



## School Choice

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Karla Browne knew from an early age that she wanted to be a teacher. Born and raised in a predominately black, working-class neighborhood in a suburb of Boston, Karla spent her elementary school years in an overcrowded and under-resourced school a few blocks from her house. As a young girl, she struggled learning to read. She was shy and flew under the radar of her teachers whose attention was often focused solely on the students who were most disruptive.

After consecutive years of poor performance, Karla's elementary school was closed and she was reassigned to the John Coyne School, a K-8 school in a historically white and working-class, but rapidly gentrifying, neighborhood across town. Karla recalls her early experience at her new school as traumatic. She was one of a handful of black children and was self-conscious about her poor reading ability. It wasn't until the 7<sup>th</sup> grade that she felt truly seen as a student. Mr. Heckstall, a black teacher from her neighborhood, stayed after school with Karla every day helping her catch up to grade level in reading. He also helped Karla learn to navigate what she often thought of as two different worlds—her school world and her home world. Over time, she grew to love her academic experience at the Coyne School, but longed to have the same opportunities in her old school, back in her neighborhood.

Inspired by her own schooling experiences, Karla decided to dedicate her career to improving the schools in neighborhoods like her own. She envisioned a system of strong community schools that empowered the students who were far too often cheated out of a good education. She believed deeply that every city public school, regardless of neighborhood, should provide its students with the opportunities she had had at the John Coyne School. Fueled by this passion, shortly after graduating from college, Karla earned a Master's Degree and teaching certification. After graduation, she quickly found a job as a middle school history teacher in a turnaround school in a community similar to the one where she had grown up – mixed-income, mostly Black and Latino, and just outside of Boston. A year later, she and her husband bought a small condominium near the school as an investment in the community and the city school system.

After ten years as a teacher and administrator, Karla, pregnant with her third child, decided to step away from a school setting and took a job in the central office. While her passion for educational equity remained strong, her experiences as a teacher and administrator had tempered some of her idealism. She had seen many examples of incredible teaching, even in classrooms in some of the "worst" schools in the district. However, she had also seen weak administrators and poor teachers, often transferred to already struggling schools. To make matters worse, she had also seen the district turn a blind eye, year after year, to the reality that nearly half of the city's schools were failing according to state metrics. In her new position, she hoped to develop district level interventions to support struggling schools, including giving principals more autonomy over hiring and increasing the quality and frequency of professional development available to teachers and leaders.

During these ten years working in the district, Karla had also witnessed a new educational reform effort take root in the city's neighborhoods: charter schools. On principle, Karla was strongly against charter schools. She believed that they exacerbated problems in the district because they "skimmed" the top students with the most engaged families from the neighborhood schools, taking away valuable and scarce resources. As a teacher and an employee of the district, she knew firsthand the importance of parental pressure in bolstering school improvement initiatives. Despite the challenges faced by students

and teachers in district schools, she felt that parents had the responsibility to keep their children in neighborhood schools, and continue to advocate for their improvement. When a high performing charter network wanted to open in her neighborhood five years ago, Karla had been a vocal community advocate against the proposal. Despite her objections, the charter school gained approval from the zoning board and quickly earned a reputation for being the best school in the neighborhood. Many of the young families on her block sent their kids to the charter school despite her attempts to persuade them otherwise.

Shortly after Karla had taken her new position in the central office, she and her husband received her oldest daughter Maya's kindergarten assignment in the mail. Maya had been assigned to the Newbury School, a Level 3 school considered the "worst" in their neighborhood. Karla knew that due to consistent underperformance and dismal test scores, the Newbury School was on the brink of earning Level 4 status in the fall. In an effort to avoid Level 4 designation, the district had replaced the principal mid-year with a young, energetic leader who had already helped to turn around an urban school in another district. While new leadership was promising, Karla knew the Newbury School had a long way to go. The facilities needed renovation and there was a group of problematic teachers that needed to retire. These changes would not happen overnight. Driving by the school on her way to work every day, she was reminded of her own experiences in a failing school and the price she had paid as a struggling reader. The thought of her own daughter in a similar school made her stomach sink.

Days after the Browns received Maya's assignment in the mail, Karla, still in a fog of confusion and frustration, did something that she never imagined she would do. She went to visit the same charter school she had advocated against only a few years before. Impressed by the instructional vision of the principal, the small student-teacher ratio, and the recently renovated facilities, Karla filled out an application to enter Maya's name into the lottery. With her own child's education on the line, she finally saw where many young families in her neighborhood were coming from. The school was in their community *and* afforded students the same opportunities she had had at the John Coyne School. While Karla strongly believed that charters exacerbated systemic problems, she did see their value for individual children currently in the system. When one of these children was her own daughter, this mattered far more than it ever had to her before.

In the weeks following that visit, Karla agonized over what to do, as she waited to hear if Maya, would even get in. However, when she finally received the charter's letter of acceptance, Karla felt torn. She knew that many of her neighbors would be ecstatic to earn a coveted charter school seat. Would Karla be crazy to consider giving it up? She had been impressed by what she had seen during her visit. She knew Maya would thrive in the small classes offering individualized support. She also knew Maya would be set up for academic success; over half of the school's graduating class of sixth graders had earned admission to exam schools in the district, which were feeders for selective colleges around the country. It would be hard to turn down an opportunity for Maya to be a part of this educational community.

But what would her colleagues think if she pulled Maya from the school she herself was working to improve? How would this impact her credibility to implement her ambitious plans for the district? Moreover, while the charter school produced strong academic results, as measured by high test scores and exam school acceptance rates, Karla believed the purpose of school went beyond academics. Helping students develop a strong sense of self and pride in where they came from had always been central to her work in the classroom. In the charter school, most of the teachers were white and lived outside the neighborhood. In contrast, Karla knew that many of teachers at the Newbury School were born and raised in the neighborhood. She knew that having Mr. Heckstall, a teacher who looked like her and lived in her community, had been transformational in her own life. She wanted her daughter to

connect with a teacher in the same way she had with Mr. Heckstall and that would be more likely at Newbury.

In addition, she worried about the impact of her decision on the children whose only choice was the Newbury School. The teacher and administrator in her knew that the Newbury School was struggling and wouldn't get any better without the support of families like hers who knew the system and were willing to invest in the school's improvement. If she pulled Maya from the school, what effect would that have on the children whose only choice was Newbury? If she wanted to do what was best for the community, shouldn't she consider the well-being of these children along with her own?

Newbury's new principal was also promising. She could be just the catalyst for improvement that the school needed. Coupled with Karla's plan to roll out a more robust system of support at the district level, there was hope that the Newbury School would make progress in the next few years. She wondered though, how long it would really take. Would other families like the Browns, choose to support the local school as it worked to improve? If Maya's peers chose other schools, how would that impact her if she stayed at the Newbury School?

What had always seemed so clear to her, now become one of the toughest decisions she would have to make. With the stakes so high, with what felt like Maya's future on the line, what should Karla do?