

# No Transportation, No Education!

Jorel Moore

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*A firsthand account of how a campaign by the Urban Youth Collaborative preserved crucial funding for student subway passes in New York City in the face of budget cuts.*

“SAVE OUR METROCARDS!”

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**W**hen you first start going to rallies, it can be surreal. All around you, people are chanting and carrying signs. Looking at their faces, you can tell that they care.

We're all at this rally because we don't want to pay \$1,000 a year for transportation to get back and forth to our schools. My organizations – Future of Tomorrow, a youth organization that brings together youth from neighboring high schools, and the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), a citywide coalition made up of five organizations (see sidebar on page 7) – are here to do what we do best: give the youth a voice.

## **How UYC Works**

Sometimes people don't believe me when I say I'm going to a meeting. Maybe it's because I'm only seventeen and not a lot of seventeen-year-olds go to meetings.

But I do go to meetings – *lots* of them. At UYC, our five organizations come together to develop and lead – and hopefully win! – campaigns that affect students from all over New York City. To make change on a citywide level – especially in a city as big as New York – we need to join forces to develop the power we need to be able to influence decisions made about our schools that impact *us*. Lately, it seems that people like to refer to students as “consumers.” Well, we don't like that term (Schools are not a business! We are not customers!), but we do believe that because we are the ones actually *in* the schools that we need to have a big part in the decisions made *about* our schools. To build the power we need and convince the people who make decisions to listen to us, we organize.

That means more than just holding a protest rally. It means bringing people together who are impacted by an issue, doing research to understand the issue better and how it can be solved, creating demands, and making a campaign plan about how we are going to win what we want. It means

*Jorel Moore is a youth leader in Future of Tomorrow and the Urban Youth Collaborative.*

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testifying at city council meetings, writing blog posts, and talking to the media.<sup>1</sup>

UYC was created in 2005, and we already have some big victories under our belt. One is the creation of Student Success Centers (SSCs), which you can read about in Lori Chajet’s article in this issue. We have played a big part in fighting school budget cuts over the years (this is always a big fight, and we work closely with our allies on that). Just last December, years of hard work paid off when the New York City Council passed a law we fought for that will force the New York City Department of Education and New York Police Department to share data with the public about student arrests, suspensions, and expulsions by race, age, gender, English language learner status, and special education status.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of UYC’s varied tactics over its different campaigns are illustrated at the end of this article in the Perspectives sidebar, which includes testimony at a city council meeting by Robert Moore and a post on the education blog EdVox by Jaritza Geigel. For more about the use of tactics involving new media in youth organizing, see the article by Charles A. McDonald, Jaritza Geigel, and Fred Pinguel in this issue of *VUE*.

### ***The Save Our MetroCard Campaign***

But right now I want to walk you through a campaign that we did last year. First you need to know a little bit about New York. First off, not many students walk to school. Of my friends, only maybe five of them walk to school. Lots of students go to schools outside of their neighborhoods. Well, in New York the way everybody gets around is the subway.<sup>2</sup> I know that students who live far from their school in rural areas get picked up by yellow school buses. Here in New York we get free or reduced-price MetroCards (MetroCards are passes for the subway).

Before last year I had never really thought about how we get our MetroCards (just like kids in the suburbs probably don’t think about how the bus that picks them up is paid for). Last year I learned more than I ever wanted to know about student MetroCards and who pays for them. In December 2009, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA – they run the subway and bus system) announced that because they were in a severe budget crunch, they would be “phasing out student MetroCards.” The MTA has a board, and the board said that they would be holding hearings about cutting student MetroCards and having a final vote in April. UYC had less than three and a half months to influence their decision.

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<sup>2</sup> According to a *New York Daily News* article, “If approved, the measure [eliminating student MetroCards] will affect nearly 585,000 school-age kids but will hit extra hard the more than 300,000 who the Department of City Planning says live in poverty. Ninety percent of them are Black, Latino and Asian” (Ruiz 2010).

## About UYC

Our mission statement sums up what we're all about:

The Urban Youth Collaborative brings New York City youth together to fight for change through local and citywide organizing strategies. We strive for social and economic justice throughout our communities – overcoming obstacles to make sure youth voices are heard and youth empowerment is emphasized. We, as a coalition, are committed to building a strong youth voice that can ensure our high schools prepare students to go to college, earn a living wage, and work for justice in society.

Five organizations make up UYC. Each of these “core groups” works on local campaigns to improve education and the community overall.

- Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) is a multi-generational organization of low-income South Asian immigrants in New York City. DRUM's YouthPower! Group has led a range of campaigns

around immigrant students' rights.

- Future of Tomorrow (FOT) of the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation was founded in 2005 and organizes students for school reform at the Franklin K. Lane campus. In less than three years, FOT has won a Student Success Center, led a successful campaign to have the school's cafeteria redesigned, and inserted and legitimized youth voice on the Lane campus.
- Make the Road New York (MTRNY) has been organizing students in Brooklyn and Queens and, among other things, has won a Student Success Center for the Bushwick Campus High School and has created a small, autonomous high school with a social justice theme. MTRNY's Youth Power Project has organized thousands of students in support of the DREAM Act and has worked with a number of

schools to implement non-punitive approaches to safety.

- Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition brings together students in the Kingsbridge neighborhood of the Bronx. SBU has secured improvements in school safety policies and facility repairs and has successfully inserted student voice at several local high schools. SBU also worked to create a small high school, the Leadership Institute, which houses a Student Success Center.
- Youth on the Move (YOM) was launched in 2004. YOM has worked with Mothers on the Move to create green jobs in the South Bronx and close down a juvenile detention center in the neighborhood.

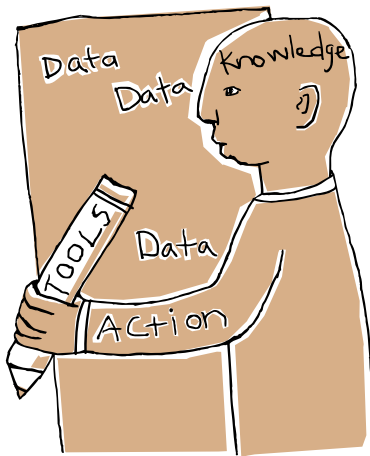
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*For more information on the Urban Youth Collaborative, see <[www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org](http://www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org)>.*

impact would this have on students? (A normal subway ride costs \$2.25 one way. That would mean students' families would have to come up with \$900 to \$1,000 per year per child they had in school!) We started to talk about the issue as a matter of fairness and how it would affect low-income families dramatically and have a much worse impact on low-income students.

We did research and learned that student MetroCards have been paid for by the city and state for about sixty

years. Research in organizing involves more than the research you might do for a school paper. It also involves talking to people who have been working on the issue for a while. In the MetroCard campaign, we talked to a political party called the Working Family Party that advocates for better public transit. We started out by meeting with them, and they gave us some history about the funding for student MetroCards. The Working Families Party put us in



touch with the Straphangers, a mass transit advocacy organization. After meeting with both of those groups we understood the history of the issue. In 1995, Mayor Giuliani said the city's share of the funding for student MetroCards was too big a burden. He forced the MTA to agree to a memorandum of understanding that stated the funding for student fares would be shared by the city, state, and MTA (each paying \$45 million to get to the \$135 million/year the MTA said it costs).

We decided we needed to learn more about the MTA and how it is funded, so we met with MTA representatives who explained the MTA budget to us. They kept saying that the burden of paying for student MetroCards should not be their responsibility and that the state and the city should pay for them.

## ***The Role of Adults***

This is probably a good time to tell you about the role of adult supporters (like the Community Organizing & Engagement staff at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, or AISR) in youth organizing. Mainly their job is to give us information so we can make good strategic decisions – they help us understand the issue we are working on. AISR staff give UYC different kinds of support, such as data analysis, research on educational reform, leadership training, and help with strategy development.

One of AISR's UYC support staff was the one who let us know that we should talk to the MTA, Working Families Party, and Straphangers. But what we *do* with that information is up to us – the youth. You could say that the adult supporters give us information and guidance, but the youth make the decisions about what to work on and what tactics we will use.

One example from the MetroCard campaign is that the support staff did an analysis of how many students are living in poverty in New York City and how many of those students depend on free student MetroCards to get to school. That helped us make the argument that cutting the cards would impact nearly 600,000 students, and that their families would have to choose between things like getting their children to school or paying rent. Like we say at UYC rallies, "That ain't right."

## ***Campaign Success***

After gathering the research, UYC leaders spoke about the MetroCard issue at our monthly Student Union meeting in November.<sup>3</sup> The meeting was attended

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<sup>3</sup> The Student Union was created by UYC as a broad outreach effort – beyond the core membership of UYC – enabling students to take action to improve their schools. It includes students from across the city attending more than two dozen schools.

by about 150 students from all over the city. At the meeting it was decided that we needed to run a campaign to save the MetroCards. Because of the three-way responsibility, the targets of our campaign were the city (Mayor Michael Bloomberg), state (Governor David Paterson), and MTA (Chairman of the MTA Board Jay Walder).

At the meeting, UYC core organizations and UYC Student Union members decided to form a coalition named Students for Transportation Justice (STJ) to work on this issue. Together we developed a plan that included many different actions demanding MetroCards for students. UYC/STJ held rallies outside of the MTA offices where we had members of the Transit Workers Union, city council members (including Speaker Christine Quinn), and student leaders speak. We mailed letters to the governor, mayor, and chairman of the MTA requesting a meeting with students to hear how these cuts would affect them and their families. After no response, we hand delivered the letters personally to the mayor's office and to the chairman at an MTA meeting.

We held daily protests at the subway station Mayor Bloomberg uses to ride the train to work. We rallied outside of Governor Paterson's office in Manhattan. We had a sit-down meeting with Jeff Kay (at the time, he was the director of the office of operations for the city). We mobilized a couple of hundred students to attend the public hearings the MTA held in all the boroughs. At the Manhattan hearing, as a result of not getting a response to our letter, UYC/STJ leaders demanded a response from the chairman in front of the packed auditorium, where he agreed to a meeting.

On March 17, UYC/STJ leaders became the only group that we know of to ever have a sit-down negotiation meeting with the chairman of the MTA. At this meeting, we were able to persuade him to not cut the MetroCards (as was planned) until after the state and city budgets came out.

We also took the fight to the state capitol in Albany. We mobilized about fifty students and parents to go to Albany and speak with twenty-four state assembly members and senators about saving the MetroCards. We also held a rally in Albany. Finally, On June 11, UYC/STJ coordinated a school walk-out of more than 1,000 public school students to protest their MetroCards

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being cut out of the budget. The decision to walk out of school was not an easy one. But we had gone through all of the appropriate steps: meetings with policy-makers and elected officials, testifying at hearings, holding rallies, building alliances, and using the media to tell our story. The deadline for the city budget was looming, and we still had no commitment to fund student MetroCards. Instead, the MTA, city, and state continued to shift the blame. In an attempt to increase the pressure, we planned and executed the walkout. We had learned from past successful youth organizing efforts that sometimes civil disobedience is necessary when all else fails. UYC leaders believed that



time was running out and that more “drastic” action was needed.

The day of the walkout, a rally was held at City Hall Park where student leaders, Transit Workers Union members, labor leaders, professors, and city council members all spoke in support of the students. We then led about 1,000 students on a march across the Brooklyn Bridge to MTA offices in Brooklyn. The walkout and rally were covered by all the major media sources in the city, as well as the Associated Press (reaching as far as Los Angeles), and made the front page of *Yahoo! News*. NY 1’s half-hour show *The Call* was dedicated to the MetroCard issue and the walkout.

Six days after UYC’s walkout, the state, city, and the MTA announced a deal to save student MetroCards, which included sharing the burden of the cost among the three entities. Three days after the deal was announced, UYC held a victory press conference where assembly member Richard Brodsky, the Transit Workers Union, and city council members Robert Jackson and Letitia James credited UYC’s campaign and the leadership of students with forcing the student MetroCard deal. As City

Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Transportation Committee Chair James Vacca said in a joint statement on June 20: “This victory belongs to the thousands of young people and advocates who spent hours petitioning, rallying, and testifying before the MTA Board to save student MetroCards.” Even the MTA acknowledged that it was organized students who pushed the MTA, city, and state to find a way to save student MetroCards. The MTA’s statement of June 20 read:

We heard loud and clear at our public hearings, in meetings with student leaders, and in protests around the city that charging students would have a life-changing impact on the ability of New Yorkers to receive a quality education.

### ***Youth as Leaders***

During the campaign, students who had been shy about speaking in class ended up emceed rallies of hundreds of students. I had never talked to the media before, but suddenly I was seeing myself on TV and in the newspaper. Youth who previously hadn’t even known who their City Council representatives were, were meeting with them and speaking out about what we needed. That’s one thing I love about youth organizing – students get to take on all kinds of leadership roles. Personally, I emceed rallies, spoke at press conferences, and met with lots of elected officials as part of this campaign. Many of my peers also took on leadership roles for the first time.

Sometimes people ask me why I do this work. I guess I’d say that youth organizing fits me. I’ve always wanted to make change in the world, and through organizing I do make change. As a Black male, I represent one of the groups most affected by education

policies, including this decision to cut student MetroCards. So I feel like I have a big part to play in changing them.

So, yeah, I go to meetings. I go to meetings because in the youth organizing work I do I feel powerful. The youth are in charge: we are deciding what our strategy is, planning campaigns, and making our voices heard. It's a great feeling, and something I wouldn't trade.

UYC is not done – we have a long way to go to improve our schools. But at least now we can get to school.

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#### References

Ruiz, A. 2010. "Angry High School Students Put MTA to Test on Free MetroCards, Chairman Walder Agrees to Hearing," *New York Daily News* (March 7), <[www.nydailynews.com/ny\\_local/2010/03/07/2010-03-07\\_students\\_put\\_mta\\_to\\_test\\_on\\_free\\_cards.html#ixzzopjLWYGHd](http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/2010/03/07/2010-03-07_students_put_mta_to_test_on_free_cards.html#ixzzopjLWYGHd)>.

## PERSPECTIVES:

### UYC Leaders in Action on Two Campaigns: Saving MetroCards and the Student Safety Act

*Jaritza Geigel is a youth leader at Make the Road New York and the Urban Youth Collaborative. The following is adapted from a post she wrote on EdVox.org about the MetroCard campaign.*

I am proud to be one of the dozens of youth leaders in the Urban Youth Collaborative who planned last Friday's walkout. Thank you to the city council members who supported us in this endeavor and to the adults at the Urban Youth Collaborative and the Annenberg Institute who, along with other allies, ensured our safety. By showing their support, they show that they care about our education and are not interested in playing with students' futures.

Mayor Bloomberg said on his radio show that we should have been targeting our action and demands at the state and suggested that we were misinformed about who is responsible for funding student MetroCards. We students are fully aware of who provides funding for our MetroCards and organized ourselves to say that we will no longer continue to be a part of any political game.

Since 1994, the city and state have each paid \$45 million for student MetroCards, with the MTA paying the rest. Since then, the city and the state have kept that figure at \$45 million. Over the years the cost has gone up, and the MTA can no longer fund the program because of its own deficit. Mayor Bloomberg says he has not cut student MetroCards in his budget. But because the MTA will no longer pay, the city needs to increase its share – not to mention that they haven't raised funding one dollar since 1994.

Now, while politicians play their political game of pointing fingers, the students of New York City decided that it was time to take matters into our own hands. We fought for what is rightfully ours: transportation to get to school. About 600,000 students use MetroCards to get to school. Students that come from large families in poor and working-class communities cannot afford to pay \$1,000 per year per child. We talk about how education is a right, and yet education has continued to be placed on the back burner,

and students that are Black, Brown, Latino and other ethnic backgrounds are taking it the hardest.

UYC began by focusing on the MTA: we held rallies, mobilized for all of the MTA hearings, and ultimately got a meeting with Jay Walder, the chairman of the MTA. Then, as students began to understand more about this issue, our next target was the senate and assembly. The president of the senate, Senator John Sampson, proposed \$65 million for student MetroCards. New York City students thanked him and his fellow senators and urged them to vote no on a state budget with less than \$65 million for MetroCards. We also met with many assembly members and urged them to raise their proposed allocation from \$35 million (less than in 1994!!) to \$65 million. Upset that our "education" mayor had not publicly worked on this issue and agreed to share the cost that the city, state, and MTA agreed to before, the students thought it was about time he was in the hot seat. Shame

*(continued on page 12)*

**UYC Leaders in Action on Two Campaigns:  
Saving MetroCards and the Student Safety Act** *(continued from page 11)*

on our “education” mayor who relies on cuts as a solution.

New York City students – the future voters of this city – are not playing around anymore. We are done having Mayor Bloomberg close down schools, which only increases overcrowding; we are done having funds removed overnight from our schools; we are done seeing valuable teachers laid off; we are done being treated like criminals; and we will not tolerate the mayor’s silence on this issue. New York City students are becoming more proactive everyday, and the numbers of students involved is rising every day. It is time that the state, the MTA, and mayor Bloomberg stop playing their political game and fund student MetroCards. The fight isn’t over, and we will not be silenced or intimidated into submission. This is only the beginning; leaders are being born and growing everyday, and soon New York City will see just what we are capable of and how organized we can be.

*Robert Moore is a youth leader at Make the Road New York. The following is the testimony he gave before the New York City Council in support of the passage of the Student Safety Act, Int. No. 442, part of another initiative that UYC worked on successfully.*

Hello. My name is Robert Moore. I am eighteen years old and a youth leader with Make the Road New York.

Last June, I graduated from high school. I now attend the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Since I was a tenth-grader in public high school, I have worked with other students at Make the Road New York and the Urban Youth Collaborative to pass the Student Safety Act. I and the other students here are grateful to council members for helping to get us to the point of having this hearing today, and to get the bill passed this year.

There are very good reasons that all of us have worked so hard to get the Student Safety Act passed. This act is our first stepping stone in creating school safety policies that treat youth with the respect that we deserve. The act will require regular reporting of data on school discipline and police activity in schools. When we have this data, it will open the door to real discussions about whether students in our city, especially students in low-income communities of color, are being kept safe by current policies or being unfairly targeted by them.

I think everyone in our city would agree that we want our schools to be safe, nurturing, and respectful places for all students. Having information on who gets disciplined, for what reasons, and how they get disciplined, will only help us move further in that direction. No student should risk suspension for minor things like carrying a cell phone or being late to class. No student should be put in handcuffs because they are having a bad day and talk back to a teacher. I and many of my classmates have seen things like this happen. I agree that schools need rules to keep students safe. They also need to have appropriate and supportive responses for issues that come up with students every day. Many Black and Brown youth from low-income communities have plenty of challenges already. We shouldn’t be criminalized for behavior that other students get comforted or counseled for.

I look forward to seeing the Student Safety Act passed this year and to continuing to work with the city and with other youth to make sure that all students have a chance to succeed. Thank you.

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*For more on school safety issues, see the article by Nijmie Dzurinko, Johonna McCants, and Jonathan Stith in this issue of VUE.*