

## FirstLine Schools

### Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Statement

#### Our Context: Starting Conditions and Core Values

**Our Roots, Pre-Katrina:** In 1992, Dr. Anthony Recasner, a black psychologist and Jay Altman, a white educator, founded James Lewis Extension (JLE) school in partnership with 100 families who were seeking a high quality public education for their children. In the 1997-98 school year, with support from parents and teachers, JLE applied to Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) to convert to a charter school, and with unanimous approval from the board became the city's first charter school as memorialized by a change of name to New Orleans Charter Middle School (NOCMS). NOCMS flourished with strong academic results, a nurturing environment, and a rich range of elective classes across arts, music, sports, and cultural subjects. In 2005, the recently created state Recovery School District and OPSB asked NOCMS' leaders to take over Samuel J. Green Middle School. Green was only open for five days when Hurricane Katrina struck, decimating our city. NOCMS was badly flooded and could not reopen until another location was secured.

The roots of our organization are homegrown and our aspiration is to continue to be an organization that honors the culture of the city and strong staff, family, and community relationships. The organization was founded in the deep belief that whole child education, grounded in strong relationships and a nurturing school environment, is the path to great education.

**Post Hurricane Katrina:** In January of 2006 we reopened Samuel J. Green as an open-admissions public charter school, welcoming many former NOCMS families and teachers. We realized early on, however, that we were not prepared for the trauma that our students and staff had experienced. While we struggled to make the school safe and deliver a strong academic program, we also worked with community agencies to help families to secure housing and jobs and return to rebuild their lives. The following year we opened Arthur Ashe Charter School and addressed the same challenges - how to provide a nurturing environment and strong academic program while also meeting students' basic needs. We have always had a vision for educating the whole child, but we did not fully live this vision in the post-Katrina era. The urgency for academic gains and calm and orderly environments led us away from our whole child focus. We relied too heavily on more punitive discipline approaches, such as suspensions. This resulted in our middle schools exceeding a 35% suspension rate. While these practices sometimes were effective in creating calm and orderly schools, and while many of our students were academically successful in high school and college, we learned that these approaches unfortunately did not always serve the students who were struggling the most, some of whom entered the school-to-prison pipeline. This is why we are committed to reviewing our discipline practices regularly and why we commit to incorporating social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices as a part of our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work.

Over the past several years, we have worked relentlessly to develop more inclusive practices of school discipline while at the same time providing school environments that facilitate teaching and learning. These more inclusive practices include a focus on trauma-informed approaches, social-emotional learning, and community circles, and have reduced our suspension rate to below the state average. One of our core beliefs, since our founding, has been that school culture is driven by strong relationships and transparent communication with students and families. As part of our continued growth towards providing an education that nurtures young

people in mind, body, and spirit, we have drawn on the lessons from the post-Katrina period to develop even deeper skills as a team to meet the needs of all students, especially those who are struggling the most in with social or emotional issues. Today more than ever, our schools prioritize relationships among students, staff, and families, with a focus on meeting students' needs so they may focus on learning and on realizing their full potential.

One of the most painful parts of our history as an organization was our work at Joseph S. Clark High School. Clark had a long history in New Orleans, originally opening in 1947 as the second high school to educate black children in New Orleans. Based on our success with elementary schools in the 2005-2011 school years, community members, including the Joseph S. Clark Alumni Association, advocated for FirstLine to take on Joseph S. Clark High School as a turnaround school. As an organization we struggled to provide a strong enough educational program. Over time, we made the difficult and unpopular decision to close Clark high school. We know that the decision to close Clark was painfully felt by the Clark families, students, neighborhood, its deeply loyal alumni, and Clark staff members, and we regret that we were not able to successfully turn around the school. This experience is why we are dedicated to ensuring a strong educational program in mind, body, and spirit.

We, like many schools around the nation, are still working hard to deliver on our promise of strong academic outcomes for all of our students. This tension between our commitment to ensure all of our students are academically well prepared and the reality that we still have many students achieving below mastery is one that we feel acutely every day and is a strong source of motivation for our continued work to improve our practice. We believe in the inherent brilliance of all of our students, and thus our goal is academic success for all of our students. Whenever we fall short of this goal, we know it negatively impacts our students' lives and thus requires dedication to providing a nurturing school community, continually improving our instruction, rigor, learning supports, and culturally responsive teaching. This is why our first action of our DEI work is about ensuring a strong program that leads to strong academic outcomes.

**Our Role in Post-Katrina Education Reform in New Orleans:** It is important that we address our presence in the charter landscape in New Orleans. Our perspective of our role in post-Katrina reform is one of “both, and” as it relates to our work to better understand the racial dynamics and inequities that have characterized our city and our organization. We believe that school reform was needed due to a system failing far too many students. In 2005, 62 percent of New Orleans students attended the lowest performing schools in the state, compared with just 8 percent in 2018. New Orleans students' college-entry rate has risen from 37 percent in 2004 to 61 percent in 2017. FirstLine contributed to this success with our year-over-year academic gains from 2008 to 2015. At the same time, we acknowledge there was a cost to that reform, and we acknowledge our participation. First and foremost, reform happened without enough community input. A hallmark of anti-racist work is partnering with people, giving voice to families and students. As a system and at FirstLine, we have not been strong in this area, and we commit to growing. Another consequence of the reform was the impact on the black middle class, particularly teachers. Pre-Katrina, most New Orleans Public Schools teachers were African-American. They were an experienced group, averaging more than 15 years in the classroom. While FirstLine maintained employment for the NOCMS employees for months after Katrina, the education reform movement as a whole did not have solutions for rehiring the fired native New Orleanian black teachers. We acknowledge that we did not focus enough on hiring native New Orleanian black educators in the early years post-Katrina. At the same time, we are committed to, and have achieved, creating a diverse organization, where the majority of our teaching staff are teachers of color.

**Our Race and Equity Work:** A deep commitment to racial equity has always been at the heart of FirstLine’s work, and it was core to our founding commitment to provide quality education experiences to all young people in the city. We have been even more intentional about developing our collective understanding of racial equity since 2016 after the murder of Alton Sterling at the hands of police. At that time we began to engage more formally in workshops and conversations about race, inclusion, equity and the different perspectives and skills we all bring to discussing and addressing these issues. We believe a racial equity lens is essential to actualizing FirstLine’s mission and vision by developing our skills as team members who believe that equity begins with the high expectations we have for our students and is actualized through the will and skills needed to provide our students with an educational experience that matches those expectations. At FirstLine, we know that all identity markers (race, gender, orientation, able-bodiedness, differences in learning abilities, etc.) can have an effect on a child’s self-perception, how others relate to that child, and ultimately access to opportunity. We also know that research reveals that race, above all, is the strongest predictor of outcomes for academic and financial success above all other identity markers. Lastly, we serve a primarily African American and Latinx population, and we know that this identity marker is important as we think about the future of our diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

We value developing a school culture that helps students have a “big life,” one that is filled with positive internal and external experiences at school. We value a strong academic program that is complemented by great extracurriculars, as we are committed to developing the whole child in mind, body, and spirit. We value a social-emotional / trauma-informed approach with our students. We have always valued diverse perspectives and diversity amongst our staff, from racial diversity to educational background diversity. We believe these values are the foundation of our anti-racist work and will lead to our students becoming adults who can positively change unjust systems and help build a more equitable society.

### **The Role of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion In Our Network**

First and foremost, our race and equity work is about impacting the lives of students in mind, body and spirit.

To actualize this, we will:

1. Hold ourselves accountable to achieving strong student outcomes in mind, body, and spirit.
2. Hire and develop staff who believe that equity begins with the high expectations we have for our students in mind, body, and spirit and the will and skills to provide our students with an educational experience that matches those expectations;
3. Provide FLS community members with a set of intentional experiences that will build strong relationships, strong academic outcomes, and develop a deeper understanding of our parents, families, students, and each other in the service of being more effective educators.
4. Develop equitable organizational policies and practices and a more inclusive organizational culture.
5. Engage and communicate with families and students in ways that demonstrate our value of partnership.
6. Live our value of “all means all” by ensuring that all student populations are served well at our schools.

### **We Commit To Act**

1. **Mind:** Driving student learning outcomes is the **first priority** of DEI work, and this begins with a strong student and parent partnership.
2. **Mind:** Adopt, modify and/or build curricula that welcome and affirm each student's unique identity and values community cultural wealth.
3. **Mind:** Support employees to engage in culturally responsive practices in the delivery of high quality instruction (as measured by student outcomes).
4. **Body:** Provide safe spaces where students can learn and explore, both physically and emotionally through the use of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed approaches.
5. **Body:** Provide access to physical fitness, healthy food, and nutrition education.
6. **Spirit:** Communicate regularly with students and families to build strong relationships and discuss academic progress.
7. **Spirit:** Ensure that all of our community members, including students, families, and staff, have the space to be their authentic selves and ensure their voices are heard.
8. **Organization:** Use the FLS School Report Card and FLS Network Report Card to measure our equity outcomes and use these measures to drive individual goals within the organization.
9. **Organization:** Actively recruit, hire and retain staff that reflect student demographics at all levels and set clear diverse staff hiring goals.
10. **Organization:** Intentionally change policies and practices in the interest of equity: culture, talent/HR, and teaching and learning, and include student and family stakeholders in those decisions.
11. **Organization:** Create an ongoing network dialogue to explore our individual and collective consciousness about race and racism and examine our implicit biases and areas of privilege.