

Center for Equity and Excellence

Presentation to NEASC Board of Trustees
September 16, 2004

Thank you for giving me this time to describe the new Center for Equity and Excellence which is attempting to solve a major and persistent issue in independent schools regarding the success of students of color and students from low-income families. The idea is not simply to focus on numbers and money, although these two factors certainly play significant roles in the diversity of our schools. As a focus, we hope to *improve the experiences of all* students in independent schools by working to alleviate the historical difficulties surrounding the issues of race and class.

It might be helpful to you to learn a little bit about how I came to think that the Center might be a good thing to work on.

About six weeks ago, I went to the Morningstar Baptist Church in Roxbury to a funeral of a young man named Biggie Gaines who was murdered while coaching basketball in a park across the street from his apartment. The reason I was there, with my daughter, among all those devastated people, was that Biggie had graduated from one of our member schools, Nativity Prep, and that I know several of his teachers. As we were leaving the church, we saw this 22-year-old kid laid out in an open casket in the lobby of the church; I hadn't met the boy, but was struck by his youth, healthy stockiness, and the tragedy of the whole youth/violence/inner-city dynamic. What *really* got to me, however, was seeing that he was going to be buried in a brand new, shiny white, Red Sox uniform. Here we had the hope of the Red Sox, which is eternal, and the hope of a young boy of promise, which had been eliminated.

Last night, I went to Fenway Park with one of my sons to watch the Red Sox beat the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. This was my fourth outing to Fenway this year and every time I go, I marvel at the variations in the crowd. You see rich and poor, old and young, fat and skinny, short and tall, men and women, the attractive and the not-so. But, what you do *not* see are black people or many Hispanic people. It is almost a *totally white crowd*. You'd think, with the prosperity of our country, with the diversity of our city, and the popularity of the Sox, that more people of color would show up.

In addition to these feelings about Biggie, Nativity Prep, and the Red Sox, I have been affected by a variety of *other* personal experiences:

- growing up in the South – I was just ending my 7th grade year in May 1954, when Brown vs. The Board of Education was decided; I was immediately shipped off to boarding school by my Dixiecrat father.
- having a daughter whose five years of teaching have only involved poor students of color
- many interactions with black and Hispanic kids in the independent schools I have worked in or visited through my NEASC work

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- meeting and getting to know many trustees, administrators, heads, and diversity coordinators, black and white, who are concerned about the experiences of black, Hispanic, and poor kids in our schools
- partnering with two extraordinary African-American women, Maria Alexander Bridges, a former trustee of two independent schools who holds both an M.D. and a Ph.D., and Sharon Lloyd Clark who has been the head of two schools, is on sabbatical from her most recent appointment, and who, because of her sabbatical, has become our first, part-time Director of the Center
- being an interested and observant witness to the incessant changes in the demographics of the state, the region, and the country

So, with all this piling up in my mind, I joined with Maria, and a dozen or so other school people, and started the Center for Equity and Excellence. What the Center has taken on is to promote nothing less than *cultural transformation* within entire school communities where issues of race and class are used as a lens to view quality of life issues on campus

As Michael Brosnan, the editor of *Independent School*, the magazine of the National Association of Independent Schools, has written: "It's no longer a matter of us (white educators) inviting them (students of color) to our school. It's about schools transforming themselves into communities that reflect the broader culture, and find moral strength and academic excellence in this diversity."

The diversity of our culture in this country does not reflect the culture of our independent schools. We understand why this is true and we're not necessarily advocating mirroring the culture in our schools. What we are advocating for is that the students of color and the poor kids who find themselves at our schools have a good and productive experience and are not allowed to be treated like, or *even feel like*, guests or visitors. Certainly, it would be great if *more* students and faculty of color could be included in our schools -- in order to be fair, equitable, and help cure the injustices of the past -- however, there is a larger, but less obvious, reason for doing this: we need to make our schools better for *all* our students, not just those who traditionally attend *or* the students of color or lower class who are relatively new admits to these schools.

For all children, school should be a second home, a place where they can grow and excel physically, mentally, and morally. While this growth *does* occur in schools that have homogeneous populations, the absence of diversity can limit it. Diversity in any school community forces those who feel at home to confront others, "foreigners," who may not find a place for themselves in the environment and who may feel alien. It is the foreigner's sense of alienation and discomfort that may make individuals and the community question themselves and their view of the world: members of the community may have to begin to see and deal with the complexity of living in a diverse setting, to develop the skills to form relationships across difference, and to rebuild, with the help of all members of the community, their schools to accommodate the needs of all students. In addition, diversity enables students to find real intellectual and emotional connections with those they may have previously considered foreign. The dialogue that can result

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from these encounters can unearth profound intellectual and moral conversations both within the classroom and within the community and can begin to dismantle stereotypes. A school and its constituents may enter a process of self-reflection that allows for transformational change that enriches the learning environment and possibilities of all students and that unleashes the innovative, revitalizing energies of an entire community. In this setting, where respect, inclusiveness, and social justice-- the bedrocks of diversity-- are nurtured, everyone can learn to his or her potential, everyone becomes a student, teacher, role model, or mentor, and everyone's humanity and gifts are welcomed and appreciated.

The moral and intellectual expansion and skills to be gained from such a setting will prepare students for the challenges they will face in this century. These skills and understandings are, in fact, *essential to their ability to determine their own destiny*, whatever their profession, and to be *productive citizens of the world*.

Diversity is a catalyst for our evolution as human beings. The creativity, generated from the healthful discomfort and tension around resolving issues of diversity, may help schools develop individuals with the consciousness to build a society that respects all human life and cultures.

We have been fortunate to have the support of Jake Ludes as we all plan to have the Center for Equity and Excellence become formally part of NEASC, Bill Bennett, who has allowed me to spend some of my Commission on Independent School time on this project, and Russ Quaglia, Endicott College, and the people at the Global Institute for Student Aspirations, who have been generous and accommodating with their time – after all, the Center has yet to have one dollar of gift, grant, or revenue income. I also want to thank Jay Stroud and other heads of school who have help us in the testing and piloting of our new opinion survey.

What our Steering Committee, our new Director, Maria, and I are working on during the next year are the following interesting, exciting, and, we hope, worthwhile projects:

- The piloting of a student opinion survey, developed in partnership with Russ and the Global Institute, which we hope will help schools assess where their students are with regard to issues of belonging, involvement, access, and achievement. We are working with more than a dozen schools and hope to complete some 6,000 surveys this fall.
- We will be working with the Commission on Independent Schools as it improves its standards and process for accreditation. Our hope is to help the Commission and its member schools develop appropriate and useful tools to improve the quality of life for *all* their students, through more effective programs for students of color and those from low-income families.
- We will develop strategic planning models for our schools, using diversity as a lens, and consult with schools who are interested in pursuing this process.

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- Through an outreach program, we will be sharing “best practices” in curriculum development, personnel policies, and school planning with diversity and multicultural issues in mind.

In closing, I'd like to provide a little prospective in thinking. If we, in education, think about an African woman living in slavery in Boston in the 1830's, our thinking will eventually lead us to Abraham Lincoln. However, if we think initially about Lincoln, we are not naturally led to that enslaved woman. We as adult leaders and teachers, especially white adults, need to guide all our students and faculty in the right direction so that they can see others, and themselves, more clearly.