

CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**

Danielle West

Director & Chief Academic Officer
The Queen City Academy Charter School



I was born and raised in Newark, NJ. My parents didn't feel comfortable with the local public schools at the time, so I went to parochial schools for K-12. In high school, I went to an all-girls Catholic school where I was one of only five students of color in my graduating class of 45. My experience there instilled the value of what education should be. I knew I had advantages, because I saw the disadvantages that my friends attending Newark public schools experienced.

I went to an HBCU (Lincoln University), where the majority of my professors were people of color, and I became the first in my family to graduate from college. After graduation, I worked as a social worker for a low-income housing project in Elizabeth, NJ. There I worked with the city and community organizers and planned programming for the entire residential population, which ranged from 0-90+ years old.

In speaking with young women, I became aware of the lack of resources and exposure in their educational experiences. It pulled on my heart strings and led me to take a PRAXIS exam and become a teacher. I taught for 8 years in Newark Public Schools and then worked as a curriculum specialist in a rural part of North Carolina. In 2010, I joined my current school as assistant director, and I became Director in 2013.

ACCESS AND EXPOSURE FOR ALL

It has always been my desire that every student be given access and exposure to high-quality education. While Queen City Academy is a charter school, we're not a "no excuses" charter school. We function more like a small independent school and like a family. As the school has matured, we now have families that attended QCACS as scholars and are now enrolling their own children. This type of generational attendance says a lot about our school and the way families feel about us. We haven't had to advertise, because our waitlist exceeds our enrollment numbers.

We want all of our scholars to have the opportunity to go to college, so we start speaking about college very early. Each of our classes is named after a college or university, and we have a college day when we invite college students to speak with classes and perform a step show to get our scholars excited.

We are ranked a Tier 1/High Performing charter school since 2016 when NJDOE began tier rankings. On PARCC, our 3rd to 5th grade students outperformed their peers in local public schools by 20.5 percentage points in ELA and 21 percentage points in Math. Our 6th to 8th graders outperformed their peers in public schools by 45.3 percentage points in ELA and 33.9 percentage points in Math.

We link our students with ABC and the Wight Foundation as well as independent boarding schools and parochial schools. We're passionate about passing the baton to an organization that's going to take our students to and through

College. Last year, our 8th grade scholars received \$745,000 in scholarship dollars to attend private, parochial and boarding schools. That's a true testament to the hard work of our guidance counselors and teachers, along with our scholars and families, in moving our vision forward.

I believe students' social experiences are just as important as their academic experiences. We have male and female mentoring programs, retreats where we take students to see Broadway plays, and lots of different events including assemblies, ice cream socials, Black History Month celebrations, a mother-son date night, and a father-daughter dance. We also have an annual kid-preneur challenge fashioned after Shark Tank.

BUILDING A LEGACY

Being a charter leader of color is really important in terms of legacy. Legacy is not the dollars that I'll leave behind; it's what I invested in someone else. Every day I sit in this seat, I get to invest in students that will lead tomorrow. Knowing that I'm creating a pathway for them is the ultimate legacy. This work is about more than education. It's community building and building generational success. Education is the tool to advance a family and change their dynamic. The perseverance I give every day is because of our scholars. I have several mentees and they reach out to me quite frequently. Some are in college, and some are out of college. When I see what they've remembered, especially the small things, it means so much. It's easy to stand and persevere when life is going well, but the strength and character I like to instill in our students you pick yourself up in tough times. Failure doesn't determine who you are. You need to keep moving.

I had my first child a year ago, and parenthood has changed and impacted the kind of educator I am and how I think about legacy. I have a black male son and my lens on equity and justice is sharper now. This is why I'm excited about the Queen City Academy Charter High School expansion that will be opening for the 2020 school year. Being a parent has upped the ante in so many ways, and I am excited to have positioned our school to pass the baton of education directly to the colleges.

THE QUEEN CITY ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL

Student Demographics

Location Plainfield, NJ
Year Opened 2000
Student enrollment 324
Grades served K-8, growing to 12th
Website queencity.edu

| | |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Black/African-American | 40% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 60% |
| Homeless Youth | N/A |
| Free & Reduced Meals (FRM) | 83% |
| Students with Disabilities | 12.3% |
| ESL Students | 18% |



CHARTER
LEADERS
OF COLOR
MATTER.