

FORUM

## Make a choice to help Connecticut students

By Anna Hall

"Your Vote, Your Choice."  
So said slogans, banners and signs last November, as millions of people across our nation participated in the midterm elections. But voting is just one form of choice that can help democratize society and level the playing field in ways that our country needs it most. This National School Choice Week (Jan. 20-26), we should remember the way in which school choice empowers parents, and ultimately students, to pick the best possible learning environment for their family's needs.

Here in Connecticut, where the divide between rich and poor is larger than anywhere in the country, school choice is often a luxury afforded only to the privileged few. It might seem implicit to say, but wealthy families are guaranteed school choice; they can write a check to whatever school or private academy they please, or afford a mortgage in a neighborhood with "good" schools.

Meanwhile, in our cities, most parents have their options limited by their income. Too many families have no option but their neighborhood public schools, which don't always provide children with the support they need to succeed. Connecticut has among the largest achievement gaps in the country for exactly this reason — because while wealthy families are empowered to choose the best schools for their children, low-income families have that choice taken away.

Over the last several years, school choice has increasingly been used as a political litmus test, twisted and misused into an argument against public education. That couldn't be further from the truth. School choice is a bedrock, foundational value — the belief that every child, and every family, deserves to choose a school that will help them be successful.

I represent an association of public charter schools across the state of Connecticut. As public charters, we receive public dollars for the students we educate. But public charter schools also have the flexibility and autonomy to innovate to meet our students' needs. In exchange for more autonomy from a school district's procedural requirements, we must meet explicit perfor-

mance standards laid out in the charter. In essence, the charter functions as a contract between the school and families; if the school breaks the contract, it could lose its charter and close.

People might find it surprising to hear this from the head of a charter school association, but not every student should attend a charter school. Some students might benefit from a traditional public school environment; others will take advantage of our state's leading magnet schools. Some students need specialized instruction in one particular topic; still others might benefit from the added discipline that can be found in some private schools. Every child is different — school choice simply means parents should pick the option that works best for their children.

Regardless of what school parents choose, I support school choice because it democratizes education — it gives every parent a choice. I want to make sure that families of more modest means have the same opportunities that these wealthy families do — to make sure that lack of access to a quality education does not hold a single child back from achieving his or her potential.

This National School Choice Week will see parents, teachers and students gather at more than 40,000 events and rallies during the week of Jan. 20-26. The rallies provide a great way to put faces and names to the abstract concept of school choice. When you see the smile on a young child's face when she tells you how much she loves her new school, you realize the impact that a gift like school choice can have on the next generation of Americans.

As someone who firmly believes in American democracy, I believe that every child — regardless of race, gender or income — deserves access to the best education possible for them. School choice has helped to democratize the education system for millions in this way, and I hope it will do so for millions more.

*Anna Hall is the CEO for the Northeast Charter Schools Network, which serves New York and Connecticut. She holds a bachelor's degree in politics from Princeton University and a master's degree in public policy from the Harvard Kennedy School.*



Students from charter, private, parochial and home schools participate in a school choice proponents rally last year in Jackson, Miss.



In this 2015 file photo, Angela Davis, author, educator and iconic civil rights activist, speaks during her visit to the University of Michigan-Flint, in Flint, Mich. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama announced this month that it has rescinded its decision to honor Davis.

FORUM

## A lesson on justice and its indivisibility

By Shelly Altman

*"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." — Martin Luther King in Birmingham jail, 1963*

Our right to advocate for justice via our constitutionally guaranteed free speech is under attack by those who use false charges of anti-Semitism to mask their own unwillingness to address the human rights emergency that has intensified in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza for the past 70 years.

Angela Davis is a human rights scholar-activist and icon of the American civil rights movement. This month, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute announced that it was canceling its intent to honor the Birmingham native with the Fred L. Shuttlesworth Human Rights Award. Davis is part of a growing lineup of African-Americans who are being censured for connecting the liberation struggle of African-Americans with that of Palestinians.

Davis' lifelong work is globally recognized. But her advocacy for human rights for Palestinians apparently negated her qualifications for receiving the award. The BCRI decision was driven by complaints by some Jewish organizations in Birmingham.

Davis said the BCRI's decision is "not primarily an attack against me but rather against the spirit of the indivisibility of justice."

Marc Lamont Hill is a tenured professor of media studies at Temple University and was a political commentator on CNN. In November remarks at a U.N. International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People meeting, Hill said, "We must advocate and promote non-violence," and added, "We cannot endorse a narrow politics of respectability that shames Palestinians for resisting, for refusing to do nothing in the face of state violence and ethnic cleansing."

He called for a "free Palestine from the river to the sea," words and concept used

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by Zionists, without censure, since the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. CNN reacted to his remarks by firing him from his position at CNN.

Esther Kowitz has been a Kansas public school math teacher for nine years and state-wide teacher-trainer. Kowitz was fired from her position when she refused to sign a formal declaration certifying that she does not participate in a boycott of Israel, as dictated by Kansas law. Kowitz said that she could not sign the form in good conscience. A U.S. District Court has now ruled that the Kansas law imposed "a plainly unconstitutional choice" on state contractors.

Bahia Amawi is a Texas speech pathologist who has worked with developmentally disabled, autistic and speech-impaired elementary school students in Austin, Texas, for the last nine years. Amawi was fired because she refused to sign a pledge that she will not engage in any action to limit commercial relations with any entity doing business in Israel or in an Israel-controlled territory. She and the ACLU have sued the state of Texas.

Twenty-five states now have laws which require individuals and/or businesses in a relationship with the state to sign a pledge that they will not engage in any boycott related to Israel or its illegal settlements. The U.S. Congress is considering similar legislation. Both the existing state laws and the proposed federal legislation have a chilling effect on free speech and are unconstitutional.

In working for the "indivisibility of justice," Angela Davis and Marc Lamont Hill and so many others give life to Dr. King's eloquent words.

*Shelly Altman is chairperson of Jewish Voice for Peace New Haven.*