

CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**

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MY JOURNEY TO HOWARD MIDDLE SCHOOL

Education was not my first career. I got my degree in Mathematics and I was going to be an actuary, but I kind of got steered into technology and spent 25 years designing systems for the federal government and for some big consulting firms. Along that journey, my mother was ill and was in the hospital. I went to see her every day and one day she said, “Baby, go get the bible.” So I got it and she told me to read the front cover. It turns out it had been given to me when I was 12 by a pastor and he had written that I was going to be a consecrated teacher. My mother said, “You need to go do this, because this is what you’re supposed to be doing.”

My mother passed and I was trying to process that and deal with my grief, and my husband said, “You know, you need to go do what your mother told you to do.” So, I turned around and went back to school midlife. I started teaching middle school in DC at a charter school. When I walked in the room, the kids said, “You’re number 9.” I was the 9th teacher they had had, and it was January. I decided that if this was what education looked like for children who look like me, I was where I was supposed to be and I needed to really dig in and be a part of the change.

I’m one of those reluctant leaders, so when leadership opportunities first came, I was trying to shy away, but I had lots of ideas about what we should do and I found myself in it. I was principal at Maya Angelou PCS and got to work with David Domenici and James Forman, which was a phenomenal experience. From there I went to Friendship and was having a wonderful time. I thought I was gonna kinda chill and stay there for the rest of my career, but I’ve learned that once you get comfortable in a space and you start thinking you’re doing it by yourself, it’s time to move on, because you never do anything alone.

This was right after Howard Middle School had experienced trauma. There was a very traumatic event here where the news that got out was that there were teachers who were trying to teach Black History and had been fired by the principal. That isn’t actually what happened, but that’s the news that got out. There was a walkout, parents left, and it was just a really difficult time for the school. One of my sorors who was very close to the school said, “I want you to apply for this.”

I started on August 10, 2015 with 9 teacher vacancies, no building to go into, because there had been a flood, and school starting in 2 weeks. One of the blessings of being part of Howard University is that Howard has lots of buildings and they’re very supportive of our program, so we did find a temporary space. Teachers came. The whole school community was grieving, so we worked to heal and let parents know that we still care about their children and their education. In the tradition of Howard University, truth and excellence, I told the truth. I said, “This is where we are and we can’t get to where we want to be alone.” We pulled together and it’s gotten better.

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

We've been very blessed. We were one of CityBridge's Breakthrough Schools a couple of years ago and as a part of that, we had to look at how we were "doing education." We moved to an individualized learning platform that allowed students to go at their own pace, to pick resources that they wanted, and it was blended learning. So we had already been doing it for years. Since our school was founded, we were a 2-to-1 technology school, so we always sent tech home. So when we had to hit pause on March 13, the most we had to hammer through was kids who threw the iPad in the corner so we had to recharge it and those types of things.

Even before COVID, we purposefully put a lot of wrap-around services in place. We have culture deans for every grade level, 2 social workers, 2 counselors, a student support director, and 2 special educators per grade level. Teachers can't do all of that, especially now that they're home, because they're managing their home life as well. We purposefully put a lot of wrap-around services in place. In addition, we have a mentoring program where everyone in the school has 8 or 9 children that they mentor. That gives us a one-on-one touch point with each child. They may talk about academics, but they may talk about what's going on at home. When we get that information, we can provide them what they really need.

I really want to credit the people who work here, because they all care about the children's learning. We had a lot of communication with parents. We let kids know that we were taking attendance when they logged into the platform and were engaged in the learning. It wasn't totally smooth. There were bumps, but they weren't big ones. They were ones we collectively got together and smoothed out.

The most difficult thing was that there was trauma in the community, because we had so many children who had lost grandparents, parents who lost jobs. So a lot of the work we did was more than just academics, it was taking groceries over to someone's house. It was driving someone to a funeral. I think that one of those pieces of COVID that we forget is the trauma of the child. I live with my granddad, but now my granddad's gone and you want me to do academics. We have to make sure we're addressing that trauma before we start hammering the other things that we do as a school.

The other part of it is the trust that we have to continue to develop with families. One thing that COVID did is open up people's homes to us, and often people don't want that. We need to make sure they understand that we're not there to judge, we're there as a community partner to help them. That takes a minute, because we're an establishment. School is still part of the "system." We had to let them know that yes, we're about education, but we're about you as a person and you as a family before we even get to that part.

There's so much that we don't know about our families. There are things our community is experiencing that I don't think people realized how deep it is and how much it affects them every day. Schools can't just be about test scores and attendance and the data of the day. There really are some qualitative things that we really have to focus on, because if we don't get that right, we're never gonna get that other stuff right.



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We're seeing different aspects of our children and staff. Some of them are blossoming in a distance learning space. They're responding in the chat and doing what they need to do and moving ahead in their academics. We need to continue to affirm for children that it's about what your growth looks like and that growth looks different for everybody. Some of our children who were late to school every day are showing up on time now, and we need to affirm that growth. We're seeing growth in our students' writing, because they're having to write in the tech space. We're seeing them find ways to communicate with each other in a virtual space, which is really amazing.

I find that students are really advocating for themselves. The way our program is set up, for students to show mastery, they have to request an assessment from their teacher. Now, if the teacher doesn't respond, they text me. Or they'll text me that they forgot to plug in their iPad, so can I text their teacher and let him know that they're here. They've bought into the idea that we want their success and that we're here to support them.

THE MANATI FELLOWSHIP EXPERIENCE

During the time that I was a Manati Fellow, we were dealing with our fifteen year charter renewal. As a part of that, we had to address our goals as a school. Manati reminded me that I had power but I wasn't using it. It allowed me to have conversations about creating goals that really spoke to our children. Not goals about a score on PARCC, but "How did you grow?" Because growth as a measure never ends. Now, we're talking to children about "How are you growing?"

For me, what we've done is give teachers permission to unapologetically say we are addressing the needs of black children, this is a traumatized section of our community and we're addressing those specific needs. My team has talked about what a successful student looks like. At first, people talked about good grades, but then we realized that wasn't enough. We came up with our own definition and it has things like they believe in their own potential, they gain confidence every day, and they trust the process and aren't afraid to make mistakes. It was freeing to me and it's freeing to our staff to say, this is who we are and this is how we're addressing the needs of our children.

The coaching for me has been phenomenal. I look at my day and I see things that I've shifted as a result of the coaching I've received in the program. I take time for myself in the morning. I have an under the desk treadmill so I can take a few minutes and walk and read. When people bring challenges to me, my inclination has always been, well let me fix that. As a result of the coaching, my comment now is, "What is your solution for this?" This has provided space for leaders to grow here and for me to help develop them. Giving them the opportunity to fail forward and learn from that is phenomenal.

DCPS has created spaces for principals and school leaders to get together. It's purposeful and it's something that charter leaders and especially charter leaders of color don't have. Manati was critical to me, because the relationships formed through the cohort are going to stay. We're going to find spaces to make sure that we're collaborating. It took so long for someone to realize this needed to be here. We've lost schools, because leaders didn't have the support they needed. I hope the fellowship will grow and continue to be there.



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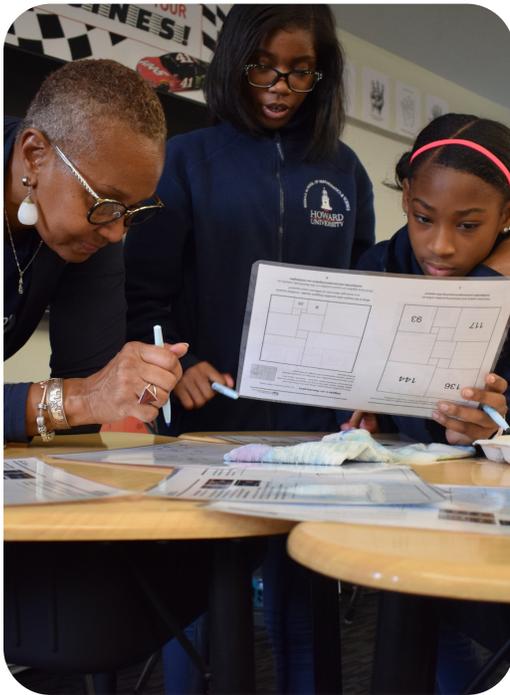
Another thing that's really stayed with me is giving myself permission to be happy. I know that sounds weird, but I would feel guilty if I took time for myself if I wasn't on vacation. The coaching gave me permission to take some time for myself. What I was doing was falling out. I would give time to my husband and my grandchildren, but I didn't give time to myself. I didn't realize I wasn't doing it, but I sure am doing it now.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF NOW

Don't be shy. Speak the absolute truth. This is who we are and we need to capture this moment and run with it. I see our children doing a voter registration drive that they came up with. They're going to show pictures of all their family members with their "I Voted" stickers. This is a time of young people who are tech-savvy and know how to operate in the social media world. This is a time to let them know, go for it. I'm not standing in the way. I just want to learn.

They need to learn that the system wasn't made for us to fly. It was made for us to be under a knee, unfortunately. But we don't have to stay there. Let your voice be heard, because people are actually listening. COVID opened the door and exposed all of the inequities that have existed forever and ever. We've been living with them and we have survived. We are a surviving people. We have to say, "Put technology in my community." Use the exposure that's happened as an opportunity for us to move forward. That's the best thing that can happen out of this pandemic.

I hope that ten years from now we are not under white supremacy constructs for education. I hope that we are looking at learning in a more holistic way. Yeah, you need to know mathematics and those types of things, but paying attention to what true learning is for our community. Not only history of who you are and what happened before, but how you are going forward. Test scores and what school you're going to aren't as important as how you've grown. What's important is that I've grown in my ability to advocate for myself, I've grown in my understanding of who I am and what I need to do in my community. Education needs to create those types of people, because those are the types of people who are going to change all of the foolishness that's going on outside. I love that our young people are out and they're protesting, because they've grown and they've found a way to express themselves.



Howard University Middle School of Mathematics & Science

Location	Washington, DC
Year Opened	2005
Student enrollment	294
Grades served	6-8
Website	www.hu-ms2.org

Student Demographics

Black/African-American	92%	Homeless Students	2%
Hispanic/Latino	7%	FRPM/FRPL %	78%
Indigenous/Native American	.5%	Students with Disabilities	13%
Two or More Races	.5%	ELL/ESL Students	1%