

# CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**

## Erika Bryant

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Public Charter School



My first position in education was as an English teacher in the Peace Corps in West Africa. Two years in this role gave me such an appreciation for teaching, learning, and community development. I went on to receive my Masters in Education Administration Planning and Social Policy from Harvard University, and I spent about ten years working for NGOs in development and educational policy in Africa and the United States. This experience deeply informs my work at Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School (“Stokes”), named after my grandmother.

My grandmother was a teacher in Arkansas for nearly 40 years. She began her teaching career in one-room schoolhouses in the 1940s, before integration, serving low-income African American students. She was the kind of teacher who believed that all kids could succeed with the appropriate resources. When my grandmother passed away, my mother, who also had a background in community development and early childhood education, decided that the best way to honor her legacy was to start a school. My mother founded and was Executive Director at the Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School for 15 years, and she now serves as our Senior Advisor. I’ve worked for the school for 17 years, as Operations Director, Managing Director, and now Executive Director. My work is a labor of love for our students and for my family, and it is such an honor to do it.

### **UNITED NATIONS SENSIBILITY AT SCHOOL**

In 2015, The Washington Post cited Stokes as most diverse school in the city. We prepare students to be leaders, scholars, and responsible citizens committed to social justice. Stokes is an International Baccalaureate candidate language immersion school, and we teach children to think, speak, read, write, and learn in two languages. Our teachers come from Africa, South America, the Middle East, and Europe. Our students range from immigrant families to the children of diplomats. It is not easy to navigate many belief and value systems, but we believe it is essential. We expose our students to as many schools of thought as we can.

Stokes is a Tier 1 school and has been for many years. Over the past two years, we’ve seen a weighted average of 57.6 median growth percentile in English Language Arts (ELA). We have strong student and staff retention. A couple of our students we call “our grandchildren” because we’ve educated their parents. Several people on the leadership team have been with the school for longer than I have—18, 19, 20 years.

Alumni come back telling us how their education at Stokes helped them to do what they wanted to in the world. I remember one student whose family had recently immigrated to the United States. When she started at Stokes she was just learning English, and she later went on to study at Harvard University. In an interview about her Harvard experience, she credited Stokes as having provided the foundation for her educational success.

Stokes opened our flagship campus in 1998. In 2018, after years of carefully refining curriculum and building community, we opened a second campus "East of the River"—in the section of DC with the highest concentrations of poverty. This campus is as diverse as our first and attracts families and children from every Ward of the city.

## DIVERSITY INSPIRES

I think it's impossible to think about Stokes without thinking about the value of diversity. The mini-United-Nations feel of our school is what makes it such a special place for our students and staff. We have a diverse staff at Stokes because it is necessary (in any sector) to bring a variety of perspectives to the table in order to achieve the best results. We also have a diverse staff so that every child can look to someone in a position of leadership and feel a connection. It is so important for students to see leaders who look like them, to know that they can impact the world. I remember a few years ago, a group of eight second-grade girls (five African American and three Latina) came to me and asked if we could start a book club. We did, and we met once a week for three years, reading books in English and Spanish about girl power and women leaders. I was so grateful to be able to bond with these students over issues that were important to all of us.

As our populations continue to evolve, and our student populations continue to diversify, we have an opportunity to better support charter school leaders of color. The support structures that we put in place now can help us to build a welcoming and peaceful future for our children.

# Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School

Location	Washington, DC
Year Opened	1998
Student enrollment	540
Grades served	PreK-5
Website	<a href="http://www.ewstokes.org">www.ewstokes.org</a>



### Student Demographics

Asian	1%	Homeless Youth	5%
Black/African-American	45%	At Risk Students	12%
White/Caucasian	26%	Students with Disabilities	10%
Hispanic/Latino	16%	ESL Students	12%
Two or More Races	12%		



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