

**PREP Public Schools**  
1849 Union Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37404



**Letter from Dr. Edna Varner, Education Chair of the Chattanooga Branch of the NAACP & Chattanooga Preparatory School Board Member, in support of Knoxville Preparatory School:**

**Knoxville, Tenn. – March 29, 2023** – In response to the letter from the Knoxville Branch NAACP, Dr. Edna Varner, Education Chair of the Chattanooga Branch of the NAACP & Chattanooga Preparatory School Board Member, has released the following in support of Knoxville Preparatory School:

**Rev. Brown:**

Even though I hold the position of Education Chair of the Chattanooga Branch of the NAACP, I am a retired Hamilton County teacher and principal, and a board member of Chattanooga Prep (and two other Chattanooga charter schools), I am writing this letter as an individual and strong community advocate for public schools. I am writing to you ahead of reaching out to others in Knoxville.

Before Hamilton County approved its first charter school, many of us had the same fears articulated so well in letters I have read from Knoxville. I had strong reservations. In fact, I was anti-charter. A trusted friend asked me to read more about charter schools, listen to what supporters had to say and were proposing, and to keep children and their futures at the center of my deliberations and decision making. It was that “keeping children at the center” that made me rethink charter schools.

I serve on the board of Chattanooga Prep public charter school, and I remain absolutely loyal to our traditional public schools. I attend nearly every monthly district school board meeting, I am routinely invited to and serve on our district’s committees, and I am in our public schools, traditional and charter, every week. In my work I help develop new teachers our local public education foundation recruits to lead the change that gets us to our school district’s vision: “All students thrive and experience a future without limits”.

I also know Chattanooga’s history with public schools and the promise of a great education for all children. I suspect you know it, too. I know that NAACP Chattanooga President James R. Mapp filed one of the longest lawsuits in the nation’s history and remained steadfast as our school system tinkered with integration. It took our city 26 years to achieve bold levels of progress with school shake-ups, mass transfers of teachers to achieve racial balance, and the opening of the first truly diverse magnet school. Within a few years after the conditions of that lawsuit seemed satisfied, and with good

intentions all around, we slowly fell back into old patterns of high performing schools and struggling schools, the latter mostly populated with poor and minority students failing year after year.

Some of the greatest progress we've seen for children of color was in 2000 when a private local foundation (See Benwood schools) decided to change the trajectory of schools in the bottom 20 in Tennessee. Nine of those schools were in Chattanooga (no other district had more than four). The district accepted that partnership and within five years those nine schools moved from the bottom to the top of the state's list in academic growth. That has inspired private citizens to rally others to partner with the district in service of demonstrating what students of poverty and color (not just the ones already achieving in other schools) can do in an environment intent on proving that all children can excel. This partnership of district and community advocates for public charters is working for us. More importantly, it is working for students.

We know there is still some confusion about public charter schools because it's hard to believe that a public school can offer what some students can get only in a private school. It's possible! The founder of our first charter school was a former public school teacher. That's how I met her, and that's how I know she insisted on a "public" rather than a private school. The founders of Chatt Prep were also insistent that we demonstrate what great public schools can accomplish, regardless of a boy's zip code. All of our current charter schools are public charters, authorized by the district, supervised by the district, have board members from the district, and produce high levels of achievement year after year for which our district gets the credit (and should because of the way Hamilton County has supported the charter schools). When asked about charter schools here, our superintendent says publicly, "All students are our children".

The disadvantages to public schools listed in the letter to the Knoxville County Board of Education were also disadvantages here, but long before the first charter school opened in Chattanooga. With us it was flight to local private schools. Historic Black schools named for outstanding Black Americans were closed more than 30 years before the first charter schools opened, not because charter schools opened. Now our district is curbing the flight to private schools with outstanding, high achieving public schools in neighborhoods with easy access for poor families of color, accepting children on a first come, first serve basis, recruiting community leaders to mentor our students and volunteer in the schools, and using local philanthropy to provide opportunities that only the most advantaged students in our city have experienced in the past.

We still have skeptics about charter schools here. When I am asked why I support them, I share what I am sharing with you---I see students of poverty and color achieving at high levels in public charter schools just as they do in public magnet schools (when they can get in) and schools in the most affluent neighborhoods. I see our students discovering their amazing talents, and regularly meeting with local leaders who encourage them to see their future selves leading Chattanooga to higher levels of prosperity and inclusivity. I also see our district becoming more appreciative of this help to serve all students well. I ask those who press me, "Have you talked with students and families who attend Chatt Prep? What part of the charter school agenda do you want me to be against?" Then I ask if they will join me in continuing vigilance to make all public schools serve all children as well as they are served in local public charters.

I am asking those who read this letter to learn more about public charter schools and how they partner with the district to serve all children well. I am asking you to spend a day or even an hour in a public

charter school in Chattanooga to see what's possible when everyone in the school has high expectations for every student. I am also asking you to extend the powerful and important work of the NAACP by serving on the charter school board, and by continuing to volunteer for every opportunity provided by your local school district to strengthen every public school.

Most Sincerely,

Edna E. Varner, Ed.D.

Cell: (423) 488-5292

*For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it,*

*If only we're brave enough to be it. -Amanda Gorman, Poet*

# # #