

January Action: Letters to Editors on MLK Birthday & Youth PROMISE Act

On Monday, January 20th, we celebrate the birth and life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We plan to invoke Dr. King's legacy of championing social justice and non-violent resolutions to conflict by writing Letters to the Editor (LTEs) promoting the Youth PROMISE Act.

Every paper has its own criteria regarding letter length and other considerations. Please use the "E.P.I.C." structure – illustrated below with some suggested content for each section.

Basic Steps

1. Identify local daily newspapers. Find list here: http://bit.ly/find_newspapers **It is likely that only daily newspapers will report on MLK's birthday, but some weekly papers will publish a heartfelt letter if received in advance of the holiday.** A relevant article will likely be in the print edition on or around January 20th and in the online edition on or around the 19th. If you do not find one, you might reference any article during the middle of January touching on youth violence and/or incarceration.
2. Look in the paper's (print or online) editorial section - find criteria for submitting a letter.
3. Read a few LTEs they have published to get an idea of how writers begin them.
4. Ascertain whether your two US Senators and/or any local US House Members are already co-sponsoring the Youth PROMISE Act, so you can thank them or urge them to co-sponsor – see the list of co-sponsors at www.peacealliance.org/ypa-sponsors/
5. Draft your letter, using their criteria and the E.P.I.C. format below.
6. The more letters sent in by your team, the more likely at least one of them will be published. Please be sure to write unique letters!

Note: for the "hook" to be relevant to an MLK article, your letter should be submitted as soon as possible after January 20th! You can either draft your letters after our conference call on the 11th, and then vigilantly scan the paper on the 19th and 20th for a relevant article to respond to – or choose a smaller paper or an article in today's paper and complete and submit your letter TODAY! Have Fun, Write Well, and Build Peace!

The "E.P.I.C." Format

Please frame everything in your own words.

Engage:

Reference an article about MLK's birthday (and/or some relevant local story about youth violence or crime – especially if little or no MLK birthday references appear). In about one sentence state your reaction to the article, perhaps a positive reaction to the celebration of his work and vision – along with some concern about more local issues.

Problem:

Mention (in your own words, but perhaps using stats provided below) the national tragedy of rampant youth violence and incarceration.

Example: "As we reflect on MLK's birthday and his life's work, we might see progress toward his dream, but so much more needs to be done for all our children, and particularly in the area of urban violence and incarceration, which disproportionately affect minority youth."

Provide a few statistics. E.g. According to a 2012 Children's Defense Fund report, young black males die from gun violence at a rate *2.5 times higher than Latino males, and eight times higher than white males. Gun injuries are suffered by black teens at a rate ten times higher than white teens.*¹ While people of color make up about [30 percent](#) of the United States' population, they account for [60 percent](#) of those imprisoned. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, [one in three black men](#) can expect to go to prison in their lifetime. In school, students of color face harsher punishments than their white peers, leading to a higher number of youth of color

¹ blackyouthproject.com/2012/03/report-gun-homicide-is-the-leading-cause-of-death-among-black-teens/

incarcerated. Black and Hispanic students represent more than [70 percent](#) of those involved in school-related arrests or referrals to law enforcement. African Americans make up [two-fifths](#) and Hispanics [one-fifth](#) of confined youth today.²

We owe it to the work of MLK and the nonviolent civil rights movement he led, to carry on his vision and work. An oft-cited quote from Dr. King: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Even if these youth aren’t in our particular neighborhood, the effect is felt everywhere. Let’s not continue to allow many of our own communities to be war zones.

Inform About the Solution:

Ex: “I believe Dr. King would have championed the Youth PROMISE Act, **(H.R. 1318 and S. 1307)**,” a bi-partisan bill currently before both houses of Congress that will give our communities the information and support they need to reduce youth violence and incarceration.

The bill 1) specifically funds evidence-based prevention & intervention practices, 2) empowers local control and community oversight, 3) reduces crime and saves taxpayer money, and 4) creates accountability by linking funding to measurable success. This bill will go a long way towards saving lives and giving every young person the opportunity to meet his or her potential.

For example, Pennsylvania recently adopted a similar approach to the Youth PROMISE Act, and over a ten year period they saved \$5 for every \$1 invested.³ Due to the shrinking number of juvenile detainees, they were able to close a 100-bed detention facility. In West Philadelphia High School, within two years of implementing a Restorative Discipline program, incidents of assault and disorderly conduct dropped more than 65%.⁴ And while recidivism rates in the surrounding Boulder County have been over 50%, the Longmont Community Justice Partnership used Restorative Justice to bring its recidivism rate to below 10% within the first three years of operation.

Tell how such programs need much more attention and funding and that the projected eventual cost savings from reducing incarceration are huge (average cost per inmate is over 30k/yr)⁵. We must change what is often called the “cradle to prison pipeline” with empowering support for our most valuable asset, our children. Dr. King would surely have championed such a change.

Call to Action:

Thank your US Senators and Members of the House of Representatives (by name) for co-sponsoring the bill or ask them to do so if they are not co-sponsors. (See “Basic Steps” above, number 4 for a way to find out if your Federal Representatives are co-sponsors). You might also call on fellow citizens to support Youth Promise Act via www.YouthPromiseAction.org.

(Some papers may limit letters to 150 or 200 words, so each of these sections may be very concise. They usually ask you to include address and daytime and nighttime phone number.)

Signing Off

Under your signature, you might mention that you are a member of The Peace Alliance locally.

² http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2010/02/black_americans_in_the_2010_census.html

³ Bumbarger, Jones, et al., “The Economic return on PCCD’s Investment in Research-based Programs: A Cost-Benefit Assessment of Delinquency and Prevention in Pennsylvania”, The Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development, Penn State, March 2008, p. 3

http://www.prevention.psu.edu/pubs/docs/PCCD_Report2.pdf

⁴ fixschooldiscipline.org/toolkit/educators/goodnews/

⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/nyregion/citys-annual-cost-per-inmate-is-nearly-168000-study-says.html?_r=0