

The Mikva Challenge

What is the Mikva Challenge?

The Mikva Challenge is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that gets Chicago high school students involved with politics. We do this by putting young people at the center of the political process. They are active participants on political campaigns, serve as election judges, work on issues in their schools and communities, and advise decision makers on how to make Chicago a better place for young people.

Since 2000, Mikva Challenge programs have helped over 20,000 students get involved in elections, activism or policymaking. Through the Mikva process, young people connect with peers, adults and political issues, strategize about how to win their issue or campaign and take action to become real political participants. These youth tell us that they feel they have a “voice” now and report having a greater desire to vote, campaign, organize, lobby, and even run for office. Perhaps most importantly, these Mikva youth now believe that Chicago is their city and that they have the power, knowledge and skills to make it a more just and equitable place – both now and in the future.



Students working on the Presidential campaign in 2008.

In 2008-2009...

- 84 students had internships in the offices of elected officials
- 2610 hours were spent on campaign work
- 2539 students served as Judges of Election
- 48 Youth Activism Projects were completed
- 1600 students participated in public speaking competitions
- 45 students served as youth policymakers for the City of Chicago

The mission of the Mikva Challenge is to develop the next generation of civic leaders, activists, and policy makers by getting young people involved in politics NOW!

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Our Programs

In the 2008-2009 school year, Mikva Challenge programs engaged over 4,800 students in partnership with 100 teachers and school counselors from 75 Chicago-area high schools. We ran a highly successful summer program this year, and are excited to begin the 2009-2010 school year. We will be in more schools, developing more students to become active leaders in their communities and schools, and training more civics teachers in the tools necessary to provide an active, engaged learning environments for students. Our Activism and Electoral Participation programs will focus on the Gubernatorial and Senatorial primary elections, and our Youth Policymaking program will develop strategies to continue lobbying on the issues they worked on this summer.



Our founders, Abner and Zoe Mikva



A Mikva Youth talking to Arne Duncan, former CEO of Chicago Public Schools and current Secretary of Education.

Youth Policymaking

At Mikva, we believe that youth deserve a place at the table of city and school leaders who make public policy that significantly affects Chicago youth.

In the **Peace and Leadership Councils** (currently at 6 Chicago High Schools) students work with Mikva staff to research issues in their schools, create recommendations for school change, and serve as advisory councils to their principals and school administrators.

City Youth Councils are a group of students from across the city who work together to research and develop solutions to city problems, and make recommendations to city officials on issues that affect youth. **The Youth Safety Council** focuses on ways to make Chicago communities and schools safer. **The Teen Health Council** works on health issues that range from nutrition to mental and sexual health. **The Education Council** is composed of 15 youth from across the city and advises the CEO of Chicago Public Schools.

Classroom Activism

Through partnerships with teachers, Mikva trains youth in the skills they need to be activists inside and outside of the classroom.

In **Issues to Action**, students identify issues in their schools and communities and advocate for policy change. Teachers run this program as part of a class or as an after school club.

The Democracy in Action Course, which will be in over 20 high schools in 2009-2010, is a civics/government course in which students learn civics by doing civics. The course focuses on building literacy and critical thinking skills in students in the context of civics and civic action. The course culminates with a collective class project in which students synthesize their skills and work cooperatively to select a single issue and create an action plan to effect positive change.



Brooks College Prep students rallying to get funding for their school.

Electoral Participation

Hands-on campaign work is the core of Mikva's Elections programs.

Elections in Action engages youth in campaign work, voter registration and school-wide mock elections. Launched each year with a student-run candidate forum, this project transforms students' attitudes toward the political process and supports their understanding of campaign work and electoral politics.

Through the **Student Judge Project**, high school juniors and seniors from across Chicago learn about the voting process by serving as election judges and helping to run an actual polling place on Election Day.

The **Summer Government and Leadership Institute** gives teens the opportunity to take their civic leadership skills to the next level by interning in the offices of state, local and federal elected officials and creating a Civic Action Project on a challenging current issue.



A student serving as a judge of election in November, 2008.

What are people saying about Mikva?

From a Teacher's Perspective:

I began working with Mikva Challenge five years ago and I am convinced that no other organization has had such an impact on my teaching and my students. Participating in Issues to Action transformed my classroom into a place where the students' interests and concerns were driving their learning. The professional development Mikva Challenge provided enabled me to prioritize students' voices in my classroom. Similarly, my students were really charged by participating in the Youth Conference and the Civics Fair. This increased student engagement and motivated me to find more opportunities for my students to become active with Mikva, so I was honored to collaborate on the Democracy in Action curriculum and participate in the elections program. I value civic participation and community action, but my school of education did not prepare me to train students to actively engage in our democracy. Mikva Challenge has made me a better teacher and created countless opportunities for my students as election judges, campaigners, and activists.

—Teacher from Social Justice High School, 2009

From Students' Perspectives:

Mikva has taught me the principles of being a leader. They've taught me to be the change I want to see.

-Orr Academy student, 2009

I feel like I am more powerful now that I am politically active, because America's future is practically in the palm of my hands. I've never felt like I had a say in politics until now.

-Kelly High School student, 2007

I learned that I have the potential to make a positive change in the future.

-Amundsen High School student, 2008



Want to get involved?



There are a variety of ways for teachers, students, and others to get involved in Mikva Challenge. Please contact us at 312-863-6340 or at info@mikvachallenge.org for more information!

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