



## **A Message to Our Students from America's Educators**

We teach to prepare our young people for their future—hopefully, for a better future. We teach to impart skills and knowledge. We nurture and support our students to help them build relationships and resilience. We teach them to dream. To think. To engage. To act. To make a difference. To lead.

And, often, our students teach us. Students have led some of the most powerful and effective movements for social change. Sixty years ago, the students who sat down at a lunch counter in a North Carolina five-and-dime store galvanized a national movement. Now students and young people are raising their voices in nationwide protests to demand an end to police brutality and for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer.

As America's public school teachers and school staff, we see you, we hear you and we stand with you. We also recognize the deep frustration and anger that people feel—both young and old—as a new generation of young African Americans watch the violence of modern-day lynchings and brutality by police. You have responded, peacefully and nonviolently, throughout the nation.

“Nonviolence is a weapon of the strong.” These words by Mahatma Gandhi are the foundation of nonviolent resistance. Martin Luther King Jr. used the lessons of Gandhi to power the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. Students and young people throughout the South stood together to wield the weapon of nonviolence and civil disobedience. Through their solidarity and persistence, they were able to challenge and overturn nearly a century of Jim Crow laws that forced Black men, women and children to live as second-class citizens. When their peaceful actions were met with extreme violence and police brutality, students and youth activists persisted. In early May of 1963, thousands of schoolchildren left their classrooms and headed to downtown Birmingham, Ala., to protest segregation. The entire nation witnessed the horrific images of those brave children as they were sprayed with fire hoses and attacked by police dogs at the direction of the city's public safety commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor. In 1965, unarmed marchers in Alabama were attacked by police and local posses with tear gas and clubs on the Edmund Pettus Bridge during an attempted march from Selma to Montgomery. Rep. John Lewis, then a young leader of SNCC (the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), was severely beaten during the march.

We are in the midst of three crises: a health crisis, an economic crisis, and a crisis of the continued failure of the American justice system, all made worse by the current president's conduct and attitudes—a president who directs the police to fire tear gas and rubber bullets at peaceful protestors so he can have a photo op in front of a church; a president who threatens to deploy military forces to quash protests; a president who tweets the refrain of a racist former Miami police chief from 1967, that “when the looting starts the shooting starts.”

Yet you persist with peaceful protests throughout our land. This right to peacefully assemble is enshrined in our Constitution. And former presidents are with you. President George W. Bush

wrote that this is a time to listen, not lecture. And President Barack Obama calls these protests a tipping point.

Of course, as you know, it is not enough. Even now, with the four officers arrested in the Floyd case, we must do more. We are confident that you will bring your power and voice to continue to raise awareness and organize. This November, your organizing—from the school board, to the statehouse, to the White House—will make sure that we elect decision-makers who will act on reform.

Racial equity is the great unfinished work of this country. You, our students, give us reason to hope. Even during some of the darkest days, young people have shown that they are willing to take a stand and fight for what is righteous and just. You are demonstrating the power of collective action. As educators, we are learning a timeless lesson from you that, together, we can change the world.

Activism is how we channel our anger to confront injustice. You are teaching us that. Your teachers are so proud of you. And the other caring adults who support your learning are inspired by you too.