

Preface

While the policing of youth in our society is not a new phenomenon, the heightened surveillance and punishment of both inappropriate personal conduct and learning in public schools is a new occurrence. Undoubtedly, we can attribute the overemphasis, almost obsessive emphasis, Texas school districts such as Austin Independent School District (AISD) place on examinations such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) as a legacy of Governor George W. Bush and a precursor to the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act. With the passing of the NCLB Act, we have witnessed an increased attention to the “adequate yearly progress” of primary and secondary school students across the country without regard to the socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors—teen pregnancy, single-parent households, English not spoken at home, and families separated by borders—that shape and prevent so-called proficiency in reading and math. Children and young adults are now accountable for their educational achievement in an institution that is riddled with the same race, class, gender, and sexual inequalities that plague society at large.

Similarly, the enactment of “zero tolerance” policies by school districts like AISD in response to Chapter 37 of the Education Code has led to misuse and abuse by educators. Chapter 37, which requires the removal of students for crimes like sexual assault or drug possession, also allows for the judgment of teachers and administrators in determining instances of misconduct that warrant removal. Unfortunately, it is students of color and other underrepresented students who officials have disproportionately targeted and placed in disciplinary alternative education programs for infractions as minor as chewing gum, speaking too loudly, or carrying Advil. The majority of educators in urban schools, who are white, have

found an easy way to rid themselves of “disruptive” youth of color. It is imperative, then, for us to wonder about the kind of climate of learning created by zero tolerance policies and excessive testing. At a fundamental level, the very institution that exists to address the needs of youth is failing them. How can we expect this generation of youth to learn to be better citizens, human beings, if schools no longer stress a love and interest in humanism and the knowledge that reflect these traditions? What type of education are they getting if their main goal is to pass a test and maintain a draconian status quo? Simply put, our schools are erasing the civil liberties of youth and putting the blame on them.

This crisis in education is neither a distant nor some other city’s problem, but is happening in AISD schools. Several schools have operated under the threat of closure for a number of years, including Johnston High School, because they have not met federal and/or state standards of acceptable academic performance. The TAKS scores of Johnston students, according to the Texas Education Agency, continue to be unacceptable. Additionally, AISD youth report that zero tolerance policies further create an inhospitable environment, where their education takes a backseat to eradicating perceived “criminal” behavior. Still, no local, state, or federal governmental agency or body has suggested a holistic solution that addresses the obstacles and struggles that “low-performing” and “at-risk” students encounter daily in inner-city schools with stretched resources, teachers, and large student bodies. Only grassroots and community-based organizations have truly heeded the challenge to take back the schools and dismantle the micro-police states that are destroying our educational systems.

In this second year at Johnston High School, Save Our Youth (SOY) continues to cement and nurture the relationship began in 2005 upon the impetus of English teacher Camille DePrang. SOY, a Red Salmon Arts (RSA) program dedicated to the empowerment and creativity of

youth, works with “hard-to-reach” students in writing clinics. The intensive writing workshops serve as vehicles where youth can self-express, self-reflect, grow and heal through poetry. They are safe spaces where the RSA facilitators encourage participants to fully delve into their lived experiences. Here we do not censor subject matters nor dismiss a piece of writing if it does not fit some future test. Indeed, the strength of the workshops lay in the uncovering and recovery of what RSA Executive Director and internationally renowned poet Raúl Salinas calls our “medicine stories,” which we sometimes quiet as a result of shame, trauma or retaliation. Yet, we must write in order to begin to recover our histories, our cultures, and ourselves.

In *On the Meeting Grounds*, we read poetry that defies the “unacceptable academic rating” that has haunted Johnston for the last four years. The SOY authors have written texts that illustrate strength, resistance, beauty, wittiness, and a command of language that call into question the usefulness of labels and rankings. Moreover, through their poems, they dare us to confront the entirety of their life stories. We bear witness to the dislocation and alienation between family and friends, the fragmentation caused by low-intensity and high-intensity warfare, questions about the role and purpose of organized religion, and the shortsightedness and superficiality of educators and policy-makers who dismiss them and their school. These poets also invite us to share in their desires, goals, and futures, which convey their compassion, humor, and willfulness. Ultimately, we are asked to listen and see beyond the negative attention that has surrounded their school. As Charlie Ramirez states in his poem “Meeting Grounds,” which inspired the title to the collection, “The laughter never dies in our world/and we battle for respect.”



Numerous people were instrumental in making this publication and we thank them con todo corazón. First, we are grateful to Camille for her deep commitment to SOY

and the work we do. Her invitation to conduct workshops with the students of Johnston High School created a much-needed bridge to the voices of these youth. Second, thank you to gifted poet Erika González for assisting in the facilitation of the workshops. Third, we appreciate Mariama Konneh's generosity in sharing her lovely artwork that we feature in the chapbook. Fourth, we thank the poetas of Johnston High School, whose vision and hopefulness allows SOY to grow. Finally, we are indebted to Raúl for his ongoing support and guidance, which makes SOY and RSA possible.

—Lilia Raquel Rosas,
Osten, Tejas,
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