I n a year riddled with both crises and complacency, young people were at the forefront of some of the nation’s largest movements. I co-lead the Kentucky Student Voice Team, which comprises over 100 students from across the state who are working to advance education research, advocacy, and policy. We rallied in solidarity, advocated against legislation we saw as a threat to the integrity of our democracy, and sought answers to some of the toughest questions threatening public schools. Rather than checking off a box called “student engagement,” we sought to amplify student experiences as a means to drive change.

During statewide school closures due to COVID-19, our team created what became the largest student-led research study in the state. Reaching nearly 13,000 students from all 120 Kentucky counties, “Coping with COVID” offered a perspective on the social-emotional and learning experiences of Kentucky students and proposed policy recommendations that were shared with education policymakers, educators, and school administrators. Among several findings, the study shone a light on disparities in resources for underserved schools across the state, impacts of infrequent teacher-student communications, and the ways in which students’ postsecondary plans had drastically transformed. During the 2020 presidential elections, our team also focused on down-ballot races affecting public education, organizing and moderating school board town halls for our communities.

The team brought the same drive to efforts to preserve the space for student and educator voice when a March legislative proposal threatened the dedicated teacher and student seats on the Kentucky Board of Education. In response, our team developed the #SaveOurSeats campaign, calling on the support of equity-oriented education and civic organizations to stand in solidarity. Over 300 students, educators, parents, and allies signed on to our campaign to share the same message: the presence and participation of students and teachers on state boards model democratic decision making.

Mostly, however, our activism has been rooted in storytelling. Through the Student Voice Forum and the Get Schooled: Student Stories from Across Kentucky podcast, we amplify narratives in order to radically reimagine public education.

There isn’t a single kind of activism that could eradicate the achievement and opportunity gaps in our education system. As the consumers in our education system, students are uniquely positioned to present real-world solutions to real-world problems. It is inexplicable to hinder young people’s agency to promote change.

Democracy thrives when primary stakeholders are brought into the picture. Our version of a just world is one that resists reactive measures but remains proactive. A world that confronts policies that sound good but fail to do good. A world that finds value in intergenerational partnerships and youth agency. A world devoid of social, economic, and racial crisis in which the youngest generation can sustain their youthfulness and find hope by claiming power.