to discuss them.
- After a few minutes, or when the discussions have drawn to a conclusion, ask the group to get back together to share their ideas.
- The aim of asking these questions is to encourage students to think about their own roles as active participants in the school community, the various representative structures and points of contact that they have, and the effectiveness of using them.
  1. Is there anything you'd want to change about school?
  2. What are the different ways you could try to change things in school? Are there particular people or bodies that you could speak to?
  3. Do you think students' voices are listened to by those in charge of your school?

## Activity two: Pretoria Girls High protests

**Requires:** Slides 2 and 3, Worksheet sources 1 and 2

**Preparation:** Ensure that the videos from slide 2 can be played, print out worksheet sources 1 and 2.

- Inform the students about the protests at Pretoria Girls High in August 2016 using the information below.
  - In August 2016, students at Pretoria Girls High protested their school's policies on hairstyles. Black students claimed that they were being forced to straighten their hair, and that 'afro' styles were being called improper by teachers and staff at the school. They resented being told that their natural hairstyles were considered messy, and the suggestion that they should use potentially-damaging chemical products to make their hair conform to white standards of respectability.
  - The school was a whites-only establishment under Apartheid, and only began integration in 1994. Students from black African backgrounds further claimed that their use of native languages had been mocked by their teachers.



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## Activity two cont:

- Students protested outside the gates of the school over a weekend, blocking the entrances. They continued their protests during the week, marching with placards in break times, sitting out classes, and wearing their hair natural, in defiance of the policies. The school hired armed security guards to break up the protests, and videos and pictures of young women, led by the 13 year old Zulaikha Patel, silently refusing to leave the protest, went viral. Their protests caught the attention of the wider population, and soon they were joined by ex-students of the school, parents, and community and campaigning groups. A petition launched online called on the government to get the school to change its policies and garnered 25,000 signatures within a day, while a hashtag (#stopracismatpretoriagirlshigh) was used over 150,000 times online. The Gauteng Province Education Minister intervened and suspended the school's hair policy.
- Show the students the two short videos from slide 2, and inform the students that the young women's protests were successful in changing the school's policy.
- Break the group into smaller groups of 3-4. Have each student read the extract from The Washington Post (source 1) and look at the image in source 2.
- Ask them to address the questions from slide 2 in their small groups, before bringing the group back together to share their answers.
- These questions aim to develop a sense of understanding of why these young women felt marginalised by this policy- the fact that their natural African hairstyles were labelled 'messy' and unprofessional by a school which had previously excluded them, and that they were effectively being asked to use potentially damaging chemicals to change their hairstyles. They also aim to draw attention to the fact that the highly-visible nature of the protests, and the fact that a group of young women were threatened on-camera with arrest, drew the attention of the media, previous students, the local education department, advocacy groups, and the government itself to the issue. Pressure on the school was created through the combination of viral images, a petition, and a coalition of students, ex-students and campaign groups who successfully got the local state to intervene and overcome the resistance of the school leadership.

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## Activity three: Isca Academy protests

**Requires:** Slides 4 and 5, worksheet sources 3 and 4.

**Preparation:** Ensure that the video on slide 4 can be played, and print out the sources from the worksheet.

- Explain to students that in June, 2017, Isca Academy became the centre of national news when its students decided to protest uniform policies at the height of a heatwave. Tired of not being allowed to wear shorts, over 30 boys wore skirts to school, getting national media attention. Their protest was featured on Good Morning Britain, BBC News, and made the pages and websites of most national newspapers. Eventually the school reversed its policy, allowing shorts to be worn in summertime.
- Show students the video on slide 4, and inform the students that these students also successfully managed to change their school's policy on dress codes.
- Ask students to read source 3 and look at the image in source 4. Ask the group as a whole to answer the questions on slide 5.
- These questions encourage students to think about how to progress their complaints- students at the academy originally spoke with their teachers and then the headteacher. They took to protesting only when they found that they were faced with a dismissive attitude from school management. Similar to the protests at Pretoria High, these protesting students used a style of protest that was eye-catching- the pictures were able to draw the attention of the media. While at Pretoria an image of defiance in the face of power highlighted the over-the-top nature of the school's response, here an unusual image demonstrated the dismissive attitude of the school. Students are also asked to think about how supportive parents can bring their own pressure on a school, and increase the strength of student protests.



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## Activity four: The Little Red School Book

**Requires:** Slide 6 and Worksheet Source 5, pens

**Preparation:** Print out Worksheet source 5, ensure that students have pens.

- Display the image on slide 6. Explain to the class that this book, 'The Little Red Schoolbook', was written and published by two Danish teachers, Søren Hansen and Jesper Jensen, in 1969. It was translated into many languages and was published around the world in the early 1970s. It gave students advice on how to organise protests in school, and assert their power against school authorities, as well as offering frank advice on controversial topics such as sex, masturbation, and drugs. It quickly became very controversial, and was even banned in some countries, such as France, Italy and New Zealand. In Britain it was banned under the Obscene Publications Act, and only published after several sections of it were deleted.
- Ask students to read the section contained in worksheet source 5, which discusses how to organise a protest in school, and ask them to highlight or underline anything that they find interesting, confusing, or unusual. Pose them the following questions:

1. This book is now around 50 years old- it was published at a time when many of your parents and grandparents would have been at school. Does it surprise you that people were writing this kind of material around then? Why/Why not?
2. If you were writing a similar book today, would the advice offered in it be very different? What would you change and why?
3. Is there any information in this passage that you would keep if you were to write a new version?



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## Source 1

### *Extracts from an article which looks at why young women in Pretoria posted their school's hair policy*

In recent years, staff members at the prestigious Pretoria High School for Girls in South Africa's administrative capital had taken to telling black students to "fix" their hair, according to some current and former pupils. Exactly what "fix" meant depended on who was issuing the order, the young women said: Some were told to use chemical straighteners, while others got a reminder about the school rule limiting cornrows, dreadlocks and braids to a centimeter or less in diameter.

### **To many of them, nothing needed fixing in the first place.**

Last month, propelled by the long-simmering belief that such criticisms were discriminatory, a group of current students took action. Protests were staged on the leafy, gated campus over the hair fracas

"They go around posting signs about the ethos of equality for all the girls at the school, but that is not true," said one 15-year-old student. "It feels like they don't want to accept the fact that we're African."

"It's degrading," said a classmate, also 15, noting that the students' protests were about much more than rules on hair. "If we don't stick up for ourselves, no one's going to."

**After thousands signed** an [online petition](#) supporting the Pretoria students, the head of Gauteng province's education department met with students, parents and staff at the school this week to hear the students' claims. The department later ordered the code of conduct clause dealing with hairstyles to be suspended.

**Krista Mahr, for the Washington Post**

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/protests-over-black-girls-hair-rekindle-debate-about-racism-in-south-africa/2016/09/02/27f445da-6ef4-11e6-993f-73c693a89820\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.839d93ade5d3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/protests-over-black-girls-hair-rekindle-debate-about-racism-in-south-africa/2016/09/02/27f445da-6ef4-11e6-993f-73c693a89820_story.html?utm_term=.839d93ade5d3)



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## Source 2

*This image shows 13 year old Zulaikha Patel, who helped to organise and lead the protests in Pretoria, defying the head teacher's order to stop blocking the school entrance. It went viral and drew a lot of attention to the protest and the school's hair policy.*



(<https://mobile.eurweb.com/2016/08/south-african-girls-protest-school-policy-forcing-straightened-hair-pics-video/>)



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## Source 3

*Extracts from an article about the protests at Isca Academy*

### Teenage boys wear skirts to school to protest against 'no shorts' policy

When the Isca academy in Devon opened on Thursday morning, an estimated 30 boys arrived for lessons, heads held high, in fetching tartan-patterned skirts. The hottest June days since 1976 had led to a bare-legged revolution at the secondary school in Exeter.

**As the temperature soared past 30°C** earlier this week, the teenage boys had asked their teachers if they could swap their long trousers for shorts. They were told no – shorts weren't permitted under the school's uniform policy.

**When they protested** that the girls were allowed bare legs, the school – no doubt joking – said the boys were free to wear skirts too if they chose. So on Wednesday, a handful braved the giggles and did so. The scale of the rebellion increased on Thursday, when at least 30 boys opted for the attire.

**"Quite refreshing"** was how one of the boys described the experience... Another said he rather enjoyed the "nice breeze" his skirt had afforded him...

**Ironically, the temperature had dropped in Exeter to a more manageable 20°C**, but some boys said they had enjoyed the freedom afforded by the skirts and that they might continue.

**The school said** it was prepared to think again in the long term. The headteacher, Aimee Mitchell, said: "We recognise that the last few days have been exceptionally hot and we are doing our utmost to enable both students and staff to remain as comfortable as possible.

**"Shorts are not currently part of our uniform** for boys, and I would not want to make any changes without consulting both students and their families. However, with hotter weather becoming more normal, I would be happy to consider a change for the future."...

**The mother of one of the boys** who began the protest said she was proud of him. Claire Lambeth, 43, said her son Ryan, 15, had come home earlier in the week complaining about the heat. "He said it was unbearable. I spoke to a teacher to ask about shorts and she said it was school policy [that they could not be worn]. I did say this was exceptional weather, but they were having none of it. If girls can wear skirts, why can't boys wear shorts?"

**"Ryan came up with the idea of wearing a skirt**, so that evening we borrowed one. He wore it the next day – as did five other boys. Then this morning ... I didn't expect it to take off like that. The school is being silly really – this is exceptional weather. I was very proud of Ryan. I think it was a great idea."

**[Another] mother said:** "Children also don't like injustice. The boys see the female teachers in sandals and nice cool skirts and tops while they are wearing long trousers and shoes and the older boys have to wear blazers. They just think it's unfair that they can't wear shorts in this heat."

(Steven Morris, for The Guardian)

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/22/teenage-boys-wear-skirts-to-school-protest-no-shorts-uniform-policy>



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## Source 4

*An image of the students' protest at Isca Academy which was used by many different newspapers and websites*



(BBC/ Apex)

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## Source 5

### *Extracts from 'The Little Red Schoolbook'*

"There are many things to remember if a demonstration or strike is to have any chance of success.

You should first make sure that there are a lot of other pupils who are dissatisfied with the same thing as you - and preferably some teachers too.

You should have tried every other method first to get your grievance settled.

Before you start, everyone should be told about the problem and what you want to achieve. Use the school magazine and notice boards. Make your case clear by using posters, banners and slogans. Talk to other pupils during breaks and after school. Talk to any teachers in whom you have confidence.

Try to explain the problem to your parents, but don't count on getting their support.

You should be prepared for the worst.

You should be prepared to get punished.

You should be prepared for newspapers sometimes distorting the facts and being against you.

You should be prepared for some of your friends to give in when parents or teachers threaten punishment."

## The demonstration itself

A demonstration doesn't have to be a walk-out. The form of the demonstration should be suited to what you want to achieve.

If, for example, you don't want to have to line up in the playground, demonstrate by just going straight into the classrooms.

If you want to stay in the classroom during breaks, demonstrate by not going out when the bell rings. Just sit down in a group.

If you object to having the school magazine read by the headmaster or a teacher before it appears, print it and distribute it illegally.



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## Source 5 cont.

### *Extracts from 'The Little Red Schoolbook'*

If you're dissatisfied with a certain teacher and he refuses to talk to you, organise a boycott of his lessons. Try organising your own lessons on the subject he teaches badly.

Get leaflets printed or duplicated to explain what you want. If it's an issue of general educational policy, like corporal punishment or overcrowded classes, get in touch with pupils at other schools. Try to form a real pupils' union. In France in 1968 the pupils' union did organise a large scale strike and succeeded in getting important changes made...

Whatever you do, don't be put off by being threatened or spoken to angrily.

## After the demonstration

If anyone is singled out for having starting the demonstration, be loyal to them. Go with them if they are to be told off or punished.

Check that promises you are given during the demonstration are kept after it. Don't believe that things will necessarily get solved just by being left to staff meetings or the school council.

If you have no other way of expressing your views, send letters about the problem to the editors of newspapers and magazines. Try making your own 'wall newspaper': put up a big sheet of paper on a wall in the playground or some other suitable place. Write up your own views, then everybody else can add their opinions and write about their problems too. This 'newspaper' may get torn down - but not before a lot of people have had a chance to see it. And it's easy to put another sheet of paper up.

Usually a demonstration or strike will make the authorities and teachers more frank with you, whether it's actually successful or not."

**(Jesper Jensen and Soren Hansen, Pinter and Martin Ltd)**





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Written and compiled by Dr Daniel Edmonds, [danieledmonds237@gmail.com](mailto:danieledmonds237@gmail.com)

