

Dear Delaware,

There is an education crisis in Delaware, and most notably in the City of Wilmington, that has prevented too many of Delaware's youth from fulfilling their fullest potential and continues to threaten our social and economic future. Freire Charter School, an applicant to join Delaware's public schools, is an innovator in education that for 15 years has been unlocking the potential of some of Philadelphia's most underserved youth. Their proven results are transformative for inner-city students, and their focus on college preparation is the kind of unique programming that is critical for the futures of both the City of Wilmington and the State of Delaware.

The City of Wilmington desperately needs more college graduates, and the current education system is not meeting that need. Last month, Governor Jack Markell and Delaware State University President Dr. Harry Lee Williams shed light on Delaware's education challenge in this paper. They stated that while 60% of Delaware's jobs will require training beyond high school, only 22% of African American youth in Delaware return to college for their second year. This disturbing fact illustrates that the public education system is failing our children, pointing to a loss of market competitiveness for Delaware and an unstable economic future for our City. A first-year college drop-out rate of 78% for African American youth should concern parents, students, and everyone who has a stake in Wilmington's future.

These challenges are not new obstacles for Freire Charter School. Working with a predominately low-income and African American population in Philadelphia, Freire has proven that they have an educational program that can combat these distressing statistics. Approximately 90% of Freire's graduates enroll in college within two years of graduation, a number that exceeds every public high school in the State of Delaware. Even more significantly, almost 90% of those students return to college for a second year, compared to 22% in Delaware.

Despite the fact that Freire could be an obvious partner in preparing Delaware's youth to succeed in college, last week, a group of lawmakers came out against the granting of a charter to Freire for 2015-16. While new schools are not always the answer, we would be remiss not to allow Freire to replicate its exceptional results in Wilmington. Only three public high schools in Delaware currently exceed the national average for college enrollment, with the remaining thirty-plus public high schools falling short. Our youth and our community deserve better than this. It is our belief that the school will lead the way in changing the abysmal reality our inner-city students are currently facing in their educational journeys.

It is perplexing that, in a city plagued by violence, charter opponents have criticized Freire's nonviolence policy, which creates a safe haven in which students can learn and thrive. Freire Charter School's faculty and staff respect their students by holding them to high academic and behavioral standards—and by teaching them how to achieve those standards. They know that their students are still growing, emotionally and mentally, and are still learning to implement the social and academic knowledge they gain in school. Through an innovative peer mediation program, Freire students learn to engage constructively in conflict, extending empathy and respect to their peers without resorting to violence. And while Freire holds students to a high standard, the school employs deans that are thinking practitioners, who take each student's circumstances into consideration. Freire maintains an environment where students understand what is expected of them, and where they can learn and practice the skills they need to meet those expectations. Furthermore, as the lawmakers acknowledge in their own letter, none of Freire's policies are against Delaware law. Freire's application has been fully vetted by the Charter School Accountability Committee in a rigorous evaluation process—a process so tough that only half of the original applicants ultimately earned a recommendation for approval.

We respect the difficult decisions facing the State Board of Education when they vote on five new charter schools on April 17<sup>th</sup>. Charters are not an answer to all of public education's ailments. However, we cannot allow special interests and a failing status quo to deny an educational opportunity to Delaware's most vulnerable students. If we do, we allow even more children to slip through the cracks, endangering their ability to live fulfilling lives. And, as a community, we risk the economic future of our City and our state. Today, we join the hundreds of families and community leaders throughout the Wilmington area who have demonstrated their support for Freire Charter School in the public record. Freire Charter School can make a difference and will fight hard for kids to succeed. Freire does not just have the intent to better Wilmington but also the unique experience to achieve the results our City so desperately needs.

Sincerely,

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