



# Two Families, One Story

*Charter schools let parents—not school boards—decide where to send their children.*

Tina McDowell was a single mother with college hopes for her two children. Kimberly Branch wanted smaller classes for her son and daughter. Both working mothers from the Hill District; neither could afford private school.

Unhappy with the local school district and school board options both explored other means to best serve their children's academic needs. McDowell chose to send her children to the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School, an East End elementary school. Branch enrolled hers at the Northside Urban Pathways Charter School, a Downtown middle and high school.

McDowell's children took judo, Japanese, chess and drama. Branch's daughter tutors young children and plans to attend nursing school; her son is an avid member of the high school band. Each provides a concrete example of how charter schools— independent public schools governed by a non-profit board of directors, give crucial options to families, regardless of their economic situation. **Charter schools enabled these families to select a school that best matched their needs, rather than having their local district dictate the choices for them.**

When Tina McDowell visited the Urban League Charter School, she liked the school's African-American History curriculum, math and science focus, and extended school year. "My instincts told me this was the right place for my son," says McDowell, who has since moved to Forest Hills, but whose children still attend the Urban League Charter School.

Her daughter, Bryna, now a fourth-grader, is a straight-A student and Black History whiz. Her son

Kevin excels at chess, robotics, and drama. "I've literally watched my son blossom," she says. "He's been exposed to things I don't think he would have been otherwise."

**Kimberly Branch felt strongly that her children needed smaller class sizes; she feared they would get "lost" in their local middle school.** At Northside Urban Pathways, she says, "my children get that individual personalized attention they might not get in a bigger school. If there's a problem, the school takes time out to call you. You don't have to wait, wait, wait to speak to someone."

Branch's 11th-grade son, Brandon, takes part in the school's Benefiting African-American Males program, which links high school students with positive African-American role models. Her daughter, 12th-grader Marketia, does community service with the local food bank and tutors younger students.

Both Branch and McDowell exemplify why the charter school movement continues to grow. Enrollment at charters nationally is up 170,000 this school year, to 1.5 million students in 4,900 schools. In Allegheny County, there is clearly room for more charter schools, where 11 schools enroll 3,500 students and have waiting lists totaling 2,450.

**"I like the idea of having a choice," says McDowell. "Let's face it, when you're not wealthy, your choices are limited. Once I learned that I had options, I did what I thought was best for my children."**

*This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.*



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