

Denisha Merriweather

Good morning! Thank you for your time this morning. My name is Denisha Merriweather, and I am just entering my second semester in graduate school at the University of South Florida, where I will be receiving my master's degree in Social Work.

When I was growing up, college was a dream that I didn't even know I had. And if it weren't for an educational option Florida gave me 12 years ago, I wouldn't be here today. If you were to rewind my life back to my childhood, you would see someone very different. You would see someone who got in fights with her classmates. Someone destined to drop out before she made it through high school. Someone who didn't even know what college was. But thankfully, I did not become a statistic. Growing up, I was not a student who picked up ideas and concepts quickly in class. School didn't come easily to me and I struggled to keep up.

When I was in elementary school in Jacksonville, Florida, my mother and I were moving around town constantly. That meant I kept changing schools, and I had a hard time re-adjusting to a new school, new teachers and new students every time we moved. Because we moved so much, I also missed several days of school, and when I got back into the classroom, it was hard to catch up. Needless to say, my grades were bad, and I didn't understand most of my schoolwork. I got picked on by other kids because I was doing so poorly in school. And I kept getting into fights. I failed third grade. Not once, but twice.

All too well, it seemed my future was mapped out for me. I would follow in the footsteps of my mother, uncle and brother who all dropped out of school. I was unmotivated and learning became a nightmare- a punishment for being a child. Not too long after that, I started living with my godmother and my life began to turn in an entirely different direction. One of the first things she wanted to change was my school. She heard through our church about a private school in Jacksonville called Esprit de Corps Center for Learning, and liked what she heard. But she had no way to pay for it.

Thankfully, she heard about a scholarship that was offered through a nonprofit I now know as Step Up For Students, and the state program, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. Let me tell you. That was just the change I needed. Before I even set foot on my new school's campus, I met my teacher. In fact, the summer before I started attending Esprit de Corps, she worked with me to get me up to speed on the things I had missed at my other school. I would go to her house almost every day over the summer to work on my multiplication tables and go over other subjects that I hadn't grasped.-It was so nice to have a teacher who truly cared. The following August, I began the sixth grade at Esprit de Corps, and for the first time in my life, adjusting to a new school was a very positive experience for me!

The classes were very small – I had just eight other students in my sixth grade class. It really helped me because my teacher was able to go around to each of us and help us with any questions we had. As the years at Esprit de Corps went on, my grades improved. I began to earn A's and B's consistently, and proudly made the honor roll. I also grew very close to my classmates and it began to feel like a family. I bonded with much younger students and by the time I was a senior, they looked up to me. I can say to all of you here, Esprit de Corps truly changed my life.

The school gave me a new perspective, and helped me prepare for my future. They helped me pay for the SAT, ACT and college applications, and pushed me to expect more from myself. The motto at Esprit de Corps Center for Learning is this: "Learning is a joy, excellence is the norm and superiority is our goal." And I think about that every day. If I hadn't had the opportunity to attend Esprit de Corps, I don't think I would have ever learned what my potential is. No one in my family ever went to college, and the mindset was that if school gets too hard, you just quit.

But since Esprit de Corps expects excellence, I rose to the challenge. In 2010, I became the first in my family to graduate from high. In 2014, I became the first to receive my bachelor's degree and in 2017 I will be the first in my family to graduate with a graduate degree. The cycle of poverty is ending in my family, thanks to the Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship. I received a quality education and my sibling are now seeing how to take advantage of every educational opportunity.

At the University of South Florida, I am receiving my master's degree in social work and I am committed to advocating for educational options. So many opportunities have been given to me and I want to create the same for other children just like me. I have seen the power of a tailored education demonstrated in my own life, and I'd love to see it carried throughout future generations. It is truly an honor to share my story with you all today. Thank you!