

CPLAN

Massachusetts Charter Parent
Leadership Action Network



“Our seventh graders are thinking and talking about college”

Renee Hibbard, single mom to 12-year-old adopted son TJ, believes that her son’s charter school is able to offer him the best education possible. She wants for all parents who value their child’s future, and for all students, to have access to excellent schools. That is why she has decided to become an advocate not only for her own child, but for all children in Boston.

Originally from Chelsea, Renee attended all traditional public schools while growing up, and she greatly disliked her experience in the Boston Public Schools. She explains that she “couldn’t wait to quit school.” As a result, she left school in the ninth grade, got her GED, and then went to a trade school to study office administration. Her mother didn’t push school when she was growing up, which is why she is determined to make different choices for TJ.

Renee moved to East Boston sixteen years ago and hasn’t been able to get to know her community very well due to her demanding work schedule as a property manager for Peabody Properties. Because of her own negative public school experience, however, she *did* know one thing for sure – she did not want to send TJ to a traditional public school: “When my son became of age, I knew I was going to push for

Excel. There’s no comparison between Excel and any other school, in my opinion. It is the model school, and I can’t say enough good about it.”

TJ attended two different traditional public schools, neither of which Renee was very impressed with, before he got a spot in Excel Academy Charter School. Renee had concerns with the atmosphere at the two public schools, and she knew that she needed to make a change sooner rather than later. Because TJ had lived in seven different foster homes before Renee adopted him at four years of age, he needed a school environment that was highly structured and also nurturing to his emotional needs.

Renee feels that Excel is able to maintain very high expectations of students, while also treating students with a great deal of respect. She explains, “They teach them [students] how to be responsible and respectful. He [TJ] needs that structure. Most children learn at a very young age about discipline and respect. I didn’t have that young phase of development with him.” The warmth, friendliness and firmness at Excel have proven to be a winning combination for a learner like TJ, and Renee asserts that the teachers and staff at Excel not only believe in their students, but they “*show a child how to believe in themselves*”.

Among Renee’s complaints about TJ’s traditional public school experience is her firm belief that public schools lack structure and “backbone”, class sizes are too large, and discipline procedures for misbehavior are too lackadaisical. She also feels that many public schools are falling into the status of underperforming, lacking high academic expectations for their students. She knows that TJ “has no choice but to learn at Excel”.

“Every child deserves the best education possible, and it shouldn’t matter what city you’re in, what neighborhood you’re from, or what your income is. Each child deserves that for his or her future. We want our children to be proud to be from their community.”

– Renee Hibbard

Following five years in Boston Public Schools, TJ was finally accepted into Excel Academy Charter School at the start of fifth grade. “*Good thing I didn’t listen to the skeptics who warned me about charter schools and special education!*” explains Renee emphatically. In addition to some emotional needs that TJ has following a traumatic first four years of life, he also continues to struggle with reading. His mom feels that Excel has accommodated him in ways that no other school would have done. In fact, in contrast to her very brief IEP meeting at a Boston Public School, the IEP meeting at Excel was an hour long. Renee states, “It blew me away!” She feels that the teachers at Excel are “just amazing!” TJ entered Excel reading at just a first-grade level. By the end of fifth grade, after only one year at Excel, that gap had been narrowed by at least three full years! She is so thankful that Excel is now in the process of building a high school so that TJ can continue to attend such a high-performing school through his high school years.

Renee also appreciates the high academic standards that TJ is held to at Excel. She explains that “there’s a participation award at traditional schools that I really don’t like. If you’re going to receive a reward, you have to earn it.” In her opinion, charter schools effectively redirect students when needed so that they can meet their full potential. TJ missed honor roll by a fraction of a point in his first quarter last year, which only pushed him farther in the second quarter when he did earn honors.

Although TJ is only twelve and about to begin seventh grade, his mom loves that he is already starting to think about and talk about college. Renee enthusiastically shares a story of how Excel is inspiring TJ to work hard now in order to ensure a solid, productive future following high school:

“I work in Chelsea and some of my clients have children in the Chelsea Excel. Our children all did college visits not long ago with their Excel schools, but both schools visited different area colleges. At a recent meeting with some of these clients at which TJ and their children were present, we [the parents] overheard our kids get super excited about those visits and which colleges are better, and why! *My child, at the age of twelve, is thinking about college!* There was an Excel Dinner for Excellence recently at which Charlie Baker spoke. I had to give a speech about what Excel means to me, and I shared this college story in that speech.”

Perhaps it is because Renee didn’t graduate from high school or attend college herself, or due to the simple fact that she so dearly loves her adopted son TJ, that it is so moving to hear her talk about TJ’s ability to project such a positive outlook on his own future. And what Renee wants for TJ, and for all students, is also simple, yet powerful – the best education possible.

“*Good thing I didn’t listen to the skeptics who warned me about charter schools and special education!*”

– Renee Hibbard, on Excel’s management of her son’s IEP and his remarkable progress in reading after one year at Excel.