

Dear Leonard,

I recently had the honor to read your article titled "In Baltimore, One School Performs Miracles" published on April 2, 2007 in the Miami Herald. I have to first commend you on your ability to address the social issues facing African Americans in today's society. You truly hit the nail on the head.

This story really hit close to home for me. I am a resident of Miami and it may surprise you that the same situation you wrote about in Baltimore is happening right in your neighborhood. I have two children that currently attend Miami Union Academy on a Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship and a daughter that is a graduate of the Scholarship Program.

The CTC Scholarship Program provides low-income families the power to choose a school for their children. I recently read in the Program's newsletter that there are over 4,000 students in Dade on this program and around half of the students statewide are African American.

My daughter Melody is a perfect example of why school choice should be an option for all parents, not just those of limited means who cannot afford to send their kids to the school of their choice or those parents who are trapped in neighborhoods that are zoned for chronically underperforming schools.

Melody is currently in college, which seemed like an unachievable dream when she was in public school. Prior to receiving a Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship, Melody's GPA was below a 1.0. Her education, knowledge and the person she has blossomed into are all in thanks to the education at Miami Union Academy, which wouldn't have been possible without the scholarship. This scholarship has given all three of my children a second chance at learning and becoming a productive member of society.

My son plays the trumpet and my daughter has a beautiful voice thanks to the training she has received at Miami Union Academy. Miami Union Academy is a school where the principles of self-discipline, responsibility and commitment to study are held in high esteem.

The teachers at Miami Union Academy are committed to helping each student reach his/her potential and become a productive responsible citizen in this world and worthy citizen. There are currently approximately 100 scholarship students at the Academy, which is nearly one-third of the students. Also, Miami Union Academy graduates 95 percent of its students-a promising statistic that you don't hear enough. Tuition is around \$4,500 per year, and there is no way I would have been able to afford it without the scholarship program.

As a strong advocate for school choice, I live in fear that politics may kill a program that has provided such promising opportunities that wouldn't otherwise be available to Florida's low-income children. The passion for this program is motivating roughly 4,200 parents and students to take buses to Tallahassee on April 12 to rally for this program.

This is the largest school choice rally in the nation and I am proud to be attending. As a Miami resident, I will be boarding the bus at midnight and driving through the night. I encourage you to write about this and spread the word on such a tremendous program. I am dedicated to the protection of this program and it would be an honor to see a respected writer like you take the time to explore the opportunities it has provided for so many.

Thank you in advance,  
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### **ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

Article published Apr 2, 2007  
In Baltimore, one school performs miracles  
By Leonard Pitts  
MIAMI HERALD

Consider the neighborhood. Words tumble to mind by way of description. Words like desolate. Words like tough. Words like hard and mean and grim and sad. Words like dead. Bail bonds and liquor stores are what passes for industry in Baltimore. Ragged row houses, many boarded and abandoned, crowd one another like strangers in a bus shelter.

Now consider the girl who goes to school here. Danielle Branche, 16, is tiny, has a pretty smile, and speaks with self-possession about her dreams. "When I graduate, I want to go to either Antioch College in Ohio or Point Park University in Pittsburgh and I want to get my bachelor's in both dance and business management so I'll be able to open my own dance company."

Consider the neighborhood. Consider the child. If they seem not to fit one another, well, that's the point. Welcome to St. Frances Academy. Welcome to What Works.

The latter is my series of columns highlighting that which is helping to improve the lives of black children. The former is a sterling example thereof.

St. Frances ([www.sfacademy.org](http://www.sfacademy.org) <<http://www.sfacademy.org/>> ) was founded in 1828 by Mother Mary Lange, a Haitian-born nun who eventually moved to Baltimore, where she used her own money to educate free children of color, which was then illegal.

Nearly 180 years later, the order (Oblate Sisters of Providence) and the school she founded serve more than 300 students. More than 70 percent of them qualify for free or subsidized lunches. More than 90 percent of them go to college.

What makes this miracle? David Owens, a teacher of theology and, like a number of his colleagues, an alumnus, ticks off a few factors: small class sizes, uniforms, discipline, rigorous academics, high expectations. "And then lastly, love. When I scold you - yell at you, they say - it's not because I don't like you. It's because I love you."

In some form or another, every student or teacher says that. "The teachers look out for the students" . . . "It's like family." That sense that teachers are invested in them seems to go a long way toward lifting students who have been taught from birth that they are not and cannot.

"What makes us different," says Sister John Francis, the school's president, "is we're independent. We can do whatever we want, pretty much."

In public schools, she says, "the principals' hands are tied, the teachers' hands are tied" and no one has the freedom to simply do what works. But at St. Frances, they do. For example, the school provides counseling to mend the emotional wounds of kids who have seen mom on drugs, dad in jail, brother murdered. A third of her students, says Sister John, are in weekly therapy.

"My belief is that you can take the smartest kid in the world, but if they've got all these issues, they're not going to be able to focus on their academics until they at least start dealing with the issues."

Across the street from the school is a prison. High stone walls topped by concertina wire. Squatting there massive, ugly and cold. Squatting there like a warning. Squatting there like a threat.

Deonte Tuggle, 17, goes to school in the literal shadow of that threat. Yet he is a young man of offhand confidence. He speaks with punctilious precision, his words not just grammatical, but delivered with a studiously correct enunciation reminiscent of Data from "Star Trek." A way of saying without saying, "See me. I'm not the usual. I'm not what you expect."

"I'm not like most boys my age that live in the neighborhood," he says. "I'm not out there smoking, drinking and getting high and all that kind of stuff. I don't let people dictate my life and tell me who I am as a person. Only I know who I am as a person."

Consider the child. Consider the neighborhood.

Now, consider the possibilities.