

## Dear Mayor: Mikva Challenge Program Gets High Schoolers Talking To Chicago's Next Mayor

By Will Guzzardi – January 27, 2011



Shawn Shaw watches his back now on his walk to and from Tilden Career Community Academy, the massive South Side high school that backs onto a Norfolk Southern rail depot in Chicago's New City neighborhood. The 18-year-old student got jumped on this walk once by a handful of gang members -- now, it's hard for him to feel safe.

And he wants the city's next mayor to hear about it.

"My issue for the new mayor to focus on in the first 100 days is unsafe communities," he says in a recorded video message for whoever wins the contentious mayoral race. "This so-called 'code of silence' we have is killing off our youth, and we're the innocent ones getting hurt."

Shawn is one of hundreds of city high schoolers -- from schools rich and poor, in neighborhoods affluent and afflicted -- that have sent messages to the future mayor advocating for an issue that matters to them. Public safety, after-school programs, jobs, education reform, and sexual health have all proven popular subjects.

"These youth have a lot of experience, a lot of expertise, and nobody taps into it," said Jelani McEwen, a senior program director at the civic advocacy nonprofit Mikva Challenge.

McEwen created the [Dear Mayor](#) project, which solicited the testimonials from high schoolers, as part of Mikva's attempt to get students engaged in the upcoming city elections. The aim of the

nonprofit is to help low-income youth in Chicago to connect with and become actors in the city's political process, and to make their voices heard.

Dear Mayor makes that message very literal. The project's website is a collection of videos, short letters, and even a handful of poems highlighting an issue that hits home for each student who submits. McEwen says he hatched the idea for the program at a meeting on how to use new media to engage students for community activism, citing the examples of Barack Obama's presidential campaign and the website [cureviolence.org](http://cureviolence.org).

McEwen said his colleagues were skeptical of the notion at first, but he put together a few video clips, bought the domain, made a mock-up of the site, and no one has looked back since.

So far, he's been getting the content mostly by reaching out to schools where Mikva has existing programs, but "the hope is that people will start submitting directly," McEwen said. Already, the site has received several submissions from St. Gregory, a Catholic school that has no ties to Mikva. And "Lake View High School is thinking about doing it as a public service project for the whole school," McEwen said, although he expressed some half-joking concerns about the site's bandwidth if the school's 1,350 students all start uploading videos at once.

Dear Mayor isn't Mikva's only project leading up to the February 22 election -- far from it, in fact. The organization was founded in 1997 (as a tribute to longtime Judge and Congressman Abner Mikva and his wife Zoe), and McEwen himself was one of its early participants, traveling to Iowa with the program to participate in the Bush-Gore presidential caucuses.

The organization now runs a student activism program, which galvanizes youth at underserved high schools to advocate for specific issues and create policy recommendations for local officials. Over 220 students attended a Youth Convention last month; to read their eleven-point platform, [click here](#).

It gained citywide prominence last week for hosting a forum for the major mayoral candidates, in which high school students got to grill the hopefuls on their issues. The forum was [the first televised debate in the mayor's race](#), and the students pressed hard and were [lauded in city media](#).

There's also an Electoral Participation program, which, among other things, signs up thousands of students to learn about the process by serving as election judges at polling places around the city. And in five especially high-need schools, Mikva runs Peace and Leadership Councils, where students research issues in their schools and make recommendations to principals and other educators on how to fix their school.

Tilden Career Community Academy is one of the five schools with a PLC program, and it's here that Shawn Shaw first crossed paths with Mikva Challenge. At a weekly meeting of the program last Friday afternoon, instructor Ayeshia Johnson was leading the class in a brainstorming exercise about the causes and effects of disruptive students. While his classmates were debating whether teen pregnancy was a cause or a result of bad behavior, Shawn and Jerry Hardy spoke about their school and the program.

"It gives us a lot of opportunities to get out there, get involved in politics," Jerry said.  
"Ultimately, that's the best thing that politicians can hear, is the word straight from our mouths."

Shawn joined in: "I honestly wish people had thought of this a longer time ago, so we could have what we want and what we need here at school."

He went on to describe the vocational programs at Tilden. Nominally a "career academy," the school just two years ago had an automotive program, a course in computer technology, all manner of different classes. Now, Shawn said, "our school only has culinary, because our budget got cut short." Jerry nodded his approval: he's a computer science buff, so the cutback was particularly hard for him.

Ayeshia Johnson, known to the staff as "AJ," believes the advocacy skills the students learn through Mikva will enable them to make the changes they want to see in their schools and communities. "I think Shawn is going to be an alderman some day," she confided.

For now, he and his fellow students will make their voice heard online, in ever-larger and more convincing numbers. He can only hope it will be loud enough.

"I can't sleep at night, wondering what's going to happen to my brother, my family," Shawn said.  
"There's so much violence in the world."

To view more Dear Mayor letters, or to submit (students only!), [click here](#). For more on the Mikva Challenge, and how to donate, visit their homepage [here](#).