

“If you do not love. If you do not love the people, sooner or later, you will betray them.” These are the words of the late Mayor of Jackson, MS, Chokwe Lumumba. If you don’t love the people, sooner or later, you will betray them.

For 18 years, the Philadelphia Student Union has been organizing students to fight for a high quality education system in Philadelphia for all students, regardless of their class, race, gender, or immigration status. As executive director, I've had the opportunity to work with some of the most amazing young people this city has ever produced. I've also had the opportunity to hear directly from students how the school closures, budget cuts and staff layoffs have negatively impacted their education. Help them struggle to understand why this happening to them. And watch them as they refuse to hide the pain that comes with the realization that the adults elected and sworn to protect them and provide for them, have instead betrayed them. A betrayal that allows buildings labeled “school” to continue to be under-resourced, under-staffed and over-policed. Buildings where the only lessons being taught to the students of Philadelphia is that their lives don’t matter. Their futures, don’t matter.

A betrayal of the citizens of this city that stand by and watch as a new Philadelphia is being molded and shaped as we speak. A Philadelphia that doesn’t include all of us. Under the pretext of a “budget crisis” the city has allowed for schools to be shut down and the remaining ones to function as funnels into the prison system. A pretext that allows the mayor to try and generate income by selling public services private companies while the working poor of this city continue to get the short end of the stick. And yet, while they mayor, the governor, city and state officials continue to spin stories of how they can’t find funding for public education and worker’s pensions, they can find money to pay for non-mandatory deportation requests known as ICE holds. ICE holds subsidized by the tax payers of Philadelphia whom wonder why their neighborhood schools lack the resources they need to be successful. Why their children lack the staff needed to prepare them for college, or to be there and potentially save their lives when emergencies strike, like the one that claimed the life of little Laporshia Massey earlier this year. The city of Philadelphia is refusing to fund public education and is instead, spending resources on deporting individuals and destroying families. We demand that funds used to place individuals in the deportation process be spent on public education.

For many of our young people, the school-to-prison pipeline is a very real thing. It is the systematic criminalization of young people inside of their schools as a result of an over-reliance on police personnel to deal with discipline issues in the building. The city’s over-reliance on city police to act as immigration officers, makes the risk of criminalization for a non-citizen student and overwhelming experience. A young person's mistakes, if they are non-citizens, can result in them being deported with little to no chance that they will ever see their families again. Is this is the type of system that will foster the dreams and hopes of the young people in Philadelphia? Is this how the city dubbed the “City of Brotherly Love” shows love toward it’s young people? I don't think so.

Mayor Nutter, Council members, if you continue these ICE holds, you will be betraying the trust of the people of Philadelphia, the trust that was placed in you when you were elected to these offices. When the people voted for you, they were saying that they trusted you to provide a high-quality education to every young person, they trusted you to ensure that the police were going to protect and serve them, not assault them as they did young Darren Manning. They trusted you to create a city that everyone could call home. And so far, we are still waiting for that trust to be realized into actual change.

The people that are given ICE holds are the family members of the students of Philadelphia. And some of them are students themselves. We love our city. We love the people. And that’s why the Philadelphia Student Union stands with the Philadelphia Family Unity Network to demand an end to ICE holds in Philadelphia.

Hiram Rivera; Executive Director of the Philadelphia Student Union