

# CHARTER CONNECT

MAGAZINE

MAY 2021

*Celebrating*  
**TEACHERS**  
Pg. 10

**EMPOWER  
COMMUNITY  
CHARTER SCHOOL  
APPROVED FOR  
2022**

**MEET  
DARREN  
RAMALHO  
OF BREAKTHROUGH  
CHARTER SCHOOL**



**NEW SCHOOLS  
FOR ALABAMA**

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# CHARTER CONNECT

MAY 2021

## MAGAZINE

## OUR TEAM



**Tyler Barnett, Executive Director**  
[tyler@newschoolsforalabama.org](mailto:tyler@newschoolsforalabama.org)

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**  
[candie@newschoolsforalabama.org](mailto:candie@newschoolsforalabama.org)

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**  
[chris@newschoolsforalabama.org](mailto:chris@newschoolsforalabama.org)

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

Two 20th St N, Suite 1315,  
Birmingham, AL 35203

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



# MAGIC CITY ACCEPTANCE ACADEMY

## About Magic City:

The Magic City Acceptance Academy facilitates 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.

## About our Founder:

Michael Wilson was with the Birmingham City Schools from 1992 until his retirement in November of 2019. He earned his bachelor's degree from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Dr. Wilson completed his Masters and Ed.S. in special education from The University of Alabama, Birmingham, as well as an Ed.S. in Educational Administration from the University of Montevallo. In 2003 he was awarded a Ph.D. in Instructional Leadership from the University of Alabama.

Dr. Wilson has served as a special education teacher, assistant principal and has had the opportunity to lead two elementary schools within the Birmingham City School System. First as principal at Whatley Elementary and now principal at Glen Iris Elementary which has been under his leadership for 14 years. During his first year as principal at Whatley Elementary, his school was one of 6 schools across the state to move from Alert III status to Academic Clear. Whatley was converted successfully from a K-5 to a K-8 school in 2003. He also oversaw the first Kaboom playground construction in the district at Whatley Elementary and the last at Glen Iris. Dr. Wilson left Whatley in 2006 with 100% of their accountability goals reached.

Dr. Wilson worked tirelessly to ensure that the curriculum implemented is one that is rigorous and relevant in order to meet the diverse needs of the over 700 students at Glen Iris. He empowered teachers to utilize an integrated approach to learning thereby improving the achievement of all students. This is accomplished by having the literacy standards as the driving force across all curriculum areas. Another avenue he has instituted in order to ensure continuous learning for teachers and students is a partnership with the UAB Curriculum and Instruction Department. This partnership provides strategic professional development for teachers during and after school. Under his supervision Glen Iris was awarded two prestigious academic achievement awards: Bronze winner of National Center for Urban Transformation and CLAS Banner School.



**Michael Wilson,  
Founding Principal**

Charter  
Spotlight



Congratulations to Gerniah Scott, 2021 [ACCEL Day & Evening Academy](#) Senior Scholar, for her induction into the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society at Bishop State Community College. She was among six high school Dual Enrollment students inducted alongside 90 Bishop State college students.



BREAKTHROUGH CHARTER SCHOOL FOUNDING HEAD OF SCHOOL

## *Meet* **DARREN RAMALHO**

**Darren is a fierce advocate for students and firmly believes education has the power to cultivate success.**

Originally from California, Darren graduated from UCLA in 2014, double majoring in English and Political Science. He dedicated his undergraduate career to improving the academic experience for students at UCLA, being elected Academic Affairs Commissioner in 2014. Darren also worked for three years at the UCLA Lab School, a K-6 school on UCLA's campus, as a teaching assistant. He worked as a student recruiter for four years for UCLA Undergraduate Admission, being promoted as a student coordinator in his

third year of undergraduate studies.

Darren moved to Marion, Alabama, in 2014 as a Teach For America corps member, working for six years in the Perry County Schools system. While working in the traditional public school system, he served as a department chairperson and class advisor.

He recently earned his master's degree in Public School Building Leadership from Teachers College at Columbia University, one of the highest ranking principal preparation programs in the country. As an active member of the

community, Darren also serves on the C.H.O.I.C.E. Board of Directors in Uniontown, Alabama, working to expand academic, athletic, and workforce development opportunities. Darren is currently participating in the New Schools For Alabama School Founders fellowship, which being hosted by Citizens of the World Charter Schools.



## 30 UNDER 30 CHANGEMAKERS AWARD

DARREN IS A 2021 RECIPIENT OF  
THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR  
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS'  
[30 UNDER 30 CHANGEMAKERS  
AWARD!!](#)



*Groundbreaking Event for Breakthrough Charter School*

**Candie:** Okay, so, first just give me a general idea of who you are.

**Darren:** I think it's important to start my response by giving some context as to how I've evolved into the person I have become/am becoming. I am a California native, growing up in a rural community in California's central valley. I grew up in a single parent household for a good portion of my childhood, watching my mother go back to college to become a teacher, which deeply influenced my belief in the importance of education. After graduating from a Title I high school, I attended UCLA, double majoring in English and Political Science. I moved to Alabama in 2014 as a Teach For America corps member, and I fell in love with Perry County. I taught high school English and history for six years before beginning my work with Breakthrough Charter School. I recently graduated with my master's degree in School Organization and Leadership from Teachers College, Columbia University.

**Candie:** Tell me a little bit about the charter school that you are going to head up, Breakthrough Charter School and your educational philosophy.

**Darren:** Breakthrough Charter School was an idea started by families in the Perry County community. To me, that's the most compelling piece of Breakthrough's founding. Families and community members were frustrated with the status quo and wanted to find a way to bring a diverse, high-quality public option to the area. Breakthrough will be the second rural charter school to open in the state of

“  
Giving students  
opportunities was my  
purpose as a teacher, and  
it continues to be my  
purpose as a school  
leader.”



*Family Game Night*

Alabama. We are committed to providing students an educational opportunity rooted in experience through project-based learning, service-learning, and social emotional learning. Our core values are scholarship, diversity, leadership, and community. Students will be able to see these core values lived out every single day in our building.

**Candie:** Could you elaborate on what brings you to this work? Why start a school?

**Darren:** I graduated from a Title I high school in California's central valley, and those limitations definitely fueled my desire to improve educational opportunities. I worked in higher education policy at UCLA as a student admissions officer and was elected to the undergraduate student government council as the academic affairs commissioner. Education has always been a deep part of my being. I never intended to start a school—that was never in the plan, but when families approached me and wanted me to get involved, they reminded me that students were the reason I became and stayed an educator for so long. Giving students opportunities was my purpose as a

teacher, and it continues to be my purpose as a school leader.

**Candie: What has been the most challenging part of this process?**

Darren: I think the most challenging part comes with educating people as to what charter schools are and how they can positively impact education. There are many false/misleading narratives circulating about charter schools in the United States. I am a firm believer that school choice has the power to transform communities, and that is exactly what we are trying to do at Breakthrough.

**Candie: What has been your experience in New School's for Alabama's Founder's Program? How has it helped you prepare for the opening of Breakthrough?**

Darren: New Schools for Alabama has been instrumental in bringing Breakthrough to fruition. The technical support we received (and continue to receive) helped our team write a high-quality charter application. We received the highest external evaluation score during that application cycle. My fellowship with Citizens of the World Charter Schools has deepened my leadership capacity and equipped me with a toolkit that will play a critical role in leading a diverse-by-design charter school.

**Candie: What are your hopes and dreams for the future students in your school?**

Darren: I want my students to leave Breakthrough feeling prepared to pursue their passions, whether it be postsecondary education or a career. I want students to reflect on their time at Breakthrough Charter School and think fondly on the relationships they built and the educational experience they receive. I hope some of our students stay in the community or return to the community with expertise that will help Perry County and the Black Belt region thrive.

**Candie: How will you know when you're successful?**

Darren: Students, families, and community members will see the lasting impact through how our students engage, learn, and develop. This will not necessarily be immediate, but I do believe we will see evidence of transformation early in our development. Of course, we will look at data to see what our students decide to do, but that's only one piece of a much larger puzzle.

**Candie: What is your approach to parents and**

**community involvement? What will that look like?**

Darren: My favorite part of 2021 has been the opportunity to meet families and their children at in-person programming events. We have done events in the community and at our site, and these events would not have been possible without the support of local businesses. Our families are involved with so many different pieces of Breakthrough. Every week, our families receive a newsletter where they are informed of current events at Breakthrough and asked for input on issues including mascot selection, extracurricular activities, and more. It's important to connect with diverse community members and to help everyone understand who we are, our purpose, and how we plan to support the community.

**Candie: Who has been your greatest cheerleader through all this?**

Darren: Goodness, there have been so many! I have an incredibly supportive board of directors, family, and circle of friends. Specifically, my mother has been an incredible cheerleader. She's a school leader in California, so her and I will often discuss what effective school leadership looks like for all students.

**Candie: What was the best piece of advice you've ever gotten?**

Darren: I don't know if this counts as advice, but it's a truth I've held onto for the past couple of years: "Thieves don't break into empty houses." There will always be people with something negative to say about you or the work you are doing. This has been very true for me over the past two years. However, despite how challenging these situations might be, there's purpose in the struggle, and God equips us with the experiences and networks of people to make us strong through adversity.

**Candie: What do you like to do for fun, when you aren't knee deep in opening a school? Lol**

Darren: Haha! I've been working really hard to find a healthy work-life balance, which I believe is critical to maintaining my passion and dedication to work. Some weeks are better than others, but I like to think I'm improving as more time passes. I adopted my pup, Jack, during the pandemic, so I enjoy spending plenty of time with him. I love to travel and spend time with friends. I love eating good food, drinking most coffee beverages, and spending some time binge-watching the latest Netflix series. I also recently started spending more time in the gym, reigniting my love for cardio workouts!

**Candie: One last fun question, if you could go back and give advice to your teenage self, what would you say?**

Darren: Ah, that's a great question. I would tell my teenage self not to worry or stress about issues or situations outside of your control. God has a purpose and a plan, and His plan will be so different than what you might think, but everything will work out exactly as it should! Sometimes, I need to remind my adult self of this truth, too.

**Candie: Thanks so much for your time! Wishing you all the best and success with Breakthrough Charter School!**







# ***Alabama Public Charter School Commission Approves***

"Empower Community School influences change in our community by forging collaboration between a diverse group of scholars, educators, families, and partners to educate the next generation of community leaders and advocates. Our personalized approach to learning supports the academic, social, and emotional development of each scholar and prepares them to excel in every endeavor with the courage and ability to advocate for themselves and the community." -[empoweral.org](https://empoweral.org)



**Empower Community  
School - Fall, 2022**  
Bessemer, AL

**A special education teacher who taught a 14-year-old with Down Syndrome to read. Remotely and during the pandemic.**

**An art teacher who helped a student come to terms with her father's death.**

**A second grade teacher who moved out of her home so she could educate kids in person.**

This article first appeared on [the74million.org](https://the74million.org) on May 6, 2021. Used with permission.

# CELEBRATING TEACHERS

BY LAURA FAY



## HANNAH LAND

*Nominated by parent Krystal Gurganus  
Special Education, Spartanburg 7 School District  
Spartanburg, South Carolina*

As the mother of a teen with Down Syndrome, Krystal Gurganus has seen her son Landon face his share of challenges. So it came as a shock when special education teacher Hannah Land taught Landon to read this year – remotely. In the middle of a pandemic.

“I’ve never heard my child read before. And he’s 14 years old,” said Gurganus. “So this was in that moment when I was sitting beside him on a computer, and I hear him read an actual story for the very first time, that was not only emotional, but it was mind-blowing that this teacher was able to engage my child through a screen and to get him to do that

when we’ve never been able to do that.”

Land was also able to teach Landon to add and subtract this year, surpassing his goal of simply being able to identify numbers.

That was “one of those moments of ‘Holy moly’ ... he is adding and subtracting. Not only identifying his numbers, but she’s taught him how to do something I never thought he would be capable of,” Gurganus said.

“She’s just kind,” she added. “She’s able to break that [communication] barrier down and still get to know her kids.”



## SHEBERIA WOLFE

*Nominated by parent Sherrie Chaney  
Third grade, Glen Oaks Elementary*

When Sheberia Wolfe saw that Brittney Chaney was struggling to adjust to virtual learning last spring, the teacher wasted no time in doing what she needed to do. “She actually came to pick my daughter up, took her and tutored her for a couple of hours, brought her back home,” said Brittney’s mom Sherrie.

Brittney, 9, has been getting straight As all year and also joined a dance program and a mentoring program Wolfe organized outside of school.



## MICHELLE FAIN

*Nominated by parent Shnia Davis  
Fourth grade, KIPP One Primary  
Chicago, Illinois*

When Michalle Fain learned her student Julius and his siblings were having trouble keeping up with their online classes because they didn’t have enough devices, she used her own money to purchase two tablets for the family.

Fain has always been “that teacher that just goes above and beyond,” said Julius’s mother Shnia Davis. Fain got a green screen to enhance her Zoom lessons, and “the way that she taught was... almost like the kids were watching a show,” Davis said. When she wasn’t teaching or making educational TikTok videos, Fain checked in with the family often to make sure they were getting the school lunches and helped replace Julius’s computer when it broke.

“She really has a passion and a heart for these kids,” Davis said.

**Every year teachers touch countless students' lives with inspiring lessons, heartfelt advice and ice cream parties.**

**To mark Teacher Appreciation Week, The 74 talked to parents and students around the country about the educators who have made a difference for them over the past year.**



## SHAMEEM PATEL

*Nominated by parent  
Stephanie Reyna  
Second grade, KIPP Destiny  
Elementary School  
Dallas, Texas*

When her school resumed in-person classes last fall, second grade teacher Shameem Patel took a drastic step so she could be there for her students.

Patel moved out of the house she shares with her mother-in-law and husband into an apartment so she could see her students without putting the older woman at risk for COVID-19.

Since then she's been living away from her family and teaching a class of 45 students — 11 in person and 34 at home.

Patel is like "one of those famous teachers that you see on Facebook and television" and think, this is the kind of teacher every kid should have, said Stephanie Reyna, whose daughter Arianna is in Patel's class. "Arianna is the middle child. She feels like she doesn't get that attention from me," Reyna said. "But Ms. Patel gave her that attention and she gave her that time. And she made her feel special... So I liked that she was helping me make Arianna feel that much better."



## JULIA SATTERTHWAITE

*Nominated by Oishee Misra  
Journalism, Monta Vista High  
School  
Cupertino, California*

When student Oishee Misra had to meet with the parents of a student who died to write his obituary for the student magazine, she asked her journalism advisor Julia Satterthwaite for guidance.

Satterthwaite told her, "Don't worry, you're a great reporter, you're going to do great. I know that you know how to approach this situation, with tact and with grace," Misra recalled. The teacher also suggested some questions to ask and offered tips for the conversation.

"That validation was really reassuring to hear, just because I was so nervous," Misra said.

"I feel really lucky to have had [Satterthwaite] for all four years of high school, and I really feel like I wouldn't be the person that I am today without all the love and support and guidance that she's given me," Misra said.

"She really has a passion and a heart for these kids," Davis said.



## RICHARD WIEDA

*Nominated by Syfur Rahman  
English, The High School of  
Fashion Industries  
New York, New York*

When the pandemic first hit New York City last spring, high school senior Syfur Rahman faced a difficult situation: one of his close friends lost a parent to COVID-19, and Rahman wasn't sure how to show his friend he cared.

His school was closed for spring break, but Rahman emailed his teacher Richard Wieda and got a response right away. Wieda shared his phone number, so Rahman called.

"We talked about it — how to address the students' problem and how to get back to him and how to show him that I care. And then he gave me advice. ... [He said] give him your phone number and always have his back, try to support him [even though] ... some people might not feel comfortable sharing out during tough times," Rahman recalled. "I always go back to that instance, where [Wieda told me], try to take care of people you really care about and follow up with them."



# CHARTER SCHOOLS

## TOP RANKED AMONG 2021 BEST HIGH SCHOOLS

BY MELINDA TOLLIVER

Charter schools outperform once again! U.S. News & World Report released the [2021 Best High Schools](#) ranking including data on nearly 24,000 public high schools.

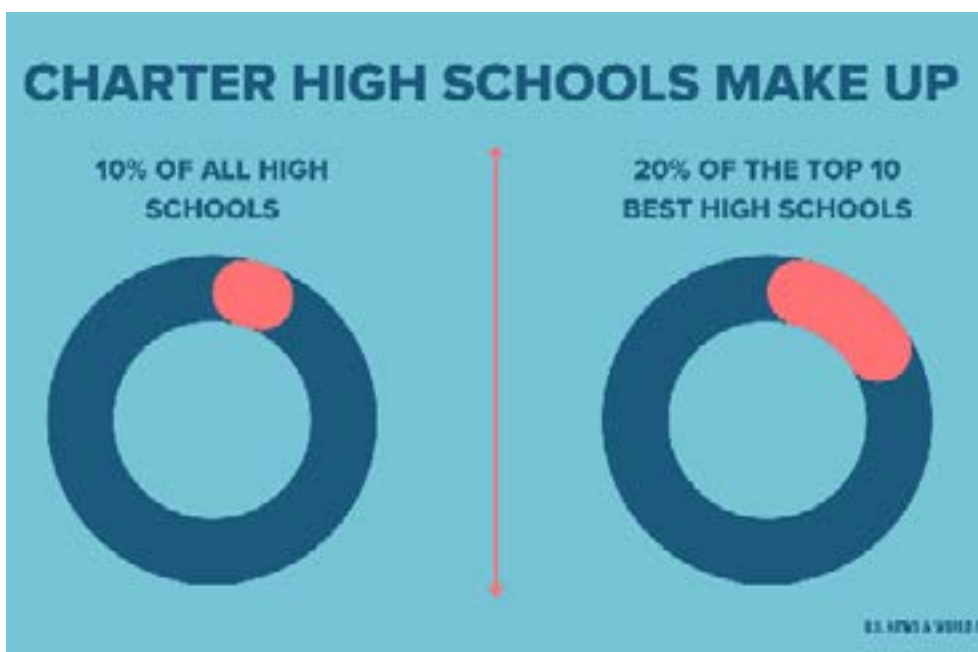
As always, charter schools showed up and outperformed again this year.

Charter schools only make up 10% of all public schools included in the ranking,

but they make up 24% of the top 100 best high schools. Charter schools from Arizona, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Texas were represented on the top 100.

Let's take a look at the breakdown:

### Top 10 of 2021 Best High Schools



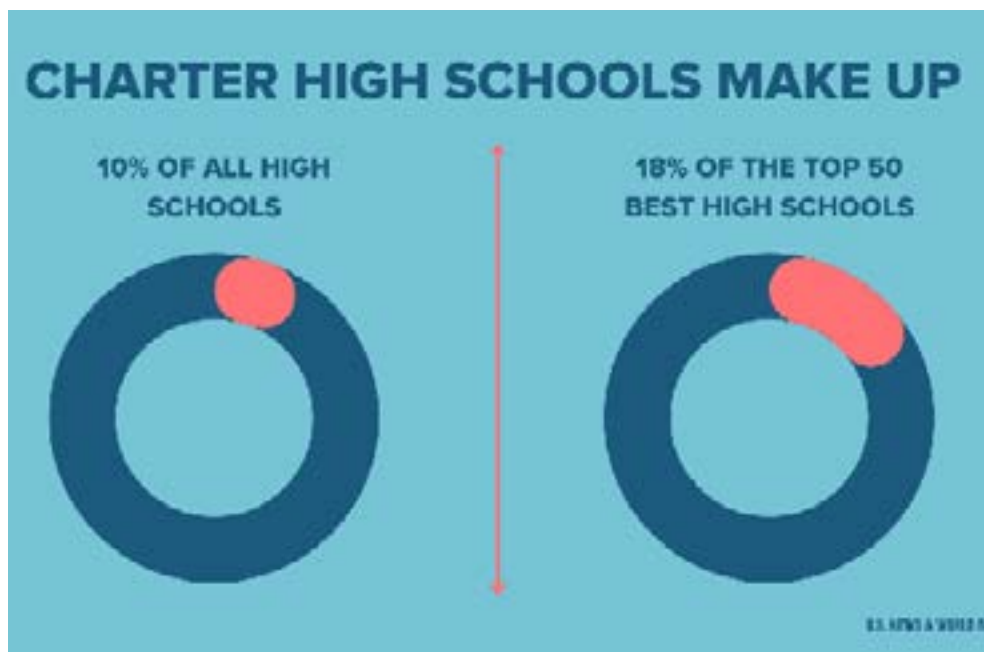
In the top 10 of over 17,000 top ranked public high schools, there were two charter schools in the top 10:

BASIS Chandler in Arizona (#8)  
Signature School in Indiana (#10).

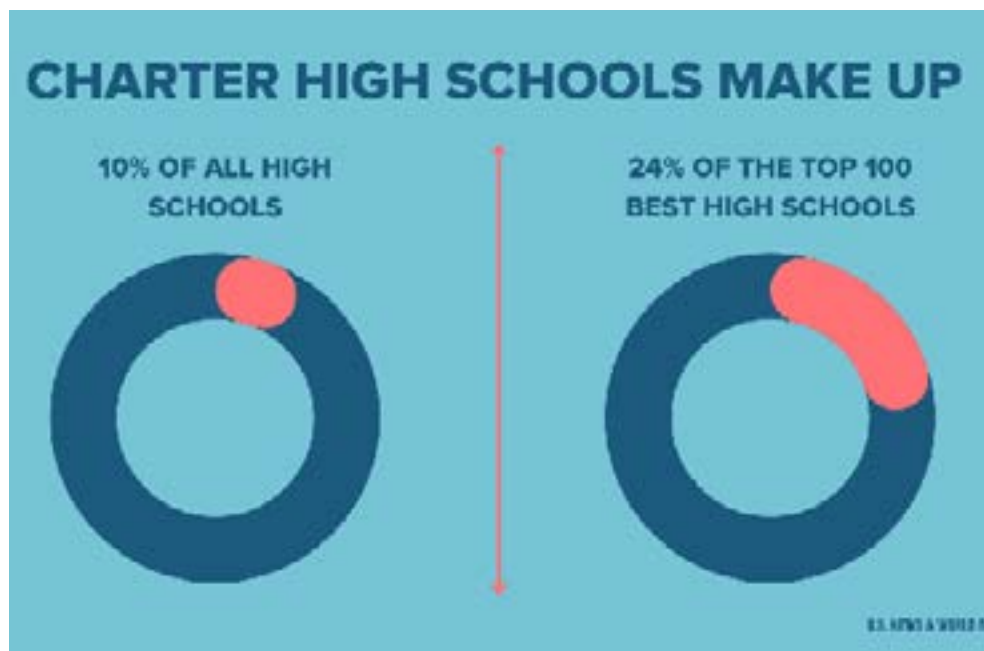
## Top 50 of 2021 Best High Schools

In the top 50 ranked public school schools, seven more charter schools join the list:

BASIS Oro Valley in Arizona (#23)  
BASIS Peoria in Arizona (#33)  
BASIS Scottsdale in Arizona (#38)  
Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School in Massachusetts (#40)  
BASIS Ahwatukee in Arizona (#45)  
BASIS Tucson North in Arizona (#47)  
Haas Hall Academy in Arkansas (#50)



## Top 100 of 2021 Best High Schools



BASIS Phoenix in Arizona (#52)  
BASIS Mesa in Arizona (#55)  
Archimedean Upper Conservatory Charter School in Florida (#63)  
Benjamin Franklin High School in Louisiana (#64)  
IDEA Frontier College Preparatory in Texas (#68)  
Charter School of Wilmington in Delaware (#74)  
Preuss School UCSD in California (#76)  
Haas Hall Academy Bentonville in Arkansas (#80)  
Albuquerque Institute of Math and Science in New Mexico (#82)  
International Studies Charter High School in Florida (#85)  
University High School (Fresno) in California (#86)  
Advanced Math and Science Academy Charter School in Massachusetts (#93)  
Pacific Collegiate Charter in California (#95)  
Math and Science Academy in Minnesota (#99)  
Raleigh Charter High School in North Carolina (#100)

Congratulations to all the schools in the 2021 Best High Schools ranking! Special mention to these 24 outstanding charter high schools facilitating student success.

*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 April 27, 2021. Melinda Tolliver is the senior manager of digital strategy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.*



## Should **YOUR** Charter School Host a Summer School Program?

BY RYAN ELDRIDGE

**A**fter a full year of mid-pandemic learning, a major topic among educators is bridging the education and social gap for students. As such, administrators plan to increase summer school in districts and charter schools across the country.

With the recently passed \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act and the \$4.6 billion for Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Grants in California, school leaders may finally have resources to support struggling students with summer programs.

According to The Washington Post:

“Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said schools need to be creative and employ a ‘sense of urgency’ to summer programming. ‘The summer learning experiences we’re talking about now really need to be better than they ever were in the past,’ he said in a call with reporters earlier this month. Cardona also said districts will need to work with local

community groups and organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs of America to create additional learning opportunities and experiences for children.”

There’s no question: the need is there. But how do charter schools cover the expense?

While schools have struggled to cover the expense of summer school sources, they may now be able to afford the program thanks to additional National and State funding options. In the American Rescue Plan, Congress set aside \$1.2 billion that states, districts, and schools must use to build successful summer programs.

Beyond supporting the student needs and accessing incremental funding, there are long-term benefits for the charter schools that deploy a summer school program.

While enrollment numbers are down (by about 155,000 students) and hit record lows across the state, parents are putting off their enrollment decisions

longer than ever. Summer school provides an incredible opportunity to serve the community, support students, and give an introduction to your school that – done well – will encourage that family to stay with your school long term. While parents would default to the local district school in years past, a summer school program creates the soft entry into your curriculum to show that family and those in their community what alternative options are available to their student.

*This article was posted with permission by Charter School Capital and was originally published on its blog on April 28, 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/>*



# breaking news

[ACCEL Day & Evening Academy](#) announces the launch of their middle school, ACCEL Preparatory Academy, which will serve grades 6 and 7 beginning in the 2021-2022 academic year. ACCEL will also expand to a new location to serve both the middle school and high school. Click the photo below to watch Dr. Jeremiah Newell discuss the exciting news with Fox 10 News, Mobile.



# CHARTER HEROES

Celebrating Alabama Charter School Champions



## [i3 ACADEMY, BIRMINGHAM, AL](#)

This is the amazing child nutrition staff at i3 Academy! i3 contracts with Christian Catering for their food needs, and they are fantastic. They provide a delicious and nutritious breakfast and lunch each day. They also keep food allergies in mind as necessary. On top of all of that, they decorate for holidays, and move through the school with smiling eyes (thanks to masks, we know the smiles are under there though).

Thank you for all that you do to keep the students and staff fueled up and ready to learn!



# CHARTER HAPPENINGS



Registration is open for new and returning students. Parents, please log in to SchoolMint to upload your child's documents. The deadline is May 18th. If you need any assistance, please contact Lori Sills at [lsills@i3Academy.org](mailto:lsills@i3Academy.org).



Legacy Prep is hiring! [legacyprepal.org/careers](https://legacyprepal.org/careers)



LIFE Academy is hiring! <https://lifeacademyal.com/>



University Charter School is hiring! [www.universitycharterschool.org](http://www.universitycharterschool.org)



New Schools for Alabama is a 501(c)3 nonprofit, public charity organization created to serve kids in Alabama. The organization supports the growth of excellent public charter schools in Alabama to ensure that every child has access to a quality public education. For more information go to [www.newschoolsforalabama.org](http://www.newschoolsforalabama.org)

**Absolutely For  
Our Kids!**