

TEDTALK: "HIGH SCHOOL TRAINING GROUND"

Malcolm London, Poet, Performer, Activist
May 2013



Young poet, educator and activist Malcolm London performs his stirring poem about life on the front lines of high school. He tells of the "oceans of adolescence" who come to school "but never learn to swim," of "masculinity mimicked by men who grew up with no fathers." Beautiful, lyrical, chilling.

0:12 At 7:45 a.m., I open the doors to a building dedicated to building, yet only breaks me down. I march down hallways cleaned up after me every day by regular janitors, but I never have the decency to honor their names. Lockers left open like teenage boys' mouths when teenage girls wear clothes that covers their insecurities but exposes everything else. Masculinity mimicked by men who grew up with no fathers, camouflage worn by bullies who are dangerously armed but need hugs. Teachers paid less than what it costs them to be here. Oceans of adolescents come here to receive lessons but never learn to swim, part like the Red Sea when the bell rings.

1:06 This is a training ground. My high school is Chicago, diverse and segregated on purpose. Social lines are barbed wire. Labels like "Regulars" and "Honors" resonate. I am an Honors but go home with Regular students who are soldiers in territory that owns them. This is a training ground to sort out the Regulars from the Honors, a reoccurring cycle built to recycle the trash of this system.

1:40 Trained at a young age to capitalize, letters taught now that capitalism raises you but you have to step on someone else to get there. This is a training ground where one group is taught to lead and the other is made to follow. No wonder so many of my people spit bars, because the truth is hard to swallow. The need for degrees has left so many people frozen.

2:05 Homework is stressful, but when you go home every day and your home is work, you don't want to pick up any assignments. Reading textbooks is stressful, but reading does not matter when you feel your story is already written, either dead or getting booked. Taking tests is stressful, but bubbling in a Scantron does not stop bullets from bursting.

2:27 I hear education systems are failing, but I believe they're succeeding at what they're built to do -- to train you, to keep you on track, to track down an American dream that has failed so many of us all.

2:44 (Applause)

Young spoken-word poet Malcolm London has been called the "Gil Scott-Heron of this generation" (by Cornel West). His feisty, passionate performances take on the issues of the day, including the Chicago education system in which he grew up.

Why you should listen

This poet wields a dynamic spirit for speaking engagements utilizing his feisty and passionate performances as words of encourage for next generations to tell their stories. In 2011, Malcolm London won the Louder than a Bomb youth poetry slam in his native Chicago, scooping

the top award as both individual performer and with a team. The poet, performer and activist has performed on stages throughout his home city as well as across the United States. A member of the Young Adult Council of the prestigious Steppenwolf Theater, London brings vim and vigor to his energetic performances tackling tough contemporary issues head-on. He wrote & directed a spoken word-infused play responding to the Zimmerman verdict called *Two Years Later*, and

London attends University of Illinois at Chicago & is a member & co-chair of BYP100 Chicago Chapter, a national organization of black activists & organizers. Deeply interested in working on ways to improve the national education system, London regularly visits high schools, youth jails, colleges and communities to work with students on writing workshops and performances. London is currently devoted to being a youth advocate & coordinator of The Know Your Rights Project out of Northwestern Law School, a project dedicated to educating young people on their rights within the juvenile justice system, & continuing his work as teaching artist on staff at Young Chicago Authors, a program working to transform the lives of young people by cultivating their voices through writing, publication and performance education. His work has been featured on national outlets including CBS, NPR, *The Huffington Post*, *The Root*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

What others say

"Malcolm London is that rare and important breed of poet-activist who can engage in a civic conversation via his art." – Kevin Coval, Young Chicago Authors