

INTERN REFLECTION: SCHOOLS ARE PILLARS OF THE COMMUNITY

AUGUST 15, 2018



I grew up in California's East San Francisco Bay Area, a diverse region which inevitably came with its own complex set of socioeconomic trends and tensions. I attended El Cerrito High, a mid-sized public school located in a semi-urban neighborhood just a few blocks removed from the small collection of shops and restaurants that make up downtown El Cerrito. Bordered by the stereotypically lower-income city of Richmond (with a median annual household income of around \$44,000) and upper-middle class city of Kensington (with a median annual household income of around \$140,000), El Cerrito High drew students from all three communities. This created a diverse student body representing a range of different backgrounds and experiences.

My school district, West Contra Costa Unified (WCCUSD), is ranked among the lowest-performing in California. Just like Chicago Public Schools, WCCUSD faces corruption, mismanagement of funds, and a rising tide of charter schools drawing resources away from public institutions. Below average SAT scores, a student counselor ratio of 550: 1, and lack of air conditioning in many of the buildings aligned El Cerrito High with other under-resourced public schools in the district. However, while I was peripherally aware of these issues at the time, they are not the things that defined my high school experience.

When I think back on my high school experience, it's not the persistent lack of paper towels in the bathroom or the outdated textbooks that immediately come to mind. I think about my favorite teachers, who worked tirelessly during class, lunchtime, and after school hours to introduce us to new ideas and push us to think critically. I think about the flourishing programs that I got to be a part of, like Band, Speech and Debate, and Queer-Straight Alliance. And most of all, I feel nostalgia for the strong sense of community and pride that existed at my school. El Cerrito High School is a place where alumni return to become teachers and administrators, where parents volunteer their time to coach club sports, and where all sorts of community members gather to watch the homecoming parade. I always felt that people were invested in the school, its history, and its community. And that made all the difference.

My high school was far from perfect. In many ways, the school was unable to remedy the race and class divisions existing in its feeder communities. For example, there was a visibly higher concentration of high-income white students populating the honors and AP track classes. But there were also many efforts, from administration, teachers, parents, and students to address equity issues. Our School Activities Fund organization worked to provide support for extracurricular activities so that students from all backgrounds could participate, and our student health center hosted discussions and restorative justice circles to address topics such as the harms of a white supremacy mindset or homophobic language. My school was a place where we could address these issues instead of avoiding them, even if we couldn't always fix them.

My experience represents the advantages of the public school system, as well as the challenges that the system is currently facing. I can honestly say that overall, I loved my public high school and am grateful for the opportunities that it offered me. Sure, the college application process and transition to higher level academia might have been easier coming from an elite, private institution. My education would probably have benefited from the resources and supports available in more affluent areas. But even without many of these resources, El Cerrito High managed to give me the tools I needed to scrape by as a first year at the University of Chicago (even if I had to play some catch-up). And perhaps more importantly, it allowed me to access a legacy of loyal community commitment and support, and to share the halls with the same people who live in and represent the El Cerrito community in all its diversity.

That's why I share Generation All's vision: strong neighborhood high schools for a stronger Chicago. At the center of the Gen All philosophy is the neighborhood public high school as a vital community pillar, an experience that I lived and loved.

-Alice Johnson

GENALL INTERN REFLECTION: HIGH SCHOOL CHOICE ISN'T REALLY A CHOICE

JULY 30, 2018



I grew up in Thornton, Colorado, a northern suburb of Denver. It's a town with boundaries that straddle the boundary line between the cookie-cutter suburbs and the large swaths of prairie farmlands that make up most of the northern half of the state. Colorado has made some questionable policy decisions when it comes to education, and I feel that my experience is an example of many of the pitfalls of school choice as a public education policy decision.

My high school selection came as I had completed 8th grade at a K-8 charter school, and my peers and I were all faced with the decision of where to go to school now that our charter education had concluded. Most of us had been sheltered in the small school environment for years, having received an education that only a handful of students with high enough test scores were given access to. Attending a charter was beneficial to me in the sense that it provided me with a rigorous education, but the “gifted and talented education” environment also instilled a sense of elitism and snobbishness in myself and the rest of my 8th-grade cohort.

Most of us had never attended a traditional public school up until that point, and our opinions about the public high school options were, regrettably, mostly informed by middle school gossip. This gossip ranged from the relatively benign to the outright outrageous. Everyone at Legacy High School has a pill problem, they said. Thornton and Northglenn High Schools were written off as “dangerous” and “ghetto”. There were nasty nicknames coined for Horizon High School, because its facility included a daycare center for students who were also young parents. Mountain Range High School, the most recent addition to the district, was too new to have developed much in the way of a “reputation”, but the general consensus among the middle school elitists was negative. Of course, none of us realized the more alarming fact about all of these high schools, which was that they were highly segregated across racial and socio-economic lines, and were contributing to an inequitable system that separated students based on demographics and academic performance.

“Adams 12 Five-Star School District”, as it is officially named, was a big proponent of school choice, and offered options for students in a variety of ways. Everyone had a “boundary” high school where they were guaranteed a spot. Then there were many charter school options. Additionally, if a student wanted to go to a different high school in the district, they could apply to “choice in”. This meant applying to a lottery to the different school, and a certain number of students would be pulled from the lottery to attend depending on the number of spots available. Some schools were much more difficult to “choice” into because demand to go there was higher. However, there was somewhat of a back-door option to the “choice” process. Many of the high schools also ran specialty programs – IB, STEM, liberal arts, etc. – and if one was accepted into the specialty program, they would automatically be allowed to “choice in” to the school.

Despite the negative comments about all the high schools, there was definitely a hierarchy of preference among them. Legacy was generally regarded as the “best”, but that made it very challenging to choice into unless you could gain admission to their rigorous STEM program “Legacy 2000”, or “L2k”, as it was nicknamed. The stakes for this were high, however: L2k had very strict expectations for your high school

grades and conduct, and if you failed to meet those, you could be kicked out of the program. For those students who had obtained their choice slots through L2k, this meant being kicked out of your high school, as well. Yet this was not a deterrent, because I had always gone to school in an environment that prioritized educational prestige over everything else. So despite a lukewarm interest in STEM, and the added stresses that would come from having my school enrollment so directly tied to my grades, I applied to the program and ended up attending Legacy as an L2k student for all four years.

Did that end up being the right choice for me? Yes and no. At Legacy, I was fortunate to have a few really great teachers who supported me. Also, being surrounded by my ruthlessly ambitious L2k peers definitely pushed me to work harder and apply to colleges I wouldn't have otherwise considered. The selective program was insular, to be sure, but it also created a tight-knit group of people all in the same academically challenging boat.

However, I sometimes think about the other high school opportunities I turned down in favor of the "prestige" of the high school I chose to attend. Considering the activities I ended up getting involved with later in my high school years – theatre, music, and writing – I realize that many of the high schools I brushed off in my selection process actually had much better programs for those things than Legacy did. The Legacy 2000 program demanded so much of my time that I was never really able to experiment with academic subjects or even indulge in free time, either – my schedule was so full of credits that I didn't even have a lunch period for my entire junior and senior years of high school! Additionally, the academic stratification of Legacy, in conjunction with its location in a pretty racially and socio-economically homogenous area left me with the distinct impression that my entire high school experience was taking place in a bubble.

I remember during the whole process of school selection that my parents were frustrated with all the extra steps it took just to enroll their child in a public high school. *Why can't everyone just go to the school down the street like we did growing up?* Looking back, I absolutely agree with them. My experience with Generation All has really helped me see how inequitable my school district was. I always had teen-angst

frustrations at the homogeneity of my suburban hometown. A big part of my desire to come to the University of Chicago, and part of why I have loved living in this city so much for the past 3 years, was because I wanted to burst my aforementioned bubble and experience the cultural diversity of a large city. I now firmly believe that neighborhood schools are a big part of what helps contribute to and foster that diversity. Just like my hometown, Chicago is city that supports school choice. But from my own experience, I can see how these choices might overwhelm students and foster negative perceptions of the schools deemed “other” by students whose choices separate them from the general school population over the years. My experience taught me how education is about more than just a means to an ivory tower end – it’s about cultivating communities, learning from the people around you, and finding your place in the world. Unfortunately, and probably unintentionally, I think school choice has the adverse effect of undermining these aspects of education. It’s my hope that communities like Thornton, Chicago, and countless others can keep these ideas in mind as the debate over education reform continues.

-Hannah Skaran is a summer intern at GenAll and a rising senior at University of Chicago.

RETHINKING MY HIGH SCHOOL CHOICE

JUNE 27, 2017



Though it might be unusual to hear from someone working at Generation All, I was a private school kid. The tiny private high school I attended was created in 2007 with an initial graduating class of only 49 students. Although my parents are attendees of, employees of, and general supporters of public education institutions, they had heard through the grapevine about a new “independent” high school opening up in the neighborhood next to ours that promoted an education heavily focused on college admissions and encouraged my older brother to apply. With the help of generous financial aid, my brother was admitted to the school and became a part of the first graduating class of students. A few years later as I was nearing freshman year I was given two options: attend the new, shiny private high school but give up my involvement in YMCA gymnastics (as it would be unaffordable to do both, even with financial aid), or continue with my favorite sport and attend the public neighborhood school. The pressure to go to what was considered the “smart kids’ school” seemed to outweigh all the benefits gymnastics had provided for me such as rigor, discipline, friendship, strength, and a second home.

I had done little research on either of the schools, instead basing my perceptions on gossip and anecdotes. I came to realize much later that my perceptions of both of these schools were somewhat misleading.

What surprised me was that the most challenging aspect of going to the private school wasn't the academics, but the social life. Although I had a comfortable childhood, many of the friends I made at this high school lived in an entirely different world of wealth. While my family went camping for our vacations and splurged on dinners at local chain restaurants once or twice a month, my peers had already experienced lavish European vacations, had refined tastes in dining, and lived in mansions out on the edges of the city. While I made some amazing friendships throughout my time there, struggling to keep up with these students was stressful and sometimes embarrassing, and overall I felt like I didn't truly belong. Despite the social struggles, I set aside my grievances and focused on college admissions.

I had dreams of moving to New York or Chicago to pursue my education in a big city. Helping students get into college was one of the purported strengths of the school and I was lucky enough to be admitted to the University of Chicago, something I assumed would have been impossible without the help of the school. But as the Facebook posts of my old friends from elementary and middle school that went to the public neighborhood school started to explode with excited statuses about their admissions to amazing colleges and programs all over the country, I began to doubt the supposed essentiality of my school. After talking to a few of my old friends I was surprised by how much I had missed out on by not going to the neighborhood school. They had sporting teams and events that my school was too small to support, they got together at each other's houses after class to do homework and hang out while I hardly visited my friend's homes since everyone lived so far away, they had a wider variety of classes to choose from, and nearly all of them had been accepted into colleges, universities, or training programs.

I think there is a commonly held belief that private schools provide more for their students in terms of extracurriculars and academic enrichment, and are therefore a superior choice, but in my

situation that was not the case. While I don't think private schools are to blame for this perception, I wish I had been exposed to a more nuanced view of my options when choosing a high school, as I am still unsure if I attended a school that was truly the correct fit for me.

I harbor a large amount of gratitude towards my high school, but I simultaneously find myself frustrated by the exclusivity of my high school and many others like it, as they seem to only further issues of socio-economic segregation and negative perceptions of public schools. Now, having worked for several years in the CPS system, I have become an enthusiastic supporter of public neighborhood schools and the incredible effort staff and administrators put in to help students have the most rewarding and enriching experience possible. Working at Generation All has provided me with the opportunity to become even more involved with the improvement of public neighborhood schools, and I am so excited to see what the summer has in store for us!

REFLECTIONS ON HIGH SCHOOL

BY SARAH GOUREVITCH ON AUGUST 18, 2016



Sarah Gourevitch, Generation All Intern and Student at the University of Chicago

I attended high school in a small town in the suburbs outside of New York City. It was the typical suburban school experience in many ways: students came from within the one square-mile boundary, we had cafeteria cliques, book fairs, and annual pep rallies. I started kindergarten with the same 160 classmates with whom I graduated, after attending the same elementary, middle and high schools. My experience was also different from others' in the suburbs. In my second-grade class of 23 students, there were 11 different languages spoken at home. "Where are you from?" really meant, "Where are your grandparents from?" and kids would meticulously breakdown their heritage into sixteenths.

Perhaps as a vestige of our immigrant culture, there was an obsession with “achievement”. As early as middle school, it wasn’t uncommon to hear “well, it’ll look good on college applications” as a reason to participate in an activity, or “I can’t, I have homework” as an excuse not to spend time with friends. At school, I was surrounded by competition. After any piece of work was returned, there were forbidden whispers of “*What’d you get, what’d you get?*” and the clicking of calculator keys, as students factored the new grade into their averages. Everything was a number, everyone knew theirs, and wanted to know everyone else’s to see how they measured up. When college tours and applications rolled around, we were introduced to a website that mapped our SAT scores and GPAs against those of previously accepted, rejected and waitlisted students at any given college. Whatever our outcomes, it seemed we would each become just one more data point.

My school’s fixation on test scores and resume lines was certainly rooted in good intentions: parents wanted the best for their children, a myriad of opportunities at their disposal. The “best” started with the best test scores and extracurricular activities to grant them the coveted acceptances into the “best” colleges, which would springboard them into a successful career—or so the narrative goes. However, by focusing exclusively on these important end goals, intrinsic motivation was lost. Cheating was rampant. Hallways were full of students copying homework before class and programming test answers into graphing computers before a test. This norm represented the community’s value of grades over how and why they are achieved.

While several friends spent their summers at academic summer programs, I ran away to circus camp every June (and to trapeze class every weekend). Unlike at school, in the circus, I was constantly eager to learn and improve. While building human pyramids, I was learning about teamwork, collaboration and communication. By creating aerial acts over days or months, I was learning time management and how to work towards goals. I was instilled with a positive attitude through enduring the five-pushup circus penalty for saying the word “can’t”. In the circus, I was surrounded by a supportive community: I had role models

to look up to, peers to teach and learn from, and people to continuously encourage and push me to accomplish more than I ever thought I could.

I yearned for a school experience like my circus education: I wanted to have input in shaping my learning and freedom to explore my curiosities. I remember staying up late at night, eager to break free of a monotonous, number-driven, and bell-scheduled life, researching all the possibilities that high school could be—semesters at sea, music conservatories, alternative private schools, schools without grades or required classes—but each possibility seemed to be across the world or have a big price tag very few could afford. I was left wondering how school could incorporate the excitement and drive to learn I experienced in circus.

Now, I volunteer in high schools and hope to become a teacher. I hope to help provide my students with what I lacked in school, but found in the circus. I admire and am excited to work with Generation All's model of integrating communities and schools, emphasizing not only academics, but also experiential learning, social emotional learning, technology and innovation, and wrap-around services. This is not only the education system that I wanted, but also what I wish to work in for my future students. With support, community, and inspiration, their education will do even more than prepare them for college applications and graduation; it will instill in them a love of learning and the perseverance to pursue whatever success means to them.

MY JOURNEY TO KELLY HIGH SCHOOL

BY GISELLE HERRERA ON JULY 18, 2016



Giselle Herrera, Generation All Intern from Thomas Kelly High School

A New Starting Point

My eighth grade year was all about preparing to go to high school. My mind was set to go to Whitney M. Young Magnet High School. However, my parents weren't so keen on letting me go to a high school where I would have to take public transportation. It was not safe and I was too young, they would say. Instead of the forty-five minute train ride it would take to get to Whitney Young, my parents preferred for me to go to my neighborhood school, Thomas Kelly High School, because it was a five minute walk away. I never wanted to go there but I still applied to their IB program as my backup. It had a bad reputation and I wanted to go somewhere better. I had heard many stories of students fighting, students getting their

personal belongings stolen, and students always cutting class. Students even had to use transparent book bags and go through metal detectors every morning. I hated the thought of going to Kelly, not just because of the reputation it had, but because I knew that the majority of the students from my elementary school, James Shields Elementary School, would be there as well. I wanted to get away from them and start fresh.

To actually get into the school of my dreams, I had to apply and take the Selective Enrollment test. In the application I had to rank my choices and my top one was Whitney followed by Jones and Lane Tech. I took the test early January at King College Prep High School. After an excruciatingly long wait, my results came in the mail one Sunday morning in late March. At first I was not hopeful that I had gotten any offers because many people I knew had already received their results and they weren't accepted to the high school of their choice. However, I opened the letter and saw that I was offered a spot at Whitney Young! I was ecstatic. This amazing feeling did not last long, however. The second I told my mother, she told me she was not going to let me go.

Expect the Unexpected

For weeks on end I begged and begged my parents to let me go, but to no avail. It was dangerous to go far and I would have to wake up too early to get there. In the end I chose Kelly but I could not be more grateful for going there. I have made amazing new friends and established even closer friendships with the people I went to elementary school with. There are many wonderful opportunities at Kelly that I never knew I could find. Their IB and honors program is preparing me for life after high school. For example, in my AP European History class, the teacher treated us and taught us like we were college students. He would give us lectures and it would be up to us to take notes and keep up. We were also responsible for keeping track of the deadlines for our assignments and turning them in. In fact, there are many students that have taken his class and graduate but come back to tell him that his class really prepared them for college. Their courses were just like his class.

This fall, as a senior, I am going to take some more AP classes, an IB class, as well as other honors classes. I will also continue take advantage of the many other opportunities that Kelly offers like the Key Club and the Spanish Club. Since I really love helping out the community, Key Club is a great opportunity to help serve the community and the school. Last fall we volunteered to help give out refreshments at the Hot Chocolate 15k/5k run. The Spanish Club also focuses on helping the community and learning more about our Hispanic culture. In April, for Children's Day, we decided to create a story explaining the history of the piñata. Kelly opened my eyes and made me realize that I can do anything I want to do. I know I want to attend college and learn more even though I may not know what I want to study. If I had done my research back in eighth grade I would have realized all these things that Kelly could offer. I wanted to go to Whitney Young because it had a great reputation but that was pretty much it. I did not know much about the school and I did not bother to do much research. The search for a college will be different, however. I will research more about the courses offered and the extra-curricular activities that fit my wants and needs than the reputation.

I realize now that it does not matter much what school you go to. What matters more are the opportunities that you can find and the opportunities you take advantage of.

Unveiling the Truth

I have learned that education in Chicago is not equal. Everyone deserves a high-quality education and it is not fair that the focus of the push for that quality education only happens in select schools.

Neighborhood public high schools deserve the same resources and support that selective schools and charters schools receive. Many of my elementary school classmates go to charter schools or selective schools. I know many of them along with many people in the community look down upon neighborhood schools. Neighborhood public high schools offer many opportunities and the only difference between these schools and others are the amounts of resources and support that they lack. I know now that there should be a widespread effort in improving them because everyone deserves a chance to learn.

Education should not be a competition between schools and students.

Instead, education should be about creating a society where everyone can understand and learn from each other.

MY HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

BY TIYE STEPHENS ON JULY 11, 2016



Generation All Intern and Student at University of Chicago

I grew up in Stone Mountain, Georgia and went to Stone Mountain Middle School. Once I started sixth grade, I immediately joined the band and loved it. Most of my friends were in band, and I spent many hours a week practicing my clarinet. I already had a musical background since my family is musical and I started playing piano when I was six. For my future education, I envisioned probably what most of my band peers envisioned: I would go to Stone Mountain High School and be in the marching band then go to the University of Georgia and major in music. It made sense.

Then one night, when I was in 6th grade, my mom took me and my friends to see a musical at Dekalb School of the Arts. I'd never seen a live musical before. It was The Pajama Game. I don't actually

remember what the show was about— even after seeing it I probably couldn't tell you— but what I do remember is the experience. The singing, the dancing, the orchestra, and the sets were all so captivating. That's when I knew I had to be a part of something like that. I auditioned for the school the very next year and entered Dekalb School of the Arts (DSA) in 8th grade.

I auditioned as a piano major and creative writing minor. The school requires that each student earns credits from performing or working on crews for shows, so I also gained a lot of exposure to other art areas like dance and visual art. I learned important skills behind the scenes of live performances working on stage, lighting, and costume crews as well. I even ended up double-minoring in technical theater building sets and recording lighting cues.

DSA isn't like most of the other school in that area, and not just because of the arts aspect. One of the most noticeable differences is the diversity of the students. That's something that you won't see in very many Dekalb County public schools. A good number of schools are made up almost exclusively of one race or ethnicity. And it certainly isn't just a Dekalb issue. Diversity is an issue in most neighborhood schools across the US because most neighborhoods aren't diverse. The students were also very open-minded and had varying social and political views. I definitely benefited from learning in an environment amongst these students because I was introduced to so many different perspectives that have shaped the way I think about issues.

Looking at the school, you wouldn't think much of it— one hallway with 320 students. However, the school is pretty highly ranked as number 3 in the state. It didn't get to that position with much money either. We didn't have the resources of well-funded schools, and we were losing staff every year due to budget cuts. But we were motivated. Teachers who loved teaching brought up students who loved learning. Plus, we gained valuable knowledge in areas that we were passionate about. Everyone felt intelligent, talented, and valued, and we performed as such both academically and artistically.

I believe it was our attitudes toward education that took us so far. And I've always believed that the only difference between students in neighborhood schools and those in magnet or private schools is access to opportunity. Schools like DSA motivate students by offering the opportunity to work with staff who want to be there and the opportunity to expand on student's passions. That is why they are successful, and that is why I was so inspired by Generation All's initiatives to fund and enhance neighborhood schools. All students deserve the chance to be brought up in a learning environment that genuinely fosters their creativity and promotes their success, not one that merely tolerates them until graduation. This type of school should be able to exist and thrive in any community. Organizations like Generation All understand this and constantly work toward bringing schools like that to the Chicago neighborhoods that need them.

MY TIME AT ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL

BY ANGEL CHACON ON JULY 11, 2016



Angel Chacon, Generation All Intern from the University of Chicago.

I was definitely not planning on attending Roosevelt when I was an 8th grader at Palmer Elementary. As a kid on the north side of Chicago, I really didn't know what high schools were available, nor did I know what it would be like to go to a school that is far away from home. Consequently, I was set on going to Lincoln Park, the school my older cousin was attending at the time. The only other schools I wanted were Von Steuben, since my best friend was going there, or Lane Tech, which I believed to be very prestigious. In my mind, the worst case scenario was to go to my neighborhood school, Taft. When it was time to apply for high schools, I had to choose five, and my last two choices were a total mystery to me. Schools like Whitney Young and Northside Prep seemed laughably out of reach, and I had absolutely no idea

what other high schools were available, so I called my cousin and asked him for suggestions. He told me two names that he believed were good, and I applied to them: North Grand and Prosser.

As it turned out, I only received acceptance letters from North Grand and Prosser, but those schools were too far for me. I received nothing from Lincoln Park, Von Steuben, or Lane. To this day I have no idea if I was accepted. Defeated, I decided to enroll at Taft. On my way there with my mom, we got lost; we called a cab, and it just so happened that the driver's son went to Roosevelt. He convinced us that Roosevelt wasn't as bad as its reputation made it seem and we decided to enroll since it was closer to us than Taft.

In eighth grade, the thought of going to Roosevelt was a nightmare. At school, we would joke about Roosevelt's violent reputation, under the impression that it was unsafe and for low-achieving kids. To think that this "bad" school was suddenly an actual possibility for me was unbelievable. My first instinct was to transfer to another school as soon as possible, namely Von Steuben. However, as time went on, I learned that the cab driver was right all along.

Roosevelt was an enigma. Royal blue lockers and tiled floors created the impression of a warm retro TV high school that was juxtaposed by cold metal detectors and security guards. It was simultaneously predictable and unpredictable: fights were common and many kids didn't care about school, yet teachers went above and beyond their roles and students excelled in their classes.

Perhaps the most unpredictable thing for me, in those days, was how rewarding my experience actually was.

Students at Roosevelt didn't partition into cliques like they did in middle school, which allowed me to make friends with people of all kinds of interests and backgrounds. We had a lot in common, with most

students being poor students of color. Mexican, African American, and Filipino were some of the most represented ethnicities on campus, and we had almost any ethnicity with a diaspora due to Albany Park's historic popularity with immigrant groups. We were also diverse in interests, with some of my fellow graduates achieving contracts with colleges for basketball and football, going to Hollywood to pursue a musical career, studying to become aerospace engineers, doctors, and teachers, and taking over family businesses. Our students were not the only ones who were diverse; our teachers were coaches, chefs, biochemists, college professors, dancers, investors, beekeepers. They organized performances and community service projects, started sports teams from the ground up, and shared their time with us before school, after school, and even during their lunch; I know a few who would actually share their lunches with students. It was with these people that I learned and bonded, forming memories that constantly make me reminisce about high school.

The people of Roosevelt proved my eighth grade self wrong; an enriching and valuable education can happen anywhere that teachers and students invest time in learning. They kept me coming back to school in spite of the struggles we shared. In my time there, Roosevelt underwent a plethora of faculty, staff, and administrative changes due to budget cuts enacted by Chicago Public Schools. Millions were lost, resulting in less classes and extracurricular activities that were organized by teachers. The quality and quantity of our lunches dwindled as lunch lines lengthened from the lack of cafeteria attendants. The experience was worsened by the peak in conflicts between the Chicago Teachers Union and Chicago Public Schools, which resulted in longer school days and years and interruptions to our regular curriculum caused by strikes. As our poor school got poorer, pressure to succeed academically multiplied, forcing teachers to dedicate a substantial amount of class time to preparation for standardized testing. Additionally, the lack of resources made it harder to learn and do well in the first place. All of these challenges gave the impression that we as students aren't worth investing in, so we had to prove our worth. Our experience as poor students of color at Roosevelt was marked by systematic negligence that we knew all too well.

I didn't know much in 8th grade, but I already knew that not all Chicago public schools are created equally, and my experience at Roosevelt reinforced that belief. All of the schools I had thought of as "bad" were neighborhood schools, but it's the neighborhood schools that suffer the most from budget cuts and do the most for their students with what they have. My neighborhood school exposed me to systematic injustices that exist in this city while people who live, love, and learn educated me and developed my strong interest in social justice. At UChicago, I study History in order to understand how injustice and inequity became parts of our global society, as well as to look for solutions to the problems we face today by analyzing triumphs and mistakes of past generations. My experience and education have made me proud to be an alum of Chicago Public Schools and Roosevelt High School.

MEET GENERATION ALL STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBER AND INTERN, JESUS VELASQUEZ

BY JESUS VELASQUEZ ON SEPTEMBER 28, 2015



My name is Jesus E. Velazquez, and I am a youth organizer with the Logan Square Neighborhood Association. I am a senior at Kelvyn Park High School and my experience in school has made me get involved in education policy because it hasn't been the best. I was really interested in school before eighth grade. At my old schools we did a lot of hands of projects that were cool, and towards the end of my eighth grade year my friends were all excited and getting ready to go to high school. Everyone was excited but me because I didn't really have plans to stay in school because of my undocumented status. I thought even if I get a good job not having a social security number would stop me.

My first year in high school wasn't really anything new other than the people. It was the same "read a book and answer this sheet" routine for most of my classes. I had mostly regular level classes. I noticed

we didn't really do projects or go on field trips like the smarter classes. I thought this was just how things were and that's it. I ended up getting suspended my second year of high school for ten days and when I came back most of my teachers didn't really offer support or ask what happened; they just told me, "You should stop coming because your grades have already dropped." Small things like that kept me from getting motivated, so I barely went to school that year because there wasn't a point. I ended up going to court for a request of expulsion almost a year after the incident. When I went to the hearing they told me I could choose to go to an alternative school or stay in a CPS school but I would have to complete a smart program. (I felt this was really unnecessary because I had already served a two week suspension.) The smart program had lessons on how we could improve our lives. We learned about respecting ourselves and others, friendships, and alternative activities that wouldn't harm our bodies. The students were brown, black, and white. Some were there for arguing, fighting, or for using or selling drugs or alcohol.



After that year I started getting involved with the Logan Square Neighborhood Association through an After School Matters program. I soon got really interested because I felt I could actually help people. LSNA is a community organization that helps and provides a lot of services like affordable housing, safety routes, parent mentors etc. They also help the undocumented community by offering legal support and space for D.A.C.A (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and T.V.D.L.S (Temporary Visitors Driver's License) workshops. They also focus on education where youth play a big role. We were part of a coalition called V.O.Y.C.E, Voices Of Youth

in Chicago Education, which is a student led group. Our purpose was to reduce the school to prison pipeline, reduce suspension rates for minorities, and help implement restorative justice practices that would reduce suspensions. We got a couple of state bills passed, like one that limited suspension from 10 days to 5 days at most. We also stopped disciplinary fines and fees at charter schools and passed a transparency bill for charter schools requiring them to report the number of students they suspended, how long, why, and their race.

After learning about the school to prison pipeline from my LSNA and V.O.Y.C.E experiences, I realized that there was a system that had pushed a lot of my friends out of school, and I was almost pushed into that system as well. I felt it was time to end it, and that's why I joined Generation All. Generation All is a group that I heard about from a staff member at L.S.N.A, and he encouraged me to come to their meetings. I liked it because it was a big group of people trying to improve the education system. Besides me and a few students, principals, teachers, CPS staff and community organization representatives were working and talking to each other. Everyone was passionate to help improve schools, and it was a really great learning experience because I was able to ask questions about certain terms or conversations I didn't understand. I also learned how difficult the principals and teachers' jobs are. Principals worry about increasing test scores because they influence the school's report card, and as a result teachers aren't able to teach certain ways or use methods that might improve their students' learning experiences. Instead, teachers often teach students how to take test instead of teaching them the actual material. I know this because I had an experience with a teacher from a different high school who used drama to help students understand the reading better. When I asked why she did that instead of just reading the book, she informed me that sometimes teachers can't use certain methods if they're not improving the test scores.

I've seen a huge difference in neighborhood schools that are in low-income neighborhoods compared to schools up north where the richer folks stay. They have a lot more resources and because of that they are able to let teachers teach how they want because they are "showing progress." If neighborhood

schools had all the same resources as more resourced schools we would progress just as much. It's not fair that we are held to the same standards as people who don't have to worry about money, safety, or even a place to stay. I want to continue working with Generation All to present a plan and help improve how the whole system operates. If we as a city help students get those essential things they will have less to worry about and more time to actually focus on their education. I've appreciated my experience with Generation All so far because in the meetings my voice was heard and valued. I also liked that adults gave me and other students feedback on how we're so young but involved. That type of positive feedback makes me feel a little relieved and supported because it's nice to have people who feel just as passionate about something as you do. I also really like how we were learning from other people but also teaching them a little too.

After high school I plan to enroll at Wilbur Wright Community College for Occupational Therapy but continue my involvement in community work and helping others any way I can. Then I want to go back to become a chiropractor. I chose this career because growing up my parents have always had hard labor jobs and complained about back pains but couldn't afford medical assistance. I figured I can combine my community work with occupational and chiropractic experience to give back to the community and those in need.