



# ON A MISSION

*A civil rights mainstay puts its faith in a Charter School*

When the Pennsylvania charter school law passed in 1997, one of the first people to grasp its potential to help inner-city children was Esther Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh.

Bush had spent much of her life fighting for educational equity for youth in underserved communities. As a child of educators and as a former high school teacher and college administrator, Bush saw education as “the great equalizer,” a way to shrink the disparities that confront African-American students.

She organized a team of highly experienced urban educators—former public school principals, administrators, and other experts—to start the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School, the first charter school in Allegheny County. The school opened in an historic former synagogue in East Liberty and celebrated its tenth anniversary last year.

“I said to them, ‘You tell me, if you had no barriers how would you design an elementary school?’ And that’s what they did,” Bush says.

For the Urban League, a century-old civil rights organization, the charter school provided a way to parlay decades of advocacy into action. Charter schools, autonomous public schools run by their own board of trustees rather than a local school board, allow school leaders to implement a wide variety of interventions with fewer bureaucratic hurdles than a typical school district. With this type of freedom, the school’s founders implemented policies that are known to help inner-city students but that existing public school districts are seldom able to carry out: a longer school year (215 days instead of 180), longer school

day, smaller class sizes, school uniforms, and involvement of teachers in planning processes typically conducted without them.

The result is a school where students learn to set their sights high. Students have access to state-of-the-art science lab facilities, participate in robotics and learn foreign languages. The school has achieved the important *Adequate Yearly Progress* benchmark for four consecutive years. The school has received the *DAME Award* for academic achievement.

The school teaches extensively about the contributions of African-Americans to U.S. and world history, so as to show its students—98 percent of whom are black—their own potential worth to society.

“My scholars are always thinking, always questioning, they’re very bright young people,” says Dr. Gail Edwards, the school’s principal and CEO.

It’s symbolic that students sing “I believe I can fly” every morning in an all-school assembly. “You’re going to say, you sing that every day? Absolutely,” Edwards says. “As a group, we are inspiring them, to forget whatever else is going on outside the school walls. Now you’re here, this is your moment in the sun, we need you to be all you can be.”

Charter schools like this one are leveraging the energy, know-how, and passion of important community organizations like the Urban League to reinvigorate public education. This is good for everyone, especially for students and their families.

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



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