

## **SAM Graduation Speech**

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Statistically, I should not be standing here today — a first-generation Puerto Rican-American female, raised in a single-parent household, educated in the public school system. My mother, brother and I lived in a rat-infested tenement building in a poor section of Brooklyn. She remarried when I was 13, and we moved to what we considered a better place: Newark, N.J. There, I continued to attend public school because we couldn't afford parochial school, and I went to what — looking back today — must have been one of the worst junior high schools in New Jersey. I'd wake up every morning afraid of going to school, but to school I went. Not attending was just not an option for my mother.

Even though I attended school faithfully, it was not until my junior high school English teacher Mr. Haight firmly asserted, "You are college material. You are going to college," that the prospect of higher education became a possibility in my mind. His words were a reaction to my happy news that my guidance counselor was arranging for me to enroll in a part-time vocational program. The course of my life changed in that instant. This is what I call the power of one — the power of one individual to make a positive difference in the life of another individual — and it is why I enrolled in SAM.

We are in the business of teaching children. We fail when students are unable to read, write or do math at appropriate levels. We fail when a significant number of students from certain segments of the population do not graduate. We fail when, as educators, we decide we are powerless to improve these outcomes. Over the past two years, SAM has sought to empower our graduating class by offering us a vision of leadership that focuses on expanding our schools' sphere of success.

SAM pushed me — no, shoved me — out of my comfort zone. There I was in my domain, the guidance office, superbly counseling children through their high school angst. The next thing I knew, I was sitting with teachers discussing their lesson plans and asking, "What exactly do you want your students to learn in this lesson?" and "How do you know they got it?" I admit I was a bit anxious. Yet I moved forward assessing my own strengths and weaknesses. Today I am more confident in my abilities to help a teacher develop clear goals and provide useful feedback on how to improve a lesson.

SAM assignments served to open dialogue among colleagues focused on improving specific student outcomes. I, and every SAM graduate, will affirm that this dialogue is imperfect and quite often messy, complicated and downright frustrating. Yet I believe it is the entry point at which leadership grounded in the principles of inquiry-based school reform can have the biggest impact in shifting a school's learning culture toward success for all.

Let me be clear here — as Susie Greenbaum, our SAM instructor, will confirm — I have on many occasions vigorously questioned the idea of inquiry-based school reform and its reliance on data. I am

wary of data, its interpretation and use. My sensitivity to an overreliance on data might stem from my experience in public relations. I learned to interpret available data in support of whatever or whomever I was promoting at the time. Aggregated data are often used to make grossly oversimplified assumptions about me as a so-called minority and what I should be capable of doing. My resistance to data could also stem from SAM assignments, which called for us to design one dreaded assessment after another that would reveal student learning gaps. It felt as if nothing was ever good enough. But how else, if not for data, are we to know what our students need to learn and what we need to teach them? So, yes, I have crossed over. Collecting data on student learning is an important part of that messy dialogue that engages us all.

Another aspect of the dialogue and a cornerstone of the SAM program is that of challenging assumptions and mental models about the student learning experience. I have had professors question my writing skills, well-meaning individuals comment on my ability to speak English without an accent, and employers tell me I don't look or sound Puerto Rican. If we are looking to move students toward the sphere of success, we must not make assumptions about them. We must challenge our own mental models of success. Someone once asked a group of educators, "Why is it that they (black and Latino parents) don't share our middle-class values of success?" The inquiry was not malicious in its intent but exposed the individual's mental model of black and Latino families. If the space to have that conversation had not existed, I and others who responded would not have been able to help shift this individual's mental model. It takes strong leadership skills to keep all of us safely engaged in the conversation.

As educators, we teach, we inspire and we function as change agents for the hundreds of thousands of children who enroll in our schools, sit in our classrooms and are counseled by us. As educational leaders, we have chosen to continue this work on a larger and more complex scale. Every SAM graduate is making a commitment to lead our educational system through its inevitable culture shift toward more accountability and measurable change.

Remember, educators are not failures as the media often portray us. And as educational leaders, we are better poised than anyone else to redefine public education. As President Obama plainly stated last night in his State of the Union address, education is our nation's greatest anti-poverty program. I'm a clear example of that.

I'd like to take this opportunity to publicly thank my family and friends for their never-ending support and belief in me. Thank you to Baruch, New Visions, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for their generous contributions to the future of education in New York City. And congratulations and best of luck to all of us as we move toward engaging families, students and colleagues in the necessary dialogue that will broaden our educational community's sphere of success.

Thank you.