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OP-ED: AN OPEN LETTER TO CHRIS CERF, NEWARK'S NEW SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

IMANI THORNTON | OCTOBER 13, 2015

'Luck' has no place in the vocabulary of education reform -- not in Newark, not in Chicago, not in any public school in the country



Imani Thornton

Editor's note: Imani Thornton is a sophomore at Princeton University studying education and public policy. The following open letter to Superintendent Chris Cerf is a result of her summer research fellowship with Princeton Chapter of Students for Education Reform.

Chris Cerf was appointed and approved in July as successor to the former Newark Public Schools superintendent Cami Anderson. In the shadow of One Newark, I

implore Chris Cerf to transcend the false dichotomy between traditional public schools and charter schools, and focus solely on the ways to provide quality schools for all students.

While I am not from New Jersey, I am an undergraduate student at Princeton University interested in educational reform. And as a product of the "Chicagoland" (Chicago metropolitan area) education system -- one not dissimilar to Newark -- my educational experience made at least one thing clear: School choice is not only beneficial, but also essential to truly engage parents and students in the fight for education reform.

My educational experience exemplifies the concept of school choice. My school choices, marked by my parents' constant search for the perfect school, were not readily available to many students across the country. I was lucky.

I began my education in the Chicagoland public elementary school in my neighborhood, but my parents transferred me out in third grade because the classrooms became crowded. My parents

chose to send me to a small Lutheran school, but once tuition rose in sixth grade, attendance there was no longer feasible. Finally, when I graduated middle school from the traditional public school down the road, my parents insisted I attend the best high school in the area because my local public high school often ranked as one of the lowest-performing schools inside and outside the city of Chicago. My high-school choices were limited and my parents enrolled me in a private, Catholic school with a monthly tuition that rivaled tuition of state universities. To my parents, my education was worth the financial burden on the family. I was lucky.

Barely a week before the first tuition deposit, I was entered into the lottery for a new charter high school opening that fall. The school, Southland College Prep, provided an alternative to the traditional public schools in the area. There were only 125 spots, and with more applicants than spots, my place in the inaugural class was uncertain. On the day of the lottery, my number was selected and the decision to attend a public charter school was made. I was lucky.

But the community was upset. The local school district attempted to shut down my charter high school well into my sophomore year. My friends from middle school mocked and scorned the school, often adding, "You're stealing our money, and that's why our classes are getting cut short." While this statement was unfounded, it raised many questions for me:

- Where were these sentiments coming from?
- Had the problems at their high school gotten worse?
- Why is the choice for a good school a threat?
- Why can't everyone have access to what I have?

With a mixture of guilt and pride, I attended Southland College Prep with parts of the school credo ringing through my head each day: "The students of today are the leaders of tomorrow ... We give 100 percent every day ... When we pull together we can move mountains." I received the individualized attention and resources of which my parents had always dreamed. I was lucky.

Now, as I look back on my secondary education, I remember the number of times I had doubts about my charter high school -- many of them personal: I would often question the how and why of many decisions the school administration made and how this would improve our overall educational experience. My middle-school friends -- with talents and merits that rivaled my own -- seemed to have wrongly been subjected to a subpar education in the traditional public schools. Why was luck allowed to play a role in the ways in which my potential was harnessed in high school?

I don't enjoy using words like "luck" when discussing education. Luck simply has no place when constantly there are reminders that a quality education is a right and not a privilege. My educational journey has made it clear to me that in order to disassociate luck from education, the focus in Newark must shift to that of quality schools.

What these two metropolitan areas have in common is perhaps what many cities across the country share: lack of choices and a public-school district that fails to understand the desires of the parents and students desperate for a chance at a quality K-12 education. While the creation of charter schools and efforts like the OneNewark Plan are admirable, they do not excuse the interminable problem that exists. How can parents truly have choices when a charter-school class has only 125 spots? How can parents truly have choices when their school has neither the resources nor the funds to support their students? How can parents truly have choices when the only quality school is across town?

As Chris Cerf steps in, I implore him to consider the parents and students. Truly engage with the community to refocus on quality educational options, regardless of what they are called. Give all

students -- not just the lucky ones -- true opportunities at a quality education, and take luck out of the education reform vocabulary.

Imani Thornton is a sophomore at Princeton University studying education and public policy.

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