

Morehouse Student's Charter School Off to Hopeful Start

Contributed by Elizabeth Sawyer -- Black College Wire
Monday, 25 October 2010

Jonathan Wall's dream becomes a successful reality

Just as they do every year, teams of children all around the state of Georgia made their way back to school in August. Most students came back to the same old school halls and classrooms that they are accustomed to. However, 654 students from Dekalb County were beginning their year at a new school. These students were the inaugural class of Peachtree Hope Charter School. The new school, which opened its doors on Aug. 16, was born out of Morehouse College junior Jonathan Wall's dream to close the educational gap in the state of Georgia. After acting as a judge in a math competition, Wall was appalled that of the 40 individual winners, only three were Black. In response to this jarring experience, Wall wrote a Facebook note titled "Something Has Got to Give," expressing his frustrations with the lack of diversity and inequality in the distribution of education.

Wall's Facebook post turned into an article in the Atlanta Journal Constitution.

The article caught the attention of high-ranking officials, and in less than a year, Wall's cries for educational improvement developed into a plan for what would become Peachtree Hope.

At that point, ground had just been broken on the site that would become Peachtree Hope Charter School.

"The sight used to be a strip mall with a Save-A-Lot and many other stores, but we were remodeling it into a school building," Wall said. "After signing with our management company, SABIS®, all of the logistics and constructions matters had been handled, and all we really needed to do was fill the school with students!" However, filling the school with students and opening the doors in general, was a daunting task. What was even more difficult was the bureaucracy and politics of Dekalb County, which made the process of opening the school tortuous. "Dekalb County did not want us to be able to open this charter school," Wall said. "In order to start a charter school you have to file an application with the county in which you seek to open the school...with every kid that leaves their school system and comes to your school, so does that child's tax money. So with DeKalb's per-pupil funding being around \$10,000, if we opened with our record setting 654 kids, we would essentially be taking \$6,540,000 from their bottom line. They don't want to lose that much money."

The county initially rejected the application for Peachtree Hope Charter School. But all hope was not lost. On Jan. 31, 2008, the House Education Committee endorsed a law, which allowed charter school applications to bypass the local school boards and speak directly to commission nominated by state government officials and approved by the school board.

Certain counties within the state of Georgia found the creation of this council to be an egregious offense; therefore, they filed a lawsuit stating that the creation of this charter school review board was unconstitutional.

"This lawsuit slowed down our construction, because its results could've impacted our income," Wall said. "On top of that, we were turning what was zoned to be a retail space into a school, so I along with the other six board members, and the schools newly formed administration, had to go speak to the Dekalb County Commissioners and explain why we should be given a license to open and rezone the strip mall. By the grace of God Fulton County Superior Court Judge Wendy L. Shoop declared the Georgia Charter Schools Commission is constitutional, and the Dekalb County Board of commissioners lifted the zoning restriction and gave us a certificate of occupancy. But because of the delays, the opening of the school had to be pushed back a week, from Aug. 9 to Aug. 16."

Peachtree Hope Charter School's 654 enrolled students on its opening made it the largest start-up charter school in the United States this year and the largest start-up charter school in the history of the state of Georgia. Since its opening, the school has been functioning magnificently.

Wall was notified that 58 percent of students are African-American males. "That is very exciting, because we set up this school with the intentions of breaking the 'school to prison pipeline' in Georgia, and also to help our Black males who are falling behind," Wall said.

This is not to say that there have been no issues since Peachtree Hope opened its doors. The staggering 654 inaugural student body has decreased to 590. Sixty four students were unable to continue attending Peachtree Hope for one reason and one reason alone: transportation.

"Last week we found out that a single mother had been riding the bus for 45 minutes every morning to bring her four children to school, and 45 every afternoon to pick them up," Wall went on to say. "She had been doing this for the first two weeks of school, but on the third week she realized that she couldn't afford it, and she would have to

withdraw her four children. The president of our board, Mr. Lonnie King, discussed the situation along with the schools administration and within one week we were able to raise almost \$2,000 from donations, in order to pay for her daily commute for the rest of the year."

Peachtree Hope Charter School has become a beacon of change and success in Dekalb County but Wall says there is much more on the horizon.

"We plan on opening two schools next year and 15 schools within the next five years," Wall said.

Peachtree Hope Charter School has now blossomed into a fully operational school that is changing the lives of 590 children and their families. Because of Wall's dream and the perseverance of his team, students at Peachtree Hope Charter School are receiving an experience full of hope, diligence, and opportunity that was never once afforded to them previously. The excellence of Peachtree Hope will extend beyond Dekalb County and have the potential to touch every corner of the state and Jonathan Wall's dream for complete educational reformation and equality will be one step closer to completion.

Elizabeth Sawyer is features editor of The Maroon Tiger, the Morehouse College student newspaper.

{moshaloscan}