



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

Honoring Community

Ashley Jones



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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In the summer of 2005 I had the rare privilege to see an ancient community working together to make themselves stronger. In this community – where people sat in a circle on the floor – there were expert hunters, farmers, and medicine men. Each person had a skill to share, and in the event that the medicine man was absent, people did not die because everyone was taught the healing properties of certain herbs and plants.

This ancient community was part of a play by students from Fredrick Douglass and Chalmette high schools – both schools in neighborhoods severely devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Chalmette, a predominantly White high school, is in St. Bernard Parish, just across the parish line from Douglass, the all-Black New Orleans public school where I was working. As part of the State of the Nation program, a project of the Douglass Community Coalition led by coalition member Artspot Productions, these students dealt with the problem of inequities of public education, specifically starting with the New Orleans public school system.

In the six weeks that we convened to create this play, a group of Black and White students – who wouldn't otherwise be affiliated with each other – became a community. I've seen them with my own eyes, learning from each other's strengths and all growing stronger themselves. As much as it made me happy to see this utopia of learning and understanding and community development, it was also heart crushing. Because in the real world – a world where the individual is more important than the group – this type of community learning would not be awaiting these students at their respective schools, unless they were able to be a part of a program such as Students at the Center (SAC), a school-based writing program that links community to school and develops youth voices and leadership.

I know of no other program that encourages students to learn through their own experiences, which means that everyone can be a teacher in his or her own way. How well you do in the class is not dependent on your grades or whether or not you can pass a test, but on how well you can connect your experiences to the current events, policies, and decisions that affect your life. SAC equips each student with the ability to be a leader in his or her own school and community.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the students from Chalmette and Douglass high schools have both suffered devastating losses to their communities. The good thing is that all of us who care about New Orleans and the surrounding parishes have the opportunity to learn

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from the SAC community. We can make our school system reflect true equality and community cooperation that could generate significant economic and technological growth as well as great self-reliance and sufficiency.

One of the first and most critical steps to having a public school system that works for each student is to break down the barriers that divide communities. These barriers include selective-admissions schools that have the ability to design their student body based on admissions test scores or simply self-selection by students, their families, and their teachers.

Separating students who can achieve on certain levels from those who may not be able to achieve on those levels hurts and weakens all students. Instead of creating a system that allows students from the same neighborhood with varying degrees of knowledge to learn and help each other be better students, these selective-admission schools rip vital human resources from their own communities while discriminating against others. But these “others” are also vital human resources.

I know this because I attended McDonogh #35, a selective-admissions school. Yet my relatives and friends in my own community attended Carver, Booker T. Washington, and Douglass high schools, all of which are considered low-performing schools. Although I didn't initially understand some of my family's resentment of the high school I chose to attend, somehow I did feel like I was a part of the abandonment of not just those in my family but in my community. I understood that my education was somewhat better than theirs, but why? Whenever I walked into my cousin Eddie's room when he was doing homework, he would stop immediately and throw his books aside. I knew he was having trouble because his mother told me so. Even though we were cousins, for some strange reason the fact that he attended Carver and I, McDonogh #35, made it hard for him to come to me for help even when I was clearly offering my services.

Imagine if all of the medicine men, all of the hunters, musicians, and farmers decided to create their own communities, excluding or rarely dealing with those with other skills? They would notice that their communities would become gravely destitute as musicians realize they know nothing about hunting, the hunters can't heal the sick, and the medicine men starve to death because they know not how to cook. The ancients understood one thing we fail to realize: you can't be a community by yourself. And even if you find a group of people who are just as smart as you, or can play an instrument just as fine as you can, there are skills that the group lacks and desperately needs.

If we are serious about creating a better New Orleans and we understand that a better school system is an important factor in doing that, then we know what we have to do. There is only one way to eliminate low-performing schools for good: get rid of those schools that separate and destroy the potential of community.

The vision that we created through the State of the Nation play last summer was a vision of community. So when a student is trying to decide whether to attend Easton or Douglass, the determining factor should be as frivolous as liking the color of the uniform. It should not be a choice to abandon your whole community to better yourself.