Final Action Plan Progress Report

During my time attending Brown University’s Global Health Leadership course, I discovered how important education is to all facets of life. My action plan began as an ambitious goal to improve education in rural Tanzania by raising my own school’s tuition by 400 dollars per year. This way, every student at my school would represent a Tanzanian student now able to attend school, purchase textbooks, receive adequate nutrition, and primary medical care, and eventually retain employment sufficient to feed and improve the wellbeing of his or her own family. I soon discovered, however, that with so many families already struggling to afford my school’s tuition, the administration was unwilling to increase tuition to help a faceless child thousands of miles away. As I thought on how to adapt my original action plan to become more realistic, I decided to focus on children in my own community.

From prior experiences, I knew that Baltimore students faced similar issues to children in the developing world. Since the 9th grade, I have tutored 5th graders at the local KIPP School in English and Math. Only about 5% of graduating Baltimore City high school students, who also pass the high school proficiency test, completes a college degree. Teenage pregnancy rates remain one of the highest in the nation and so does Baltimore City’s illiteracy rate. This past year, I took an elective course, which concentrated on social injustices. For our final paper, I researched the history and current controversies surrounding Baltimore City public education. This past fall, I attended the Brown’s Leadership Institute Symposium on Social Action, where I heard Mayor Angel Taveras speak. The way Mayor Teveras described the challenges and changes taking place in Providence reminded me a lot of Baltimore. These experiences fueled my desire for combating unequal access to education as a method to improve individual wellbeing.

To take action, however, I knew I must first obtain a comprehensive understanding of the Baltimore City educational issues at hand. For eight weeks this summer, I interned at the Johns Hopkins School of Education where I assisted in planning for the imminent opening of a new early childhood through eighth grade school that Johns Hopkins will be operating in East Baltimore, a highly impoverished neighborhood with poor access to quality education. This school, known as Henderson-Hopkins, embodies a lot of what I learned during my time at Brown’s Leadership Institute last summer. To truly have an impact, it is not enough to treat one symptom of a problem. In addition to providing an innovative education to its students, Henderson-Hopkins will offer healthcare and family services to its students and their families. During my internship, I extensively researched how schools can be instrumental in the revitalization of impoverished neighborhoods. I also attended meetings with city councilmen to discuss education policy in Baltimore.
During these meetings, I used a lot of what I learned last summer at Brown and the Leadership Symposium regarding active listening and effective public speaking. I also now have a new appreciation for how difficult it is to bring novel concepts and educational opportunities to a neighborhood with entrenched political leadership. Prior to this experience, I would have thought that it was simply enough to offer the resources to an urban area that lacked them. Now, I appreciate how entangled educational policy is with local politics, and how important leadership and strategic long-term thinking are.

My involvement with Henderson-Hopkins will not end this summer. In the fall, I have an independent study with a teacher at my high school in lieu of a traditional class, which will focus on the history and current issues facing the Baltimore City public education system. During this time, I will continue to work with the Johns Hopkins School of Education on negotiations with the school district to impact policy. I am convinced that the final outcome will not only better the lives of the students enrolled in Henderson-Hopkins but also students in public schools citywide. In addition to my work with Henderson-Hopkins during my independent study, I will continue to expand my own knowledge by reading books on Baltimore’s education system such as *Brown in Baltimore* by Howell S. Baum. This year, I was elected to be a leader of my school’s KIPP tutors. This will keep me connected to the improvement of education in Baltimore on an individual and community basis. As a leader, I hope to spread awareness by getting more people involved with tutoring at KIPP. My action plan is now to learn as much as possible about Baltimore City education, and to take whatever steps I can to improve it, whether by assisting individual students or helping to shape policy.

My advice to students beginning their action plans is to start locally. Starting close to home not only allows you to give back to your community, but is also a much easier way to get hands-on experience, working face-to-face with others. I have found that the relationships I have formed through working on my action plan have been much more meaningful to me than the satisfaction of simply making a donation. In addition, my action plan has taught me the importance of peering over social boundaries to learn about those in other racial and socioeconomic groups. Before learning about the educational disparities in Baltimore City, they were easy for me to ignore. Since beginning my action plan, I have gained a sense of responsibility to the very same educational system that I have been lucky to avoid.