When Constance Jones was named CEO of Noble Network of Charter Schools last year, she started tearing down the dress code and other restrictive policies. A 20-year-old rule required hair color to be natural and tattoos covered. “These things have no impact on academic results,” Jones says.

On the day of the changeover in February, Jones dyed her hair purple and visited each of Noble’s 18 campuses. “If I say we’re doing it, I’m going to model it,” Jones says. “Yes, we’re doing it. My hair is purple.”

The reforms were important because “as a woman of color, I struggled with bringing my authentic self to work,” she says. “I was holding back a lot for fear of rejection.”

Jones overcame her insecurities and then some. The daughter of a teacher and a research statistician from Durham, N.C., she began her career as a pharmaceutical sales representative. She dreamed of applying to Harvard Business School but talked herself out of it, worried that her test scores weren’t high enough. Over holiday break, Jones’ older cousin scolded her: “They may tell you no, but don’t tell yourself no.” She applied and was accepted.

“I take that into my work,” Jones says. “So many kids tell themselves no.”

After grad school and a brief stint at Hyatt, Jones decided if she was going to be “grinding this hard, I’m going to be grinding for the public good.” She landed at the nonprofit KIPP Foundation, which oversees a national network of charter schools. She rose from project manager to national development director, where her efforts led to fundraising of more than $10 million.

Jones wondered if she could do more to help “black and brown kids in Chicago.” In 2015, she joined Noble as chief external affairs officer.

Today, she heads an organization of 12,000 students, a staff of 1,300 and an operating budget of $180 million. “She brought an infusion of energy, and she’s an active listener,” says Noble board member Jonathan Reinsdorf. “She’s engaged the stakeholders, and she loves the students.”

“I want to make sure we’re growing the dignity of our kids,” she says, “who, because of their skin color, will have to field all kinds of challenges that are unfair.”

Judith Crown