

Good Evening. My name is Destiny Watford and I'm a member of Free Your Voice a student-led human rights group of United Workers. I would like to thank the board for inviting the group to come speak. After I say a few words, you will be hearing from Charles Graham, students from Vivien T Thomas Medical Arts Academy, and Audrey and Leah Rozier.

We are here tonight to talk about choices. 2 years ago, a group of students and myself made the choice to form a group at our school called Free Your Voice. This choice meant giving up a lot of our time so that we could learn more about the world we live in. We meet every week to study, reflect and act together.

Along the way, we learned about another choice - one that was made years earlier - and that was the choice to build the nations' largest trash incinerator less than a mile away from our school - Benjamin Franklin. At first, we were shocked because we didn't have any idea that this was happening in our own community - but we realized that learning about this presented us with a choice: should we, as a group, get involved with an issue this big, complex, and to be honest - intimidating?

We chose yes, and proceeded to stick together to study, research and reflect. And through studying the issue we came to learn about another choice - and this is a particular choice that makes what we are talking about here tonight so important - in 2011 the Baltimore City Public Schools chose to enter into an agreement to buy energy from the incinerator. The same incinerator that would be less than a mile from our school. The same incinerator that would burn 4,000 tons of tires, metals and plastic every day. The same incinerator that would be nearly twice the size of the deeply troubled incinerator Baltimore already has. The same incinerator that would emit 240 pounds of mercury and 1000 pounds of lead into the air each year.

The connection between the incinerator and the schools shocked us but also forced us to reflect on the meaning of schools. To be honest, as a child, I hated going to school. Partially because I was not, in any sense of the term, a “morning person”. But I also didn’t see its purpose. Sure, I could effectively construct a sentence or calculate the square root of “x”, but I never grasped the meaning behind it all. In fact, only recently have I begun to understand the true beauty of it. You see, I was educated through the public school system. And, although it has its flaws, the beauty of the system is that, at it’s core, it aspires to be a public place of education. I want to emphasize the word public because this means it includes EVERYONE - NO MATTER WHAT ECONOMIC SITUATION YOU WERE BORN INTO. At its root, it is a system that springs forth from the principle of equity. It represents a choice that we made as a society to reach towards fairness. It provides opportunities to enlighten ourselves and allows us to look out at the world and question what we see. Which is exactly why we are here tonight.

We are here tonight to make it clear that this incinerator threatens the very idea of equity that we - students, teachers, parents and board members share. We ask everyone here tonight: Is it fair to build the nations’ largest incinerator in the community with the highest level of toxic air emissions in the state? Is it fair to build the incinerator in the community with some of the highest rates of death from heart disease, lung cancer, and lower respiratory disease in the city? Is it fair to build the incinerator in the city that has the highest rate of air pollution related deaths in the nation? Is it fair to have your life cut short because of where you are born? We say that it is not fair and more - that it is not right. The incinerator is failed development.

Let me conclude with a simple, but revealing fact that brings us back to the idea of choice: No incinerator has been built in the United States since 1997. Let me repeat that - we, as a society have chosen not to build a single incinerator since 1997.

So what can be done? We are here to say that we can choose. We are here to say that we all deserve and have a right to Fair Development - development that puts our needs first. We are here to ask you to make a choice for Fair Development. We are asking you to free your voice by pledging to end your relationship with the incinerator next April when the contract runs out. And as a first step towards making this choice, we want to invite each and every one of you to come to Curtis Bay so that we - the students of Free Your Voice can give you a tour of what we are proud of in our community and so that we can continue this critical discussion about how we can work together to achieve Fair Development. Thank you!