

TRUE / SLANT

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Can 36 Hours on Campus Change a High Schooler's Life?

When thinking about our nation's schools and students, I tend to follow the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci's idea of "pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will"—seeing the world as it is, without rose-colored glasses, and trying to change it despite what we know. So although this page often includes stories and commentary on problems facing kids, families, teachers, schools, and communities, I generally am optimistic about our chances of making things better.



One of the reasons for my optimism is George Dong, a first-year [Teach For America](#) teacher at [Urban Prep Academy](#), an all-boys charter school in Chicago. Over MLK weekend, when most teachers were getting a well-deserved break, George took three of his freshmen students on an overnight trip to his alma mater, the University of Michigan. (Full disclosure: I am George Dong's Teach For America alumni mentor.)

The boys watched Michigan upset Connecticut in men's basketball and then rushed the court with the student body, toured campus, ate in the dining halls, and met journalist/newscaster Gwen Ifill after her MLK Symposium lecture. They marveled at how friendly the squirrels were, at the support available through the academic writing center, and at the fact that wherever and whenever you choose to cross the street, cars will stop for you. They also noticed the "vibe" of the school. In *The University Record's* [story about the visit](#), student Steven May explained,

The atmosphere is really encouraging. I want to be an anesthesiologist. Where I come from, if I told someone that, they would say, 'Quit playing.' Here, everyone supports you. You feel like you can succeed.

In *The Michigan Daily's* [story documenting their visit](#) (these guys got some serious press coverage!) Dong explained that the trip to campus was a

*concrete and critical step to reverse the current disturbing trend of failure for my students. I will not allow my students to fall into the trap of negative stereotypes and low expectations. I intend that all of my students will not only graduate from high school, but also will succeed in college.**

This kind of attitude and effort is exactly what students in our urban schools need. Kudos to Mr. Dong for setting such a good example for his students, and for the rest of us. And thank you, George, for helping me remain optimistic that, with a lot of hard work, "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education."

*The word "concrete" in the excerpt above also can be used with regard to how such a trip benefits students. As I wrote in my September 17 post, [Convincing high school students to give it the old college try](#), "...many teenagers know little about college. They don't understand how much work is involved, how much fun and

freedom there is, or how large the economic payoff can be. Therefore, they do not see college as the logical and necessary next step in their educational process.... Unfortunately, this can render ineffective a teacher's use of college as a motivator/incentive." A well-designed trip like this allows students to see for themselves the rewards of working hard and performing well during high school. It turns the abstract notion of college into something concrete that they have experienced and want to experience again.