

*Excerpts from Nia Jacobs's remarks at the 2024 Step Up Celebration*

I'd love for all of the Steps students, current or alums, and parents and caregivers of Steps students who are in the room, to stand and be recognized. You are the true heart of this organization and thank you for being here tonight.

Steps programs provide the foundation of academic and social-emotional support that students and their families need to unlock their potential and be their fullest selves. Although, of course, not every Steps student will return quite so literally back to Brookline to reinvest in the community and the next generation of Steps students the way that Abby has done, an investment in Steps students is an investment in Brookline and the world around it. Steps students are the next generation of teachers, doctors, mental health providers, community organizers, leaders, and changemakers. Like Abby Jaynes, they will change the world if we tell them that they can, and even more importantly, if we work to help them navigate the obstacles that stand in their way.

As you saw when they stood, in this room are powerful minds – Steps students of the present and past. The reason for our mission and work is right here in this Atrium. Also here in this Atrium are all of you—those integral to our work here at Steps.

Today, we gather with a shared purpose, a purpose larger than all of us and that asks us to harness our collective potential. As a community, we are well-poised to confront one of the most pressing challenges of our time: the opportunity gap that plagues under-resourced students and families.

When I first read the position statement as Steps searched for its next Executive Director, I was instantly drawn to this organization for many reasons. Its mission certainly deeply resonated with me—it was an organization much like Steps that changed my family's life trajectory, taking my father from sharing a single pair of shoes with his brother to me standing on this stage as an Executive Director. But what drew me in most of all was Steps' use of the term opportunity gap as opposed to academic achievement gap.

While the academic achievement gap is a glaring symptom of inequality in our education system, it is not the root cause. That distinction of being the cause belongs to the opportunity gap, a broader and more insidious phenomenon that encompasses the myriad factors outside of the classroom that shape a student's educational journey.

The opportunity gap is the unequal access to resources, support, and opportunities that students from low-income families face, and they face them here in Brookline. It encompasses everything from access to quality summer opportunities, after-school activities, advanced coursework, and college and career counseling designed explicitly to meet their needs. In essence, the opportunity gap is the soil from which the seeds of the academic achievement gap sprout and grow. It is no surprise that students who lack access to the resources and support they need to thrive struggle to achieve academic success.

Here's the crux of the matter, then, and why Steps exists: addressing an academic achievement gap without tackling the opportunity gap is like treating the symptoms of a disease without addressing its root cause. It may provide temporary relief, but it will not lead to lasting change.

If we are truly committed to creating a more equitable Brookline, we must confront the opportunity gap head-on.

Of course, we all know that doing so will be no small feat. But here is the good news – we are not gathered here this evening to dwell on the challenges of the past or the obstacles of the present. We are not gathered here because we are powerless – we are here because together, we are powerful. In partnership with Steps to Success, you can champion the cause of educational equity and pave the way for a future where every child, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can reach for the stars, where the foundation they build today will empower their tomorrow.

Sometimes the foundation is goeey, like magnetic slime. In the video, you saw students at the Lincoln School working with BU Bioinformatics on a lesson around magnetism. If you asked them what they did that day at AHU, the answer might be—we had fun

making super cool slime—a very deep and noble academic feat to be sure! But learning to listen carefully, ask good questions, experiment, and problem-solve are key academic and life skills.

Sometimes the foundation is literally a slippery one—a sheet of ice on which a Steps student laces up figure skates for the first time—but it provides the opportunity to try new things, take healthy risks, and explore other communities. Sometimes the foundation is high on a ropes course at sleepaway camp, but the bravery needed to take that risk and the confidence that comes from completing the course translates into a student taking a risk to enroll in an advanced class or the ability to see themselves as a resident student on a college campus. Sometimes the foundation is more literal, like summer internships that lead to future job prospects for some students, but that for all involved, builds critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and career readiness skills.

The Steps programs of today help to ensure each student's bright tomorrow. We are here for our students at every step of their journey to post-secondary success, and we can do so because of the hard work and dedication of our young people and through our partnership with all of you. So, let's roll up our sleeves and get to work. Let us advocate for and support programs like Steps that promote educational equity. Work with Steps as we continue to provide the tools needed to mentor, support, and uplift those who are most in need. Let us challenge the status quo and dare to create a world here in Brookline in which a family's household income does not determine a child's ability to achieve professionally and personally at the highest level.

Together, we can close the opportunity gap. Together, Steps will continue to build a future where every child has the chance to thrive. Together, we can enact change in Brookline, a change that will lead Steps students to change the world.