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Gaining Critical Exposure

Two Tufts graduates have launched a project that puts cameras in the hands of middle and high school students in order to chronicle the state of public schools.



Focus on public schools

Medford/Somerville, Mass. [05.10.05] Heather Rieman and Adam Levner wanted to sharpen the focus on the plight of underfunded public schools – literally. So the Tufts graduates launched [Critical Exposure](#), a program that enables students and teachers to create first-person photographic and written narratives on the state of their schools.

"We didn't want to just pan the schools," Levner told the *Baltimore Sun*. "But there are things that obviously need to be addressed, that speak to just how drastic the underfunding has been."

Levner and Rieman met as undergraduates at Tufts, and two years ago they began discussing the detriments of budgetary constraints in urban schools.

Levner, a former teacher and community nonprofit organizer, and Rieman, a former policy analyst at the U.S. Department of Education, quit their jobs to launch Critical Exposure with a pilot project in the mostly low-income public schools of Baltimore. Students were given point-and-shoot cameras and taught the basic principles of photography.

The two Tufts graduates have raised \$23,000 so far, winning support from Maryland and Washington D.C.-based foundations, including the Public Education Network, the Journal reported. Two D.C.-area lawyers have also contributed pro bono legal advice.

Levner and Rieman hope to expand the project to other locations like New York City.

Fifty black-and-white shots by the project's 60 students are currently on exhibit in an East Baltimore gallery. Among the images captured are lead-contaminated drinking fountains, dirty bathrooms, and broken windows.

But the students also captured the positive aspects of their schools on film, including a collection of college acceptance letters and portraits of favorite teachers. They have welcomed the opportunity to share their perspectives on the best and the worst in their schools.

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"It's great. It gives you a way to say something without actually having to use words," 14-year-old Sahara Scott of East Baltimore told the *Sun*.

The organizers hope their work will gain notice in high places. The *National Journal* reported that some Maryland politicians, including Democratic House Delegate Keith Haynes, have taken note of the issues raised in the exhibit.

"A lot of policymakers never set foot in these schools. They don't know what it's like," Rieman told the *Sun*.

