

## Engaging and empowering students through photography



A Baltimore gallery exhibits the work of students in the Critical Exposure photography program.

MICHAEL CAMPBELL

Project spotlights school building disrepair, as students become activists

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but the photo documentary of Baltimore City's public schools was priceless.

Equipped with 35mm point-and-shoot cameras, 60 students from grades 3 to 12 snapped more than 1,500 pictures documenting the physical conditions of their schools between July 2004 and April 2005.

"Empowerment through photography is what I call it," says Chingquapin Middle School teacher Helen Washington, a member of the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU).

The project was initiated by Critical Exposure, a Washington, D.C.-based organization aiming to influence public policy for equality in education.

The project "is really about giving the students who are most affected by the inequities in our public education system the tools to express themselves and fight for reform," says Adam Levner, co-director of Critical Exposure.

The disrepair of Baltimore City schools is an ongoing issue in the community—and well documented in the

media. According to studies commissioned by the school system, more than \$950 million is needed to repair facilities and upgrade classrooms.

Washington and her Chingquapin colleague Tenerra McFadden, who also is a BTU member, worked with more than two dozen students who contributed to the project during a summer 2004 program sponsored by Community Law in Action, a project partner of Critical Exposure.

The full photo documentary was unveiled during an April exhibit at Gallery 1448 in Baltimore. And partial displays have been exhibited at other galleries and events around the city. The photos are accompanied by essays explaining the images and how those conditions affect the learning environment.

"The kids enjoyed it," says McFadden. "They didn't just take pictures. They were given the opportunity to speak about what they saw and how they felt about it." And that, she adds, "helped our goal of turning these kids into community leaders."

"They had a ton of people coming in to view what they did," says Washington, noting that at the beginning of the project, many students were skeptical that adults would take the time to see what kids had to say. "By the end of the program, [the students] realized that people were interested."

Critical Exposure will expand its project this school year to include New York City or Washington, D.C., says Levner. For more information about Critical Exposure, visit [www.criticalexposure](http://www.criticalexposure).