

LIFESTYLE

Critical Exposure helps teens focus on progress

Jin-Ah Kim
Young D.C.

Critical Exposure is an organization which trains young students from across the country to express their point of view through photography. The project not only teaches students to take quality pictures, but also uses these pictures to raise public awareness of the state of the students' environments. Critical Exposure is giving voice to dozens of teens from all across the nation.

The project was started in 2004 in Baltimore by former educators Adam Levner and Heather Rieman. Since then, the program has spread to other parts of the country, including Austin, Texas and Albuquerque, N.M. But Baltimore and D.C. are still the most active areas of the program. The project allows for teens to report the condition of public schools through their photography.

Critical Exposure has achieved much in four, short years. Students in Baltimore, used their photographs and their experiences to testify on behalf of increased public school funding by millions of dollars in not only Baltimore itself but Maryland as a whole. D.C. students also played an active role in increasing funding for DCPS. In February 2006, the City Council approved a school modernization bill, thanks, in part, to Critical Exposure.

In 2006, two of its students were featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show. One of them, Brandon Wilkins, 20, said Critical Exposure has "helped me a lot." Wilkins joined Critical Exposure during his senior year at Eastern High School in D.C. when his photography teacher recommended the program to him.

"The program taught me how to handle stuff," said Wilkins. "I learned to look at the world around me critically." While he was with the Critical Expo-



Photo by Fatimah, IDRA/Albuquerque Public School District

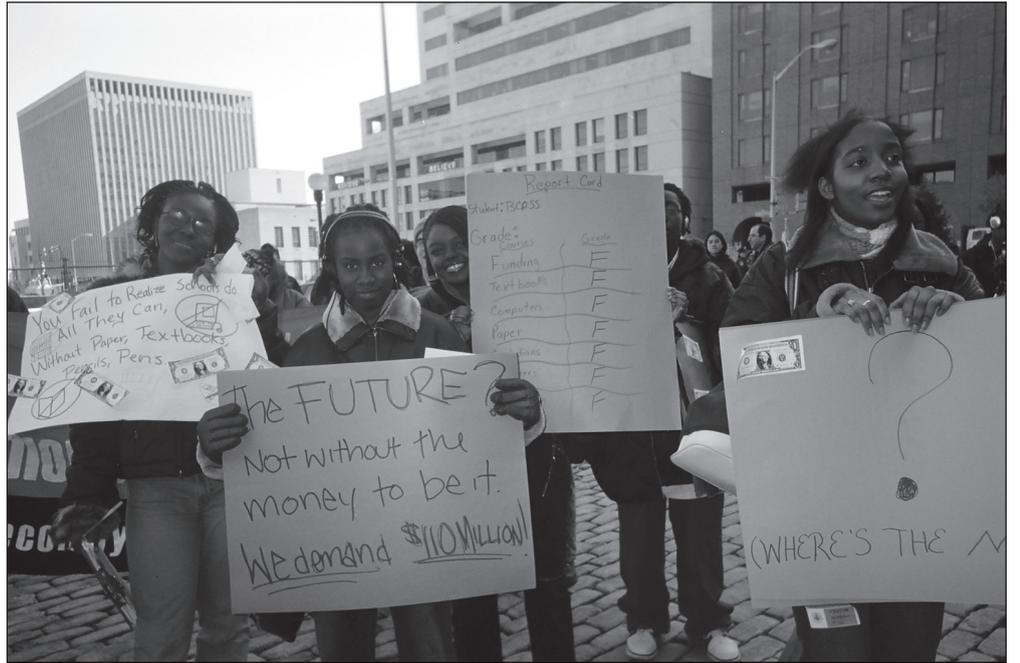


Photo by Unique Robinson, Baltimore Youth Congress

Clockwise from above, Critical Exposure participants document their school experiences: the broken fence at her school reminds Fatimah of broken promises; Baltimore students demonstrate at budget time; vending machines offer little nutritional value; gymnasium needs rehab.

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Photo by Hugh, Youth Education Alliance (D.C.)



Photo by Charlie, Austin Voices for Education and Youth

sure, he documented many of Eastern's problems.

"I was very involved in music," said Wilkins. "So I would take pictures of empty [instrument] cases or broken instruments." Wilkins told YDC that his favorite piece was of his counselor, Ms. Wilson, which is displayed on Critical Exposure's on-line gallery. The caption reads: "Ms. Wilson is dedicated and helped me a lot. We have to do the work ourselves, but guidance counselors help us stay on track."

Although Wilson himself joined his senior year, he recommends that others join as soon as possible.

"Personally, I wish I had more time," said Wilkins. Joining the program is easy. "If any individual students are interested in participating, they can contact us directly and we'll try to figure out a way for them to get connected to one of our projects," said Levner.

For more information, visit www.criticalexposure.org

Jin-Ah Kim, 18, is a senior at Thomas Jefferson HS for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Va.

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