



# Freire

Charter Wilmington

## Freire Charter School Wilmington Charter School Annual Report

2015-2016 School Year



Paul Ramirez, Co-Head of School, Academics, [paul.ramirez@freirewilmington.org](mailto:paul.ramirez@freirewilmington.org)

Felicia Wenell, Co-Head of School, Academic Supports, [felicia.wenell@freirewilmington.org](mailto:felicia.wenell@freirewilmington.org)

Tier: 2

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# I. Charter School Program

## Narrative

- ***Provide a synopsis of the school's mission and educational program, including key components of the education model and any unique or innovative features of the school.***

“The power to build the future” is both Freire Charter School Wilmington’s vision statement and our promise to the young people we serve. Since 1999, Freire has been a force for positive change in the lives of underserved youth in Philadelphia, connecting students to the skills and resources they need to design and build their own futures. In fall 2015, we were honored to bring our time-tested academic program to Wilmington for the first time, working to create a school where Delaware students from any and all walks of life could access a top-notch college preparatory education without having to pay for private school. Situated in the heart of downtown Wilmington, Freire is a unique school that cultivates students’ individuality and instills motivation in each child to strive for greatness.

Freire’s mission is to provide a college-preparatory learning experience with a focus on individual freedom, critical thinking, and problem solving in an environment that emphasizes the values of community, teamwork, and nonviolence. Our program brings a much-needed high-quality educational choice to low-income and minority students in Wilmington and surrounding areas, and we are committed to a belief that students are capable of a great deal when we set the bar high. Our students can and do achieve, and as our reputation continues to grow our school model will help change the narrative of public education for high school students in Wilmington.

Freire provides a safe, friendly, and rigorous education for any and every Delaware student with a dream to go to college. Our model is built around high academic expectations, clearly delineated instructional and cultural principles, a commitment to nonviolence, a data-driven cycle of instruction, an emphasis on student voice, and a focus on social justice. The programs we implement to fulfill these principles include research-based curricula, free therapy services for students and families, individual academic mentoring and tutoring, a range of after-school activities, and special programs focused on peace and social change.

In traditional schooling, students are passive recipients of knowledge. Paulo Freire believed that in order to learn, students needed to be “in dialogue” with knowledge. At Freire Charter School Wilmington, we reinvent and update Paulo Freire’s notion of dialogic learning for 21st century adolescents. Our approach teaches our initially disenfranchised, passive students to seek and value alternate perspectives, take responsibility for their learning, speak up in passionate yet appropriate ways, and use education to gain personal power. We meet our students where they are by providing intensive skill remediation and intervention as needed, make instruction active and engaging, and help students persevere through and “own” challenging coursework. Our curriculum is designed overall to reflect depth, programmatic coherence, and continuity while it fosters critical thinking and integration of reading, writing, numeracy, and research skills.

One of the School’s great strengths is a curriculum that is truly focused on preparing students for college. For instance, in English, this means that students are pushed through a rigorous program of critical reading, where texts may range from Shakespeare to *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. Here they develop the ability to deeply analyze texts through intensive discussion, reading, and writing. In math, Freire’s instruction highlights high-level problem solving and critical thinking. The courses are designed to expose students to a wide variety of mathematical thinking, including shifting the focus from computation and fluency to problem solving application and conceptual understanding. Gradually, students come to know not just how to solve a problem but why those methods work. At the same time, the courses also differentiate based on need, meeting students where they are and giving them the basic supports so that they are able to meet the high standard of rigor.

Equally important as curriculum and instruction in fulfilling our college-preparatory mission is Freire’s commitment to nonviolence. The support of our dedicated staff helps our students to create a caring community where our students adhere to and self-enforce a strict code of nonviolent conduct. Our strong peer mediation program helps students feel safe enough to take the risks needed for learning. In this environment, students can achieve both academic and emotional growth. In addition, special classes and activities engage students in dialogue about peace and social change and promote civic activism in order to prepare students for futures as change-making, engaged adults. Freire’s student-centered philosophy allows us to offer the kind of personalized, multifaceted, and rigorous education that public school students in the Wilmington area deserve.

➤ ***Discuss key accomplishments of the charter school program over the 2015-16 school year.***

We have already achieved impressive academic results in just our first year of operation. On statewide Smarter Balanced exams, Freire Wilmington students grew by 1.5 times the state average in English and 1.6 times the state average in math from fall 2015 to spring 2016. Freire students also outperformed many middle schools in the neighboring Brandywine, Christina, Colonial, and Red Clay school districts on these statewide tests.

Even in our first year, we were able to build up the culture of the school, offering a healthy mix of extracurricular activities, including basketball, student council, math team, art club, dance, and more. Students were excited to go on a variety of field trips, including college visits, science laboratories, and pure fun days at amusement parks. Our sense of community and camaraderie flourished during events like “Color War” days, homecoming dances, and spring formals.

The school also performed well in operational areas. Construction for the first year was completed on time with two out of our building’s four floors accessible and in use. The School met enrollment targets and filled all teacher and staff positions. We met all applicable financial performance standards, and had no audit findings. Freire Wilmington also met all expectations with regard to governance, operations, and regulatory compliance with the exception of our average daily attendance.

## **II. Performance Reflection**

### **Academic Performance**

➤ ***Identify areas or factors where the school has met standard in academic performance.***

Please see below for a holistic analysis of academic performance.

➤ ***Identify areas or factors where the school has not met standard in academic performance. Provide an analysis of strengths, challenges, and opportunities for growth in these areas. What are the school’s academic performance outcomes that will improve student growth, proficiency, and college and career readiness levels as measured by the Performance Framework?***

As a new school, Freire was not given any star ratings based upon the points that were earned within the Delaware School Success Framework (DSSF). Since the star ratings are what formally measure whether

the school has met the state standard, we have opted to analyze our academic performance in a single narrative. We begin by summarizing our results in each of the four DSSF categories, followed by an explanation of our improvement plans for the 2016-17 school year. When our students arrived at Freire, many came from schools where they were not prepared to achieve proficiency. Despite these gaps in students' previous education, we were able to achieve substantial growth over the course of a single school year. Pushing even further for the next school year to ensure that our students are improving academically is a major priority for us, and multiple opportunities and plans for growth are outlined at the end of this section after going through each area of the Academic Framework.

In the first area, Academic Achievement, Freire earned a score of 48 out of 150 points, which would equate to a 2-star rating had one been awarded. While we are working on improving this rating, an important context is that this low rating is attributed to the fact that students arrived significantly behind in proficiency levels. Although we were able to help students make great academic process (which we've described below in the second area), for many students it was still not enough to get them to proficiency. Students entered with a need for substantially accelerated growth in order to reach grade level expectations in ELA and math. To be specific, less than fifty percent of students arrived on grade level in ELA, and less than thirty percent of students were on grade level in math based on their prior year Smarter Balanced scores. Our own testing also confirmed that of those students not on grade level, on average they were two or more grade levels behind. While we see this as no excuse and we still push for all students to reach proficiency and beyond, it does pose a major challenge for us as we move forward.

With regard to the second area, Growth, Freire scored 122 out of 200 possible points, which would equate to a 4-star rating had one been awarded. In ELA, Freire beat the state growth metric value by 8 points (58 as compared to 50). In math, Freire further outstripped the state metric value at 13 points ahead (63 as compared to 50). It is important to note that while our students' achievement levels were farther behind on math, we demonstrated a clear ability to help students grow faster in that subject to help close that gap. We attribute these gains to our rigorous curriculum, as well as the ability of our teachers to engage students in deep critical thinking.

Freire's score in the third area, On-Track to Graduation, was a 44 out of 50, which would equate to a 5-star rating had one been awarded. Once our school has been in operation long enough to graduate students, this metric will be based chiefly on graduation rates. At present, however, we are scored as an elementary/middle school and this is based on average daily attendance. While we exceeded the statewide expectation in this area, we did not meet the charter school goal. Efforts to improve our attendance rate are described below in the Organizational Performance section.

In the fourth and final area, College and Career Preparedness, Freire received a score of 30 out of 100, which would equate to a 2-star rating had one been awarded. When we offer higher grade levels, this measurement will be based on a variety of measures that demonstrate college-ready proficiency. In the meantime, while our school is scored as an elementary/middle school, this measures whether students are on track to achieve proficiency within three years as determined by DDOE calculations. By these measures, 46% of our students met this in ELA as compared to a 57% state average, and 14% met it in math, as compared to a 34% state average. We are taking this rating seriously and have determined to continue performing even better with Freire's hallmark commitment to outstanding levels of growth. At the same time, it is important to consider that the state calculation is "based on an expected growth path that takes into account variations in the amount of growth demonstrated on average statewide for each grade level" (DSSF Reference Guide 2015-16, 7-15-16, p. 16). Given Freire's above-average growth, we expect our students to reach proficiency more rapidly than the state average.

Overall, a repeated focus of the above analysis is on increasing our academic achievement and growth, especially putting a great deal of effort into bringing students with proficiency gaps up to grade level. There are a number of ways in which we are working on improving in this area. Beginning in the 2016-17 school year, Freire will put an emphasis on implementing carefully aligned, high-level interim assessments and ensuring that teachers understand critical benchmark assessments like the PSAT and SBAC on a deep level. Teachers will spend time during professional development analyzing the level of questioning and the depth of thinking necessary for students to be able to succeed not only on these assessments but also in a wide variety of rigorous applications. In addition, all teachers will continue to focus on literacy, pushing the use of the highest quality texts, and implementing close reading and writing techniques in their classrooms. Math teachers will focus on

complex problem solving and critical thinking, ensuring that they are aligning curriculum to standards and teaching not just basic fluency but also problem solving and conceptual understanding. We are also continuing to give teachers additional support and development, whether through instructional coaching or promoting workshops and conferences.

Unsurprisingly, given the overall level of preparation our students arrived with, many of them struggled to achieve our college-preparatory standards. At Freire, we are driven to see these students through to success and therefore plan intensive supports for these learners. We believe high expectations must be paired with a high level of support, and as a school we strive to do whatever it takes to get our students there. In the next year, we will be implementing assessment data systems to more deeply understand the academic needs of our students, especially in ELA and math. Teachers will also be doing data analysis to take a closer look at how strategic interventions could help individual students.

We are also continuing to give more support to students in a number of ways in both individual and group settings. All teachers offer extra tutoring and support before and after school, and we give students access to any technology they need to complete assignments or projects. In the coming school year, we will be intensifying parent communication for students who are falling behind as well as creating after school centers to give additional support from teachers and peers in core subject areas. Through these strategic interventions, we will continue pushing the academic achievement of our students.

## **Organizational Performance**

### **➤ *Identify areas or factors where the school has met standard in organizational performance.***

Freire met the organizational performance standards on the following indicators regarding its Educational Program, Financial Management and Oversight, Governance and Reporting, Students and Employees, School Environment, and Additional Obligations:

- 1a Implementing the essential terms of the charter's education program as defined in the current charter, and complying with applicable state and federal requirements
- 1b Compliant with legal requirements for students with disabilities and English Learners
- 2 Meeting financial reporting and compliance requirements
- 3a Complying with governance requirements

- 3b Holding management accountable
- 3c Complying with reporting requirements
- 4a Protecting the rights of all students
- 4c Meeting all staff credentialing requirements
- 5a Complying with facilities and transportation requirements
- 5b Complying with health and safety requirements
- 6 Complying with all other obligations

Freire ensures that it is meeting performance expectations for its educational program by submitting a school calendar that meets the minimum number of instructional hours, instituting state assessments, and teaching to Delaware content standards and program requirements. Other measures include complying with federal requirements under ESEA, IDEA, and ADA for at-risk, special education, and ELL students. Freire's Director of Student Services monitors all students with IEPs and 504 plans.

The School complies with financial management and oversight requirements by submitting all required financial reports, posting information to our website, using the FSF system, and convening a CBOC. The offices of Michelle Lambert, CPA and Freire's charter support organization, Build the Future Education Collaborative (BtF) manage accounting and financial compliance for the school. Freire's successful financial management efforts were affirmed this year through an unqualified audit report.

The BtF team works closely with the Board of Directors to ensure compliance with all Governance and Reporting requirements. Freire has appropriately filed Articles of Incorporation, compliant bylaws, and numerous policies in place to this effect. The school observes state requirements regarding open meetings, the state code of conduct, conflicts of interest, membership composition, training, background checks, and annual evaluation of the school, including the school leaders and student performance.

Freire ensures the rights of Students and Employees through following board-approved handbooks and policies. These cover areas including admissions, student records security and access, due process, civil rights, student conduct, and staff credentialing.

Build the Future's experienced charter school operations team works closely with the Co-Head of School, Academic Supports to ensure a safe school environment. Freire holds appropriate permits, licenses,

and inspections including a certificate of occupancy and fire inspections; maintains appropriate insurance coverage; and complies with requirements regarding student transportation, food service, dispensing of pharmaceuticals, nursing services, and emergency plans.

Freire was not rated in one area: 4d – respecting employee rights. The Department of Education was unable to rank the school in this area due to confidentiality of information. However, we can report that the School had no substantiated reports of employment violations, which is the metric used to measure this standard. Freire operates with the intent to comply with all applicable labor laws and regulations.

- **Identify areas or factors where the school has not met standard in organizational performance. Provide an analysis of strengths, challenges, and opportunities for growth in these areas. What are the school's performance outcomes in meeting its organizational responsibilities including, but not limited to, administrative operations, reporting, and legal responsibilities as measured by the Performance Framework?**

Freire did not meet the standard for organizational performance in one indicator—4b Meeting attendance goals. The goal set by DDOE is 95% average daily attendance, and Freire's figure was only 88%. Given the financial constraints of being in its first year of operation and serving only two of five planned grade levels, the school did not have the necessary staffing focus on attendance. Often, corrective conversations with families regarding attendance were attached to discussions with school staff about academics or behavior. Freire was not able to dedicate a staff member to attendance issues, and some of the systems and structures put in place did not run consistently throughout the school year or were not as effective as we had hoped.

The school set up an automated call system to alert parents of absences but it did not successfully connect with eSchool. In August and September of 2016, our technology team worked for many weeks with Dan Mize at the DDOE to sync the multiple systems involved in producing daily absence reports and sending automated phone calls and emails to parents/guardians. This communication is now sent each morning between 10:30 and noon to keep parents notified that their student has missed school or arrived late to school.

Another improvement that Freire has made for the 2016-17 school year is devoting more person power to the issue. A graduate student from West Chester University pursuing a Masters' degree in Social Work is completing his field placement hours at Freire specifically focused on absenteeism prevention. He identifies

students when they reach 5 unexcused absences and begins meeting with them weekly or bi-weekly on an absence elimination plan. He is working with both students and families to identify the underlying cause of their individual struggles with absenteeism, draw connections to show the impact absences have on grades and learning, and provide additional support based on the student's specific needs.

Freire has also begun friendly competitions and incentives to encourage and promote attendance. Each homeroom teacher receives a weekly tracking report on their students' weekly attendance rate. Any homeroom who hits a monthly attendance rate of 95% or higher receives the monthly incentive and is recognized at school wide assemblies.

Getting our average daily attendance rate to 95% or higher will require us to build a sustained and deep level of trust with our students and to continue to increase connectedness by continuing to build an even stronger school culture. We need more capacity at the staff level, more after school activities, more school spirit, a stronger connection with our parents, and more positive incentives. Finally, we need to ensure that all of our students experience academic success at school. We are working on improvements in all of these areas, but it will take time for all of the efforts to come to fruition and lead to an attendance rate as high as 95%.

## **Financial Performance**

### **➤ *Identify areas or factors where the school has met standard in financial performance.***

Freire met all financial performance standards on which the school was rated, including both the Near Term Indicators and Sustainability Indicators. Freire met the standard for the following indicators:

- 1a Current Ratio (1.27, meeting standard of greater than 1.1)
- 1b Days Cash (31, meeting standard for a first or second year school of 30 or more days)
- 1c Enrollment Variance (104%, meeting standard of greater than 95%)
- 1d Default, Loan Covenants, and Debt Service Payments (No defaults)
- 2b Debt to Asset Ratio (0.84, meeting standard of less than 0.90)
- 2d Debt Service Coverage Ratio (4.54, meeting standard of 1.1 or greater)

Freire was not rated on the following indicators because they are based on three-year periods:

## 2a Total Margin

## 2c Cash Flow

While the state-defined metric measures performance over a three-year period, Freire met both of these standards as computed over the fiscal year ended June 30, 2016. The standards were to have a positive total margin and positive cash flow. Freire's total margin was 10%, and the School ended the fiscal year with an unrestricted cash surplus of \$223k, exceeding the summer salary and benefits obligation by \$70k.

Overall, Freire demonstrated positive signs of financial viability in its first year of operation. Although the School had to rely on non-recurring funding from our Charter Schools Program Grant (\$259k) and other private grants (\$75k), these funds were used to cover start-up costs for non-recurring instructional/facility equipment and furniture (\$272k), and other instructional and facility related start-up costs (\$100k), such as books, signage, and other non-capital purchases. Recurring operating expenses were fully funded by recurring revenues, and all expenses were consistently paid by their due date.

➤ ***Identify areas or factors where the school has not met standard in financial performance. Provide an analysis of strengths, challenges, and opportunities for growth in these areas. What are the school's financial performance outcomes that will demonstrate viability and sustainability as measured by the Performance Framework?***

There were no indicators under which Freire did not meet the performance standard.