

Column: Charter schools equipped to help young scholars succeed

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Growing up, I felt discouraged academically. I never felt fully challenged, and later in life I understood my school's approach wasn't always best to maximize my potential. Because of my experience I realized when I became an educator I wanted to work at different type of public school — a charter school.

For seven years I've been at United Schools Network in Columbus. For the past two years I've had the pleasure of teaching 28 scholars every day. That's right, scholars. I use this term because it suggests they are more than just students. It communicates a level of success we expect from them in school and when they graduate into life. They refer to one another as scholars and even parents call their kids scholars.

Teachers choose to work here because our charter school engages the community with passion. We hold literacy nights inviting parents to attend, organizing activities around the event.

We have dinner with our scholars' families, and collaborate and talk through expectations from us and from them, about their scholars' education.

I tell parents our charter school focuses on a rigorous curriculum emphasizing self-control and self-discipline. We want our scholars to develop the social and peer skills to build healthy relationships, communicate when there's a problem and solve issues without an adult intervening.

I also don't just talk the talk, I walk the walk. My fifth-grade son will be attending our charter middle school in the fall. I want him to gain the knowledge and have the enriching experience I see all these other scholars receive. I am fortunate enough to have the means to have a choice in where I live, and yet I am still choosing this school for my son.

As a public school we accept all kids from our community, not just the top achieving ones. At United Schools Network we promote quality throughout, believing that a strong charter school strengthens the entire public education system.

With more than 125,000 students enrolled in 381 charter schools across Ohio, including 310 students at United, the benefits are clear. Charter schools have helped narrow the achievement gap by providing all children access to a high-quality public education.

As an educator, I can say that the flexibility and autonomy of a charter school allow teachers to be more responsive to every child, providing individual engagement and meeting them at their growth level.

Every family should have access to a high-quality education. Too many kids get stranded in bad schools without other options. In America and in Ohio, families need a choice. It doesn't cost parents to enroll their kid in a charter school; we are a tuition-free high-quality option.

Charter schools were set up to innovate in the classroom and strengthen a public education system in need of vast improvement. The evidence of their success in that mission is overwhelming, and here's one small example to prove it.

When I started at United Schools Network, one of our second-graders began to develop bad habits. He was extremely smart but also bored because he didn't feel challenged and he struggled to communicate with us. His teachers and I sensed something wrong and realized we needed to engage him more. He needed to be pushed so we assigned him extra work.

Over time he developed self-control and the ability to express himself and found his academic stride. Now in seventh grade, this young scholar uses his creative mind to design video games and consistently does high-school-level work.

His goals and accomplishments speak volumes to our school and community. It's never easy to push for excellence.

But it doesn't matter your upbringing, you will be successful here because I believe in our scholars and so do all the other teachers.

My charter school story is just one of thousands across the country. These schools are providing scholars with opportunities that aren't available to them in their zoned, often low-performing schools. After my experience in the education system I am sure of one thing: We need more charter schools.

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