

# CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**

## Kimberly Neal

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BELIEVE Circle City Early College  
and Career High School



I grew up in St. Louis, MO and went to a Catholic school until second grade, when I was tested for gifted and talented and switched to magnet schools in St. Louis Public Schools. I earned my bachelor's degree at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, a HBCU in Huntsville, AL. I am a first-generation college student.

After college, I applied to Teach for America. I returned to St. Louis and had the opportunity to teach at the high school my father and his siblings attended years before. During my second year of teaching, I was offered a full ride to get my Master's in Social Work at Washington University, STL. I taught high school and studied full-time until I earned my MSW in 2005.

Upon graduation, I moved to New York and worked at charter schools, where I served as both a dean of students and a school social worker. In NYC, I earned my Master's in Educational Leadership at Columbia Teachers College, and then I was invited to be the founding principal for a new Noble Network Charter School in Chicago, IL. I launched Muchin College Prep in 2009, and I'm very proud that it debuted and has remained in the top 10 high schools in Chicago Public Schools.

In 2015, I moved to DC to work for KIPP as a Managing Director for Secondary Education. While there, I also supported a turnaround school, AIM Academy. I stabilized AIM, and that year we grew 10 points on the Performance Management Framework, DC's charter school accountability system. I was then given an opportunity to talk to funders about starting my own school, which brings me to today and founding BELIEVE.

## **CLOSING THE INCOME GAP**

I believe it's really important to change how we teach black and brown students and get away from the school to prison pipeline and the "college or die" mentality. I'm looking to address the income gap by focusing on early college and career. Students should be able to earn a livable wage by the time they graduate from BELIEVE.

We will open our doors in August 2020 to serve 100 students in grade 9. We'll add a grade each year until we're serving students in grades 9-12. We're recruiting from all over the city, but we're targeting underestimated youth — students in low income communities where they don't have access to high quality seats.

Our school will have a focus on agency and autonomy that will make it unique in the charter sector. Private and independent schools have had this focus for years, but it hasn't been the philosophical approach for black and brown students. At BELIEVE, we're taking the same approach you'd find in more affluent schools around student culture.

## A SCHOOL FOR U, BY US

Charter school leaders of color matter, because students need to see leaders who look and sound like them at all levels. People of color should be represented in decision-making bodies that affect our own children. You won't see organizations run exclusively by black and brown people and all white kids, so it doesn't make sense to have schools serving black and brown kids with all white leaders.

In my professional career, I've gotten frustrated by institutional racism and micro-aggressions and how they show up in terms of educating kids. Too many pedagogical practices are based out of fear and bias, not what's developmentally best for kids. For example, why are we suspending first graders for age-appropriate things? In an affluent school, most of those behaviors would be considered tantrums. In our schools, it is often considered aggressive or violent.

Until we have leaders who look at our kids and see themselves, we'll continue to see that. Charter school leaders of color should work to make sure there are policies in place that require schools to have clear assessment measures, progressive discipline policies, and people of color in meaningful leadership positions.

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# BELIEVE Circle City Early College and Career High School



Location	Indianapolis, IN
Year Opening	2020
Student enrollment	100
Grades served	9-12
Website	<a href="http://believeschools.org">believeschools.org</a>



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