



Urban League of  
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# DIS/PARITY PROJECT



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## *My Experience at Norristown Area High School*

By Kevin W.

11<sup>th</sup> Grade



As an African American in Norristown Area High School, my experience has been faced with many challenges. Norristown Area School District is a school district that is mostly African American and Latino. Norristown is a low-income area. Despite being a low-income area, it still has some ways to help people who need it. These are things like after-school programs, food pick-ups, after-school academic help, and much more. Norristown Area School District does food pick-ups, where people can go to one of a few designated schools to pick up food. The after-school academic help in Norristown Area High School (NAHS) is a program called “GEAR UP”. It is put in place for people to get extra help.

There are positives about being in the district, but there are also negatives as well. In NAHS, the students are high-risk students when it comes to falling into the wrong lifestyles. A lot of the kids are misguided and especially lack parental guidance. There are fights every day and various other bad acts. People pulling fire alarms, severe truancy, fighting security guards and cops, drug incidents, bomb threats, and much more.

The first thing that comes to people's minds when they think about NAHS is the violence. Everywhere on social media, you see lots of fights. At one point during the school year, around late September to mid-October, there were around four major fights a day. At first, they tried to ignore the fighting and hope everything would solve itself. But with people jumping off of tables like it's WWE, corny motivational speeches and mottos won't solve this issue. This led to the school getting very strict very fast. To combat the fighting, they revamped security and implemented a “two- fights and you're out” system. At the moment, it helped with fighting and violence and it wasn't as severe as it once was. But fighting is only one problem they are barely containing out of a sea of other problems.

The next step the school is trying to take is to prevent truancy. They noticed lots of disruption and chaos in the hallways in the middle of classes. Maturity seems to be a major issue in the school. Because of COVID, students are a year behind when it comes to maturity, so COVID freshmen are still acting like 8<sup>th</sup> graders. In other terms, Norristown Area High School doesn't have one freshman class, it has two. Which would explain the spike in skipping classes and not taking responsibility and accountability for their actions.

In my personal experience, staying focused in school was always a challenge. There are many bad things to fall into that will lead you down the wrong path. As a result, I was not doing as well as I should have in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Mostly due to a bad working environment; like people being disruptive in class, being in a school full of violence and drugs, getting pulled into the wrong crowd, etc. But

being in a situation when the school was on lockdown helped me focus academically. I went from being a “C” student to a straight “A” student my sophomore year. My junior year is going well too. As I continue to be in the school, I learn how to block out the noise. NAHS is not all bad though. Just because it’s may seem all bad on the surface, there are still some teachers and staff that truly care about the school and the students. In fact, in my experience, the students that cause the problems are in the vast minority. Many of the teachers there are in agreement as well. I feel like people in the school need motivation but more importantly, they need guidance.

There are many issues in the school that are brought in from the outside. Broken families, poor living conditions, gang activities, relationship drama, disagreements on social media, and the everlasting list goes on. But that does not mean we can’t resolve the issue. I use the word resolve because these problems are way too complicated to be solved 100% in the conclusion paragraph of an essay. But in my experience, as being a student in the Norristown Area School District my whole life, and being an African American, I feel the best way to start is at the core. People need proper guidance. When kids are little, they see behaviors and mimic them. People instinctively make decisions, yes, but their behaviors are directly linked to their environment. When people do not get the proper guidance early on in life, they tend to be immature and out of control. That is proven one to one with people being immature due to learned COVID behaviors. These problems can be fixed over time, but NAHS still has a lot of good. Our new principal, Dr. McGriff, is caring and passionate about the success of our students. He has only been principal for a few months, so he is bound to make mistakes along the way. His motto is “Eagles fly when they are in the right place at the right time.”, but I somewhat disagree. African Americans are resilient, we were never in the right place at the right time but still thrived. We have gone through a lot of change in the past three hundred years, but we have to be in control of our own destinies. Sure, we are at a disadvantage statistically, but that makes our success so much sweeter. Stars that shine in the day shimmer like the sun rays in a calm lazy river. But stars that shine in the night, are brighter than everything else in the universe!

## *My Experience at Norristown Area High School*

By Cara D.

12<sup>th</sup> Grade



My experience with Norristown Area High School has been an up and down narrative. There are some negatives, just as many positives. I always think of the positive things and discuss how I can change the negative by thinking of a positive solution. Some of the positive things that I enjoyed in high school were sports, technology class and making new friends. Unfortunately, these positives were put to the test the first day of my senior year. At Norristown Area High School, it's been fighting every day, shootings, students smoking and drinking and other outrageous actions. Most of us students get a lack of attention and many don't care anymore and aren't learning anything and just want to pass.

During COVID, it was hard because everybody was online and not getting the help they needed when failing. I had my own challenges and when COVID hit, my grades started to decrease. It was very hard for me because I'm horrible at math and I need to be in-person to grasp the concepts. Every time I woke up, it was like I didn't care anymore to learn, and I just gave up physically and mentally. Recently, all my friends have been talking about COVID and how it has affected us in a way. They all said learning was harder and they gave up and really do not care anymore, and as students of color we feel that teachers and administration have not heard our concerns and when we plead about academic burnout. Many students complained about their declining confidence in academics caused by virtual learning and wished we were in-person. Our plea falling on deaf ears would eventually cause other issues.

One day, an emergency incident occurred when I was in my second period class and the principal announced the entire school was on lockdown. I could tell by the tone of his voice; he was not kidding, and we were in danger. Some students were laughing and playing around as this may have been a regular drill, but I felt different. A couple of hours went by and when we were leaving the school, we noticed we were surrounded by police officers with guns and dogs. Teachers instructed us to go to the football field and wait, and we stood on the empty field for more than an hour not knowing what exactly was occurring. A lot of people said there was an active shooter at the school and others stated there were bombs planted in the schools. No matter the legitimacy of the rumor, I was extremely terrified. I'm not going to tell any lies; I would have never thought in a million years that this would ever happen at my school. Because of the overexposure to so much violence in our local communities, students thought it was a joke. Unfortunately, they don't care about the community, they don't care about themselves, they don't care about anything and that's the problem. But how can they care, when we live in an inequitable society and it permeates the halls of our institution of learning.

Food equity and access to fresh food is one of the main issues at Norristown High School. A lot of students complain about the food sources because we get hungry during the day and when we go to lunch, the food is not pleasant. Sometimes our milk is spoiled, the food sometimes has mold in it, and this is not a good look to the school, as many of us are students of color. I know that the lunch ladies, many of whom look like me, are doing their best but I feel it's the school system and they don't care about us and our access to fresh food. Does North Penn or Upper Dublin, both wealthier districts, have the same meager conditions? I do not think so.

Another inequity at Norristown Area High School is the condition of school. I find that our school is not well kept and sometimes extremely dirty. How are we expected to learn if what we see around us is filthy? Again, this is a larger issue that other wealthier school districts do not need to contend with.

When my mother attended Norristown Area High School, she enjoyed all of her experiences. My mother would always talk about how much she enjoyed her teachers, friends, clubs, and meeting new people. She mentioned back in the 90's they had a lot of fun, there were no conflicts or turf wars and everyone got along. She and her friends went to football and basketball games and it would be "popping" as she would say. I feel like if we were like that, we wouldn't have to contend with so much. But since we have fights, people with guns, inequitable conditions, many have given up hope and can't see the light of success as the end of the tunnel.

Though I spoke of so many unfortunate truths, there are many positives. One is our girls' basketball team, which is fun and nurtures the principle of teamwork. Another positive is my experience with the Central Montgomery County Technical School, where I've learned and have been exposed to the food industry. In addition, my college and career counselor, Ms. Mitchell has helped me with my college applications. With her help, I have received four college acceptances so far! Along with Ms. Mitchell, Ms. Jenn Thompkins, my College and Career Coach, has helped and taught me so many college preparatory skills, so that I would be accepted to those four colleges. I thank goodness that she has helped me and now I feel confident that not only will I matriculate to college, I will also graduate. And lastly, my friends have helped me so much during my four years at Norristown Area High School. Though the world can be unfair and cruel, I am confident my experience with Norristown Area High School has emboldened me to speak up for injustice and continue building a more equitable world for generations to come.

## *Reflections of a Norristown Student*

Naiona B.  
12<sup>th</sup> Grade



As a student of color, your experience in any school district always varies. In the Norristown Area School District my experiences have always been short of exciting. As of recently, the experiences have been getting a lot more chaotic and frantic.

As some may know, we recently had a lockdown. We were put in a ‘sheltered place’, the SWAT showed up, the students were evacuated by SWAT members with huge guns onto the football field and so many other things happened that day. The day started off as any other day would start. We went to every class, and right when my teacher stood in the front of the classroom, a panicked principal came onto the loudspeaker saying that we were in lockdown mode. Everyone then began barricading the doors and continued on like it was a drill. Our principal came back on the loudspeaker, let us know that it was not a drill, and to get to a classroom as quickly and quietly as possible. The fear and panic in that grown man’s voice let me know right then and there “This isn’t a joke”. We then sat in the classroom for about two hours. It felt like a lifetime, between the constant texts and phone calls from family members checking in on us, to the inaccurate updates parents were posting on social media outlets. Then finally a white man with this huge gun shows up at our door and escorts us out of the building onto the football field. We then stood on the field in the beaming hot sun for about thirty minutes before our parents started marching towards the school. The principal and other leaders of the school then shut and locked the gates so the students couldn’t get out, or the parents couldn’t get in. Moments later, it felt like a scene out of a movie where students started jumping over the super high fences to be reunited with their parents. That day was truly one for the books at Norristown Area High School.

Another thing that I experienced within the Norristown Area School District is gang violence. We have little minor gangs within the two campuses of Norristown Area High School (NAHS) and we sometimes have to deal with fights. One day, there was an incident between two groups of students. A boy was going to class and was jumped by a group of four other boys. His friends were nearby, and then joined in the fight. This was the start of a minor brawl. To others this may seem like a normal self-defense issue, but it was two small ‘gangs’ beefing with one another, and he just got caught lacking. On the Roosevelt campus of Norristown Area High School, there may be separate incidents we may never even hear about. Now don’t get me wrong, we have not always been this bad.

During my younger years, I felt as if Norristown was the best school district ever. I had amazing teachers who cared about my classmates and I. A cousin of mine, Thad, had a good experience in his years in the Norristown School District. He had teachers like mine. Teachers of the district made him feel seen and heard. His teachers openly listened to his emotions in the classroom. Thad

also felt like no one was against him and was embraced and the teachers cared for him. The teachers that the schools in the district picked have always been the perfect fit. They care, they impact others, and they aren't selfish. The teachers within the district impacted Thad so much that he decided to pursue his career in activism and education within our district. My experience within the district has also impacted me to be a leader and become a mentor.

During my years in the Norristown School District, I saw so many things other schools may or may not have to deal with (or what they choose to not publicize). Chronic skipping, bad test scores and troubled youth are major issues. There are many people whom I saw go through things and all I wanted to do was help them. So, I got the opportunity to. I joined the girls' basketball team, became Black Student Union Co-President, and joined Norristown Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Student Mentoring Program. To a person of color like me, your experiences somewhere are what motivate you and make you who you are. In the district, I heard and saw so many people who I wanted to help, so I made it my mission to help others. I interact with the younger kids that some teachers and other students don't want in the classrooms with them. Now I help the administration with the students, help teachers with lesson plans and even make my own for the Black Student Union. My most recent job was the mentoring program that I was recommended to by a teacher. Others may not see this as much, but I see it as my way to give back to Norristown. Basically, without these thirteen years in Norristown Area School District, I wouldn't be who I am today.

## *My Time at Norristown Area High School*

Carmelo D.

1<sup>st</sup> Year College Student



Throughout my high school experience, there were many positive and some negative thoughts that came to my mind. The transition from elementary to middle school and then from middle to high school were very different. Now that I am older, I definitely am aware of the huge discrepancies with the transitions and expectations of each, which I was required to engage in as a student. Just like any other things, in life, there are always some positive things as well as negative things, which is a great way of learning, growing, and building your legacy.

In high school, I didn't have the best grades, didn't do well with tests and assessments, and don't think that I learned a lot because I struggled. I struggled because I didn't ask for help and didn't apply myself as much as I should have. As a recent graduate, I understand my grade point average would have increased, if I applied myself at that time.

My major challenge was that I wanted to focus on writing and nothing else. The classes didn't spark my interest which impacted my overall performance in high school.

Learning about history would have sparked my interest. I found our history classes at Norristown Area High School focused more on a Euro-centric history rather than the history of the African diaspora. History class could have gone into more detail with the African American backgrounds and how our ancestors were; treated, fought for our rights, got us to where we are today, as well as how they invented so many things we use today. The good thing is now African American History is a course that is required before graduating high school.

I feel that my focus was another challenge that I faced. In school, when I was trying to complete my assignments, eight classes, projects, writing assignments, and etc. my focus was off and I would have fatigue at times. I felt that there were so many assignments and other things that I had to complete; that it decreased my focus, to the point where I would zone out and stare out the window. I would feel down and not sure if I would graduate on time, but my mother made sure that she made connections with the teachers, requested assistance, as well as encouraged me to complete assignments, along with guiding and helping me. I appreciate the support that my mother has given me, which she continues to keep me focused and motivated.

Surprisingly, I completed all of my classes; five months earlier and was able to attend and enroll at Montgomery County Community College. I enrolled in three classes and was considered a full-time student before graduating from high school. Due to the COVID pandemic, I wasn't able to perform well and didn't pass any of my courses. I am definitely not an online learner and require in-person instruction. I took deep breaths and struggled with knowing what I wanted to do with



my future. My mother made recommendations such as; enrolling in a trade school or other certificate programs. I thought about it and liked the idea, so I am in the process of enrolling in a trade school, where I am eager to see the programs.

To sum it up, there were some disparities and challenges that I faced in high school, which losing focus and lacking interest was a very challenging task for me to do.

Even with negative things being mentioned, I would also like to talk about the positive things, such as; meeting and building new friendships, meeting new teachers, having fun in different classes, and the environment that I enjoyed. I will remember those things as I have flashbacks of my high school years at Norristown Area High School. I'm glad that I graduated and completed high school, which my next chapter consists of college or a trade school. With hard work, I understand that completing any tasks requires focus and awareness of expectations. High school wasn't as challenging as I felt it was at that time; it's because I didn't apply myself as much as I should.

Getting ready for the next chapter of my life, which I will see what it brings. I'm ready!