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Give students an opportunity



Teammates from the Taney Dragons ride the float during the parade in their honor in Philadelphia last week. DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer

By Ina Lipman

Now that Philadelphia has paid tribute to the Taney Dragons and their run to the Little League World Series, it's important to keep one non-sports aspect of this story in mind: Star pitcher Mo'ne Davis is also a star student at an elite private school. Two of her teammates attend the school as well.

The real heroic story of Mo'ne Davis may be in the message she is sending through not just her baseball excellence, but also her academic achievements. As one of Mo'ne's coaches recently told the New York Times, "If you give kids in the city what kids in the suburbs have, you get the same exact results."

Similarly, all other members of the team attend highly rated schools, including Masterman, St. Francis de Sales, Germantown Friends, McCall, and Penn Charter. Some of these schools are private, some public. They have two things in common: They are all excellent and they offer students an opportunity. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for many of the neighborhood public schools that serve the Dragons' communities.

We all hope that major improvements lie ahead for our city's schools, but no one has a realistic expectation that a dramatic turnaround will happen any time soon. In the interim, there are opportunities for students in the poorest-performing public schools to attend a quality private or parochial school through the Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia (CSFP).

Starting this week, an additional 2,000 students will be given four-year CSFP scholarships. We currently support 5,500 students in more than 185 schools across Philadelphia, and we have a goal of reaching 10,000 students by the 2016-17 school year.

The good news is that when given an opportunity to be enrolled in a quality school, CSFP children succeed. With an average family income of \$29,000, CSFP children go on to graduate high school, prepared and on time, at rates in excess of 96 percent. Unfortunately, each year CSFP must turn away more than 8,000 Philadelphia children whose families are desperate for better schools.

When we award scholarships, a key component we look for is parental involvement. A parent doesn't need extensive financial resources or a college degree to be deeply involved with his or her child's education. The Philadelphia parents who apply to our program want the same thing for their children that suburban parents want: a quality education. While we wait for the issues facing our public schools to be resolved, scholarships like these prevent an entire generation of Philadelphia youths from falling through the cracks.

The Pennsylvania Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTC) allows businesses to make an immediate difference in the lives of Philadelphia children. At tax time, businesses can choose to divert 90 percent of their tax payment to the OSTC rather than to the general fund.

Currently there is more than \$25 million in tax credits available that could be used to provide scholarships to more than 10,000 Philadelphia children. For this reason, the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce has undertaken a year-long call to action for businesses large and small to fully utilize those remaining OSTC dollars and keep them local.

The grit, persistence, and success of the Taney Dragons kept us all irresistibly engaged. Let's take that same passion and belief in possibilities to unlock the talent and drive of 10,000 more Philadelphia children.

Ina Lipman is executive director of Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia (www.csphiladelphia.org). Lipman@csphiladelphia.org

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