

My name is Cheryl Jackson, and I am a teacher.

I have had the opportunity to work in a wide variety of educational settings as an instructor in the United States Army, a classroom teacher, and as an ESL coordinator at a charter high school. The reason I stand before you today is that I firmly believe the charter school system provides a successful model for reaching and teaching students who are doomed to fail by public school standards.

Over the decades, I have seen a steady increase in our student at-risk population. Public schools have done their best to implement programs they hope will remediate and re-invent at-risk students. But no matter how hard they try, they cannot hammer a square peg into a round hole. In an increasingly diverse and stress-filled society, significant numbers of children are being broken by the system, by bad personal choices, and by events beyond their control.

Currently, disenfranchised high school students are offered a choice – they can drop out, or they can attend a charter school. Let me share the stories of 2 remarkable young people, both of whom have chosen not to drop out. The 1st, a young man of 18, was a former gang member. He had gotten into trouble at his home school and was expelled. Eventually he realized that if he continued with this life style, he would either be in prison or die. He made the choice to turn his life around, got a job at Kentucky Fried Chicken, and worked his way up to assistant manager. The district manager, impressed by the work ethic of this young man, told him that if he obtained his high school diploma, he could become a manager. He returned to his home school to re-enroll, but was refused admittance. Because he was determined to graduate, he chose a charter school. He was able to earn credits while continuing to work full-time and attended manager training classes on the weekends.

Another student came to our campus as a 15 year old mother. Her parents divorced and her mother arrived in the United States with 4 children. The mother soon remarried, but the young girl didn't want to live with her mother's new husband and so left home. She missed her mom, didn't have anyone with whom she could share her feelings, and thought having a baby would make her life better. She quickly realized that having a baby had actually made her life more difficult. She did reunite with her mother after the baby was born and asked her to care for the infant while she attended school. The mother refused, saying that she would not help the girl with anything if she returned to school and continued to learn English. Because of a charter school, she is able to continue her education while caring for her baby and is persisting in her efforts to learn English. She talks and reads to her daughter in English every day because as she says, she is determined to give her baby a better life than she has.

These students are examples of children who are classified by many as broken, but they are not resigned to being on the fringes of society. They are choosing to stay in school and pursue their dreams, whatever they may be...gainful employment after high school, continuing their education, providing a better life for their children. Despite adversity, they still believe in the system.

When we consider that our country was founded on protecting freedoms, defending human rights, and embracing diversity, can we not truly model this in our educational system? Can we not continue to provide an alternative, a school of choice, a charter school? I am convinced that all of us here are dedicated to helping students put the pieces of their lives back together so that they can become contributing members of society, and I believe John Prine got it right when he wrote, "Ain't it funny how an old broken bottle looks just like a diamond ring".

Thank you.