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Oliver: Resetting the rhetoric of school choice

By: Johnny Oliver

February 9, 2020



In 1999, as a college graduate and novice educator, I joined the staff of the newly founded Freire Charter School. I was taking a big risk on a new, as-yet-untested school program. But the task of building a school that would welcome students from every Philadelphia neighborhood excited me. It was invigorating to know that we were creating a space for all Philly kids to learn, to grow and, most importantly, to be themselves as part of the Freire family. We were creating a school where students who reminded me of my younger self could thrive.

Although I'm a teacher now, I wasn't a typical student. I grew up in Philadelphia's Nicetown-Tioga neighborhood, and I'm proud of where I come from, but it was also a challenging place to grow up. As a kid, I witnessed violence in the streets and sometimes in my school. By

10th grade, I was failing at Simon Gratz High School and made up my mind to leave if I didn't pass the year. If I had quit, I'm not sure I would have surprised many people.

As it happened, I passed by half a point. My guidance counselor, Andrea Clyman, saw my potential and asked if I wanted to be part of an experimental academic program called Crossroads the following year. I chose to enroll.

I was told Crossroads would be intense, and it was. It also changed my life. For a year, award-winning instructors like my mentor Marsha Pincus pushed my peers and me to develop our talents, apply discipline to our learning, take academic risks, and begin to dream of options for school and career beyond those in our neighborhoods.

My guidance counselor and my mentor propelled me in a direction I could never have imagined as a high school freshman. They opened doors for me, from interning at the Philadelphia Inquirer to going to college in New England.

My choice to attend an experimental program in 11th grade made the difference between dropping out of high school and graduating with a master's degree. To me, it demonstrates the power of a single teacher or a unique program to transform a teenager's life.

Philadelphia is full of students who are ready, like I was, to transform their lives with the support of the right mentor, and eager to find an academic program that uniquely fits them. I strongly believe that all students and their families should be empowered to choose the best educational option for them.

As educators, we make choices too. I chose Freire Schools because our commitment to prioritizing student voices over teaching to the test works. We develop students to be advocates for themselves and their choices, from attending protests to using the power of writing to share their perspectives and build a future where their voices will not be ignored.

Twenty years after I took a chance on Freire Charter School, I am proud to say I am still a Freire teacher. I am amazed daily by the supportive Freire family we have created, and by how our confident, dynamic and collaborative students seize the opportunities available to them here. We set high expectations at Freire Schools — and over and over again our students exceed them. Freire students know that character matters, that choices matter, and that they themselves matter.

As a communications teacher, I fully understand the rhetoric around the concept of school choice. I also know that school choice has many forms beyond the pitting of district and charter schools against one another. Parents across the state exercise choice every day, from moving to a school district that better suits their child to enrolling in a new program within a traditional public school. School choice in all its forms must be preserved, so that every child can pick their best fit school — and have the option to press “reset” when something in the system isn't working.