

PROGRESSIVE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS SERIES | 1

Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School

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Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School (PFSJCS) is a public charter high school in Holyoke, Massachusetts, that opened in the Fall of 2013. The mission of PFSJCS is to prepare students for college success and to be future leaders of a global society, with a strong intellectual and ethical foundation. The school's namesake, Paulo Freire (1921-1997), was a Brazilian philosopher and educator who is best known for authoring the book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" which espoused education as a means for social action:

"This book will present some aspects of what the writer has termed the pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade."



PFSJCS students and faculty meeting with Freedom Writers Foundation founder, Erin Gruwell, in September 2014. Gruwell, a former Long Beach, California public school teacher, taught her students to use writing as a tool for engaging on social issues and co-authored a best-selling book with them: *The Freedom Writers Diary: How A Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them.*

The school's charter reflects Freire's emphasis on literacy, equality, and justice:

"There is no greater need in public education than to give every student the opportunity and resources to succeed. This was the vision of Paulo Freire, our namesake. He identified quality education for all individuals as the primary way to create a more socially just society."

"Paulo Freire espoused the importance of literacy and academic achievement. We join in the belief that personal literacy becomes a path to realizing full human potential. PFSJCS graduates will be: literate, active, self-aware, prepared to succeed in higher education, able to determine and attain their personal goals, and capable in serving as inspirational leaders and positive role models."



PFSJCS cancelled all classes so students and staff could attend a rally on International Women's Day, March 2017. Behavioral Specialist Brenda Cepeda Penolaza (center) said, "We want to be equal. Equal in pay, equal in decisions. It took us a long time to get where we're at right now, and we have a ways to go, so this is really important to us."

PFSJCS students are immersed in many aspects of social justice that are embedded in every subject. In science, for example, students learn about the misinformation and racism involved in eugenics. Social justice awareness education is also rooted in the PFSJCS's "community development" electives, such as peer mediation, resource development, mentoring, and creating equality.

Learning extends beyond school walls. Students, staff, and even parents participate in social justice advocacy and volunteerism. All seniors must complete an internship of at least 50 hours in a field of their choice and the school provides any necessary transportation. Students have interned recently, for example, with elected officials, non-profit advocacy groups, and health care providers. Throughout the year, the school's Social Justice Committee holds meetings open to the public to discuss "what can we do as individuals, and as a school to create a more just community?"

“Math is an instrument for detailing social justice issues and developing critical consciousness. Math can be used as a tool to examine and compare the inequities that exist by examining: population rates, corporate salaries, economic concerns, infant mortality rates, defense budgets, and demonstrate, in graphic terms, the way people are oppressed and marginalized.”

– DESCRIPTION OF PFSJCS MATH COURSE

More than 87% of PFSJCS students are Hispanic, as compared to 72% of students who are Hispanic at nearby Holyoke High School (HHS), a traditional public school. Almost 70% of PFSJCS students are economically disadvantaged, as compared to 62% of those at HHS. Despite having a higher percentage of historically disadvantaged students, 87% of PFSJCS students score proficient or higher in English/Language Arts, as compared to 86% at HHS. At both schools, 63% of students score proficient or above in math. The 4-year graduation rate at PFSJCS is almost nine percentage points higher than that for HHS: 77.6% versus 68.9%.



PFSJCS students participating in a protest to demand justice after the shooting of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.

PFSJCS helps ensure the success of its graduates by providing them with support services in their first year of college. In 2017, a few short years after opening, PFSJCS was recognized by U.S. News and World Report in the Best High Schools National Rankings, earning a bronze medal. U.S. News and World Report ranks high schools based on students' academic achievement on state-mandated assessments, as well as how prepared students are for college. Their ranking of PFSJCS notes that it outpaces the state on English Language Arts, despite having a much higher percentage of low-income students, based on student performance on state tests and other measures of college-level course work, such as Advanced Placement exams.



Kira Jewett, science teacher at PFSCJS, accepts an AgriScience Award at the Eastern States Exposition stating: *“Since it is a social justice school we wanted the kids to focus on the fair in a different way. We wanted them to look at whether the fair is still about agriculture, or is it about marketing or entertainment. I think we have found it is a little bit of all of that... I started gardening with my students as part of the curriculum for ecology... In class I was also teaching them about different types of farming from organic to industrial and biodynamic farming.”*

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