

What We Believe...

Black lives matter.

In the arc of human history and progress, while the first great empires and birthplaces of religion, military power, government, technology, and progress find their roots in African and Middle Eastern peoples, our school finds its origins 399 years after the first ships carrying enslaved peoples were brought to the shores of this land that would become these United States of America. We inherited a country's history steeped in racial prejudice, white supremacy, and violent systems of oppression that have allowed for and made pervasive – in every aspect of society – the suppression of racial equality creating massive economic, social, and civil disparities.

We founded our school in defiance of this history, knowing that as intentionally and perniciously as these systems were created, we must work as strategically and urgently to dismantle them. We, at Believe Memphis Academy Charter School, bring together the diverse talents, backgrounds, and experiences of our staff, Board of Directors, families, and community partners in recognition that we have all been exposed to and affected by the impact of systemic racism. Our mission is rooted in an act of antiracism and racial justice on behalf of our students.

We know and recognize that these systems permeate through all sectors of our society, including and not limited to, healthcare, housing, public services, law enforcement, nutrition, and education. We also know that no single approach can undo generations of oppression, terror, and injustice experienced by communities of color, with egregiously destructive impacts on Black and Indigenous populations (BIPOC) in our country.

In the great work toward social justice and racial equality, we know the giants on whose shoulders we stand. We learn from the women and men who fought, marched, sat, ran, spoke, wrote, and taught, as we take up this work of ensuring all children in our community, regardless of race, socio-economic status, or zip code of residence have access to a path-expanding education – in our time, in our community. We seek to build a school that proves that all children can learn and achieve at the same levels of the most affluent and privileged communities in our State, thereby proving that the achievement gap is a gap of access and opportunity, not a gap in ability. And, by proving that all children can learn and achieve at the highest academic levels, we will disrupt the status quo that continues to divest resources from communities of color and families of low socio-economic means.

An elite, academically rigorous, path expanding education has, for too long, been racially coded language meant to further suppress progress of BIPOC by allowing inherently privileged children to access settings of “high-quality” education while excluding Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children in the name of rigor, which is better defined as privilege and more accurately defined as racist. We, again, defy this tradition. In alignment with our mission and in humble service to the loftiest ambitions of our families, we believe trauma is real and that the experiences of our children and families matter. We take, as our act of protest, a commitment to prepare our students with an education that leads to secondary and post-secondary pathways that allow our students to chase their dreams. We prepare our students with both the academic integrity and social capital to navigate diverse educational institutions that best align to career pathways rich with opportunity.

Furthermore, to create a world more just, diverse, inclusive, and equitable, we need politicians, law makers, judges, local officials, doctors, teachers, executive directors of nonprofits, bankers, investors, real estate agents, chief executives, and board members who promote the ideals of this fight and of all people. By preparing our students to pursue their greatest ambitions, we believe our children can be those leaders.

With all due urgency, we drive forward the mission of Believe Memphis Academy to “prepare students in grades 4 through 8 with the academic rigor, robust supports, and leadership development necessary to excel in high school, thrive in college, and lead lives full of opportunity.”

Our work is teaching. And, we will change the world – if necessary – to do it.

What Teaching Means to Us...

We see the children we teach. We teach unique, brilliant, funny, quirky, and complex middle school students. We strive to know them in their fullness. We are confident in their ability to do great things inside and outside the classroom walls. We find ways to learn about and connect with the experiences and knowledge they bring to our classrooms so we can guide them to build on those strengths in the classroom. We commit to dedicating the time and energy to not just check, but deeply analyze their academic work to determine what they know and where we need to go next. We thoughtfully choose texts and school experiences that will broaden their knowledge base and help them to dream big dreams for who they want to be in the future. Really seeing the kids we teach takes time—time on the phone between classes or after hours with kids and their families, time during lessons to listen for just ten more seconds to really diagnose what's going on, time after school pouring over student work and charting the next day's path to make sure every student understands. We spend this time, though, knowing that it is through all these small moments and actions that build the deepest relationships with our students and the foundation of trust needed for true learning and development to happen.

We create a safe environment for children to learn and thrive. For too long and in too many places, students of color – specifically Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students – have had to navigate classroom spaces that lack physical, emotional, and academic safety. As teachers, we know that learning cannot take place if students do not feel safe. We work to establish a physically safe classroom space where children know what to expect and are collaborators in setting norms and expectations. We create systems and routines in our classrooms and our practice that ensure we see and respond to all student work, so children feel an emotional connection with us and know we are trusted guides in the learning process. We use data to intentionally push our students – in the right moment and in the right place – to go to the edges of what feels comfortable to take academic risks because we believe that is where deepest learning and growing can happen.

We intentionally build classroom experiences for students to see their own success and stoke internal motivation toward greatness. Small wins are everything in the classroom. We believe that establishing growth mindsets in our students is essential to their long-term success. If they get a problem wrong, we help to point out what aspects of their solution are right and provide them with the targeted feedback they need to see full success on another try. We mark-up student work – on every problem, every time – so they can celebrate each moment of success. We respect students' intelligence and dignity to know they can evaluate the errors that happen in a classroom and, through discussion, collectively come to a greater understanding than they might have come to on their own. We know it is our job to not just point out how to correct an error, but how to replicate current successes. Through the process, the individual benefits and the collective classroom culture and identity is established and solidified.

We know our students' success is dependent on the team with whom we work and collaborate. As teachers at Believe, we do not work in a silo. We push, question, celebrate, and learn from the colleagues around us. We know that what we can do together is so much greater than what we could do alone. We know that every moment we spend pouring over student work, reviewing a video of a lesson, and planning towards an upcoming key understanding or standard is done better with others. Through this collaborative work, we find joy. We find comradery. We establish, solidify, and refine our collective purpose.

What Antiracism Means to Us...

Diversity: We value and intentionally invite the presence of multiple perspectives, backgrounds, orientations, and identities, with special attention toward staff members and leadership in our school whose identities are directly reflective of that of our students and families. We believe that work of justice invites all to participate and requires all to take part. And, we celebrate the strength we bring through acknowledging the vast differences in our backgrounds and experiences held by our differences in race, ethnicities, and communities of origin.

Inclusivity: We work to ensure diverse people, perspectives, backgrounds, and identities are actively made to feel safe within the environment of Believe Memphis Academy. We intently listen to all voices to ensure all perspectives have been heard, knowing that we make the best decisions once we have considered all the perspectives. We believe that when people feel most safe, people operate at their best. We believe silence is a tool of oppression, and we value dissenting opinions rooted in common values as outlined in this document.

Equity: We acknowledge privilege as real, whether that be privileges afforded us by race, wealth, gender, sexuality, access to education, or otherwise. We work to eliminate disproportionate barriers placed on historically marginalized voices to cultivate an environment and culture in which diverse people, perspectives, backgrounds, and identities are heard and valued as equals. We believe that supports and development trajectories need to be tailored to individuals to both celebrate the unique, individual strengths that a person brings to this work, while honestly addressing the areas of growth necessary for us to be pushed to the best fulfil the ambitious consequential, and necessary Mission of our School.

Justice: We take action to correct what we know is wrong. Wherever we see the absence of diversity, inclusivity, or equity, we take active measures to correct the injustice present that did not leave room for those values to thrive. The achievement gap is a predictable outcome to the injustice of segregation, inequitable housing, the wealth gap, the concentration of poverty, and traditional school boundaries following housing and neighborhood zones. We know that lack of school choice is a tool of oppression that perpetuates low-performing schools in economically disadvantaged communities of color. Our form of protest and act of justice is to provide a path-expanding education to children in currently untapped communities.

Antiracism: We acknowledge systemic racism is real and finds its roots in white supremacy. We recognize this when this country declared its independence in the 18th century, slavery was already institutionalized for more than 150 years and would continue for 100 more years following the writings of the Constitution. As such, white supremacy and thereby the belief in BIPOC inferiority is deeply embedded into all systems, including public education, in this nation. Therefore, it is not enough to not be racist. We must take a position of antiracism, where we actively resist, uproot, and dismantle systemic racism in all forms. We start by evaluating the policies, procedures, practices, and language throughout our school to ensure they do not disproportionately hurt specific subgroups of children. We conduct autopsies of teaching taxonomies, philosophies, or methods that prove problematic, color-blind, or even oppressive and take courageous steps that celebrate and cultivate systems that promote diversity, equity, inclusivity, and justice within an antiracist framework. We ensure our curriculum is culturally responsive and fully of opportunities for children to explore diverse traditions, cultures, and language.