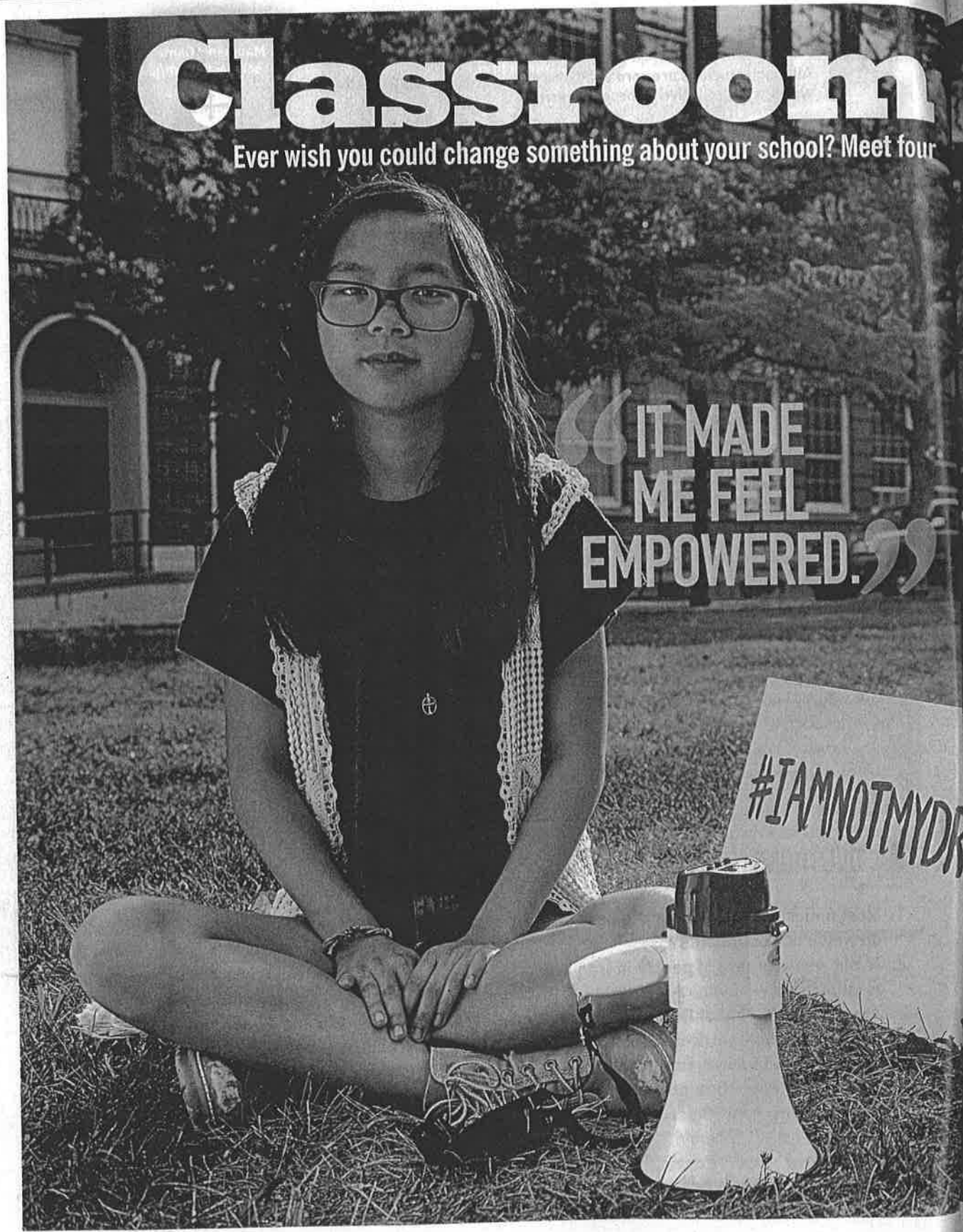


# Classroom

Ever wish you could change something about your school? Meet four



“IT MADE  
ME FEEL  
EMPOWERED.”

# Crusaders

ur teens who did — and get inspired by their dedication. BY MARY KATE FRANK

## THE SEXISM FIGHTER

Barbara Dunne never had a problem with her high school's dress code. She'd followed similar guidelines for years. No big deal.

Last spring, though, Barbara—then 14 and a freshman at Montclair High School in New Jersey—noticed something that bugged her. Girls at her school got punished for violating the code much more often than boys did—and were sometimes called out publicly for infractions. Some girls were forced to stand up in class so their shorts could be measured to ensure they met the required length.

"At first it was just a few people, then it escalated," says Barbara, who was never punished for an infraction herself. "The way the policy was being carried out didn't seem fair." Concerned about the pattern, she soon found herself in an online chat with other girls from her school, venting about the code.

The group thought the enforcement was sexist, but that wasn't their only beef. They also found

the language of the policy—which stated that clothing must not be too "distracting"—offensive. That wording "suggests that it is [girls'] responsibility to dress modestly to keep from 'distracting' their male counterparts," students wrote in an online petition.

After a talk with school officials yielded no results, the group held a protest after school. But only about 20 people came—and no one brought posters or even chanted.

So Barbara started a Facebook page to help them organize. Another student came up with a hashtag (#Iamnotmydress) to attract attention on social media. And they got megaphones.

Several other rallies drew crowds of supporters as well as local news crews. Still, nothing changed.

Finally, the group scored a victory. The principal agreed to remove the objectionable language from the code and speak to staff about respecting students' privacy.

"It made me feel empowered," says Barbara. "What we were saying was heard."

Turn the page for more crusaders!

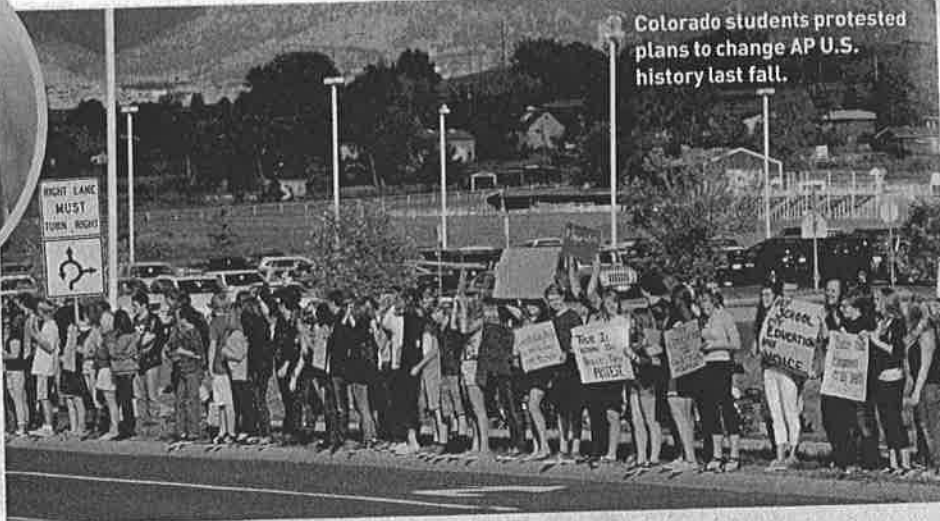
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## THE HISTORY DEFENDER

Ashlyn Maher loves studying U.S. history—even the parts many Americans aren't proud of. "The only way to learn from mistakes is to know what mistakes were made," she says.

But last fall, Ashlyn, then 16, discovered that the past might be whitewashed at her school, Chatfield Senior High in Littleton, Colorado. The school board had proposed changing AP U.S. history to focus more on "positive aspects of the United States and its heritage." For example, under the plan, teachers would emphasize patriotism and citizenship while avoiding civil disorder, disregard for the law, and "social strife," like rioting during the civil rights movement. The idea outraged Ashlyn,



Colorado students protested plans to change AP U.S. history last fall.

## I WANTED TO MAKE A REALLY BIG IMPACT.

then a senior. Though she'd already taken the class, it upset her to think that future students would be taught what she calls "a warped view."

Ashlyn recalled the protests she'd read about in AP U.S. history. During the 1960s, college students staged sit-ins and marches to demand civil rights and an end to the Vietnam War (1954-1975).

Inspired, Ashlyn decided to organize a protest at her school. "I wanted to make a really big impact," she says.

She spread the word to classmates and set up a Facebook page with details. Still, Ashlyn was nervous. What if no one joined her?

But on the day of the event, about 1,000 kids—half the student body—gathered in

front of the school where Ashlyn waited. "I was so happy, I almost cried," she recalls. Together they marched for hours, carrying signs reading "Don't Make History a Mystery" and "Teach Us the Truth!"

Their efforts paid off. A few weeks later—after students at other schools also demonstrated—the school board dropped the plan. "They could change their minds," Ashlyn admits. But, she says, "I don't think that will happen. Now they know we're watching."

## THE HEALTHY-FOOD CHAMPION

Last summer, as he watched a pro wrestling match on TV, Alex Castillo knew he finally wanted to get fit.

"I was amazed by the athleticism in the ring," says Alex, who is 6'5" and weighed more than 300 pounds at the time. "I realized that I needed to get healthier."

He began eating better, which wasn't too hard—until school started. While the cafeteria offered salads among other choices like hot dogs and enchiladas, they weren't filling—just a few pieces of lettuce, cucumber slices, and dressing.

"The salads just weren't satisfying," says Alex. "People bought junk food to eat instead."

Alex, then a senior at Southwest Academy in San Antonio, Texas, shared his concerns about the menu with a teacher.



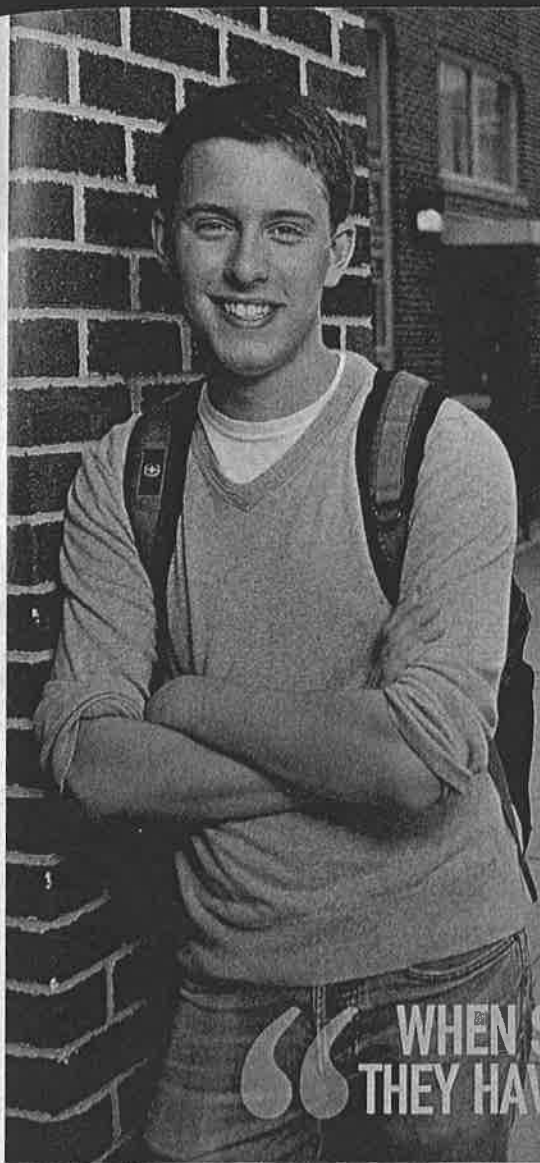
She urged him to apply for a student ambassadorship to the Mayor's Fitness Council, which works to make healthy changes in the city. Alex was accepted.

After brainstorming with others on the council, Alex proposed installing a salad bar in the cafeteria. But school officials

## YOU CAN DO ANYTHING AS LONG AS YOU'RE DETERMINED.

said they'd opened salad bars in the past, only to have them close because few students ever purchased the healthy meals.

Officials made a deal with Alex. They agreed to make space on the lunch line for build-your-own salads and stock it with proteins, veggies, and grains. Alex's



## THE SLEEP ACTIVIST

Two years ago, Ben Press was running on empty. Some nights, he got only five hours of sleep. He noticed that other students at James Madison High School in Vienna, Virginia—where classes began at 7:20 a.m.—also looked like walking zombies.

“Our lives were perpetual exhaustion,” says Ben, 17.

As a member of his school’s health advisory committee, Ben began studying the issue in his sophomore year. He learned that teens’ body clocks are wired to fall asleep later at night than other people’s. They also need at least eight-and-a-half hours of shut-eye to function at their best.

“At 7:20 a.m., the teen brain is not ready to be active or learn,” explains Ben.

Moreover, experts have found that not getting enough sleep puts teens at increased risk for obesity, depression, and even car accidents. Well-rested students, on the other hand, score

higher on tests, do better athletically and have less stress.

Ben’s school district had debated adopting later start times for 20 years. But armed with new research, Ben thought the measure could finally succeed. He took his findings to the health committee, which agreed to recommend later start times.

Ben worked on the issue for about a year, getting other students involved, teaming with a local advocacy group, and speaking with school board members. Last fall, the school superintendent proposed later start times to the board. Ben spoke at the meeting, saying, “Lack of sleep is a dire threat to our students’ health.”

Officials agreed, voting to push high school start times to between 8 and 8:10 a.m. beginning this school year. For Ben, the reward means more than extra time in bed. It’s a reminder that teens have a voice. “When students see a problem,” he says, “they have the power to change it.”

“WHEN STUDENTS SEE A PROBLEM, THEY HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE IT.”

role? Convincing students to buy them.

That wasn’t easy. A survey conducted by the district dietitian found that 17 percent of the student body didn’t eat *any* vegetables. (Experts recommend that teens eat between 2 and 3 cups of veggies daily.)

So Alex handed out flyers and spoke to classes to promote the new offering. After months of hard work, the salads debuted in January 2015. Within weeks, salad sales jumped from 4 a day to 30.

That wasn’t Alex’s only success—he’s also lost 127 pounds. He now advises other students who want to be healthier. “You can do anything,” he says, “as long as you’re determined.”

—With reporting by Jamie Primeau

## \* DO SOMETHING!

Follow these steps to tackle issues at your school

- **GATHER THE FACTS** Study up on your cause to build a strong argument. Ben Press read about teen sleep patterns to make his case for a later start time. Knowing the research helped him defend his position. “Never attack another person or their views,” he says. “Focus on showing why your points are the best.”
- **TRY TEAMWORK** Speak with teachers, administrators, and students to rally support and get suggestions. For example, Alex Castillo’s friends advised him to add fresh fruit to the salad bar to make it more appealing. Consider starting a Facebook page or Twitter account to spread the word about your proposal.
- **STAY ENGAGED** Barbara Dunne and her friends staged a dozen protests before their school took action. “It’s tiring. You think you’re not getting results,” she says. “But we didn’t give up, and it paid off.” If you’ve organized a group, don’t disband after you succeed—look for other issues to take on. Ashlyn Maher now meets monthly with fellow students to discuss local education concerns.

YOUR  
TURN

What obstacles did these students face on the way to achieving their goals? How did they overcome them?



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