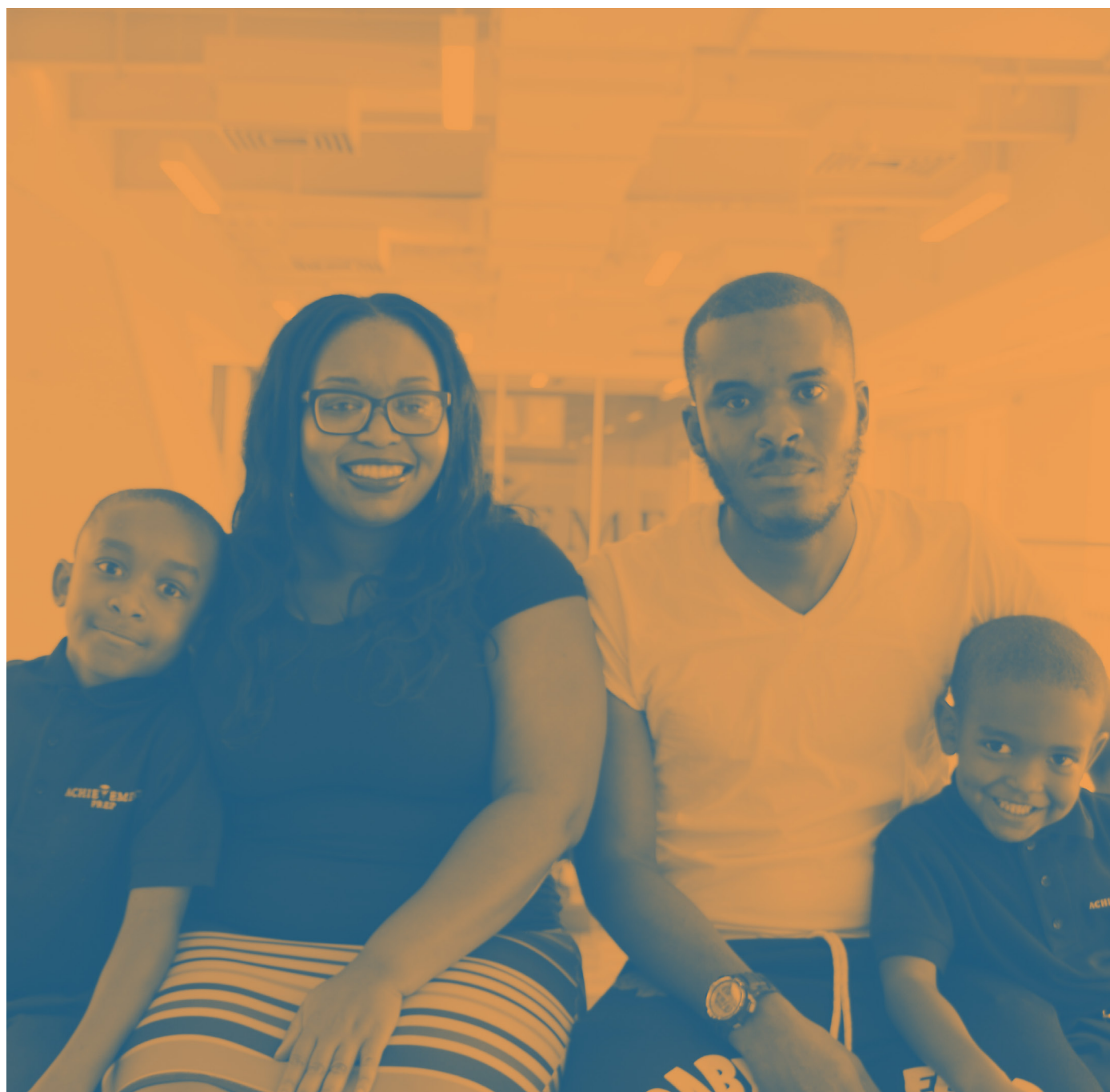


IDENTITY AND CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

PROFILES OF LEADERS OF COLOR: ENGAGING FAMILIES

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BY: NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC IMPACT



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INTRODUCTION

How does being a person of color affect the ways in which successful public charter school leaders shape their schools and do their work? This series of reports from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and Public Impact profiles diverse leaders to show some of the ways their experiences and perspectives influence how they build school culture, family and community relationships, and effective staffs.

Many aspects of good leadership are universal, and we are all, of course, more than our racial and ethnic identities. At the same time, our identities – including our racial and ethnic identities – shape how we approach a situation. In these reports, we highlight how leaders say their experiences as people of color affect how they lead. Our purpose is to inform practice for the broader charter sector where leaders have considerable flexibility to act in different and innovative ways to support students.

The profiles in this series also aim to inspire more people of color to pursue charter school leadership because research makes two points clear. First, students benefit in many ways from having teachers who look like them, including achieving better academic outcomes and getting disciplined less often.¹ The same studies have not examined the impact of having a school leader of the same race, though it seems reasonable that the same patterns would persist. In addition, a 2019 study found that Black principals are more likely to hire Black teachers and retain those already working at their school.² Second, while more than half of the students enrolled in public schools are people of color³, the same is true of fewer than a quarter of public school principals.⁴

We do not intend to suggest that only people of color can effectively lead schools that serve students of color. Rather, this report aims to acknowledge the unique value leaders of color bring to their schools,

and to share thoughtful and effective practices that other leaders—regardless of their race or ethnicity—would be apt to adopt.

ABOUT THE LEADERS PROFILED

The charter school leaders we spoke to for this series run schools across the country, from Massachusetts, California, and Louisiana to Missouri, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. Those schools include a mix of academic models, including college preparatory programs, schools that are “diverse by design,” and dual language programs. Some leaders run one school, while others oversee as many as six. They predominantly serve students of color and students from low-income families, though not all.

Similarly, the leaders we spoke with are diverse. They are Black, Latinx, Asian, and multi-racial.⁵ They include immigrants, as well as life-long residents of the communities in which they now serve or ones much like them. Still others lived a childhood markedly different from the students in their schools. And they all bring to their schools a unique culture that reflects both their identities and their experiences.

HOW THE REPORTS ARE ORGANIZED

Despite their differences, we found common themes across the leaders we interviewed. (See “Diverse experiences, common themes” on p. 5.) Each report in this series explores those themes through a different topic and through profiles of different leaders. Although each leader we interviewed is profiled just once, they all had insights to share on each of the report topics. The reports highlight what stood out as particularly thought-provoking or innovative, and where the leaders most clearly said their approach reflected their experience as a person of color. These short profiles offer a glimpse into what these leaders say contributed to their success and to the success of their students.

The rest of this particular report focuses on family engagement. Three charter school leaders of color explain how their identities and experiences have shaped how they approach family engagement and how they aim to include families in the school community and in their children's learning.



DIVERSE EXPERIENCES, COMMON THEMES

Many of the practices the leaders we interviewed described are the same practices we see and hear about from high-performing school leaders generally. Yet three themes related to their experiences as people of color ran across both their individual stories and the three topics this series explores:

- 1. Addressing holes and creating opportunities based on personal experience.** Several leaders described holes in their own academic experiences as a person of color or as a child from a low-income family. In response, they laid out the sometimes nontraditional steps they have taken to address those same challenges in their own schools and to serve as role models for students and the school community. Similarly, some leaders shared opportunities that proved pivotal for them, and which they have aimed to replicate for their students and the broader community.
- 2. Emphasizing value over deficits.** At each of the schools featured in these reports, students from low-income families and students of color make up the entire student body or a significant portion of it. There are many examples and much discussion of the deficits—both real and perceived—with which many such students enter school.⁶ In contrast, the language many of the leaders used was very different. They emphasized the *value* students and their families offer. They spoke of the ways their schools address student needs by tapping into and encouraging that value, rather than seeing their primary roles as compensating for or working around deficits.
- 3. Providing an equitable educational experience to produce equitable student outcomes.** All the leaders we spoke to have high academic expectations for all students regardless of their background. But many also aim to provide students an educational experience like that of their more advantaged peers—an experience full of art, sport, travel, and the like, as well as the space to try new things and learn from their mistakes. In some cases, they even built their school around themes and curricula seldom available in low-income districts. The leaders we spoke to argue that a well-rounded, enriched student experience ultimately fosters student achievement and creates active, engaged citizens. They stress that one does not exist at the expense of the other, but that their students can have – and deserve to have – both strong academics and rich educational experiences.

Of course, these perspectives and approaches are not exclusive to leaders of color. All leaders can reflect on their own experiences and take a holistic look at the families they serve to build a school that has as its foundation a commitment to accentuate and develop the best of what is already there.

Yet these themes consistently came through the stories we heard from the leaders profiled and their statements about how they say their experiences as people of color influence the way they approach education in real and substantial ways. Hence the profiles included in this report and others in the series center around these common themes while also highlighting the ways they play out in practice.



ENGAGING FAMILIES

Decades of research consistently show that students whose families are engaged in their education tend to perform better in school regardless of family income, parents’ education, or racial background.⁷ But engaging families goes beyond simply bringing them into school buildings to attend events or activities; it means providing the opportunities and skills they need to actively participate in their children’s learning experience.⁸ Charter schools also have another strong incentive to engage families because families can choose to leave the charter school if they want, and more engaged families are more likely to stay.⁹

ABOUT THE LEADERS

All the leaders we interviewed for this series reach out to and involve families in various ways. As just a few examples, they described rallies to celebrate student success, “Bring a Parent to School” weeks, classes to improve families’ financial literacy, and opportunities for parents to weigh in on key decisions as part of committees.

This report, however, focuses on the approaches of three particular charter school leaders – Maquita Alexander of Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., Freddy Delgado of Amigos Por Vida Public Charter School in Houston, Texas, and Kriste Dragon of Citizens of the World (CWC) Public Charter Schools in Los Angeles, California, and Kansas City, Missouri. In addition to implementing many of the practices noted above, they stand out for the intentional and additional steps they take to ensure all families and students feel welcome on their campuses, have opportunities to participate fully in the life of the school, and are equipped to support their children’s learning:

► **MAQUITA ALEXANDER** looked to parents to play a leading role when she wanted to make Yu Ying a more inviting campus.

► Since taking the helm at Amigos Por Vida, **FREDDY DELGADO** has built on the school’s family-centered culture and reset expectations for parental involvement to focus on what students need to succeed.

► **KRISTE DRAGON** and her team at CWC are constantly considering the systems and structures that make it more difficult for some families to engage at the same levels as others and adjusting how they involve and what they ask of parents to level the playing field.

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FIGURE 1: ABOUT THE SCHOOLS*

	WASHINGTON YU YING PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL	AMIGOS POR VIDA CHARTER SCHOOL	CITIZENS OF THE WORLD CHARTER SCHOOLS
Founded	2008 ¹⁰	1999 ¹¹	2010 ¹²
Grades Served	PK3-5	PK3-8 ¹³	K-8
Number of Schools	1	1	4
Number of Students	569 ¹⁴	494 ¹⁵	2,171 ¹⁶
% non white	69% ¹⁷	100%	60% ¹⁸
% eco. disadvantaged	11%	98% ¹⁹	43% ²⁰

*Based on 2018-19 data unless otherwise indicated

STRATEGIES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT REFLECT COMMON THEMES

In our interviews with Alexander, Delgado, and Dragon, they described how their backgrounds as people of color shape their schools' approaches to family engagement. We heard in these conversations the same core themes that arose in our other interviews. (See "Diverse experiences, common themes" on p. 5.)

- ▶ **Addressing holes and creating opportunities based on personal experience.** As a child who grew up in situational poverty, Alexander says she often felt different or excluded at school. So, as a school leader, she has invested in addressing opportunity gaps between students on her campus, including changing the pay structure of the after-school program to make it more affordable and developing a plan to more intentionally recruit under-represented students to Yu Ying as the school expands.

Similarly, Dragon's experience as a bi-racial child attending both a progressive Montessori classroom that valued student diversity and a traditional public school that seemed to divide students along racial and socioeconomic lines motivated her to create a "diverse-by-design" charter network. All four CWC schools are located in diverse communities and enroll a student body that reflects that diversity.

Meanwhile, Freddy Delgado was drawn to Amigos Por Vida Charter School because, like his students there, Delgado learned English as a second language. But unlike his own experience attending public schools in Puerto Rico, Delgado wants to ensure that the education his students receive will prepare them to achieve whatever goals they might have.

- ▶ **Emphasizing value over deficits.** Alexander, Delgado, and Dragon all expressed a firm belief in the value all students and families bring to

their campuses. Nearly all the students enrolled at Amigos Por Vida are Latinx and come from low-income families. Delgado acknowledges the struggles they face, but also knows that the school's families want better opportunities for their children. In response, Delgado focuses on showing families how to support their children at school, celebrates the role they play, and provides opportunities for them to share their thoughts and concerns as partners.

In contrast, many students attending Yu Ying and the four schools in CWC's network come from middle- or upper-class families. At their schools, Alexander and Dragon have made a point of recognizing and affirming the value all families bring. They also provide pathways for all families to be involved in and influence school life, including creating webinars so parents can access need-to-know information when they can (rather than at a set time and meeting place), having translators at school events, and constantly sharing their core belief that all students and all families belong.

- ▶ **Providing an equitable educational experience to produce equitable student outcomes.** Students at Amigos Por Vida, Yu Ying, and CWC are all outperforming their peers across the state or district. But all three schools do much more than teach English language arts and math. CWC aims to educate the whole child and has developed 11 graduate dispositions, skills and habits meant to position students to lead in the community and in the world, such as cultural competency. Moreover, its schools teach the dispositions with the same vigor and dedication as they teach the core subjects. Leaders at Amigos Por Vida aim to educate the whole child, providing students opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities, from volleyball and band to chess, business, and photography. Meanwhile, Yu Ying's Chinese immersion curriculum allows students to learn and apply skills in two languages, a rare experience in public schools, especially within

the District of Columbia.

NEW THEMES RELATED TO ENGAGING FAMILIES

Two additional themes related to family engagement also shined through these particular profiles:

- ▶ **Engaging parents as genuine partners.** All three of the leaders expressed a belief that parents should be partners in their children's education, rather than just observers. As a result, they all take concrete steps to put that belief into practice. At Yu Ying, parents have driven efforts to improve student equity, and what started as a series of parent trainings has led to a new race and equity committee on the school board—as well as some new carpool relationships. At CWC, leaders are incorporating the networks' graduate dispositions both into conversations with families and into report cards, to extend that language and learning beyond the classroom. And at Amigos Por Vida, Delgado opens his door to families through monthly breakfasts with the principal, where all are welcome to come in, chat, and share their ideas for improving the school.
- ▶ **Acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges of diverse campuses.** In contrast to Amigos Por Vida, where most students share a similar background, student enrollment at CWC schools and Yu Ying is diverse both in terms of race and socio-economics. For all of its benefits, the leaders of both organizations noted that such diversity poses special challenges to family engagement in that families are not on equal footing to learn about their schools or to participate in the school once they arrive. In response, Dragon and her team use recruitment strategies that leverage community partners and a weighted lottery to increase the likelihood that lower-income families will learn about the school and see it as an option for them. Similarly, Yu Ying's enrollment outreach campaign now includes a partnership with a low-income

housing community and has used Spanish-language radio ads. Both schools have also taken steps to identify and address practices that might make it more difficult for some families to participate at school. As a result, they have eliminated membership fees for parent organizations and provide child care during meetings.

The rest of this report shares the leader profiles.

FREDDY DELGADO: SUPPORTING FAMILIES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

AMIGOS POR VIDA CHARTER SCHOOL

Freddy Delgado Delgado dreamt of becoming a pediatrician. As he graduated from his high school in Puerto Rico, however, he faced the difficult realization that the education he received had not prepared him for a career in medicine. So he changed course and became a teacher committed to ensuring his students would be equipped to pursue whatever careers they chose.

Delgado has spent more than 30 years in education. During that time, he’s held a variety of teaching and leadership positions and even found his way into a regional education office in Texas. But eventually, he missed being in a school every day, and he especially missed speaking with families and students. When he saw a listing for a new principal and superintendent at Amigos Por Vida, a PK3-8 charter school where most students learned English as a second language as he had, he ignored it at first. But as he explains, “it kept calling.” He eventually applied, and shortly thereafter, the school’s board offered him the job.

Delgado credits his parents’ encouragement and high standards for much of his success. He has also seen firsthand the impact of thoughtful programs that invite families into schools and provide them with concrete tools to support themselves and their children. As a result, Delgado has created a community at Amigos Por Vida that feels more like an extended family, where he pushes not only his students, but their parents, to succeed. “We don’t let parents out of sight until we are ready to let students go,” Delgado says.

FAMILY ROOTS

Amigos Por Vida opened in 1999 to offer the largely low-income, Latinx families in Houston’s densely populated Gulfton community a quality alternative to the overcrowded traditional public elementary schools serving them. Amigos Por Vida

was initially located in an apartment complex, mostly serving the children living there. Though the school moved to a new facility across the street in 2011, its family feel continued. Many students still live in the apartment complex and nearly all live within walking distance.

But the school’s academic performance was middling when Delgado took the helm in 2013. He immediately focused on putting strong teachers in classrooms. Within three years, he had used the autonomy the school’s charter status gave him to release and hire his way to a staff that uniformly believed all students can learn. He also taught his staff to work together, pairing experienced teachers with new teachers on instructional planning and bringing lower and upper grade teachers together on “vertical teams” that could more seamlessly connect the content students learned year over year.

Delgado recognized, however, that building a strong staff was just one piece of the puzzle; he needed families to do their part, too. More specifically, he needed them to send their children to school



every day and on time, and to understand the work teachers were leading in the classroom so they could support and build on it at home.

RESETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR FAMILIES

Families were already involved in Amigos Por Vida in a variety of ways when Delgado came on board. The school had a small but active parent teacher organization. A family and student support specialist

More specifically, Delgado found himself pulling aside family members of his younger students and encouraging them to take a step back so their children could do more for themselves. Similarly, he made a big push to improve attendance. Families who enrolled their children in the Pre-K program—the community’s only full-time public Pre-K program for three- and four-year-olds—had to commit to sending their children every day. If they did so, he



and other staff told parents, their children would be able to read by kindergarten. “Parents were in shock when we said their kids would read by kindergarten. But once they saw it happen, they were on board,” says Delgado.

Delgado made a point of celebrating success as well. The school began hosting pizza parties for classes with the best attendance and giving students small prizes. It also instituted attendance ceremonies every six weeks, to which they invited families.

and the school nurse coordinated activities, including free dental and eye care services for students and families and a biannual “Parent U,” where families could hear presentations on various parenting and education topics. Family members also volunteered in classrooms, chaperoned field trips, and attended school events.

Despite these many efforts, Delgado identified two important gaps. First, he noticed that parents themselves needed some discipline. As Maria Ramirez, a former PTO president who has enrolled four children at Amigos Por Vida described, “Before Delgado arrived, parents were used to hearing they could do whatever they wanted.” Delgado made sure there were ample opportunities for parents to be in schools and express their concerns, but set boundaries around when and how parents could do so.

At the same time, he made clear to parents that they needed to hold their students to a higher standard.

The celebrations were so well attended that the school eventually had to stagger the start times by grade to fit everyone.

ENGAGING FAMILIES IN STUDENT LEARNING

Though families were involved at the school, Delgado recognized that they needed help supporting student learning. Amigos Por Vida families are largely low-income, Spanish-speaking, and young. By and large, they want better opportunities for their children, but they need help making the most of the educational opportunity that Amigos Por Vida can provide them, says Delgado.

In response, he and his team have made a concerted effort to show families how they can support students academically. Grade-level teaching teams began hosting monthly parent meetings where they share a range of information related to the curriculum, learning expectations, and even testing

logistics. The school also began inviting families to attend math, literacy, and science nights where children show and explain to their families the work they have done.

Clear and consistent communication with families about student performance is another key piece. Classroom websites and attendance apps keep parents up to date on a daily basis. Teachers also frequently invite parents in for conferences. One parent who shared her daughter’s experience repeating the third grade described how her daughter’s teachers and the school’s reading coaches followed up with her every two weeks to talk about progress and specific activities they could work on at home. “You always know what’s going on,” she said.

Delgado leverages the school and its relationships with families to get them other important information as well. In addition to Parent U, the school holds monthly and quarterly meetings covering wellness topics like health, finance, and parenting skills. Counselors from different hospitals in the area have come in to discuss mental health, while medical and dental clinicians and the school’s physical education coaches have discussed exercise and other good health habits. The Houston Food Bank provides families with food, and the school even collects or buys clothes for students when needed. “We are all in this together for our students,” Delgado explains.

FAMILIES AS GENUINE PARTNERS

Equally important to Delgado, however, is making sure parents have a voice in decisions affecting them and their students. Since taking over at Amigos Por Vida, Delgado instituted an annual parent survey that gives all families an opportunity to share their ideas to improve the school’s relationship with the community and to note which topics they want to learn more about in monthly meetings. The survey also lets families share their thoughts about the school environment, including whether they feel welcomed and informed, and whether school leadership is accessible and responsive.

In addition, Delgado hosts a monthly breakfast with families where they can raise any questions

or concerns they have, and where he can share the work school leaders are doing, including the challenges they are tackling. “His [Delgado’s] door is always open,” says Mario Hernandez, who has taught at Amigos Por Vida for 10 years.

THE FAMILY CULTURE UNDERLYING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In large part because of the efforts Delgado and his staff have taken to enfold families into the fabric of and learning at Amigos Por Vida, the broader school community often feels like a family. Students treat each other like brothers and sisters, Hernandez said. Similarly, Ramirez noted that teachers treat students like their own.

Better yet, Amigos Por Vida is now a high-performing school. In 2018-19, student proficiency and growth in both English language arts and math exceeded the district and state averages, with Hispanic students outperforming all other district and state peers by more than 10 percentage points in both subjects.²¹ The Texas Department of Education also awarded the school distinctions for academic growth and closing the achievement gap three years in a row, from 2016-17 to 2018-19.²²

The payoff goes beyond student performance, though. “As a charter school, we have a different opportunity to be creative in the way we work with parents,” Delgado says. “I take pride in how we engage them in our school.” And the feeling seems to be reciprocal. As Ramirez says, “I am proud to say that Amigos Por Vida is where my kids go.”

MAQUITA ALEXANDER: CREATING A CAMPUS FOR ALL STUDENTS

WASHINGTON YU YING PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL



Maquita Alexander understands the transformative power of an excellent education on a personal level. On one side of her family are four generations of degree-holding professionals. And on the other, she is the granddaughter of an Alabama sharecropper with a third-grade education. So, when Alexander took her talents and experience as a career educator in a nearby district to Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School in 2009—the school her own children attended—she wanted to make sure it lived up to its name and truly nurtured excellence.

And academically, it did. Yu Ying has earned the D.C. Public Charter School Board’s (DC PCSB) highest rating—Tier 1 status—every year since DC PCSB implemented the rating system.²³ In addition, 2018 marked the fourth consecutive year (and fifth time since 2013) that readers of the Washington City Paper voted Yu Ying the Best Elementary School in the District.²⁴

Delivering a strong academic program, however, is not enough for Alexander. As an African American school leader who experienced situational poverty

as a child and knew what it was like to feel excluded, she wants every student at her school to feel comfortable and welcome when they step on campus.

ACKNOWLEDGING OPPORTUNITY GAPS

Yu Ying has the look and feel of a private school. Its three-acre campus sits on a hill, and a fence separates it from the rest of the city. But Yu Ying is not a private school—it’s public. And as Yu Ying began planning for its 10-year review and considered expanding its campus several years ago, its lack of socioeconomic diversity became increasingly apparent. While about 80 percent of public-school students across the city are considered economically disadvantaged, the same was true of less than 12 percent of Yu Ying students.²⁵

Meanwhile, the economically disadvantaged students who did enroll at Yu Ying often had a different social experience at the school than their wealthier peers. They were less likely to attend Yu Ying’s after-school program because of the cost. They were also more likely to take public transportation to and from school. As a result, they—and their parents—socialized with their peers during drop-off and pick-up less often. At the same time, Alexander noticed that Black students were coming to her office for behavioral issues more often than other students. “Schools are supposed to work for everyone, but our school wasn’t. We had real and perceived opportunity gaps,” Alexander says. “I knew we weren’t intentionally perpetuating the problem, but if certain kids don’t come here and the ones who do don’t have the same experiences as others, then that is a problem.”

ADDRESSING CHANGE FROM WITHIN

Beginning in 2016, Alexander began a campaign to make Yu Ying a campus where all students and their families feel like they belong. The process began with her staff. Alexander hired an independent

facilitator to lead staff in conversations about race, equity, and implicit bias over three different trainings. Though the facilitator no longer comes to Yu Ying, staff have continued the work; every staff meeting includes a discussion on a race and equity topic that staff members lead and facilitate. Staff also complete a summer reading assignment focused on a race and equity topic each year.

In addition, the school has adopted practices that address inequities at the school more directly. A “Boys to Men” group provides a platform for men of color on staff to mentor boys of color enrolled at the school. Yu Ying adopted restorative justice practices to more effectively address discipline and created a sliding-scale fee structure for its after-school program so more families can afford it. The school also provides more information—like literacy training—to parents online through webinars so they can access it when it’s most convenient for them. And Yu Ying hired a part-time Family Liaison to lead family outreach, focusing on parents who need additional supports or are less engaged. “The school has a history of having families with privilege,” observes Abbey Southerland Story, a parent at Yu Ying. “Now they [Alexander and school staff] are trying to adjust the whole school to be more equitable.”

FAMILIES TAKE THE LEAD

Alexander knew that creating a welcoming environment for all students went beyond what

the school could do on its own, however; family members would need to play a pivotal role. In response, she hired Kindred, a local nonprofit that brings family members of diverse backgrounds together based on the belief that creating social networks among adults helps to close opportunity gaps between their children. More specifically, Kindred helps family members participate in and lead structured conversations about race, equity, and shared goals for their children. As Meredith Morelle, Kindred’s program director says, “The [intent is that there be] communal ownership—that parents aren’t advocating for just their kids but advocating for all students and the community.”

Kindred’s work starts by recruiting family members—at open houses, back-to-school nights, Parent Association meetings, and at drop-off and pick-up—to participate in dialogue groups. The groups generally include 10 participants who reflect a school’s racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity. Over the course of a year, they meet 10 times over dinner or after school (with childcare provided) to get to know each other, to examine topics like implicit bias, microaggressions, and the history of racism in the U.S., and to discuss ways to include and value all families. New groups form each year, and Kindred trains “alumni Kindred parents” to lead them.

Most importantly, Kindred works with parents to create a structure within the school that ensures



these efforts are sustained over time. At Yu Ying, for example, a Kindred parent joined the Yu Ying Board of Trustees. Kindred parents also formed an equity committee with three working subcommittees to address school policies and practices that have a marginalizing effect for some families. As a result of the equity committee’s work, a revised parent handbook more intentionally defines the role of classroom parents in connecting all families to classroom activities. Also, school practices that required financial contributions have been eliminated—for instance, requiring preschool parents to provide snacks for an entire class for two weeks each year or to pay a standard school supplies fee. Since the 2018-19 school year, the school has also doubled the percentage of teachers who identify as people of color. These efforts have had a visible impact, Story says. “On the ground, the grassroots changes are really amazing. [Even] on the parent group email list, you can see that people have a new way of looking at things.”

There is, of course, more work to do. One interviewee acknowledged how difficult is it to strike a balance that encourages more families to participate, without discouraging others. Low-income students are also still a small minority at Yu Ying, and new challenges—and opportunities—will likely arise as that figure grows. For the moment, though, there is much to celebrate in the groundwork the school and its families have laid down through its three-year partnership with Kindred.

FROM PRACTICE TO IMPACT

Meanwhile, academic performance at Yu Ying remains strong. In 2018-19, its students outperformed their peers across the District of Columbia by almost 20 points in English language arts (ELA) and by nearly 30 points in math.²⁶ Equally important, Alexander has witnessed changes in how parents and students at her school interact and feel when they step onto campus. In addition to an increase in the number of lower-income students enrolling in the after-school program, the school has new systems and structures to prioritize race and equity issues, and Alexander now sees kids in carpools

they never would have joined before.

The importance of Yu Ying’s work around inclusion and diversity has only become more important as it begins preparations to open a second campus. Though the percentage of economically disadvantaged students attending Yu Ying has not changed much over the last several years, Alexander is using new marketing strategies to publicize the new school and what it offers to low-income families while continuing the work to ensure they feel at home once enrolled.

“People who send their kids to Yu Ying want the best for their kids. But if you come from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background, then you may feel intimidated when you come to this campus, and more so if you didn’t have a good experience in school,” Alexander explains. “What we want to do is communicate to every parent that we value you and your child, and will make sure that we are addressing every need.”

KRISTE DRAGON: CO-DEVELOPING SCHOOLS WITH FAMILIES

CITIZENS OF THE WORLD CHARTER SCHOOLS

Kriste Dragon vividly recalls how different it felt to attend a school that celebrated diversity compared to one that fell into the trappings of racial stereotypes. As a student at a progressive Montessori school, Dragon saw how the school staff accepted all their students, regardless of race or background, valued what made them unique, and believed in their abilities. In contrast, the traditional public school she entered in fourth grade seemed to create divisions that split students along racial and socioeconomic lines through policies like academic tracking and busing. And as the child of a Filipino mother and a white father growing up in Georgia, she felt the weight of those differences, not only as an adolescent in school, but throughout her experiences into adulthood.

When it came time for Dragon to choose a school for her own child, she sought out a place where the student body reflected the many cultures of her Los Angeles community and where students could learn how to live and thrive in a diverse society. But she struggled to find such a school, and in time, decided to build one. “I created Citizens of the World as a school that I would create for my own child, thinking other parents would want the same,” Dragon said.

A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY

While nearly every aspect of Citizens of the World’s (CWC) four schools in Los Angeles and Kansas City, Missouri, is intentional, one of its core features is the school’s “diverse-by-design” model. CWC intentionally locates all its campuses in diverse communities and then tries to match student enrollment to the demographic composition of those communities with respect to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

CWC’s leaders have found, however, that creating a school with a diverse enrollment takes more than opening it in a diverse community. To truly level



the playing field for all families, CWC takes steps to ensure all families have equal opportunities to learn about the network and equal access through the application process. Some of those steps include additional outreach to low-income families, such as through community partners, and a weighted lottery that balances family demand with community representation. “We believe that, in order to truly leverage diversity ... you actually have to design in ways that ensure that children are working together, and that you’re talking about those interactions, talking about collaboration in a way that strengthens the ability to develop the skills to work across lines of difference,” Dragon says. “That, we believe, maximizes the diversity that we have in our student population and keeps us from recreating the status quo of discrimination that we see and experience still today in our country.”

CWC schools also try to hire staff at all levels that reflect the local community. To do so, they carefully consider where to post information about openings and look to current teachers to refer candidates they know are passionate about CWC’s mission and values. Equally important, candidates can see that

teachers and other CWC staff are in fact diverse; more than 50 percent of CWC staff in Los Angeles—including all three principals—identify as people of color, and at the Kansas City campus, 45 percent of full-time staff identify as people of color. “If you have leaders of color, you have a greater opportunity for people to see that we’re living diversity,” observes Laura Furlong, Chief of Staff at CWC. “It’s not just a word.”

SOPHISTICATED THINKERS

Another critical piece of CWC’s model is a curriculum that focuses on preparing “sophisticated thinkers,” which CWC does by developing 11 graduate dispositions—skills and habits that position students to lead in the community and in the world. These qualities focus not just on what students know, but also on how they understand themselves and interact with others. The graduate dispositions include qualities such as self-understanding, cultural competency, and global advocacy.

CWC schools build the graduate dispositions into the curriculum so that, as students learn the core subjects, they also apply the dispositions. They learn, for example, how to deconstruct their own bias in considering how redlining led to residential segregation and how to apply critical thinking to controversial issues, such as the proposed wall along the U.S.–Mexico border. “Citizens of the World encourages kids to know who they are in the world and respect each other and other cultures; but they’re not playing with the academics, either,” says Tracii McGregor, a parent at CWC Hollywood. “That’s very important to me as a parent.”

A MODEL BUILT WITH FAMILIES

Although CWC’s model shapes so much of what happens in the network’s schools, families are in many ways the key ingredient to making the model work. The importance of effective family engagement in CWC’s success has been particularly evident as it has expanded beyond California.

In 2013, CWC opened two new campuses in Brooklyn but struggled to enroll enough students. Five years later, the regional leadership there opted

not to renew its charter because the school was struggling to meet academic targets. As CWC’s leadership reflected on its experience in New York, it realized several important lessons. First, the schools struggled with a variety of issues related to management systems and governance not atypical of growing networks, including defining its model and balancing regional autonomy with central oversight. But several other lessons related to family and community engagement. Despite parents recruiting CWC to New York, for example, 18 months had not been enough lead time for CWC to build the deep community support it needed in a city where it did not already have strong connections and where the politics around charters was among the most contentious in the country.

As CWC expanded into Kansas City, it took those lessons to heart. CWC spent an additional year on the ground before opening the school. And although CWC did not have any connections to Kansas City, the community organization that recruited the network introduced its leaders to key stakeholders in the city. With its additional time, CWC also held 180 meetings with the community outlining the school’s values, purpose, and model. “When parents are involved from the beginning, it’s their model, too” Dragon explains.

Family engagement at CWC does not stop at start-up planning. While the underlying structure of CWC schools is the same from one campus to the next, families help to shape many of the details. For example, in Los Angeles, students do not wear uniforms, but Kansas City parents preferred them. In both Los Angeles and Kansas City, parents serve on regional boards that influence organizational policies. Each school also has a principal’s council that includes parent representatives and meets throughout the year to advise and provide feedback on site-based decision making. Further, family-led committees serve important functions at CWC campuses; for example, at CWC Hollywood, family-led committees collaborate with school leaders and staff to organize fundraisers and school-wide events, such as an annual multicultural celebration.

LIVING THE MODEL WITH FAMILIES

The graduate dispositions and CWC’s commitment to diversity also shine through in how schools interact with families. One of the schools, for example, held community meetings in Spanish, exposing native-English speakers to the experience of requiring a translator to convey and understand need-to-know information. CWC also piloted family sessions in Los Angeles to discuss race and equity, similar to the discussions it has with students in class. CWC continuously surveys families and staff for feedback on how the network is meeting its core values.

In addition, CWC schools work to ensure its events are as inclusive as possible. They host events at different times (including immediately after student drop-off or on weekends), often provide child care and translators (including Spanish and Korean at its Los Angeles schools), and carefully review all materials to make sure they are accessible to all readers. As one more example, CWC Hollywood posts all messages on a billboard by the front office to help ensure that families without access to the internet or email have a way to receive them.

At the same time, engaging families of such diverse backgrounds in genuine and meaningful ways has proved challenging. CWC continues to make it a priority, though its leaders acknowledge that current systems and structures make it difficult for low-income families to engage at the same level as more affluent families. For example, when a parent is working two part-time jobs, it is generally more difficult to volunteer during the school day than it is for a parent who is salaried and has paid time off. Similarly, a five-dollar fee to sign up for the PTA or a school event may not seem like much to some families, but it can provide a real obstacle to attendance for others. “We need to engage all people in the community, so that more affluent families don’t get more credit,” says Vanessa Rodriguez, CWC’s Chief Program Officer. “All families have an equal stake at the school.”

SIGNS OF SUCCESS

CWC may have struggled stepping into uncharted territory in New York, but its results in California show

what the network—and its students— are capable of accomplishing. In the 2017-18 school year, students at all three CWC schools in California exceeded both district and state averages in both English language arts (ELA) and math.²⁷ Two of them were in the top quintile statewide in both subjects. Hispanic students at the three schools outperformed their district and state peers in both ELA and math as well. And not only did economically disadvantaged students at CWC’s California schools also score higher than their peers in the state, but there was also a smaller achievement gap between them and their wealthier classmates.²⁸

Dragon and her team care about more than test scores, however; their mission is to impact and expand the conversation about what an excellent education contains, requires, and accomplishes. To that end, CWC is developing ways to measure and report on student mastery of its graduate dispositions, including on report cards and in family conferences. “[Strong academic] results are actually a symptom that we’re thinking about the whole kid,” Dragon says.

Families at CWC appreciate that, because they are, too.



FOOTNOTES

¹Goldhaber, D., Theobald, R. & Tien, C. 2015. “The Theoretical and Empirical Arguments for Diversifying the Teacher Workforce: A Review of the Evidence.” Center for Education & Data Research. <https://www.cedr.us/papers/working/CEDR%20WP%202015-9.pdf>; Rosen, J. 2016. “Race Biases Teachers’ Expectations for Students.” Johns Hopkins University. <http://releases.jhu.edu/2016/03/30/race-biases-teachers-expectations-for-students/>

²Bartanen, B. & Grissom, J. (2019). School Principal Race and the Hiring and Retention of Racially Diverse Teachers. Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai19-59.pdf>.

³Enrollment projections reported by the U.S. Department of Education in 2017 indicate that in 2019, students enrolled in public schools are 15 percent black, 28 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 percent American Indian/Alaska Native, 3 percent two or more races, and 47 percent white. National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.) ‘Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2027.’ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_203.50.asp?referer=raceindicators

⁴The 2015-16 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) found that among 90,400 public school principals of K-12 schools in the United States, 78 percent were non-Hispanic white; 11 percent were non-Hispanic black or African American; 8 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent another race/ethnicity (i.e., American Indian/Alaska Native; non-Hispanic; Asian, non-Hispanic; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic; and two or more races, non-Hispanic. These data can be found at: Taie, S., Goldring, R., and Spiegelman, M. (2017). Characteristics of Public Elementary and Secondary School Principals in the United States: Results from the 2015-16 National Teacher and Principal Survey, First Look. *National Center for Education Statistics*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017070.pdf>.

⁵This report and others in the series focus on identity. Though some of the leaders may appear to share the same ethnic or racial identities, the words they used to describe themselves differed at times. In response, we chose to use the same terms the leaders profiled used, even if it meant using different terms in different parts of the series.

⁶“Deficit thinking” or a “deficit model” presumes that some students, particularly students who are minorities, come from low-income families, or are disabled, are deficient in some way and thus cannot be held to the same achievement standards as their peers. See Valencia, R., ed. 1997. *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*. Psychology Press.

⁷Henderson, A. & Mapp, K. A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement—Annual Synthesis 2002. *National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools*. <https://www.seel.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>.

⁸Goodall, J. & Montgomery, C. 2014. Parental involvement to parental engagement: a continuum. *Educational Review*, 66:4, 399-410, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2013.781576. <https://learningfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Parental-involvement-to-parental-engagement-a-continuum.pdf>

⁹A 2017 Rice University study found that family and community engagement is the top driver of overall satisfaction among public school parents, leading researchers to conclude that traditional public schools can become competitive with private and charter schools by improving family engagement opportunities. See Falk, J. 2017. “Rice U. study: Public schools lagging in family and community engagement.” Rice University. <http://news.rice.edu/2017/11/29/105830/>

¹⁰Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School 2018. About. <https://www.washingtonyuying.org/about/>.

¹¹Texas Education Agency 2019. Amigos Por Vida-Friends For Life Public Charter Sc Application. http://castro.tea.state.tx.us/charter_apps/content/downloads/Applications/101819.pdf.

¹²Citizens of the World Charter Schools 2019. History. <http://www.citizensoftheworld.org/history>.

¹³Amigos Por Vida—Friends For Life Public Charter School 2018. The Story of Amigos Por Vida. <https://www.amigosporvida.com/about-us/index>.

¹⁴Office of the State Superintendent of Education 2019. 2018-19 School Year Enrollment Audit Report Data. <https://osse.dc.gov/node/1390091>.

¹⁵Texas Education Agency 2019. 2018-19 Student Enrollment: Totals by Campus for Campus: 101819001. https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&_program=adhoc.addispatch.sas&endyear=19&major=st&minor=e&format=w&selsumm=nc&linespg=60&charsln=120&grouping=e&key=101819001.sas&ptype=H&level=campus&search=campname&namenum=amigos&campus=101819001&prgopt=2018%2Ftpr%2Fpaper_tapr.sas.



¹⁶Reflects total enrollment of all four CWC schools. For the three CWC schools located in California, enrollment data retrieved from: California Department of Education 2018. Enrollment by School, 2018-19. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp>. For CWC Kansas City, enrollment data retrieved from 'Free and Reduced Lunch Percentage by Building 2009-10 to 2018-19' Excel under Districts, Charters, & Schools category at <https://apps.dese.mo.gov/MCDS/home.aspx>.

¹⁷D.C. Public Charter School Board 2018. 2018 School Quality Report: Washington Yu Ying PCS.

¹⁸Percent of nonwhite students calculated by summing the total number of nonwhite students across all four CWC schools in 2017-2018 and dividing that sum by the total 2017-2018 CWC enrollment. 2017-2018 data were used because 2018-2019 counts of students by race were not available for CWC Kansas City. Total number of nonwhite students for three California CWC schools retrieved from: California Department of Education 2018. Enrollment by School, 2017-18. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp>. Total number of nonwhite students for CWC Kansas City retrieved from 'Building Demographic Data' Excel under Students category. <https://apps.dese.mo.gov/MCDS/home.aspx>.

¹⁹Texas Education Agency 2018. 2017-18 Texas Academic Performance Report, Amigos Por Vida—Friends for Life C. https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&year4=2018&year2=18&_debug=0&single=N&batch=N&app=PUBLIC&title=2018+Texas+Academic+Performance+Reports&_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&ptype=H&level=campus&search=campname&namenum=amigos&campus=101819001&prgopt=2018%2Ftapr%2Fpaper_tapr.sas

²⁰Percent of economically disadvantaged students calculated by summing the total number of students eligible for free/reduced price lunch (FRPL) across all four CWC schools in 2018-2019 and dividing that sum by the total 2018-2019 CWC enrollment. Total number of FRPL eligible students for three California CWC schools retrieved from: California Department of Education 2018. Student Poverty FRPM Data, 2018-19. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesesp.asp>. Total number of FRPL eligible students for CWC Kansas City retrieved from 'Free and Reduced Lunch Percentage by Building 2009-10 to 2018-19' Excel under Districts, Charters, & Schools category. <https://apps.dese.mo.gov/MCDS/home.aspx>.

²¹Texas Education Agency 2019. 2019 STAAR Performance Data Table: Amigos Por Vida—Friends for Life P. https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&_debug=0&sublevel=camp&single=N&batch=N&app=PUBLIC&ptype=H&title=2019+Accountability+Reports&_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&ptype=P&level=campus&search=campname&namenum=Amigos+Por+Vida&campus=101819001&prgopt=2019%2Facct%2Fdomain1a.sas&subj=RE; Texas Education Agency 2019. 2019 STAAR Performance Data Table: Houston ISD (101912). https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&_debug=0&sublevel=camp&single=N&batch=N&app=PUBLIC&ptype=H&title=2019+Accountability+Reports&_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&ptype=P&level=district&search=district&namenum=houston+isd&district=101912&prgopt=2019%2Facct%2Fdomain1a.sas&subj=RE; Texas Education Agency 2019. 2019 STAAR Performance Data Table: State. <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/account/2019/state.pdf>.

²²Texas Education Agency 2019. 2019 Distinction Designation Summary. https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2019%20List_Campus_By_Distinction_Rate.pdf; Texas Education Agency 2018. 2017-18 Texas Academic Performance Report, Amigos Por Vida —Friends for Life C. https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&year4=2018&year2=18&_debug=0&single=N&batch=N&app=PUBLIC&title=2018+Texas+Academic+Performance+Reports&_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&ptype=H&level=campus&search=campname&namenum=amigos&campus=101819001&prgopt=2018%2Ftapr%2Fpaper_tapr.sas; Texas Education Agency 2017. 2016-17 Texas Academic Performance Report, Amigos Por Vida—Friends for Life C. https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&year4=2017&year2=17&_debug=0&single=N&title=2017+Texas+Academic+Performance+Reports&_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&prgopt=2017%2Ftapr%2Ftapr.sas&ptype=P&level=campus&search=campname&namenum=Amigos+Por+Vida&campus=101819001

²³D.C. Public Charter School Board Nov 2017. "History of tiers," <https://www.dcpsb.org/history-tiers>.

²⁴Washington City Paper readers voted Yu Ying the best elementary school in D.C. in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. See Washington City Paper 2018. "Best Elementary School." <https://local.washingtoncitypaper.com/publication/best-of-dc/2018/people-and-places/best-elementary-school>; Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School. (2019). "Voted DC's Best Elementary School." <https://www.washingtonyuying.org/>; Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School 2019. About. <https://www.washingtonyuying.org/about/>; Washington City Paper 2017. "Best of D.C. 2017," p. 112. <https://issuu.com/washcp/docs/wascp040717>.

²⁵OSSE. "District of Columbia: 2015-16 Equity Report." https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2015_Equity_Report_Citywide_District%20of%20Columbia.pdf; OSSE. "Washington Yu Ying PCS: 2015-16 equity report." https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2015_Equity_Report_Public%20Charter%20School_Washington%20Yu%20Ying%20PCS.pdf

²⁶In 2018-19, 56 percent of Yu Ying students were proficient in ELA, compared to 37 percent in the District of Columbia; 57 percent of Yu Ying students were proficient in math, compared to 31 percent in the District of Columbia. OSSE 2019. 2018-19 Detailed PARCC and MSAA Performance Results. <https://osse.dc.gov/page/2018-19-parcc-results-and-resources>

²⁷According to Missouri state data, CWC Kansas City did not report proficiency data to the state in the 2017-2018 school year.

²⁸California Department of Education 2018. Search Smarter Balanced Test Results. <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2018/Search>.



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