

Meet Dr. Russell!

School leader. Advocate. Blue Ribbon award winner.

Friendship Academy for the Arts Executive Director Dr. Charvez Russell comes from a deep family history of educators. Though that wasn't the path he envisioned for himself. Rather, he wanted to be a rebel. We think he's lived up to both esteems.

Following various teaching jobs in Canton, Miss., and Minneapolis (at City View), he took a lengthy detour with jobs in business: It wasn't until 2014 when he took a leap of faith and re-entered the teaching profession.

He signed on at Friendship. While the position meant teaching in a school that had been through a recent turnaround and less pay, Charvez jumped at the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the school his own children attended. "Returning to school as an educator was a homecoming," said Charvez.

In its own way, Friendship was also starting anew. Three years prior, its outlook was bleak – including its authorizer threatening closure due to low academic performance. Friendship responded by hiring a new leadership team of Nell Collier, an experienced Minneapolis district principal, and Datria Chukwu, a veteran of several gap-

closing schools, who focused on data-driven instruction and family engagement.

In just two years, the school went from underperforming to having a state Multiple Measurements Rating in the top 15th percentile for high-poverty schools.



Dr. Charvez Russell

Charvez, now the school's executive director, is determined to build upon the school's newfound success. His goal: 80 percent proficiency in math and reading next school year.

"We've had the highest enrollment ever, and we're looking to expand to meet the demand from our families. What's been the greatest benefit to us has and continues to be the structural support we receive from GMS."

Great MN Schools has provided Friendship with planning support in a variety of ways – helping define the role of outside support in the process, funding for the development of a strategic growth plan, and engaging with school leadership throughout the process. Through the creation of a "steering team" made up of teachers, parents, and board members, Charvez has ensured that key voices are contributing

to the school's core culture, principles and vision for growth. Upon the completion of the plan, Friendship will submit it to Great MN Schools in consideration of implementation support for the school's expansion.

Charvez has also accessed MN Comeback resources, including ANet and Relay to continue his own professional development.

"ANet and Relay provide leaders like me with tools to implement systemic improvements, such as more and better coaching for my teachers or tackling targeted areas within state standards. I'm experiencing first-hand how schools serving similar student demographics demonstrate changing-the-odds results. And as we look to expand, these programs help to ensure quality instruction is embedded in our model," continued Charvez.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Education awarded Friendship the coveted National Blue Ribbon School award for excelling academically. The school continues to maintain a culture in which both its families and staff can thrive. Through Friendship's growing success, Charvez is establishing a new legacy for the next generation of educators to live up to.

