

THE BELL: Hearts & Minds

Episode 6 – Testimony

Taylor McGraw: Hey listeners, I'm Taylor McGraw, editor of The Bell, a platform that amplifies the voices of New York City students in the conversation about education and empowers them to lead the fight for their futures. This is the final episode of Hearts & Minds, our first podcast season, which explores school segregation through the voices of those most impacted by it – students.

Before we start, I want to thank you for being a part of this journey, for sharing the show with your friends and coworkers. Thank you for your encouragement, your reviews and feedback. And thank you in advance for taking the action step that I'm going to outline at the end of the episode.

On a rainy Tuesday evening last month in Harlem at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, high school students from across New York City took the stage one by one and did something brave. They testified about their education.

Jederick: A memory that's on my mind is the bullet of December 20th. I sit in AP Biology and just as class is about to wrap up, a bullet fires into the room, slamming its presence into the ceiling. The air was explosive. You could taste the gunpowder in the room. Shattered glass lands in my hoodie. Curled up on the floor, I know that that was no sign. It was a reminder. A reminder of the space I occupy. A reminder that life is too short. A reminder that I'm more likely to get a prison sentence than a college degree.

Taylor: This is Jederick. He's a senior who goes to a high school in Canarsie on the eastern edge of Brooklyn. Jederick and the rest of the students who performed that night are part of a student-led group The Bell helps facilitate called Teens Take Charge. They spoke in front of a diverse crowd of more than 200 people, including some politicians.

Jederick: Am I even worth the time of some politician? Am I even going to be able to survive this public system derived from red lines meant to separate. True separation is the conversation I had with my mother the day I submitted my high school application. She told me education is the same anywhere you go. Man, how wrong could she be?

Taylor: I want to go back in history for a minute. August 1964. The Democratic National Convention. Atlantic City. President Lyndon Johnson is the party's nominee. He had just signed the landmark Civil Rights Act into law, but that act as you might recall did not mention voting rights. In Mississippi, my home state, just 7% percent of eligible black citizens were registered to vote. White segregationists were using violence and intimidation to keep them away from the polls.

So, after months of grassroots organizing, an integrated group called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party comes to the convention in Atlantic City hoping to unseat the state's all-white delegation.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (clip): The seating of the delegation from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party has prolific and moral significance far beyond the borders of Mississippi.

Taylor: Martin Luther King, Jr. and other representatives testify to the credentials committee on behalf of the MFDP, but the most powerful testimony comes from the woman who coined the phrase, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired," a sharecropper from the Mississippi Delta named Fannie Lou Hamer.

Fannie Lou Hamer: Mr. Chairman and the credentials committee. It was the 31st of August in 1962 that 18 of us traveled 26 miles to the county court house in Sunflower County to try to register to become first class citizens. We were met in Sunflower by policemen...

Bob Moses: The president Lyndon Johnson, he's not afraid of Martin Luther King's testimony. He's afraid of Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony. And so he decides that the country should not see her testify live.

Taylor: Johnson fears a southern split in the party over voting rights. So he calls an impromptu press conference, forcing the networks to cut away from Hamer. Johnson has nothing to announce. It's simply a diversion. By the time the press conference ends, so has Hamer's testimony. But the plan backfires. The networks show reruns of Hamer's testimony that night in prime time.

Hamer: I was carried to the county jail and put in the booking room...

Moses: She had Mississippi in her bones. Martin Luther King or the SNCC secretaries, they couldn't do what Fannie Lou Hamer did. They couldn't be a sharecropper and express what it meant. And that's what Fannie Lou Hamer did.

Hamer: It wasn't long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a state highway patrolman, and he said we going to make you wish you was dead.

Taylor: The next year, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. I bring up Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony because it illustrates an important truth: the testimony most threatening to people in power comes from those closest to injustice.

So in this episode, I'm going to play ten more clips of testimony from the Schomburg Center event last month. These are Teens Take Charge members who experience educational segregation and inequity every single day.

We'll start with a few voices you might recognize: Hebh from Episode 5 followed by Nelson and Whitney from Episode 3. You can see all of the students' names and schools in the show notes.

Hebh: See here's the thing. After being Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, woman – you just want to learn in a place that acknowledges right from wrong. Acknowledges that the school-to-prison pipeline is more alive than ever. That life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is more de jure than de facto. That equality is just a pretty word that politicians throw around for applause. Acknowledges that slavery never went away, and that Charlottesville wasn't a demonstration of freedoms but a demonstration of hate. Acknowledges that the state doesn't consider you a person until you're able to be an interest group. Acknowledges that our country was never discovered. Acknowledges that in fact our country isn't even our country. I want to learn in a place that's cognizant that we are more segregated than we were 50 years ago and that New York City has it the worst.

I walked into a teacher's classroom one day, asking to acknowledge these issues. He looked at me blankly, angrily, painfully, his eyes filled with a blanket of disgust at the idea of a conversation. I came out in tears, not at the intensity of your words, but at the naive idea that change is something that can be asked for.

You know what's funny: My very first college class was a professor explaining power to me. Person A leads to influencing Person B in changing the decision to get an outcome. Is Person A white parents? The state? Our council members? Is their vested power doing something to make us think we deserve less than a sound basic education. Is the result injustice? Person A has money, Person B does not. Person A has influence, Person B does not. Person A is the president, Person B is not. Person A doesn't care, Person B suffers the consequences. What if Person A was us and Person B was them? Person A was a student and Person B the DOE? Person A our teachers, Person B the politicians. Person A is an idea, Person B the implementation. Person A the changemaker and Person B reacting to the change. What if Person A thought it never had power, but now Person A realizes that was Person B's plan all along? [Applause]

Nelson (performing spoken word duet with Whitney): We must base our actions in history.

Whitney: We must take the “Ruby bridge” away from segregation to the highway of equal education.

Nelson: Our movements must be adaptations because below are rapid rivers that seep through the cracks, damaging our integration as kids from the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens.

Whitney: Are in different classifications as we are living in a hierarchy of education when in American society, the wealthy are on top.

Nelson and Whitney: And we’re feeling like a skipped over bus stop.

Nelson: Wondering when the inequality will stop. When we will be fine, as Little Rock Nine didn’t break through barriers for us to be packed up in schools like assembly lines.

Whitney: Confined by standardized test scores and deadlines, redefined by our SATs and GPAs. Meanwhile our authenticity is going MIA.

Nelson and Whitney: What does the system have to say about my future anyway?

Nelson: We’re tired of being underwater. We’re calling for a search and rescue. We no longer want to be ignored like sidewalk residue. It’s not just me.

Nelson and Whitney: Or just a few.

Whitney: There’s many who need saving or something new. We’re tired of seeing rock bottom. We want a better view.

Nelson: Because it’s the day after tomorrow, and my time already seems borrowed. And I’m feeling washed up.

Nelson and Whitney: Drowned like a refugee. [Applause]

Marquies: I attend the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice located in downtown Brooklyn. Why is it that when I talk to my friend Pachel from a public school here in NYC, she’s always asking me numerous questions. “Does your school allow you to take your textbook home, or do you have to leave it in the school for the class after yours to use? Does your high school assist you in the college process? Because we have a lack of textbooks and out of 850 seniors, my school only has two guidance counselors.” I think to myself...

Wow. I tell her my school has an excess of textbooks, and my high school has four guidance counselors for 130 of us. Look at that. Pachel is just one of many many high school students across the spectrum that is faced with these hardships. It is not fair that the students are not given the proper tools and connections to take their education to the next level. Why? Why are so many high school students trying to attain knowledge and be enlightened, when every step forward they take is another step they are being pushed back. I think to myself: teens, we have to take charge. [Applause]

Deen (spoken word): We use our education as key, but they put a latch on the door. Other kids dream to the moon, my school constrains me to the floor.

Certain classes never happened. No lab for chemistry, lack of teachers for multiple APs.

You see, with a toxic environment in the home and no after school activities, after school the kids only option is the streets. Schools are supposed to be a second home. With a lack of resources, it's like they can't hold that responsibility.

We were losing rest, had an AP English class extremely stressed because the prep books came a month before the test.

In our AP Bio class a bullet comes through the window, lost in turmoil, screams of crescendo. Thankfully no one was grazed. We were placed in the same classroom the very next day. No farewell, no goodbye, teacher left. Then we had a substitute with no real prep.

Don't be fooled by my meticulous skills lyrically. You may be impressed with my poetry, but know this – Jay Z and Nas taught me more vocabulary than my school ever did.

You see, I feel all alone because all I see is black and brown. The higher I go, the lighter the tone. Darkness got me feeling alone. 'Cause the more successful I become the more lonely I feel because of my skin tone. They say some of us inner city kids give up on school too easily, but I ask my parents this question, I ask my teachers this question, and now I'm asking you: How can we as inner city kids give up on school too easily if school never believed in me? [Applause]

David: You see no one told me about educational inequity. No one told me that some schools are poorer than others. No one told me that at many schools, including mine, less than 40% of kids who graduate enroll in college. Even less, graduate from college. No one told me that the math I learn at my school is nowhere near at the rigor or as challenging as the math taught at more affluent schools. I had to learn that the hard way. It's no longer

about me. Who's going to tell my younger siblings that educational inequity exists? Who's going to tell my little brother that his school can't have functioning laptops or textbooks to take home? Who's going to tell my little cousin that he shouldn't even try to connect with teachers in his school because in a year or two, they'll be gone to teach at a better, nicer neighborhood. Who's going to tell them that they're worth less? Not me. No I don't have the heart to do that. Before any of that affects them, I will have done my all to do something about that. [Applause]

Shenir: I really began to think about things when I went to China this summer to study Mandarin for a month in a group of 40 peers from different parts of the US with different racial and economic backgrounds. Some of them had studied the language for more than six years. I felt that it wasn't fair, wasn't fair that before my trip I had never had the opportunity in my middle school or high school to learn a language other than Spanish. I hadn't asked the questions then when receiving worn, outdated textbooks was the norm. But the teachers at Vanguard didn't hesitate to explain to me that the reason we only had one foreign language class was because the school didn't have the funds to afford another teacher. And the worst part is most of us don't even realize we are being deprived of a better education. Having the option to study different languages or having the funds to replace classroom tools are things I don't want any of us at Vanguard to have to worry about. Because options mean opportunities and opportunities don't come often enough for people like us. [Applause]

Taiwo (spoken word): I, I am, I am a young woman rooted in the Bronx and fertilized in poor education. The borough of the underestimated and too many believers. limbo bar set so low not enough high end achievers.

I, I am a 99-cent composition full of $A = \pi r^2$, maybe a few Cupid's arrows on each page because my attention span is no more than 5 minutes. And I can't help but think that we are in it, but not meant to win it.

I, I am poverty draped in reused desks and chalk boards sprinkled with a little knowledge here and there, and drenched with the complaints of the unsatisfied. This system thinks they're doing us a favor instead and I know it's not wrong to ask why more world has more erasers than lead.

I, I am years of substitute teachers, a shower of handouts in silence, untapped motivation, crumbling anticipation, falsified intimidation. How can you question my morals and codes and not question my limitations.

I, I am once upon a time lost in the pages of your books. Because I only seem to be that forgotten chapter. And my words have a hard time sending my voice through to the suits and blazers and I ask: when will we get our happy ending?

I, I am a vulture. Ravenous for knowledge but left with the scraps and bones of the educational feast. Forced to fly where the wind blows. Trust me there is more to us than you may ever think to know.

I, I am, I am, I am, I am many things crafted by the astute and the pretentious. I may be forced to swim in a world flooded with numbers, but I am not a statistic. [Applause]

Wyatt: Every time that I see large groups of Caucasian people on the train, there's usually two reasons why. Either the Yankees are playing or the kids from Bronx Science got dismissed. On the hour-long trip from my high school on the outskirts of the south Bronx to my college prep program in downtown Manhattan, I'm really nose-y so I usually look next to me when I'm sitting on the train next to someone. I'll admit, we've all done it before. I see them pack up when we get to 86th street or 59th street. Later, after two hours of supplemental work my friends and I take the same train back to 167 or Burnside Avenue. We get home by 8, if we're lucky. And all of this in the hopes of going to the same schools that the kids from Bronx Science go to.

New York City which is known for its diversity and embrace of immigrants has the most segregated school system in the country. Although the high school admissions process theoretically gives all students an equal opportunity, black and brown kids always seem to get in the same school. Year after year, they end up in the same place. Meanwhile students at selective or specialized high schools are mostly white, Asian, and most importantly, affluent. My school, which is predominantly students of color and 80% meet the requirements for free lunch, promotes helping students from low-income backgrounds, especially young men, get into college and change statistics. But the inferior academic instruction they got in elementary and middle school cripples their chances. 51% of the class of 2016 graduated and went to college. However only 9% were college ready. The same graduating class at Bronx Science had a 100% graduation rate. What do you think the other number was for college readiness? 100%. My school's average SAT score was an 819. Bronx Science? 1389.

I'll continue to make the most of opportunities that have come my way. And as I start my senior year of high school I think of those kids that come from the 86th street and 59th street of around the world. For now I may see them on the train, but next fall I'll see them at freshman orientation. [Applause]

Chantell: I began to think about educational inequity and how it affected me and it went something like this. You go to school 365 days a year to it not being enough. Not enough textbooks. Not enough teachers. Not enough pencils. Not enough diversity and not enough opportunities. Eventually after 365 days, these conditions become nothing out of the ordinary. But it was still at the back of my mind. I wondered: who's going to listen to me? Who's going to do something?

I was drawn to a statistic that said, about 1 in 5 black and Hispanic students are deemed college ready after four years in high school. When I heard this fact I immediately thought about my school. I thought about the kids who weren't even ready for high school. Who didn't come to class, who struggled with their work but were too afraid to ask for help. I didn't know them all personally or what their life was like, but I know in my heart we all deserve a quality education, but that's just not enough. Then it occurred to me – I'm afraid. That statistic scares me. Because my school is predominantly black and Hispanic. But enough is enough. This moment right here, I am a teen taking charge. I am using my voice tonight, not only for myself but for all the students at my school, all the future graduates.
[Applause]

Brianna: The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals was the best thing that could have happened for two of my cousins after crossing the border between Mexico and the US at a very young age. Now one of them has children who are US citizens, and she depended on DACA for allowing her to work in the US with a work permit. My other cousin also counted on the same benefit as he helped his mother with her expenses. They were two out of the 800,000 people who were affected by this drastic change, and it is not fair that based on the location of where I was born makes me more superior to them or any undocumented person that gives me more opportunities.

Another problem we see in today's society is segregation throughout New York City schools. According to the New York Times, by 8th grade many low income black and Hispanic children, who have spent their early grades confined to family schools and pass through similarly poor middle schools, have already fallen too far behind the competition for the high schools that could prepare them for college. This shows that the ones who require the most education are always lacking the support they need based on their background and where they attended school in their adolescence. So instead of paying billions of dollars for a wall to separate more and more families, why not use that money wisely and help those who need it? Like many have said and will continue to say: immigrants make America great.
[Applause]

Student (spoken word): I will remember those who fought for racially integrated schools in a segregated nation. Those who rather than stand on the sidelines took active participation. Children are robbed of their opportunity to succeed, lacking the tools because they live in an area that forces them to go to low achieving schools.

In my old middle school, 8% of students met standards on the state math test. That's 8%. Imagine the number of those who didn't pass yet. I'm lucky now to go to a high school that prepares me, yet what about the rest? What about treating them fairly?

My zoned high school 18K635 has a 15% college and career readiness rate. May I ask why? Prominent gang affiliations coloring our hallways with shades of red and blue, and the irony that's a part of the cops' light color, too.

We're not all too different, yet not exactly the same but should our socioeconomic difference be justified as blame that students miss the opportunity for a quality education based solely on the fact that they reside in a particular location.

We must not be acquiescent. Ready to accept the time for change is gone. Should not our schools reflect the diversity which we as a city pride ourselves upon? We must question: What do well-funded schools have that underfunded schools don't. Better yet, what can well off students do that underprivileged students won't? In this sense we all have equal capabilities, yet it is educational inequity that limits these opportunities.

Let us be remembered not for lack of contribution but as men and women of society that when given problems find solutions. Let us not be remembered as dwellers of the past but as present and future thinkers whose legacy will forever last.

I will remember those who fought for integrated schools in a segregated nation. Those who rather than stand on the sidelines took active participation. Those who are willing to fight for students to go to quality schools regardless of learning mode. Those who understand that obtaining an education should not be determined by performance, race, tax bracket, or zip code. I will remember those who will fight to ensure they are well informed. I will remember those who are willing to help change a system that we undeniably formed. [Applause]

Taylor: For more from these incredible young people check out teenstakecharge.com, where you'll find video of the panel discussion that took place after these performances between students and six policymakers.

I'm encouraged that we're having the conversation, but we are no closer to ending school segregation than we were than in 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled segregated schools unconstitutional. Segregation remains an accepted fact of life in this city. Urban school systems have spent billions of dollars on dozens of other reforms designed to improve unequal schools but refuse to address the root cause.

Jonathan Kozol: This year it's small segregated schools. That's the new trend. If we just have little segregated schools that will solve the problem. I've seen 40 solutions of this sort come and go in my lifetime. I refuse to play that game. I'm 69 years old, and I'm not going to spend the rest of my life helping to polish the apple of apartheid schooling.

Taylor: This is journalist Jonathan Kozol in an interview following the release of his 2005 book *The Shame of The Nation – The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. Kozol has spent his career writing about school segregation and inequity across the country but particularly in urban, northeastern school systems. To borrow from Fannie Lou Hamer, he's sick and tired of having to keep writing about it.

Kozol: I want to live to see a mass uprising of conscience among good people of all political beliefs. I want to see an uprising of people who won't try to polish the image of apartheid, have slightly higher scores in apartheid schools, I want to see an uprising of people who will defend the honor of this country by waging an all out attack on educational and residential segregation, and that means another civil rights movement. It means one that won't take place in Mississippi but probably in Washington and New York and Chicago, and I'll tell you it makes a lot of people angry when I say that. And a lot of moderates tell me, Jonathan you could make your old age much easier for yourself if you drop that kind of talk, if you wouldn't say things like that, because it bothers us. Why don't you just help us to make a slightly nicer ghetto school? And I answer them and I say, segregated schooling is the oldest failed experiment in American social history, and I'm not going to go to my grave playing that game. I don't care how high the price I have to pay, I'm going to keep hammering this issue until my dying day.

Taylor: There are lots of people, young and old, in New York City who are ready to take up Kozol's charge to wage an all-out attack on segregated schools. And we could use your help. Here's what you do. Go to bellpodcast.com. Right there on the home page at the top, you'll see a button that says "Join the movement." Click that button and fill out the form – it won't take you more than a minute. And no, you don't have to live in New York City. This is a national issue, and everyone has a role to play. Once you fill out the form, we'll be in touch with information about campaigns, events, and other ways to make an impact.

As for the podcast, this concludes Season One, but we'll continue to release Extra Credit segments and other material while also starting to report stories for Season 2. On that note, if you have story ideas or want to be involved in that work, send me an email taylor@bellpodcast.com. And don't forget to connect with us on Facebook and Twitter [@bellpodcast](https://twitter.com/bellpodcast).

Finally, I want to thank a few people and organizations who made this season possible: first and foremost, thank you to The New School for giving us the grant that got this project off the ground. Thanks to everyone at Leadership for Educational Equity, whose support and guidance has been invaluable. Thanks to all of the students I interviewed for this season and the adults who helped make those interviews happen. And last but certainly not least, thanks to Adrian Uribarri, my co-founder, whose last name I have trouble pronouncing but whose work behind the scenes has been instrumental in bringing The Bell to life.

We'll be back soon. Thanks for listening.