

# Local community replaces board and principal to fix start-up issues at First Place Scholars Charter School

*With the autonomy and authority and respect voters gave us in the charter school law, the community at First Place Scholars Charter School is able to do for our children what a traditional public school would never allow.*

by Dawn Mason

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My name is Dawn Mason. I am the new Board President for First Place Scholars Charter School and former State Representative for the 37th District, Seattle. I write these words to describe how poor and minority children, and our community, are all benefiting from the state's new charter school law.

First Place Scholars opened last September in central Seattle as Washington state's first charter school. We are a pioneer in this new form of public school. Everyone involved in charter schools in Washington is a pioneer—the state commission responsible for creating a fair process to approve and oversee the schools, the charter schools, the communities who want charter schools, the parents, and most importantly, the school children these new schools will serve.

For 25 years First Place Scholars was a small, non-tuition private elementary school providing education and wrap-around services for poor, mostly minority children living with the challenges associated with poverty. Our parents come to First Place seeking an education that gives their children a fighting chance for school success. First Place has long filled an essential need for families in Seattle, bringing students to grade level and returning them to Seattle Public Schools with a parent capable of managing a successful education through high school graduation, college enrollment and completion.

When voters passed Initiative 1240 in November 2012 to allow charter schools, we recognized funding from the state would allow First Place to serve more students, and that First Place could be model for educating poor children and effectively engaging their parents.

A new community-based board was formed to bring about the transition and re-organization of the school. That leadership team successfully completed the process set up by the Washington State Charter School Commission to become a charter school. In September, 2014, First Place opened its doors as Washington's first charter school, serving nearly 100 students, many more children than the prior school was able to accommodate.

A problem soon emerged. Two months into the school year, the community recognized the school was not going the way it needed to go. Conflicts among board members were hurting the ability of the school to operate properly. Teachers, parents and community members were voicing their concerns.

The community gathered to discuss what to do. The October 14, 2014 board meeting had a standing- room-only crowd. Unable to address the many pressing issues at the school, 6 of eleven board members resigned. The Board President was voted off the board. The community put an advisory team together to recruit new board members, and I agreed to return to First Place Scholars' board as its president.

By October 28, in only two weeks, First Place Scholars had seven new board members, including Dr. Linda Whitehead, a former superintendent in the Marysville School District and school principal in the Lake Washington School District. Our other board members include experienced professionals in education, finance, law, health, social services, public policy and community development. We quickly created a new governance and school leadership structure for the school.

On November 17, the former School Leader and the newly structured Board agreed on an amicable separation. After an interview process which included the board, staff and community, the new board chose Dr. Whitehead as our new School Leader.

Because we are a charter school, our community was able to act. The community at First Place Scholars stood up and said we are not pleased. The community said we think the board isn't governing effectively. The community said this is our school and we want change. We made change happen in an orderly and democratic way.

During this transition period, in October and November, the Charter Commission also noticed a number of items that were amiss at the school. We have worked very closely with the Commission to correct these problems, providing a new safety plan and hiring a new special education teacher.

Our community has never been able to fix our schools before. We have sat in traditional public school board meetings, year after year, championing the education needs of brown, black and poor children lingering at the bottom of the education outcomes. No one ever listens to us. Nothing ever happens. It is impossible to change out the leadership of a traditional school in a two-month period of time, and to bring structure, stewardship and correct any issues.

Yet, because of the autonomy and authority and respect voters gave us in the charter school law, the community at First Place Scholars Charter School is able to do for our children what a traditional public school would never allow.

The charter school law has allowed us to restructure the board, hire a new school leader, and correct the problems created by the previous board. Dr. Whitehead is now able to bring to our teachers the coaching and support they desire, parents are now organizing to receive instruction on how to support a scholar and the board has received training in open public meetings and in charter school governance. The WA Charter Association, an organization that supports



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charter schools, is reaching out to help. We were able to do all this because the charter school law allows us to help our own students.

We should be celebrated as a community and a school for showing such responsibility and integrity in protecting the education and well-being of our students. We should not be criticized for the former board's mistakes. We are pioneers bringing to public education a model for excellence. We are educating the most vulnerable children, the children who are being left behind by traditional public schools.

First Place Scholars Charter School needs to be nurtured, supported and protected, just like the young children we educate. We need help in this brave new enterprise. We need to focus on the difficult and demanding job of running a school. We need to prepare our students and their parents for the challenges they face when they leave First Place Scholars at the end of fifth grade.

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