

CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**

Rochelle Elliott

Superintendent and Principal,
Phoenix Advantage Charter School



My father was a special education teacher and then an administrator. When he taught special ed, I was about 5 years old, and I would sometimes come with him to work. I have photos of us helping the students with math and reading—I just loved the kids, watching him teach, and seeing how much fun he and the students had. It made such an impression on me that I wanted a piece of that in my own career. Now, as an administrator, it is so rewarding for me to take my own 4-year-old daughter to visit Phoenix Advantage Charter School and meet my students.

To support me and my siblings, my dad worked two full-time jobs. He was an educator during the day and worked as a machinist at night. My mom was working full time as a nurse. Knowing the difficulties of making a living as a teacher, my parents dissuaded me from working in education. But education was in my blood! I come from a long line of educators, on both sides of my family. Our family reunions could be mistaken for a teacher’s convention! I nearly majored in physical therapy in college, and I’ve worked in professional roles outside of education, but every time I left the field of education I would come back because I found the most meaning in this line of work.

GIFTS OF LOVE

I’ve worked in educator and administrator roles for more than 30 years. My first turnaround school was with an F school. In one year under my leadership, my staff and I were able to bring the school from three years of failing up to a B letter grade, and it was nearly an A when I had to leave to help care for my mother, who had become ill. In 2017, Phoenix Advantage Charter School hired me to turn the school around.

When I began my role at Phoenix Advantage Charter School during the 2018–2019 school year, we were in the bottom 5% of Arizona Title 1 schools. Now we’re no longer in that bottom 5% nor on “comprehensive support and improvement status.” Over one year, we’ve seen 8% growth in Math and ELA student performance, and 7% of our ELL students classified in higher levels of English language proficiency.

I attribute the school improvements to two main priorities: hiring all highly qualified, certified teachers and educating the whole child. At Phoenix Advantage, we strive to meet students’ basic and academic needs, knowing that better learning happens on full stomachs. Phoenix Advantage maintains clothing and food pantries, in addition to serving free breakfast and lunch. Around the holidays, we run Operation Santa—where every student receives a holiday present and every classroom receives a celebration, thanks to generous sponsors..

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

I am a gay woman of color. I feel charged with standing up for the underdog and breaking down barriers. Because of my experience, I am able to make the way, clear the path, create opportunity, and be an advocate for those like myself who have not, or currently do not have, the voice or courage to push through barriers.

One example of this, which I feel passionately about, is how I support students who have been expelled from other schools. Many schools do not accept expelled students, which means that one mistake could ruin a student's life. I accept these kids into my school, and I don't tell my teachers about their prior history. I'll walk a previously expelled student to their new class, and I'll introduce them as an excellent student. Privately I tell the student, "No one knows who you are. Rewrite your story!" And they do. Over the years, I've seen so many students take their second chance and be successful.

Ubuntu—Swahili for "it takes a village"—is tattooed on my arm. It's my philosophy. With 97% of my students at Phoenix Advantage living below the poverty line and 100% at-risk, there is value in the fact that I can relate to their struggle. I am well positioned to help create a community that supports them and their families.

Arizona is such a diverse state. Groups that used to be minorities are now majorities. We need to look at new ways of doing things to meet the needs of all populations, and part of this starts at school—in young people seeing leaders that represent them, that stand up for them.

Phoenix Advantage Charter School

"A school that is a diamond in the rough."

Location	Phoenix, AZ
Year Opened	2004
Student enrollment	220
Grades served	K-8
Website	www.PhoenixAdvantage.org



Student Demographics

Asian	3%	Homeless Youth	1%
Black/African-American	12%	At Risk Students	100%
Native American/ Alaskan Native	10%	Students with Disabilities	2%
Hispanic/Latino	74%	ELL Students	95%
Two or More Races	1%		



CHARTER
LEADERS
OF COLOR
MATTER.