



UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE AT SCALE
A Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Worse Than Those Six Days in the Dome

Maria Hernandez



www.annenberginstitute.org/equity

About Students at the Center

This essay was originally created at Students at the Center (SAC), a school-based writing program that links community to school and develops youth voices and leadership in New Orleans. SAC conducts elective writing and other classes at secondary schools, aimed at the full range of students who enroll in public school classrooms. SAC staff include classroom teachers, community resource educators, and recent graduates of SAC classes in the public schools.

SAC products include: the teen-written, designed, and edited *Our Voice* newspaper; a series of books written by students; videos on a range of subjects that are used in classroom and community educational settings; professional development for teachers in the New Orleans public school system (and across the U.S. through the Bread Loaf Teacher Network) in sessions led by students and recent graduates of SAC and in partnership with the Algebra Project; and collaboration with other community-based organizations on a range of projects.

About Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale

This essay is part of the Web site *Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale*, a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The site grew out of a forum convened by the Institute in 2006 which brought together a group of prominent education advocates and stakeholders to create a powerful, integrated framework that would reconcile divergent ways of defining educational equity and excellence, along with differing – and sometimes competing – views about which strategies work best to promote high-quality education for *all* students.

Please visit www.annenberginstitute.org/equity for more essays, multimedia materials, and interviews containing definitions of *equity* and *excellence* and descriptions of strategies educators today are employing. We invite you to participate in the dialogue by using the site's interactive features.

About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization at Brown University that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools, especially those serving disadvantaged children. The Institute works through partnerships with school districts and school reform networks and in collaboration with national and local organizations skilled in educational research, policy, and effective practices to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

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When Katrina hit New Orleans, I was two weeks into my senior year at Frederick Douglass Senior High School. My friends and I were frantically trying to keep the school from closing. Our school was one of the lowest-ranking schools in the district, so the state, using its accountability plan, was trying to shut it down or take it over. We were running a campaign called Quality Education as a Civil Right, doing our part in this one-year-old national campaign by continuing the work we had been doing at Douglass: involving more parents and students and community members in working together to improve the school and to demand all the resources we needed to do that.

A lot of people were *finally* looking at our school as more than just a place where criminals are reared, which is the impression you'd get if all you knew were news reports. They always ran to the school to report a fight, but no one said anything when my classmates placed first in a competition against professional journalists for a series they wrote on public education at the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. But for folks who knew what we were doing and spent time with us, you could see them actually smiling when Douglass was mentioned.

In the midst of all this, I was extremely bummed out. I was bored of walking the same old halls and knowing everybody that walked by. I was ready for a change. I got more than I bargained for when Katrina hit.

So far I've had to start my senior year three times at three different schools in three different cities. All of these changes happened within one month's time. From Douglass in New Orleans to Telequa, outside of Muscogee, and from Telequa to Union in Tulsa. Now after everything is said and done, I miss the high school that was supposed to be my alma mater. I'm afraid to get my class ring, because we might just move again, and I'd be stuck.

Looking back on the last few days of August, I still can't believe we spent six days in the Superdome, the stadium that housed thousands of hurricane victims, without knowing if my dad was dead or alive. We had to sneak out of the Superdome and swim past corpses and bayou animals to find him. I sliced my leg in the process of avoiding a dead woman floating.

We found my dad, and my uncle, who was with him in the old neighborhood. They had survived by swimming from roof to roof. It was a relief to find all of them okay, but there's nothing worse than walking into your 'hood and not recognizing it: water waist deep, the stores all

Maria Hernandez produced this essay through Students at the Center (SAC) in New Orleans. Hernandez took her first SAC class at Frederick Douglass Senior High School her sophomore year, following in the footsteps of her older brother Juan and her older sister Amelia. Maria served as lead writer/researcher on the Plessy Civil Rights Park Project, collaborating with visual artist John Scott to bring student writings about social justice history in New Orleans to life. As a high school student, Maria won statewide writing contests, published her historical writings in Louisiana Weekly, wrote and performed plays on teen issues and historical events, and served on local and national youth organizing committees.

looted, or in the process of being looted. I couldn't help but let tears fall. It just cut deep to know that my home was the new Atlantis.

As they say, home is where the heart is. So I guess my heart is 20,000 leagues under the sea. That would be a good explanation for the emptiness that comes through my chest and expands to my body and words. It's hard to keep going and pushing when you don't even know if what you're looking for is still there.

Everything feels uncertain, including my education. Nobody knows the procedures and regulations of what to do with my grades and my units. They're not sure which credits will transfer and whether I can graduate on time, even though in New Orleans, I only needed three courses.

This uncertainty that's strangling me is also undermining Douglass, the school my friends were fighting to make better. When we gathered for a weekend reunion on October 8th and 9th, we learned that all the New Orleans Public Schools would become charter schools this year. We had been fighting to improve from within neighborhood schools that don't have selective admissions. Now, with all schools being charters, no one will have the choice of truly public, neighborhood-based education.

And worse than that, the only public high schools open on the east bank of the city, where the hurricane hit the hardest and where probably over 80 percent of the population, my family, and all of my friends live, have selective admission criteria. How can these decision-makers open two high schools on the east bank, but none for common folk like me, who either can't get into or don't want to get into selective-admission high schools?

I've lost my home, my friends, and my school. I'm always on the verge of tears. But the worst part of it all is that the public officials – both elected and hired – who are supposed to be looking out for my education have failed me even worse than the ones who abandoned me in the Superdome. My family and friends have food and water and the kindness of strangers. But we still don't have control of our lives, and we're still being abandoned by local, state, and federal officials.

It's the middle of October, and I'm in the same situation I was before Katrina; but now I'm fighting to reopen Douglass and other neighborhood high schools in New Orleans and to provide quality education for people like me.