



AHEAD OF THE CURVE

City's first charter students show the value of choice

When she arrived at Manchester Academic Charter School a little more than a decade ago, Jasmine Davis was a pioneer. Davis, now 18, was among the first charter school students in Pennsylvania. As those first students now enter their adult years, they are proving charter schools' worth in giving real choices to students and their families.

With more than 3,500 students in Allegheny County enrolled in charters, and 1.5 million nationwide, it's easy to forget that when Davis first entered kindergarten, charter schools were a brand new concept. The schools were created to allow educators the flexibility to innovate, in exchange for meeting educational criteria. As autonomous public schools, they are run by their own non-profit board, rather than a local school board. Importantly, students and families choose whether to attend a charter school.

MACS was one of three local charters to open after the state passed its charter school law, in 1997. The school offered Davis small class sizes, school uniforms, and a nurturing atmosphere. After her family's house burnt down in fourth grade, the school's teachers and staff rallied behind her, Davis says. "After the house fire, they were very helpful, very understanding. We always had somebody to talk to if something went wrong at school or at home," she says.

Davis graduated from Schenley High School last fall and is enrolled at Community College of Allegheny County. She plans to study education. She works as a teacher's aide at MACS and at an adjacent afterschool

program, and aspires to teach kindergarten someday.

"Your first teacher guides your way as to how you feel about education," Davis says. "I want to be that person who guides whether a child likes school."

Markeya Lowry is another charter school pioneer. Lowry enrolled at Northside Urban Pathways Charter School as a sixth grader in 1998, the school's first year.

After eighth grade, she had to decide whether or not to remain at the school, or transfer to a school in the city school district. She decided to stay at the charter school because she felt the small-class sizes at NUPCS gave her a better education. "Most students, they're forced to go to certain schools," Lowry says. "It was nice to lay out my options and to be able to make a decision that was best for me, instead of someone else assuming what was best for me."

After graduating with honors from NUPCS in 2005, Lowry went to California University of Pennsylvania, and became the first in her family to graduate from a four-year college last fall. She is currently pursuing an online master's degree in counseling, and works at NUPCS in the school's administrative offices.

For students like Lowry and Davis, the charter school experiment has given them something many didn't a generation ago, something every family should have: a choice. It's an experiment worth continuing.

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



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