

# CHARTER CONNECT *magazine*

## BACK TO SCHOOL



**NEW SCHOOLS  
FOR ALABAMA**

**AUGUST 2021**



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# CHARTER CONNECT

AUGUST 2021

## MAGAZINE

## OUR TEAM



**Tyler Barnett, Executive Director**  
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Tyler began his career in the classroom, teaching high school English with Teach For America. Before returning to Alabama with his wife and two daughters, he worked in multiple nonprofits and for two state departments of education.



**Candie A. Price, Communications & Operations Manager, Editor**  
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In addition to founding a nationally-distributed magazine, Candie has led communications and PR strategy for numerous organizations. She is also a Teach For America alum, having taught middle and high school in Birmingham City Schools.



**Chris Reynolds, Senior Advisor**  
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Chris is a CPA with an extensive background in charter school leadership, nonprofit management, and philanthropy. He has founded multiple high-performing charter school networks and supported the development of a national facilities funding strategy.



**Dr. Mike Brown, Senior Advisor**  
[mike@newschoolsforalabama.org](mailto:mike@newschoolsforalabama.org)

Mike is a school leader at heart, having been a school leader with KIPP, a principal at the Tennessee Achievement School District, and Chief Schools Officer with Freedom Preparatory Academy in Memphis. He also served as Executive Director of the Freedom Fellows Institute.

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### New Schools for Alabama

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[www.newschoolsforalabama.org](http://www.newschoolsforalabama.org)

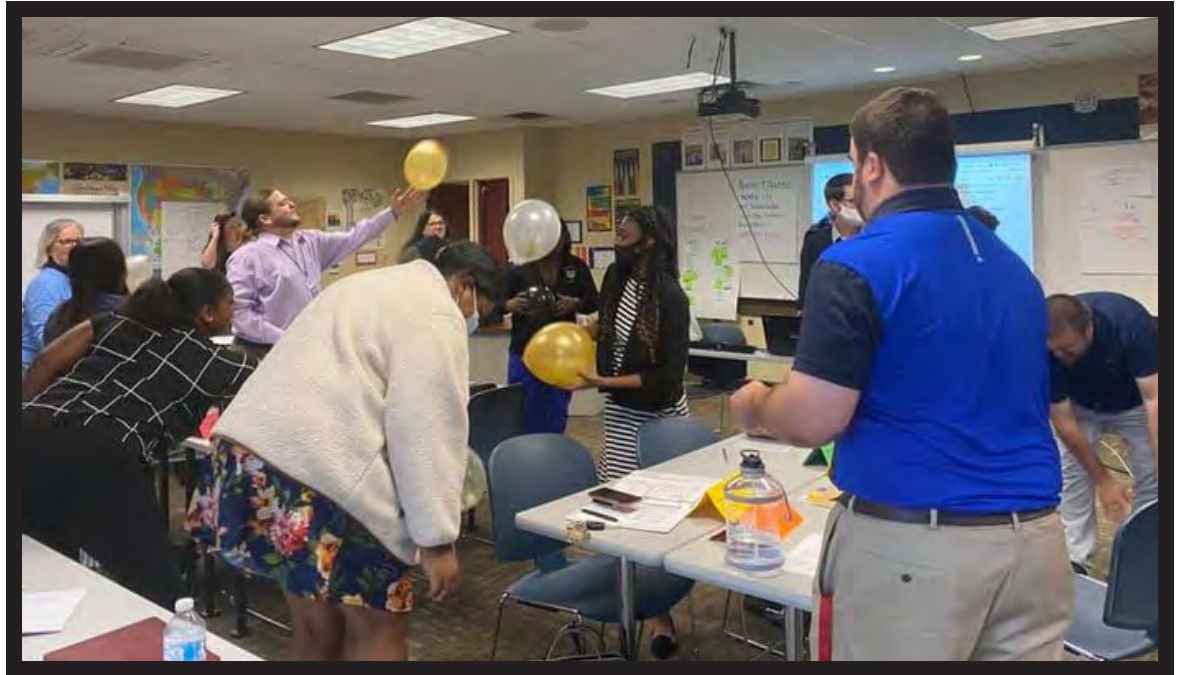




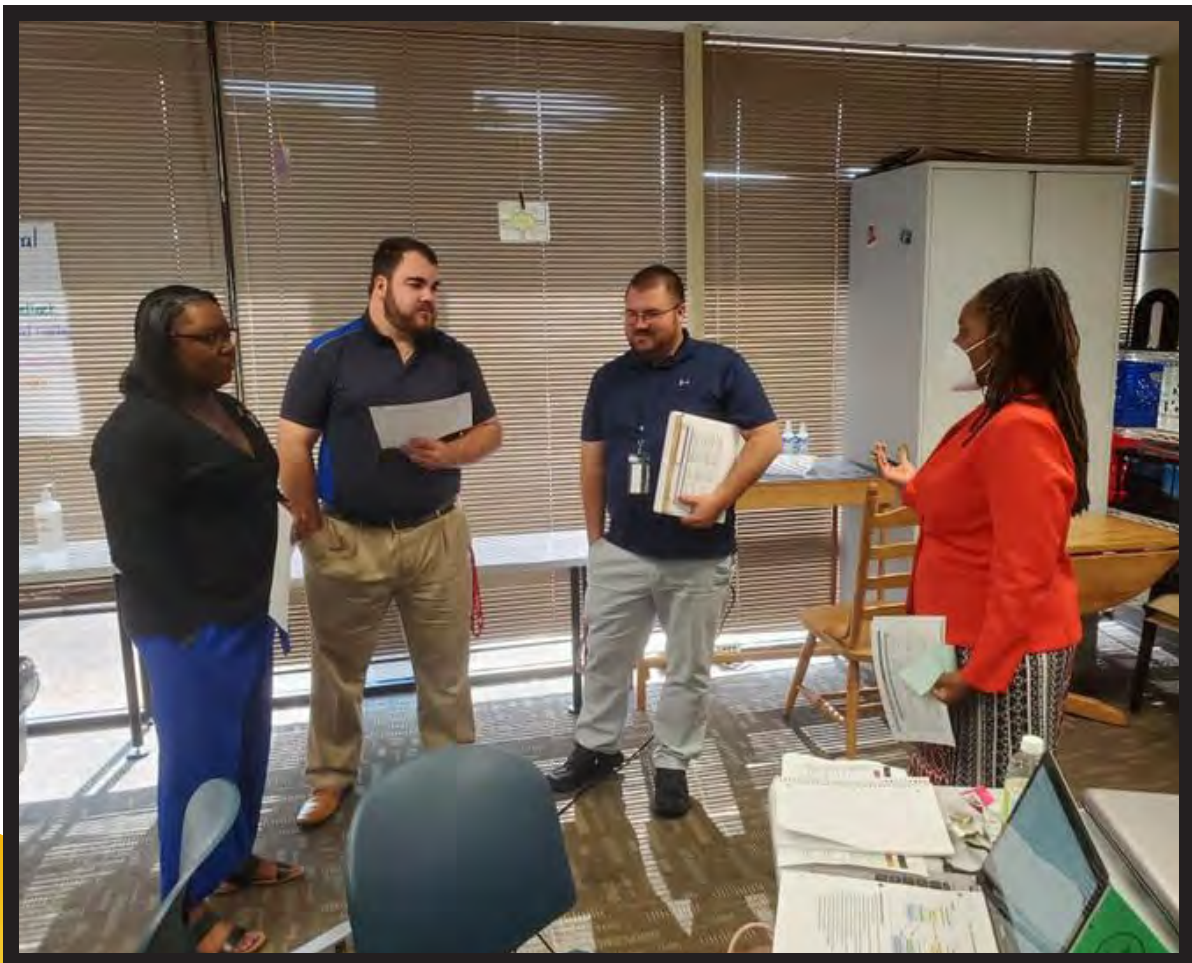
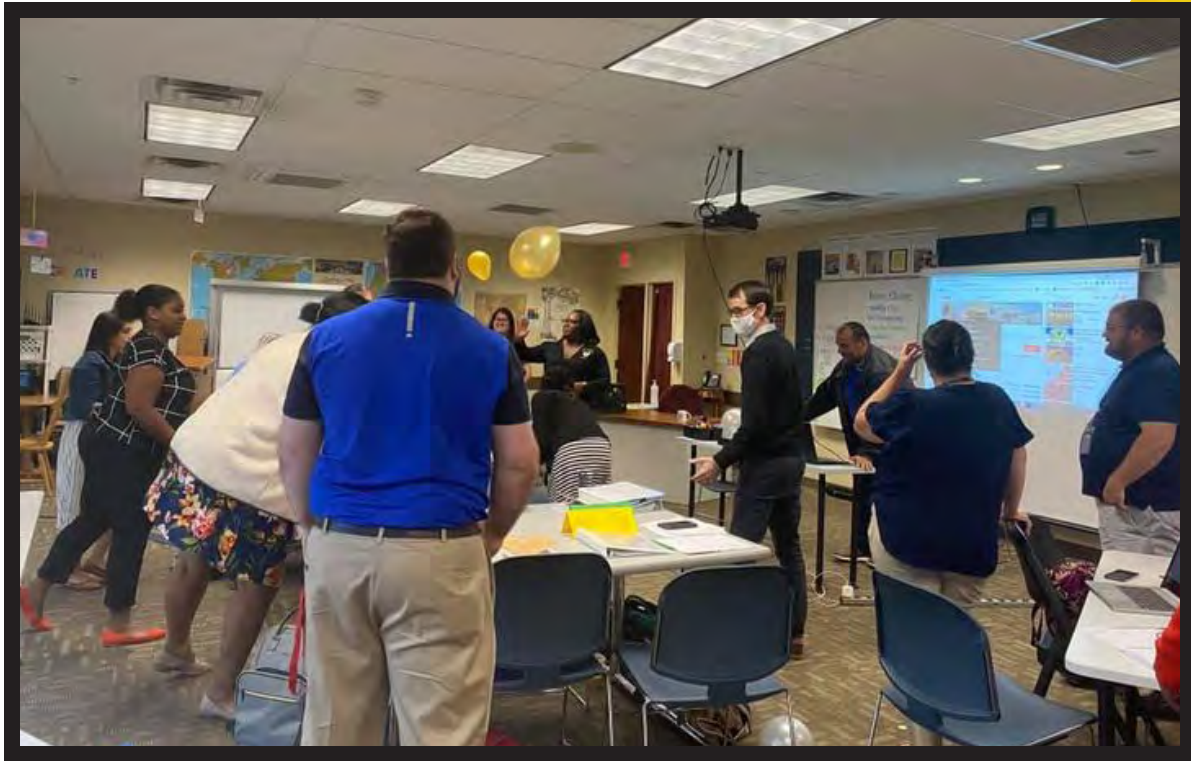
# ACCEL

DAY AND EVENING ACADEMY

ACCEL's faculty and staff are starting the year off with excitement, strategic planning and a collaborative spirit. They are ready for the 2021-22 school year. #LaunchingDreams #ACCELEratingSuccess



Charter  
Spotlight





# WELCOME BACK TO SCHOOL



**To our  
Charter School community!  
Have a wonderful year!**



We're celebrating **Back to School** with our charters and their families! Enjoy pics of all of the awesomeness happening across the state, including Teacher/Staff Professional Development, first week of school, and our **Parent Voice** section.

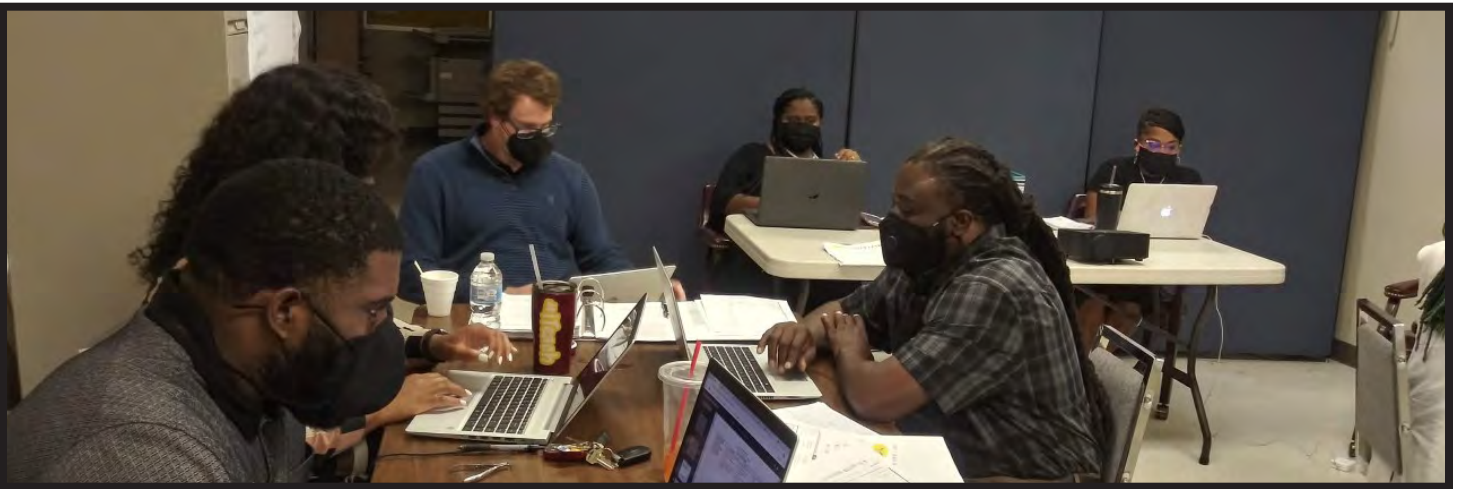
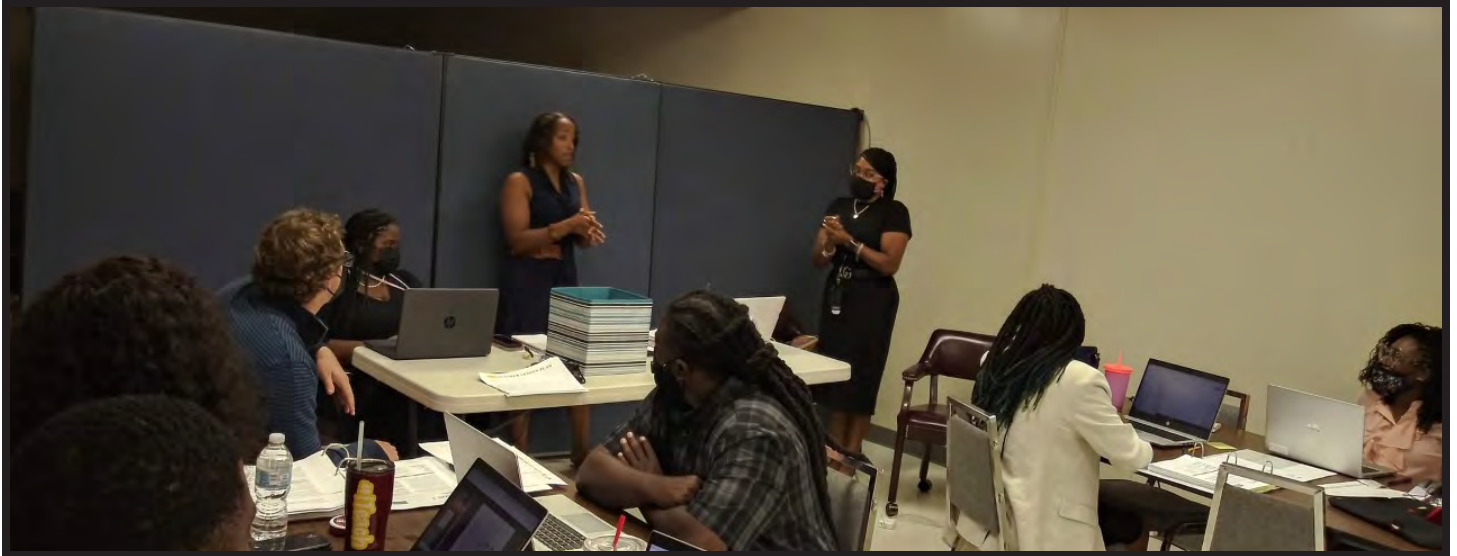
### i3 Academy - Birmingham, AL



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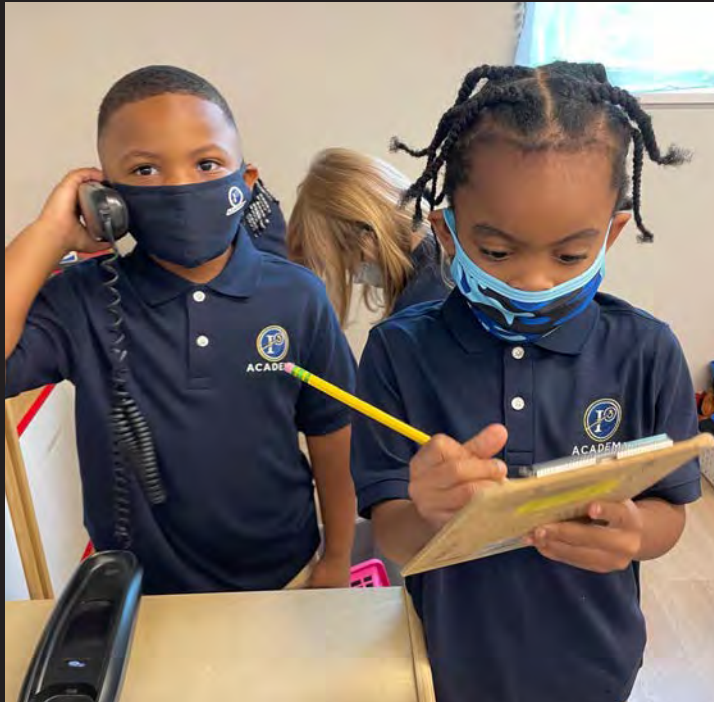


Phalen Leadership Academy Team - Davis Elementary - Montgomery, AL





### i3 Academy - Birmingham, AL

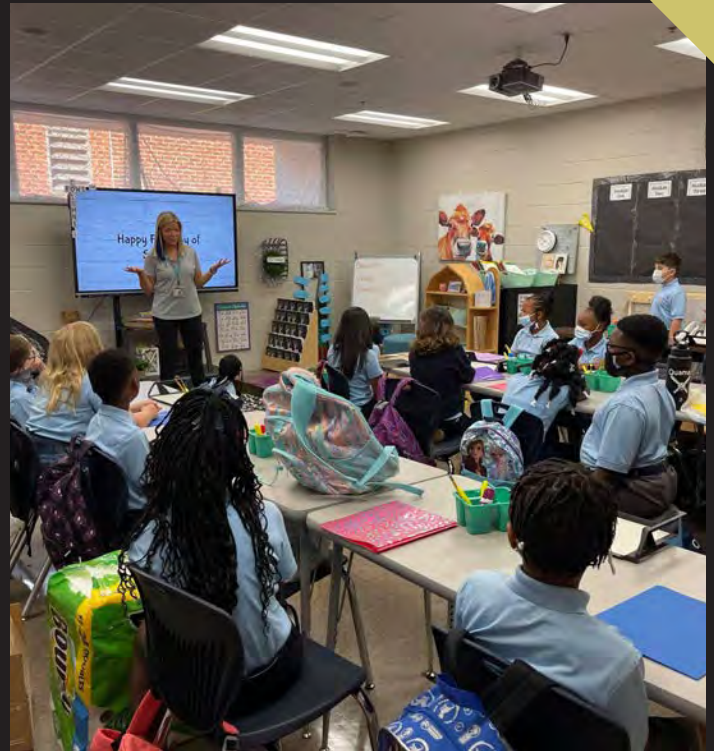


### Legacy Prep - Birmingham, AL





## University Charter School - Livingston, Alabama



## Davis Elementary School - Montgomery, AL





# Parent Voice!

*Parents of Alabama public charter schools share their experiences.*

...if they are looking for something different academically with a family-oriented environment, i3 Academy is the way to go!



**Name:** Katrina Merkerson  
**Child(ren):** Evan Merkerson  
**School:** [i3 Academy](#)



## 1. How would you describe your and your child's experience at the school?

Our experience has been amazing! My son came to i3 Academy last school year (5th grade) when they opened in the middle of a pandemic! It's still mind blowing to think about. Dr. Nalls and his team stayed on top of it and made sure that i3 Academy was a safe space for everyone. Because of them, my son had an amazing 5th grade year with an extraordinary 5th grade team (Mrs. Ivey (formerly Miss Griner), Mr. Eads, and Miss Echols). We

are still excited and hyped about our i3 Academy experience!

## 2. How are you feeling about the new school year?

I am excited about the new school year! My son is at the middle school this year. He is excited about having a schedule to follow, passing classes and riding the bus. Once again, they have opened another school in the middle of a pandemic. Dr. Nalls, Dr. Maddox (Head of the Middle School) and their teams are on top of everything, so I feel confident about my son's safety.

## 3. What are you or your child looking forward to the most?

I am looking most forward to being able to go on campus and volunteer or attend an awards program. It was different and exciting this time around to attend the Meet the Teacher event on campus instead of on Zoom. My son likes the fact that the 6th graders have the middle school campus all to themselves this year.

## 4. How accommodating has your school been during this last year of the pandemic?

Everyone was incredible last school year. They kept us informed and aware whether

it was Covid related, or they were giving information regarding resources through community partnerships. I can honestly say there was never a time that I as a parent didn't know what was going on.

## 5. What would you say to other parents who are thinking about enrolling their children at your school?

I would say it is one of the best decisions I made regarding my son's education and if they are looking for something different academically with a family-oriented environment, i3 Academy is the way to go!

## 6. Please leave any information you'd like about your school, school leader, favorite teachers, or experience.

I chose to enroll my son at i3 Academy on the recommendation of my best friend whom I trust, and I know has my son's best interest at heart. We have thoroughly enjoyed being a part of the i3 family. I am proud to say that my son will be among the first to graduate from i3 Academy as a part of the Senior Class of 2028!!! Oh, did I mention they opened a school in a pandemic and stayed open?! Who does that?! I love this school!



UCS  
made every  
effort to maintain  
a sense of normalcy in  
the chaotic times over the  
past year.



**Name: Courtney Vick**  
**Child(ren): Hudson and Jordy Vick**  
**School: University Charter School**



**1. How would you describe your and your child's experience at the school?**

UCS has been nothing short of amazing. The academics, extra-curricular activities, leadership, and school, in general, have far exceeded our expectations.

**2. How are you feeling about the new school year?**

Excited, each new year at UCS brings additional opportunities for learning and growth in and out of the classroom.

**3. What are you or your child looking forward to the most?**

My children are most looking forward to seeing their friends they haven't seen this summer. UCS has blessed us with a community of people far beyond what we could imagine.

**4. How accommodating has your school been during this last year of the pandemic?**

UCS made every effort to maintain a sense of normalcy in the chaotic times over the past year. They have gone above and beyond to help meet my children's needs, no matter what the situation.

**5. What would you say to other parents who are thinking about enrolling their children at your school?**

It is a decision you will not regret!

**6. Please leave any information you'd like about your school, school leader, favorite teachers, or experience.**

One of the things that makes UCS so special is its faculty and staff. Everyone is willing to pitch in and do their part. From the Principal and Head of School running carline to the Athletic Director cleaning up trash after a football game, everyone takes pride in seeing the success of UCS, no matter what it takes!



*...if they  
are looking for  
something different  
academically with  
a family-oriented  
environment, i3  
Academy is the way  
to go!*



**Name:** Janicesia Craig  
**Child(ren):** William, 8, and Jaiden, 6  
**School:** Legacy Prep

**1. How would you describe you and your child's experience at the school?**

We've had nothing but good experiences at Legacy Prep. Each teacher (we call them guides) my children have come in contact with, has become my friend, more like family.

**2. How are you feeling about the new school year?**

I'm excited about the new school year. The pandemic denied us a full first year so I am excited to experience a full year in person.

**3. What are you or your child(ren) looking forward to the most?**

I am looking forward to my kids building relationships. Many kids meet their lifelong best friends in elementary school. I am certain that my kids will make those friends.

**4. How accommodating has your school been during this last year of the pandemic?**

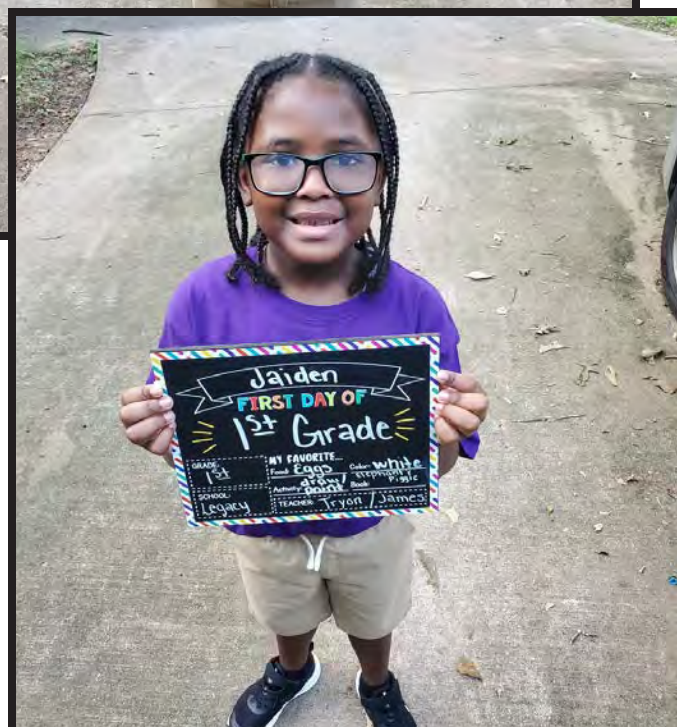
In all honesty, the past school year was smooth sailing. I had 3 Prepsters at my house learning virtually for the full school year. Their education never missed a beat. I never had to miss work. Every aspect of virtual learning was so kid friendly that my, now 6 year old, could navigate it himself.

**5. What would you say to other parents who are thinking about enrolling their children at your school?**

I would ask, "Why are you just thinking about it?" This school is amazing. The staff does not miss a beat. They make it a mission to learn every scholar and to get to know every family. Academically, I couldn't ask for a better school for my kids. I could go on and on about this school.

**6. Please leave any information you'd like about your school, school leader, favorite teachers, or experience.**

I will start with our school leader, Jonta Morris. My oldest son did not want to change schools to try a new school. He was comfortable in the school he attended. Mrs. Morris got eye level and empathized with my son. A month later, she remembered him. She remembered his name and he felt she cared. That was all it took to win us over. By the end of our first year, I knew everybody at the school and they knew me. They welcome me in with open arms. So many people ask me do I work at Legacy Prep because I'm always there. My 2 year old thinks she's a



Prepster and the staff treats her as such. I couldn't have asked for a better learning environment for my kids. I don't have favorites, at least I will never admit that I do. I genuinely care for every person in the building, even down to Ms. Ella, the custodian. Legacy Prep has given me a new outlook on public schools, on Charter schools, and on schools in general. I am grateful for this experience.



*I've never in my life experienced so many people in a school setting who really, really put in so much time and energy to make sure each and every child is happy.*



**Name: Nina Edwards Fowler**  
**Child(ren): Londyn Brielle Fowler**  
**School: i3 Academy**



**1. How would you describe your and your child's experience at the school?**

Upon meeting and speaking with Dr. Nalls and some staff members during the first meeting back in 2019 before the school finished construction and opened, I was pretty impressed. I was impressed on all the ideas and plans he spoke about concerning the school. After carefully evaluating and much prayer I must say, coming into this during an unprecedented, unpredictable time, i3 Academy made me feel very positive and that my daughter would be safe. i3 Academy has been nothing less than amazing with an awesome team of people.

**2. How are you feeling about the new school year?**

I'm feeling very hopeful with no doubt that Dr. Nalls and his team will do everything possible and go over and beyond to make sure not only the children are safe but his team and himself are safe. And that nothing but positive, good vibes are flowing.

**3. What are you or your child looking forward to the most?**

I, as a parent, due to this pandemic times we're living in, am really looking forward to all of us surviving and making yet another i3 school year a success. We overcame and accomplished so much last year and I'm praying for that this year and the years to come. If we, as parents, stick together with Dr. Nalls and his team, we will overcome. i3Academy will rise!! Our children will rise!

**4. How accommodating has your school been during this last year of the pandemic?**

Upon reading this question, I looked up the word "accommodating." Not that I don't know what it means, but a lot of times I'm lead to do so. The definition is "willing to fit in with someone's wishes or needs."

i3Academy was and is very accommodating for me as a parent and for my daughter. Our first school year, in which she was a 3rd grader, all I had to do was just bring my child to school. Everything was provided. When I reached out to her teacher or if I needed to speak with any of the i3 team with or for any regards or concerns pertaining to my daughter, they're always reachable. I would think that's very accommodating. And this school year, as we're entering in, has already started off nothing but accommodating.

**5. What would you say to other parents who are thinking about enrolling their children at your school?**

I would assure them that their child(ren) will be in the care of some amazing, energetic, positive, caring, loving, encouraging team of people making sure your child(ren) having nothing less than the best. Not only will your child(ren) receive a top notch education, but will leave the school every day knowing that

they are smart, they can do all things and are loved.

**6. Please leave any information you'd like about your school, school leader, favorite teachers, or experience.**

There's so much more I can say about i3 Academy. I absolutely love everyone that's a part of i3. I've never in my life experienced so many people in a school setting who really, really put in so much time and energy to make sure each and every child is happy. That every child is not left behind. That every child knows that he or she is valuable. Not only the children but they spill that same energy over to the parent(s) as well. I pray that there's an i3Academy High School in the vision because I want to continue this wonderful experience all the way through. i3 for me!



*This school is a great example of education, mentoring, and leadership on the forefront! They have the best staff EVER!*



**Name: Sandra Kinds**  
**School: i3 Academy**

**1. How would you describe your and your child's experience at the school?**

From day one Dr. Nalls, Mr Garrett and administrative support personnel, teachers, and para professionals have shown kindness and consideration in a manner that was consistent and professional. As a guardian to my niece and nephews it is vital that I have a foundation that is built on moral support, mentoring, and devotion. The "It takes a Village " phrase is definitely evident in this school capacity.

**2. How are you feeling about the new school year?**

I am excited about the changes that will take place and eager to show appreciation in various ways. I know that the hiring personnel were diligent in their selection process of new employees. It is important to have a school that is a cohesive unit. This appears to be the overall goal of i3 Academy.

**3. What are you or your child looking forward to the most?**

We anticipate a year filled with positivity as well as learning and exploration. The children are excited about meeting new friends and participating in extracurricular activities

**4. How accommodating has your school been during this last year of the pandemic?**

I cannot say enough about the accommodations I received not just during



the pandemic but throughout the year. The communication efforts were relentless. The detailed explanation of expectations provided a base for success. My youngest nephew has an IEP, therefore, it was imperative that he remained in a routine. We were able to achieve this by following the schedule that his teacher as well as the other teachers provided.

**5. What would you say to other parents who are thinking about enrolling their children at your school?**

I would tell parents to consider giving their child the very best, and in order to do this enroll them in i3 Academy. This school is a great example of education, mentoring, and leadership on the forefront! They have the best staff EVER!

**6. Please leave any information you'd like about your school, school leader, favorite teachers, or experience.**

Often times we question our purpose because of the many challenges we face; however, we do not take the time to focus on who stands beside us as we're going through the challenges. Having support that is above standard is a priceless effort. I have experienced firsthand generosity, a shoulder to cry on, and most importantly, love. What more can you ask for? This has not been an easy year, but I can be assured that with every hardship, every unexpected outcome, I have someone who cares and authentically desires the best for the children I love. That is why we chose i3 and I am so grateful i3 chose us.



# Charter Schools: What Does Post-COVID Look Like for You?

BY CASSANDRA BRIGHTER

**S**chools around the country were hit hard by the effects of the pandemic. Traditional public and charter schools alike were forced to adapt to distanced learning, train teachers and staff, and ensure student's success during an unfamiliar time. Although students and parents learned to adjust to the "new normal," now that more states are reopening and encouraging students to return to the class, many wonder how the pandemic has impacted the future of learning.

**Why Charter Schools Performed So Well During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Charter schools already [struggled](#)

[to receive equal funding](#) to traditional public schools before the pandemic. So, it came as no surprise that charter school administrators were prepared to rally for the resources their students and staff needed during the pandemic.

Despite not receiving the [same](#) treatment by local school boards compared to traditional public schools, many charter schools were better prepared to transition to virtual learning. [Successful charter schools](#) attribute the smooth transition to three reasons:

Charter schools are less bureaucratic, which allows for easier decision-making.

Teachers at charter schools have more experience dealing with time-sensitive situations.

Charter schools rely more on technology than most traditional public schools.

While traditional public schools grappled with remote learning and ever-changing health policies, charter schools "made rapid leaps [from](#) the classroom to the cloud." [A charter school in the Bronx celebrated a huge milestone for the class of 2021](#) amid the pandemic: all 65 graduating seniors got accepted into college. So, as you can see, despite the challenges schools faced due to COVID-19, charter schools still found a way to rise above.

**Lessons Learned: Will Virtual Learning Stay With Us?**

Charter schools are presented with





many choices when it comes to their reopening plans in the fall. You've come this far, so you're probably wondering what will become of virtual learning as COVID-19 cases fall around the country. Many charter schools have already come forward with their reopening plans and safety protocols for the fall.

Many charter schools' post-COVID reopening plans include virtual learning as an option for students, and for a good reason. Despite the push by school districts to get kids back into physical classrooms, one poll by the University of Southern California shows that parents are satisfied with remote and hybrid learning, and 42% of the parents surveyed even said they preferred remote lessons for their kids.

It's unclear that virtual learning is here to stay forever, but it's probably in your best interest to include virtual and hybrid learning options in your charter school's post-COVID reopening plans.

### **Post-COVID: Reopening School Buildings to In-Person Learning**

There are over 3 million charter school students in the country, and your charter school must be taking the proper steps to protect every student and staff member. School administrators are faced with tough decisions when it comes to

reopening plans post-COVID. Juggling the opinions of parents, state politicians, and teacher unions can make it difficult for charter schools to find a reopening plan that suits everyone.

Still, charter schools must work through logistical challenges to promise a safe return for students in the fall. If your charter school is struggling to source adequate resources or create a safety plan, we suggest you look to charter schools that have successfully reintroduced in-person learning.

Social Justice, a charter school in Washington, D.C., reopened its doors to students in the fall of 2020. Although they still offer hybrid learning options, school leaders report that the following has helped [ensure](#) a safe in-person return:

- Strategic planning
- Small class sizes
- Staggered schedules
- Strict safety protocols

The Department of Education (DOE) [released a handbook](#) that provides charter schools a detailed road map for reopening that we advise you to incorporate into your charter school's strategies. Consider the following methods suggested by the DOE when mapping out your charter school's reopening plans:

- Include parents, teachers, and staff in the strategic planning process
- Implement COVID-19 safety

protocol for food distribution

- Measure student's social and emotional well-being through the use of surveys
- Ensure school safety and inclusiveness by prioritizing creating a safe environment that supports and responds to the trauma students experienced due to the pandemic

No one is quite sure what the world will look like post-COVID. Whether virtual learning is here to stay is impossible to answer, but one thing is for sure. Charter schools are presented with the unique opportunity to create a reopening plan that prioritizes both student safety and academic success.

*This article was used with permission by Charter School Capital and was originally published on its blog on July 6, 2021. Charter School Capital provides Facilities Financing Solutions for charter schools through a long-term lease options that provides schools stable control and security in their buildings and a path to bond ownership without the significant expense. To learn more, visit <https://charterschoolcapital.org/>*

## Charter School Commission Welcomes Newest Commissioner

### Dr. Anthony Overton

**Anthony Overton** is the Chair and Professor of Biological and Environmental Sciences and the Graduate Director, Masters in Environmental Health, Policy, and Management, Howard College of Arts and Sciences at Samford University. He previously served as Professor and Chair of the Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences at Alabama A&M University and as Professor of Biology at East Carolina University from 2003-2014. Overton has published extensively in the field of fisheries and fisheries management and has served as principal investigator or co-investigator on ten different state and federal grant-funded research projects.

Degrees and Certifications  
Ph.D. (Marine Estuarine and Environmental Sciences),  
University of Maryland Eastern Shore

M.S. (Fisheries Management-Forest Resources), University of  
Georgia





A black and white photograph of three children of different ethnicities smiling. On the left is a young boy, in the center is a girl holding a tablet, and on the right is a girl with her hands clasped. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

# SAVE THE DATE

**ANNUAL CHARTER  
CONFERENCE**

**OCTOBER  
21-22, 2021**



**NEW SCHOOLS  
FOR ALABAMA**

# New Schools, New Opportunities for Success: **Magic City Acceptance Academy**

BY BRITTNEE EXUM

This feature is part of the National Alliance's 2021 [Back to School Month campaign](#).



**M**agic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) near Birmingham, Alabama will open its doors at the end of the month to more than 240 students in grades 6-12. The school's

mission encourages students to facilitate a community in which all learners are empowered to embrace education, achieve individual success, and take ownership of their future in a brave, LGBTQ-affirming learning environment.

Dr. Mike Wilson is MCAA's founding

principal and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Dr. Wilson's vision was to create a safe space for students where they can gain a strong sense of self and take ownership of their learning without being discriminated against for any reason.

The school is an extension of the Magic



City Acceptance Center, an inclusive space for youth ages 13-24. Early in the Center's existence, staff noticed high levels of anxiety in students, many of whom were being bullied throughout the school day. Dr. Wilson and others saw a need to establish an environment where students can fully embrace who they are.

MCAA is a trauma-informed space. The school helps families and students who have experienced trauma while providing resources on how to cope and navigate through their experiences. The school also places emphasis on restorative practices. Students learn that it's okay to make mistakes, how to turn challenges into learning experiences, focus on growth, and move forward on a better path.

Dr. Mike Wilson, founding principal of

Magic City Acceptance Academy

Project-based learning is at the center of MCAA where students have an opportunity to apply their knowledge from different content areas to different projects, where they would like to evoke change. Each student will have an individual learning plan and will have input in weekly goal setting. In addition, the school has partnered with Jeff State Community College which will allow students to earn college credit.

Dr. Wilson and his team have already met with several families and continue to build upon their relationships with their parents. Some of the parents with students enrolled even started a Facebook group for themselves. During the first few weeks of school, there will be an emphasis on

building relationships with the students and establishing an inclusive school culture. Dr. Wilson hopes that students, as a part of the MCAA, will know their value. MCAA is a free public charter school and is open to all students. For more information on how to enroll, visit their [website](#).

*This article is reprinted with permission by the [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#), the leading national organization committed to advancing innovative public schools. This article originally appeared on [The Charter Blog](#) on August 2, 2021. Brittnee Exum is the manager of communications and marketing at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.*

**"We are a school for all students who are feeling marginalized in their current learning space in any way."**

**– Dr. Mike Wilson, founding principal**





U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona has a message for schools across the country ahead of the new school year: Students need to be in classrooms.

"That's where students learn best," Cardona told NPR's A Martínez. "Schools are more than just places where students learn how to read and write — they're communities. They're like second families to our students."

On Monday, the U.S. Education Department will release a [roadmap for the return to school](#), encouraging districts to invest in social and emotional support for students and outlining ways to "accelerate academic achievement."

The roadmap also recommends that school systems follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's masking guidance for K-12 schools, which the agency revised last week, recommending "universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to schools, regardless of vaccination status."

**Mask mandate bans will make it hard for some schools to follow the roadmap**

Following those masking recommendations will be next to impossible for some districts where state legislators have stepped in. Texas, South Carolina and Iowa have all passed laws

**STUDENTS NEED TO BE IN CLASSROOMS, WITH MASKS, THIS FALL.' EDUCATION SECRETARY SAYS.**

BY CLARE LOMBARDO



banning schools from requiring students and staff to wear masks. Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds said last week that the CDC's recommendations wouldn't change that. In South Carolina, Gov. Henry McMaster tweeted that "personal responsibility" was the answer.

"I know that there are some folks making decisions that are less based on science and more on their ideology," Cardona said. "But at the end of the day, our educators, their job is to make sure our students are OK. We have to make sure that we're following mitigation strategies and creating safe learning environments for students."

It's on schools to communicate with hesitant families about the steps they're taking, Cardona said. If they're not taking the right steps, "what's going to happen is those families that don't feel comfortable will not be sending their children to school."

Cardona added that he knows some school leaders are "going to be running up against challenges from elected officials. And that's sad and that's unfortunate."

South Carolina's largest school district, Greenville County Schools, is strongly encouraging mask wearing — but district spokesperson Tim Waller said that's about all they can do to get students and staff to use face coverings. "The legislature has passed a number of provisos which have tied the hands of school districts in South Carolina," he said. If cases rise or high numbers of students and staff must quarantine, "It is my hope that elected officials who have placed these restrictions on public school districts in South Carolina will do the right thing and ease up on some of those restrictions."

Cardona said the department is having daily conversations with governors and elected officials about best practices — but "in those places where they're most

resistant, that's where we're seeing the most spread of COVID-19."

Meanwhile, public health leaders are warning Americans about the fast-spreading delta variant of the coronavirus. On Friday, the CDC published data showing that vaccinated people infected with the delta variant are just as likely as unvaccinated people to spread the virus to others.

"I don't have to tell you, the rising delta variant is creating some concern across the country," Cardona said. But he added, "We know that mask wearing and mitigation strategies allow [schools] to reopen safely." If increased spread of the virus prohibits schools from reopening in person, he said, "to me, that's a failure of adults."

Schools should "hit the reset button" this fall

The roadmap also recommends that school leaders encourage and provide access to vaccination for all eligible students and staff members.

Vaccines are currently approved for children 12 years old and up — so, regardless of how many students and families heed public health advice, elementary schools will be filled with unvaccinated students at the start of school. And while most middle school-age students are eligible for the vaccine, just 28% of the country's 12- to 15-year-olds were fully vaccinated as of Thursday, according to data from the CDC.

Vaccinated or not, Cardona said students need to be able to return to classrooms, where they have access to school meals and "where they can access the social and emotional support and mental health support professionals that are available in the school."

That social-emotional support is another area the department is encouraging schools to invest in with the pandemic relief funding provided by the federal

government. "I would be as concerned about the social and emotional well-being of our students as much as the academic loss," Cardona said.

Schools have an opportunity "to hit the reset button" — but he worried the one thing holding them back is "complacency."

"You know, before the pandemic, we had wide opportunity gaps in our country," Cardona said. "We had the cost of college preventing people from thinking about college because they didn't want to be buried in debt. We must do better."

For Cardona, that future might include some expanded remote learning options for students. "But post pandemic, I really feel like students need to be in a classroom learning with their peers, engaging with an educator in person."

That's what many school leaders are focused on right now. Still, in-person school is a complicated goal when, in many places, the desires of state leaders, public health officials and families all look different.

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# **New Federal Data Confirms Pandemic's Blow to K-12 Enrollment,**

With Drop of 1.5 Million Students;  
Pre-K Experiences 22 Percent Decline

BY KEVIN MAHNKEN

This article first appeared on [the74million.org](https://the74million.org) on June 25, 2021. Used with permission.



Data released Monday revealed a startling decline in the number of American children attending public schools: Total K-12 enrollment dropped by roughly 3 percent in 2020-21 compared with the previous school year.

The overall number obscures an even more dramatic drop among the youngest children. According to the data circulated by the National Center for Education Statistics — the federal agency charged with analyzing and disseminating information about schools and education — the combined number of preschool and kindergarten students decreased by 13 percent last year. All told, the decline is the largest since the turn of the century.

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said that in order to help students recover from the setbacks of the last year, educators needed to re-engage with families whose ties to schools had been frayed by COVID-related upheaval.

That work, Cardona added in a statement provided to The 74, “includes preparing to fully re-open schools for the fall, providing summer learning and enrichment opportunities, and investing in high-quality preschool, which we know is crucial for connecting children with necessary supports—particularly our youngest learners with developmental delays and disabilities.”

The NCES findings, based on figures collected from state education authorities, were characterized as preliminary, and final results will be made available next spring. While 49 states and multiple U.S. territories submitted all the relevant data, Illinois missed NCES’s deadline, and a handful of other jurisdictions did not provide statistics for pre-kindergarten.

Still, the overall picture of diminished enrollment confirms some of the impressions formed by education observers over the last year, as the disruptions triggered by COVID-19 and remote learning drove many families to switch to private schools or homeschooling. While final numbers are yet to be released, it is believed that [thousands of high schoolers](#) may have dropped out of school since their classrooms were shuttered last spring.

A 3 percent decline, measured against a national public school population of 51.1 million during the 2019-20 school year, amounts to a drop of roughly 1.5 million pupils.

While the softening in enrollment was seen in every area of the country, NCES’s figures show that it was felt much more severely in certain states than others. Twenty-nine states lost between 1 and 3 percent of their students year over year; Utah and South Dakota, along with the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and American Samoa, saw decreases of less than 1 percent; the rest of the country lost more than 3 percent — including Vermont, Mississippi, and Puerto Rico, which each saw declines of more than 5 percent.

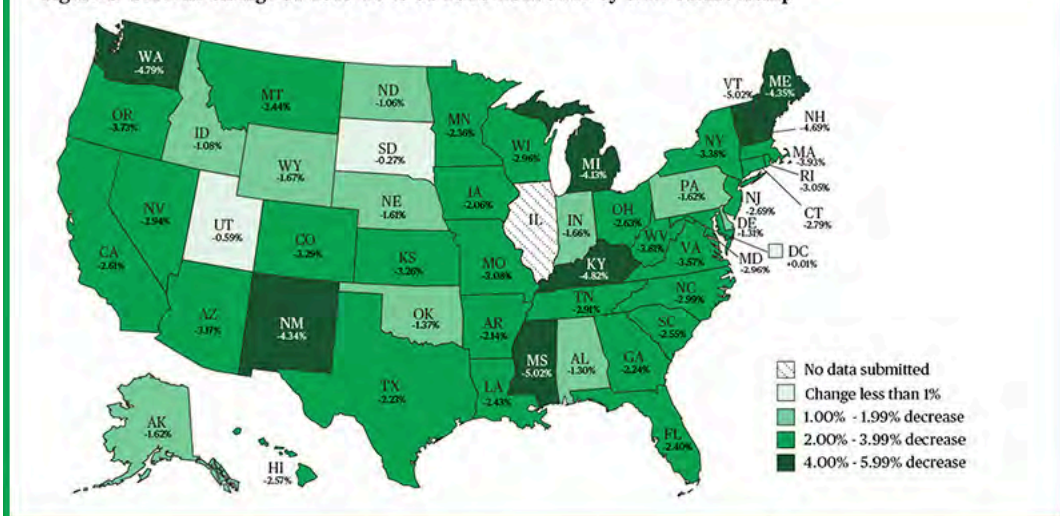
Ross Santy, the agency’s associate commissioner for administrative data, highlighted the rarity of American

results confirm [prior media reporting](#), which indicated that many families were choosing to keep their young children home longer than expected rather than sign up for virtual learning in the early school years.

Robin Lake, director of the nonpartisan research organization Center on Reinventing Public Education, said that the fall in K-12 enrollment, while somewhat predictable, still left questions about whether the families who have exited school systems over the last 16 months would return by September. The number of families choosing to homeschool their children [reportedly doubled](#) during the past school year, while applications to both virtual and brick-and-mortar charter schools has also spiked in many areas.

For kids making their way back to school, or enrolling for the first time

**Figure 1. Percent Change SY 2019-20 to SY 2020-21 in State by State Membership**



classrooms losing students.

“K-12 enrollment in our nation’s public schools has been slowly increasing almost every year since the start of this century,” Santy said in a statement. “Before this year, in the few recent years where we have seen enrollment decreases, they have been small changes representing less than 1 percent of total enrollment.”

Shrunk enrollment was also concentrated in specific age bands. The number of high schoolers fell by just .4 percent, while elementary and middle schoolers accounted for a 3 percent decrease. By contrast, enrollment of kindergarteners declined by three times as much, while the pre-K population plunged by an astonishing 22 percent. Those

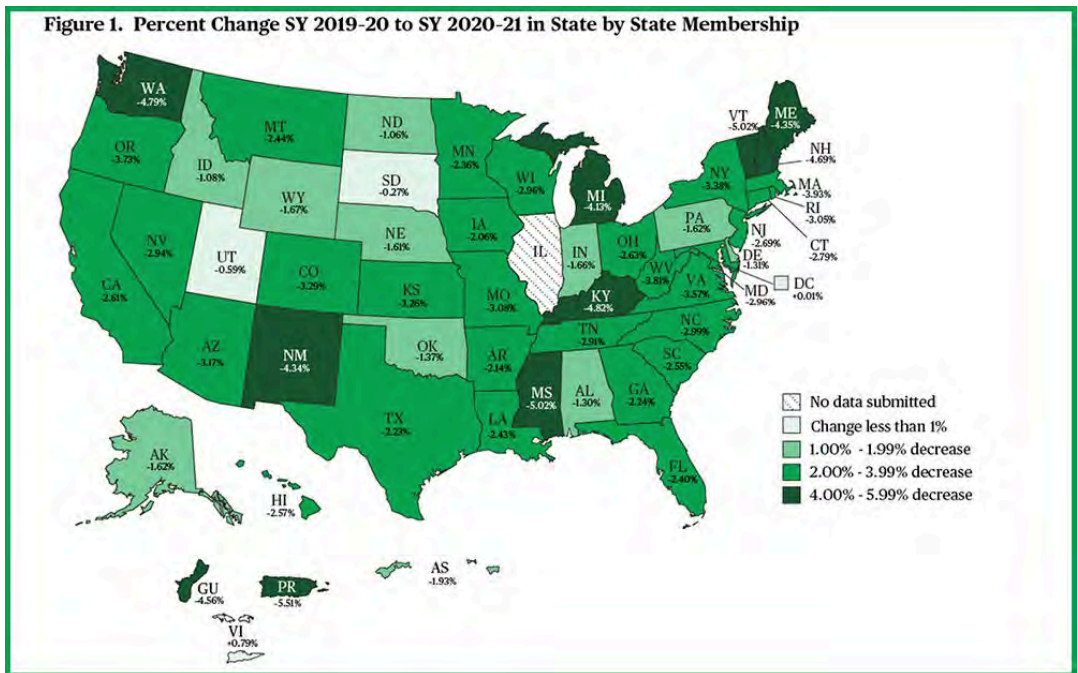
after a “redshirt” year, it would be vital to make up for the missed opportunities to learn and interact with their peers, Lake remarked.

“Not only have a lot of these kids not been in school, they haven’t been in normal play situations,” she said. “They’re coming in having to learn how to engage with other kids appropriately, and so having supports in place to help navigate those realities will be important.”

Many districts now expect to see a “[kindergarten surge](#)” in the fall, as millions of children from the ages of 4-6 enroll in school for the first time. Lake said that districts would have to be prepared to meet the rush of young kids with the necessary staff, classroom space, and

teaching resources.

“These kids are owed a lot in terms of the time they’ve missed learning things, playing with other kids, all of that stuff. So we’re encouraging school districts to put those kinds of supports in place this summer and try to reach as many kids as possible to address some of those foundational skills.”



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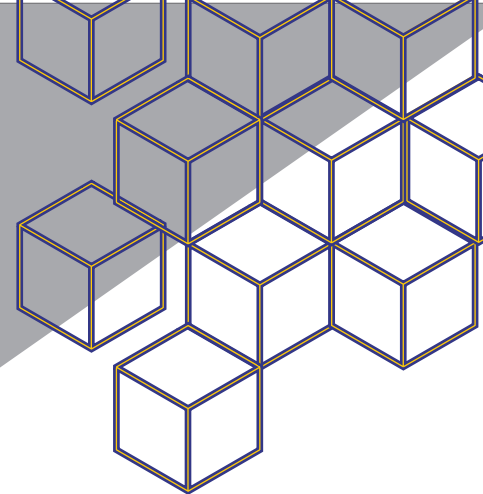
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