Of passage of sorts for 7th graders to sneak out of the courtyard at lunch and go to the corner store. If you made it there and back, great. If you got caught, you were almost guaranteed to be suspended. So, on one of the last days of the 7th grade my friends, suggested
we try our hand at it. I didn’t particularly want to risk getting suspended, but it was a hot day out and an Icey seemed like a good idea. So, we made a plan to climb. My first friend Tashana who was in 7-6 climbed first, she landed two feet outside the yard. Then my friend Laterece who was in 7-4 climbed, troy who was in 7-9 climbed... then it was my turn. I’ve never been athletic, and I was scared, but I started my ascent. Up, up, up, until I reached the apex. But as soon as my two feet touch the other side, we see Mr. Ray one of the officers turn the corner. He must have been patrolling the perimeter of the school.... We ran. He was faster. We got caught.

We were all escorted to the principal’s office. And each separately waited for our time With Ms. Brown. Tashana, Latrece, and Troy were suspended, and I was not. When it was time for my individual session, Ms. Brown sat me down and said I was a ‘good kid’, and that I don’t need to be hanging out with kids like them. She said she knew better than to sneak out of school; and that as an Astral student, I should be a role model. She said I couldn’t afford to have a suspension on my record. She called my mother and sent me back to class.

In Education, the way we label children. “gifted”, “honors”, or “IEP”, follows them. It empowers some students and families, chances, opportunities, and choice. These labels totally disempower others and enables inequity. In this situation, where a student is “let off the hook” despite clearly violating the rules, privilege would have been easier to name in a Black or PoC/White racial dynamic. But in this situation, in my racially homogenous school, it was complexified by intra-racial understandings of race, ethnicity, language (accent), and class. My mother is an Americanized Jamaican immigrant who has no problem advocating for my educational needs. This created a situation where she wouldn’t be bulldozed by administration the way some of my school mates’ parents were. Although racism wasn’t a factor in the situation, I believe that colorism, classism, and even anti-black male gender bias played a role in the unfair punishment of my friends and the grace given to me. Because of my label of an “Astral” student, my potential was recognized and valued, and I believe that is fundamentally wrong. All of us who climbed the fence that day were entitled to grace and less punitive measures. There was a potential lesson to be learned, suspension didn’t have to be the answer for any of us. This has impacted my decision to work in Education and advocacy because it highlighted for me the complex and unexpected ways that opportunities are divvied and doled as if they are scarce; and the way it concentrates educational power away from students and families of color, and around those who already have capital (educational, social) at the expense of those who have less. I hope that in my work in education and advocacy I can help to productively complicate the conversation. Black and Brown students and parents are not a monolith. Programs created to increase access for some—when implemented in ways that may inadvertently promote inequity for others, only create an illusion of doing “good”—and in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, nobody’s free until everybody’s free.