

Christian Willauer

I live in Wilmington's West Side and am a parent of two children, ages 3 and 6. I am also Director of Community and Economic Development at Cornerstone West CDC, where my focus is the revitalization of Wilmington's West Side neighborhoods.

I am here to speak in support of the Charter application by Freire Charter School to open a high school modeled after their highly successful college preparatory high school in Philadelphia.

I had the chance to visit Friere Charter school in Philadelphia earlier this year and speak with some of their faculty and students. When we asked the students what they appreciated most about their school, their answer was the lack of fighting, which they all said had been a problem at other schools they had attended. They all spoke about how the school's focus on reducing violence, and interpersonal conflict of any kind, let them focus on their studies, which is what they were in school to do.

When we asked for more details, the students and staff explained together how the school has a very effective mediation program, so that when a student has a problem with another student, they can bring it to a mediation session, run by fellow students, to provide an avenue of communication and a path to resolve problems. If a student and a teacher have a problem, there is the opportunity for mediation with an adult present as well. The result? "There is no drama here", one student explained.

This, I was told by the students, creates a school culture where the focus is learning. I looked at the statistics for this school, and they have an impressive track record of sending students to college. It is not that they achieve this by accepting the best students, because there is no entrance exam for their school in Philadelphia, and there wouldn't be for the one here. The students at Freire reflect the student population of Philadelphia schools as a whole: the student body is primarily students of color and primarily they qualify for free-lunch. The school that they plan to open here would be just as focused on providing a college preparatory education for any student who was interested, not just those who achieved a certain score on a test.

At their Philadelphia school, some of their students enter the school years behind in achievement. However, as we learned from some of the students we talked to, they have the opportunity to catch up.

What impressed me most about Freire, and why I think we need this model as an alternative here in Delaware, is because they offer their students the support they need to succeed. When we toured the school, we saw the rooms that are devoted to after-school academic support, and learned that high performing students can earn money by tutoring other students. The students we talked to told us that they felt that the staff of the school were invested in their success and would do whatever they could to help them master the material. They also have counselors assigned to coach them throughout their academic careers at the school and work with them through the college application process.

This investment in the success of each student works. Aside from the statistics, the students that we talked to told us about their college plans, and they had applied to UPenn, Penn State, Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr, University of Delaware. One had been admitted early to Connecticut College.



As a parent, as a resident, and as a community development specialist, I know how critical it is to our children's future and our community's future that we have high schools where we expect great things of the students, where they get the support they need to achieve, and where they leave prepared for higher education. Delaware is making great strides in providing quality educational opportunities for all, and I hope Freire Charter School will become part of what Delaware has to offer.