

# charterconnect

MAGAZINE

OCTOBER, 2026

A DECADE OF  
MOMENTUM  
FOR ALABAMA PUBLIC  
CHARTERS

PARENT  
VOICE  
COHORT

05

REIMAGINING

*what's*  
POSSIBLE

PG. 18



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**NEW SCHOOLS  
FOR ALABAMA**



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Keep in **touch.**





# from the editor.

## The Story Is Still Being Written

Ten years can change a lot.

A decade ago, public charter schools in Alabama existed only as an idea made possible by a new law. Today, thousands of students walk through the doors of public charter schools across our state each morning, families are asking for more options, new school models are taking shape, and people beyond Alabama are paying attention to what's being built here.

That makes this an especially meaningful moment to tell the stories in this issue of Charter Connect.

We're seeing growth, certainly. Alabama now has 19 public charter schools serving nearly 9,000 students, while more than 2,000 students remain on charter school waitlists. We're also seeing encouraging academic results, with a number of charter schools outperforming their local districts in one or more tested subjects.

Yet numbers are only part of this story.

What stands out to me throughout these pages is the role of people.



Parents are finding their voices and learning that their experiences belong in conversations about education. Our fifth Parent Voice Fellowship cohort began this summer with parents representing charter school communities from across the state, each bringing a different story, perspective and hope for Alabama's children.

Future school leaders are listening before they build. In Mobile, Jhory Buskey is developing Reimagine Education Academy with the belief that community input should be visible in the school families ultimately receive, and families have already helped shape decisions about everything from the school's grade configuration to the skills and supports they want for

their children.

Historic partnerships are also creating possibilities that would have been difficult to imagine just a few years ago. Alabama is now home to the first HBCU-charter school partnerships in our state's history, connecting K-12 students with institutions whose histories, leadership and community relationships run generations deep.

That's what makes this moment feel different.

The story is no longer simply that Alabama has charter schools. The story is that communities are beginning to see what can happen when educators have room to innovate, parents have meaningful opportunities to participate, local leaders are trusted to lead, and students have access to public schools designed with their needs and futures in mind.

There's still much work ahead. Growth must be thoughtful, and quality must remain non-negotiable. Funding and facilities challenges haven't disappeared, and every new school carries the responsibility of delivering on the promises made to families.

Still, there's good reason to recognize how far we've come while keeping our eyes on where we're going.

Perhaps that's what I hope you take from this issue most of all: momentum matters, but what we do with it matters even more.

The next decade of Alabama's charter school story is already being written. May we continue writing it alongside the families, educators, leaders and communities it's meant to serve.

Warm regards,

*Candie Mitchell-Price*  
MACE, MPR

Candie A. Mitchell-Price, MACE, MPR, Editor



# CHARTER SPOTLIGHT

A graphic of a spotlight shining down on a stage, with a blue and yellow light effect.

## ALABAMA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

A yellow arrow pointing from the 'ALABAMA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS' box towards the 'WHAT THE DATA SHOWS' box.

### WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

#### 2026 ELA RESULTS SHOW ENCOURAGING SIGNS

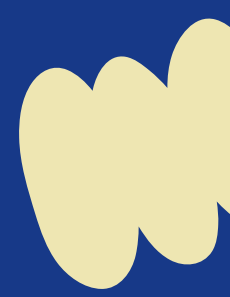
Several Alabama **public charter schools** posted ELA proficiency rates above their local district averages.

Progress is worth recognizing,  
and **the work continues.**

Source: 2026 ACAP/ACT Proficiency Results

 **NEW SCHOOLS  
FOR ALABAMA**  
newschoolsforalabama.org

The newly released 2026 assessment results give us real reasons to be encouraged in ELA, and they also remind us that student performance is never a finished story. Across Alabama's public charter sector, several schools posted ELA proficiency rates above their local district averages, including schools serving communities where students have historically faced significant barriers to academic success. There is more work to do, but we celebrate this accomplishment! CONGRATULATIONS!!!!

A yellow cloud-like graphic on the right side of the page.

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

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

A white mouse cursor icon pointing towards the URL.





# QUICK QUESTION?

Can **any student** attend a public charter school?

**Yes.**

Public charter schools are open to **all students** and do not use test scores as a condition of enrollment.

Follow us for more  
charter facts



# Alabama's Charter School Movement is **hitting** it's **stride**.

BY TYLER BARNETT

Ten years ago, public charter schools in Alabama existed only on paper. Today, they are becoming an increasingly important part of our state's public education landscape—and the momentum surrounding the movement has never been stronger.

During the 2025-26 school year, Alabama was home to 19 public charter schools serving nearly 9,000 students, representing remarkable growth from the 250 students who attended Alabama's first charter school during the 2017-18 school year. With several additional schools already approved or in development, the sector is poised to surpass 10,000 students and continue expanding into new communities across the state.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the strength of Alabama's charter movement, though, is not how many students currently attend charter schools, it is how many more families are asking for them.

More than 2,000 Alabama students remain on charter school waitlists. In Birmingham, Mobile, Montgomery, the Black Belt and communities throughout the state, parents are seeking additional public school options – schools that may be smaller, safer, closer to home or simply offer an educational model that better fits their child.

This demand has helped produce one of the most diverse collections of charter schools anywhere in the country. Alabama families can now choose from STEM and college-preparatory schools, a performing arts academy, a classical school, an aviation-focused high school, laboratory schools connected to universities and schools

intentionally designed to serve students and communities whose needs have historically gone unmet. Increasingly, those schools are producing results.

The latest 2025-26 state assessment results provide another encouraging sign. Among Alabama charter schools with comparable ACAP data, a majority outperformed their local school district in English language arts, and nearly half did so in science. Nine of the 15 charter schools with available results outperformed their district in at least one tested subject, seven did so in at least two subjects, and three charter schools—i3 Academy, Breakthrough Charter School, and University Charter School, outperformed their local district in English language arts, math, and science.

Some of the individual results are particularly striking. At University Charter School in Sumter County, 59% of students scored proficient in English language arts compared with 29% across the local district. In math, the school posted 32% proficiency compared with 9% districtwide, and in science, 50% of students were proficient compared with just 18% in the district.

In Birmingham, i3 Academy also exceeded Birmingham City Schools in every tested subject, including 46% proficiency in English language arts compared with 38% districtwide and 35% proficiency in science compared with 21%, while in Perry County, Breakthrough Charter School outperformed the district in English language arts, math, and science.

No single year of test results tells the whole story, and Alabama's charter sector remains young, but taken together, these results add to

a growing body of evidence that many of the state's charter schools are delivering strong outcomes, often while serving historically underserved students and operating with substantially fewer dollars per pupil than their district counterparts.

Alabama is also beginning to attract national attention for what is being built here.

Our state was selected as the pilot state for a national initiative designed to create charter schools in partnership with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and that work is already taking shape through I Dream Big Academy at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, an example of how charter school flexibility can connect K-12 education with some of Alabama's most important institutions and create entirely new opportunities for students.

This national attention has also translated into significant philanthropic investment. Some of the country's most prominent education philanthropies, including Bloomberg Philanthropies, City Fund, the Walton Family Foundation, the Louis Calder Foundation, Charter School Growth Fund, and NewSchools Venture Fund, have invested in Alabama's charter school movement and the organizations helping to build it.

For a state that did not have a single charter school less than a decade ago, that level of national investment is significant. It reflects growing confidence that Alabama is building something worth supporting: a thoughtful, quality-focused charter sector capable of creating excellent new public schools, developing strong education leaders, and expanding opportunity for students who have historically had too few choices.

While that national recognition matters





*Legacy Prep scholars.*

deeply, the most important story is still happening much closer to home.

It is happening when a parent who once believed there were no good options nearby finds a school where her child feels safe and known. It is happening when a student discovers aviation, performing arts, entrepreneurship or another passion that makes school meaningful. It is happening when communities that have watched schools close are empowered to imagine and build something new.

Alabama's charter school movement is still young. Charter schools educate only a small fraction of the state's public school students, and significant challenges remain—from inequitable funding and limited access to facilities to the need for more high-quality schools in more communities.

A decade into this experiment, though, the direction is increasingly clear.

Families want these schools. More communities want the opportunity to create them. New and innovative models are emerging. Most importantly, students are beginning to demonstrate what is possible when educators are given the freedom—and held accountable—to build schools around

their needs.

The next chapter of Alabama's charter school story should not simply be about getting bigger. It should be about building on what is working: growing thoughtfully, protecting quality and making sure that every family who wants a great public school has the opportunity to choose one.

Ten years ago, Alabama opened the door to public charter schools. Today, thousands of

families are walking through it.

*Tyler Barnett is the Chief Executive Officer of New Schools for Alabama. Tyler started his career in the classroom, and after earning his law degree, he worked for two state departments of education. He previously served as Charter School Director for the Arkansas Public School Resource Center, and prior to founding New Schools for Alabama, he served as State Policy Director for KnowledgeWorks.*

**FAMILIES  
WANT THESE  
SCHOOLS. MORE  
COMMUNITIES  
WANT THE  
OPPORTUNITY TO  
CREATE THEM."**



# A DECADE OF MOMENTUM

19

public charter  
schools served  
communities in  
2025-26

9,000+

students  
enrolled  
statewide

2,000+

students  
remain on  
charter  
waitlists

9 of 15

charter schools  
with available  
results  
outperformed their  
local district in at  
least one tested  
subject

7

schools  
outperformed  
their district in at  
least two  
subjects

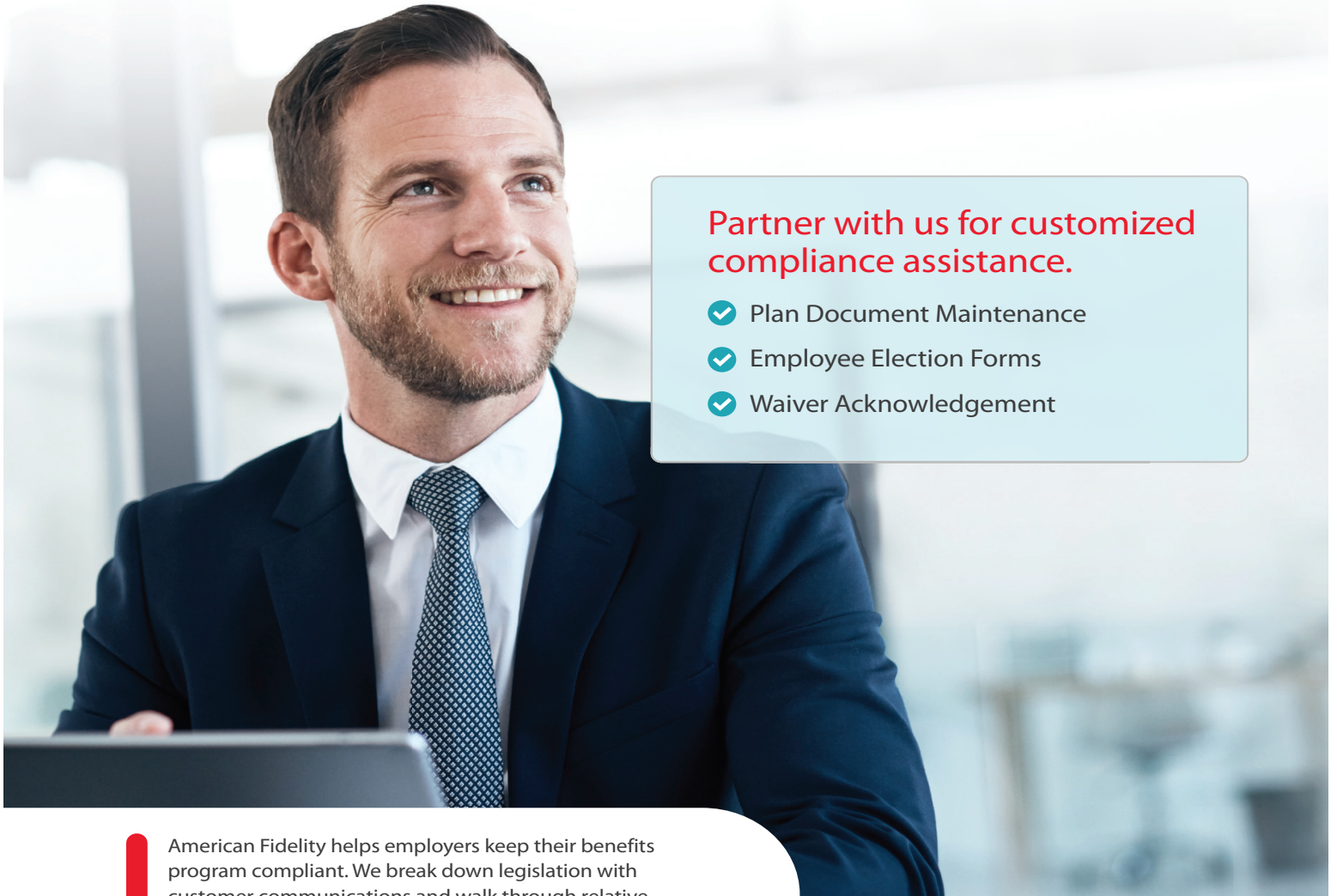
3

schools: i3 Academy,  
Breakthrough Charter  
School, and University  
Charter School  
outperformed their  
local district in ELA,  
math, and science

**Ten years after charter schools existed only on paper in Alabama, thousands of families are choosing them, and the next chapter is already being written.**



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a different opinion

# Top 4 Takeaways

— from the —

## STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING



Board members Yvette Richardson, Marie Manning, and Wayne Renolds were not present at the board meeting. Manning and Richardson made it to the work session. Governor Ivey was present at the board meeting, and all other board members were present.

Here are our key takeaways from the September 10th State Board of Education board meeting and work session.

***"Alabama's September education agenda centered on stronger teacher preparation, strategic funding, student support, and greater accountability."***

1.

### **Alabama Numeracy Act Math Course Sequence Approval for Educator Preparation Programs**

During the work session, the board heard updates on Alabama Numeracy Act (ANA) implementation work from Superintendent Mackey and Dr. Ann Dominick, who serves as the Policy-Task Force Administrator for the Office of Mathematics Improvement (OMI). Prior to the ANA, early childhood, elementary, and K-6 special education math course requirements for prospective teachers included four math courses from the math department, and one math methods course. ANA

changed these requirements to four courses that integrate elementary math content and pedagogy. This change ensures that teachers are prepared to actually teach the math that their students are learning based on the Alabama Math Course of Study, rather than learning more advanced math that is less relevant to elementary students.

The deadline for colleges and universities to submit their plans to the ALSDE for this change has passed, and all of the programs in Alabama submitted on time. The ALSDE's ANA Course Review Committee has reviewed and approved all 44 course sequences.

Next, the board will vote to acknowledge the approval at the October board meeting. In addition to the new course requirements, prospective teachers will also now need to take and pass a Foundations of Math exam, currently in development stages, prior to being recommended for certification by their program.

This process is new to Alabama, and new for the nation. The Alabama Numeracy Act was the first comprehensive K-5 math legislation in the country, and we are creating the model.

2.

### **Fiscal Year 2028 Education Trust Fund Budget Request**

During the work session, the board discussed the ALSDE's FY 2028 budget request. The board discussed the ALSDE's budget request line-by-line, as a follow-up from the initial conversation at the board retreat in August. The board will vote on the budget request at

the October meeting, and then it will be sent to the governor's office. Governor Ivey's finance team will create a "skeleton budget" using the departmental requests, and share it with the incoming governor when he takes office. The incoming governor will then have until the second Tuesday in February to finalize his budget, and submit it to

the legislature.

The majority of the items in the drafted budget were unchanged from the draft discussed during the August retreat. A few changes to note:

School Breakfast – Added to the budget request at \$14 million

High Needs Special Education Grant – \$18 million, increase of \$4



million

Line item for “Special Education Certified Behavior Analyst Program (Autism)” was renamed to “Special Education Behavior Analysts (Autism)”

During the budget conversation, Mackey shared his concerns about the increasing cost of PEEHIP.

PEEHIP provides health insurance for Alabama’s teachers and state education employees. The PEEHIP board is requesting about \$222 million from the legislature during the next budget cycle, and Mackey shared that he anticipates that the legislature will not provide full funding. This will require the

PEEHIP board to consider pulling funds from the Retiree Trust savings account, changing benefits for those insured, or increasing premiums for teachers and state education employees.

### 3.

#### **Apportionment of RAISE Act**

funds and the Foundation Program

During the meeting, the board unanimously voted to adopt the rules for the education budget. This process now includes both the Foundation Program (rule 290-2-1-.01) and the RAISE Act funds (rule 290-2-1-.06) that are distributed to districts. The Foundation Program portion that

was approved today includes fully funding PEEHIP, which supports health insurance for Alabama’s teachers, and the 2% teacher pay raise that was passed by the legislature earlier this year. The pay raise will go into effect on October 1.

The RAISE Act funding for FY27 will support student needs for the 2026-2027 school year.

This year, \$191 million will flow to districts to support students in poverty, special education students, English learners, gifted students, and charter school students. Districts can move up to 10% of RAISE funds between student groups, and apply for permission from Dr. Mackey for additional flexibility.

### 4.

#### **Superintendent’s Report: Virtual Schools**

During the work session, Mackey provided the board with data they had requested on students attending Alabama’s virtual schools and programs. This data was not shared publicly, but the board raised concerns around who holds virtual schools accountable for proficiency rates and attendance. Each district is required to maintain a virtual program or school for any high school student who would like to learn virtually. While the board shared that many programs are

doing well, seven virtual schools are priority schools, which earned a D or F on their annual state report card and student proficiency rates vary widely.

Mackey shared that virtual schooling was the first way that Alabama began to consider school choice. Families who need an option different from their local school can choose a public virtual program for free. If the family does not like the virtual program they are enrolled in, they may move back to the district school in the area they reside.

The board was concerned about

the low proficiency rates of virtual students, and the accountability measures virtual programs are held to. Mackey shared that all accountability for virtual programs is held at the local level, rather than with the ALSDE, as a part of the Accountability Act. The board was also concerned about funding, and whether state funds were going to virtual programs without accountability. Mackey clarified that the Foundation Program funds districts based on the number of students they enroll, rather than what types of environments those students are learning in.

The next Board meeting will be on Thursday, October 8, 2026, at 10 am at the auditorium in the Gordon Persons building in Montgomery, Alabama. The work session will be held at the same location at 11 a.m. or immediately following the State Board Meeting.

The Alabama State Board of Education usually meets on the second Thursday of each month, with the exception of the July meeting, to discuss important policies, procedures, and changes for Alabama’s K-12 public schools. The Board takes official action during their monthly meeting and then follows up with a Work Session to get updates and discuss future action that will be voted on at the next board meeting.

*Used with permission by A+ Education Partnership. Also check out the A+ Education policy portal, a one-stop-shop for accessible information about evidence-based, student-centered education policy. <https://policy.aplusala.org/>.*

# Parent voice in action

## Parent Voice Fellowship Cohort 5 Begins with Story, Connection and Purpose

This summer, New Schools for Alabama welcomed a new group of parent leaders as Cohort 5 of the Parent Voice Fellowship officially kicked off on August 8 at the NSFA office.

The orientation brought fellows together for a morning designed to build relationships, strengthen their understanding of Alabama's public charter school sector and prepare them to use their experiences and perspectives as powerful tools for advocacy. The day began with breakfast and fellowship, along with professional headshots and individual interviews that gave participants an opportunity to share more about themselves and why they chose to become part of Parent Voice.

Following opening remarks from NSFA Chief Communications Officer and Parent Voice Program Director Candie A. Mitchell-Price, fellows participated in "Charter Schools 101," an introduction to public charter schools, their history in Alabama and the work of New Schools for Alabama. They also received an overview of the fellowship's purpose, goals, expectations and opportunities for engagement.

One of the highlights of the orientation was "Power in Your Story," an interactive session that invited fellows to reflect on why they applied for the fellowship, challenges they have faced and the dreams they hold for their schools and communities. Led by Dr. Erica Littleton, the conversation reinforced an important part of the Parent

Voice philosophy: parents do not have to be policy experts to make an impact. Their lived experiences, questions and hopes for their children are valuable contributions to conversations about public education.

Fellows also heard directly from Parent Voice alumni and participants Mary Ward, Camille Munoz, Barbara Harper, Melodie Scott and Ida Evans during a panel discussion facilitated by Dr. Littleton.

The orientation marked the beginning of a new chapter for Cohort 5, but the work extends far beyond one Saturday. Through the fellowship, parents will continue building knowledge, relationships and confidence as they learn how to engage more deeply in conversations affecting students, schools and communities.

As another Parent Voice cohort begins its journey, one thing remains at the center of the work: when parents understand the power of their voices and are given meaningful opportunities to use them, they can help shape stronger schools for Alabama's children.

### 2026-2027 Parent Voice Fellowship Cohort 5

Laquita Bush - i3 Academy  
Stefani Steele - Ivy Classical  
Jimmisha Johnson - Freedom Preparatory Academy  
Jasmine Greene - LEAD Academy  
Veronique Reed - Alabama Aerospace & Aviation HS  
Letrishia West - Accel Academy  
Fengna Gregg - University Charter School  
Angela Michelle Craig - Legacy Prep  
Laquinnya P. Henderson - Independence Prep  
Shamonica Robinson - Breakthrough Charter School  
Bryant Bradley - Floretta P. Carson - Visual & Performing Arts Academy  
Shannon Tolliver-Coaxum - Covenant Academy of Mobile  
Matthew Fifolt - Magic City Acceptance Academy  
Kristen Collins Posey - Empower Community School





*Parent Voice Fellowship* **5**  
**A New Cohort Begins**





2026-2027

Parent Voice





# Cohort 5

Representing the following schools:

**I3 Academy**

**Ivy Classical**

**Freedom Preparatory Academy**

**LEAD Academy**

**Alabama Aerospace & Aviation HS**

**Accel Academy**

**University Charter School**

**Legacy Prep**

**Independence Prep**

**Breakthrough Charter School**

**Floretta P. Carson Visual &**

**Performing Arts Academy**

**Covenant Academy of Mobile**

**Magic City Acceptance Academy**

**Empower Community School**



**Not pictured:  
Angela Michelle Craig**



## Mobile native Jhory Buskey is coming home to build a school alongside the community that helped shape him.

BY CANDIE A. MITCHELL-PRICE

**F**or Jhory Buskey, building a new public charter school in Mobile is about much more than opening a building in 2028. It's about coming home.

Buskey is a graduate of Mattie T.

Blount High School and a product of Mobile County Public Schools, and his career eventually took him beyond Alabama, where he spent more than a decade building his experience as a teacher, instructional leader, assistant principal, principal, and founding school

leader.

Along the way, he saw what can happen when students are surrounded by strong instruction, excellent teachers, meaningful relationships, and adults who believe deeply in what they can achieve.





# REIMAGINING WHAT'S POSSIBLE!

Eventually, a question began to follow him: "What would it mean to take everything I've learned and bring it back home?"

That question has grown into Reimagine Education Academy + Initiative, the broader community-centered work Buskey is leading, and Reimagine Education Academy, the K–8 public charter school he's working toward opening in 2028 to serve families in Mobile and Prichard.

"I didn't want to return to Mobile simply to lead another school," Buskey said. "I wanted to help build something with the community that could expand what families believe is possible for their children."

Long before the first student enters a classroom, Buskey wants families to know they have a role in shaping what that classroom will eventually become.

Community co-design has become central

to the school's development. To date, the Reimagine Education Academy + Initiative team has gathered more than 300 survey responses, conducted more than 100 one-on-one conversations, participated in more than 20 community events and engagement opportunities, and held four town halls. The team has intentionally gone where families already gather, including community festivals, library events, Juneteenth celebrations,



**COMMUNITY INPUT CANNOT SIMPLY LIVE IN A SPREADSHEET. PEOPLE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SEE THEIR FINGERPRINTS ON THE FINAL SCHOOL."**



Africatown events, LoDa ArtWalk and other community spaces.

For Buskey, though, engagement can't simply be measured by the number of conversations.

"Community input can't simply live in a spreadsheet," he said. "People should be able to see their fingerprints on the final school."

That feedback is already shaping the school's design. Seventy-seven percent of families surveyed said they preferred a K–8 model rather than K–5, and nearly 87 percent identified job skills as a community priority. Families also identified safe spaces, mental health and wraparound services as important needs. Perhaps most telling, 100 percent of responding parents and guardians supported each of seven educational priorities presented to them: literacy, mathematics, science, technology, health, citizenship and creativity.

Buskey sees a clear message in those responses. "Families aren't asking us to choose between strong academics and developing the whole child," he said. "They're asking for both."

Reimagine Education Academy is being designed around rigorous literacy and numeracy instruction, career exploration, social-emotional learning, student leadership, community advocacy and a model Buskey calls STREAM+H, which incorporates Science, Technology,

Reading, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics, along with Humanities and History.

Reading is intentionally included because literacy gives students greater access to every discipline, and Buskey believes humanities and history are just as important, since preparing students for the future requires more than teaching them how something works. Students should also understand people, culture, history, ethics and the communities affected by the solutions they create.

Mobile itself will become part of that education. With aerospace, maritime industries, healthcare, engineering, environmental science, entrepreneurship, arts, culture and history throughout the region, Buskey sees opportunities for students to connect classroom learning with the world around them.

The ultimate goal is to develop students who can think critically, write powerfully and advocate boldly. In practice, that could mean a middle school student investigating an environmental issue by studying scientific data, reading historical sources, interviewing community members and analyzing competing perspectives, then writing a research paper, editorial or policy recommendation before presenting a proposed solution to an authentic audience.

Those skills, Buskey said, shouldn't

exist as isolated programs. They should become part of how students learn from kindergarten through eighth grade.

Buskey's years leading schools outside Alabama have helped shape the founder he's becoming. He's seen firsthand the importance of excellent teaching, strong instructional systems, leadership development, responsible use of data, high expectations and a healthy adult culture, and his most recent school leadership experience included 98 percent teacher retention, an accountability rating of 86, or a B, and strong student outcomes in reading, mathematics and ACT performance.

Those experiences provide lessons he plans to bring home, but the school itself must belong to Mobile.

"I don't want to take a model from Houston, New Orleans, or anywhere else and simply transplant it into Mobile," Buskey said.

He envisions local history, culture, neighborhoods, professionals, colleges, universities, artists, businesses and industries becoming extensions of the classroom.

"I want to bring home lessons about excellence while building something that could only have been created here."

Buskey is developing the school while participating in New Schools for Alabama's School Founders Program and the BES Fellowship, and both



experiences have expanded his understanding of what it takes to move from a strong educational idea to a sustainable institution.

As an experienced educator, Buskey initially approached the work largely through the lens of classrooms, teaching and learning, but school founding has required him to think just as deeply about governance, finance, enrollment, facilities, authorization, operations, community trust and long-term sustainability.

"The vision hasn't become smaller," he said. "It's become sharper."

The transition has also required patience. School leaders often identify challenges and move quickly toward solutions, but a community-centered founding process sometimes requires listening longer before deciding. That's part of the reason Buskey believes the years leading up to 2028 are so important.

Behind the scenes, work is already underway on the academic model, curriculum and assessment plans, enrollment projections, multi-year financial models, facilities, governance, partnerships, staffing, transportation, special education, multilingual

learner services, technology, student safety, family engagement and preparation for the charter authorization process.

"Opening a school is one thing," Buskey said. "Opening a school that's academically strong, financially responsible, operationally prepared, deeply trusted by its community, and positioned to serve children well for generations is something very different."

Buskey already thinks about the students who will one day make up Reimagine Education Academy's first eighth-grade graduating class.

He wants them to leave as critical thinkers and problem solvers, communicating confidently in writing and speech, approaching problems creatively, exploring careers and postsecondary opportunities, and understanding that their voices have value. They don't need to have their entire futures figured out by eighth grade, but they should know considerably more about themselves, their strengths, their interests, their communities and the possibilities available to them.

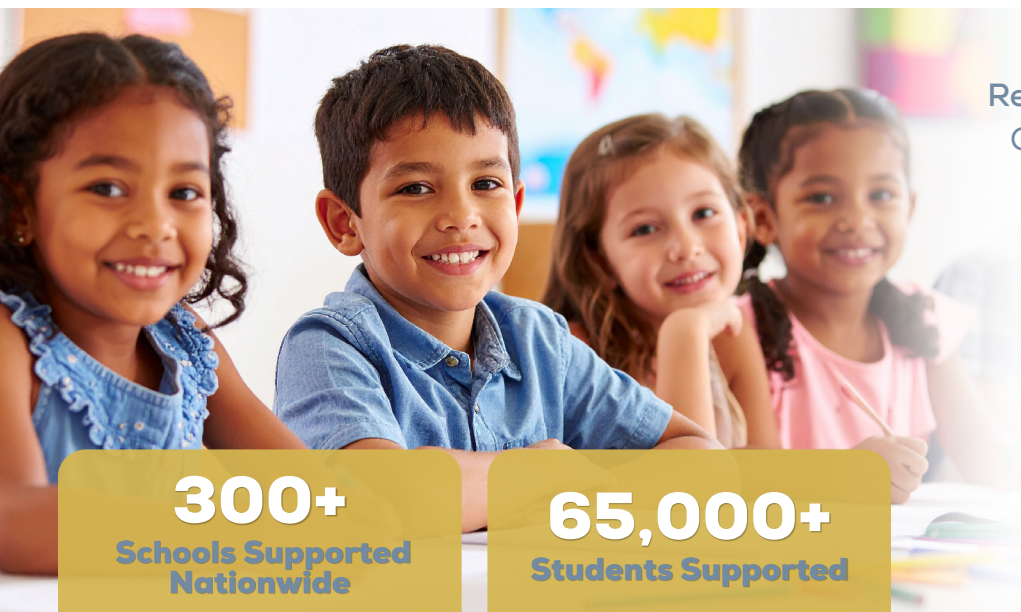
Most importantly, Buskey wants families to understand that Reimagine Education

Academy isn't being built from the belief that something is wrong with the children or communities it hopes to serve. The starting point is exactly the opposite.

"Our children are brilliant," he said. "Our families have aspirations for them. Our communities possess tremendous knowledge, culture, history, talent and strength."

For Buskey, 2028 isn't when the work begins. The work has already begun. And the invitation he's extending to Mobile and Prichard families isn't simply to enroll in a new school several years from now. It's to help shape that school today.

*Candie is the Chief Communications Officer for New Schools for Alabama. Candie has extensive experience developing and executing PR, marketing, social media, and branding strategies for numerous organizations, entrepreneurs, and small business owners. Candie's passion for educational equity and advocacy for marginalized communities brings her to her role at NSFA. She is also a former middle and high school teacher for Birmingham City Schools.*



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**ALEXANDER LLOYD,  
ANALYST**

*Alex is a Vestavia Hills native and a 2023 graduate of Rhodes College, where he achieved multiple all-conference recognitions as a varsity tennis player. He is bilingual in Spanish and loves to travel and meet new people. Alex earned his MBA from UAB in 2025, where he developed his passion for data and financial analysis. As Analyst, he combines a problem-solving approach with a competitive mindset to help others succeed.*



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# What Locally Led Change Looks Like

BY DORSEY HOPSON

In August 2025, a new public charter school opened on the campus of Stillman College in Tuscaloosa. This coming August, another will open in collaboration with Tuskegee University in Macon County. These are the first HBCU-charter school partnerships in Alabama history, and they are early evidence of what locally led change can produce.

When I was running Shelby County Schools in Memphis, I learned something that has stayed with me through every job since. The best ideas almost never came from the central office. They came from people who already lived in the communities our schools served — people who knew which streets the kids walked, which churches the families belonged to, which efforts had come and gone before. Outsiders can fund that kind of knowledge. They can connect it to other cities doing similar work. What they cannot do is manufacture it.

Last November, City Fund joined Bloomberg Philanthropies and UNCF on a \$20 million initiative to support new public schools designed in collaboration with Historically Black Colleges and Universities. HBCUs have spent generations producing leaders despite chronic underinvestment, and their academic depth, cultural authority, and community ties make them natural anchors for K-12 schools. When kindergartners walk onto a college campus every morning, the path from their classroom to a bachelor's degree stops being abstract.



*Tyler Barnett (New Schools for Alabama), Delano Ford (Charter School Growth Fund), and Dorsey Hopson (City Fund).*



■ ■ ■

## “NATIONAL FUNDING GAVE THE EFFORT SCALE AND MOMENTUM, BUT THE INFRASTRUCTURE WAS ALREADY IN PLACE BECAUSE TYLER AND HIS TEAM PUT IT THERE.”

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I Dream Big Academy is a middle school of nearly 200 students currently in grades 6–8, operating as a lab school on Stillman’s campus with a pipeline for teacher development and early college and career exposure for its students. D.C. Wolfe Charter School, opening this fall through Tuskegee University, will be a conversion school serving pre-K through sixth grade in Macon County. Each campus will look different from the next because each community is different, and together they show what is possible when an HBCU anchors a full K–16 pipeline, from a child’s first day of school through their college diploma.

Tyler Barnett, CEO of New Schools for Alabama, and his team are central to why this work has taken hold. They have spent years building the foundation that helped make these partnerships possible — recruiting school leaders, navigating authorization, cultivating funders, organizing families, and pushing the work forward through every cycle of skepticism. National funding gave the effort scale and momentum, but the infrastructure was already in place because Tyler and his team put it there. Investments that take root tend to look like that.

The work didn’t come from any single organization or strategy. It came from layering community trust built by HBCUs over generations, advocacy and leadership pipelines built by New Schools for Alabama, families pushing for more options, and capital from outside funders coming in behind it all.

The demand for more great public school options in Alabama is real. Alabama’s public charter schools serve just over one percent of the state’s public school students, but they enroll more than 9,000 children across 19 schools, with another 2,000 on waitlists. Roughly three in four of those students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and 81% are students of color. Those are the families our partners have been

working alongside for years, and the communities most likely to benefit when an HBCU and a public school share a campus.

A statewide poll released earlier this year found support for public charter schools in Alabama outpacing opposition by more than 30 points, with backing across race, geography, and party.<sup>1</sup> Two-thirds of voters say parents should have the right to choose where their child attends school, regardless of whether they can afford private school tuition. That kind of consensus is rare in any political environment.

It matters that this is happening in a state that posted the largest fourth-grade math gain of any state on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Alabama is moving, and charter schools are part of that progress, not separate from it. Public charters, district schools, and the partnerships now linking them to HBCUs are all part of the same public education system, accountable to the same families and rising together. The HBCU initiative builds on momentum that is already there, an accelerant for a state where leaders have been organizing around results across every part of the system.

Walk into I Dream Big Academy on a Tuesday morning and you will see middle schoolers learning a few hundred feet from college students, and a building that sits steps from Stillman’s School of Education. These are deliberate, structural choices made by people who live and work in Tuscaloosa.

In Alabama right now, children as young as kindergarten are walking onto a college campus every morning. Some of them will go on to attend Stillman or Tuskegee. Others will not. But all of them will grow up knowing what a college campus looks like, what college students sound like, what professors do — because that is the building they learn in. That is what locally

1 <https://aldailynews.com/new-poll-shows-strong-bipartisan-support-for-public-charter-schools-across-alabama/>

led change can produce. The question now is how many more communities get to say the same.



*Dr. Angela Lang (Founder/Executive Director and Dr. Lucretia Prince (Co-Founder/Principal), I Dream Big Academy*

*Dorsey Hopson is a Partner at City Fund, where he works with local leaders to improve student outcomes, enhance K–12 ecosystems, and strengthen state and local conditions to ensure all students have access to high-quality schools. In his role, Dorsey draws on his extensive leadership experience to drive sustainable, community-centered educational reforms.*

*This article originally appeared in CharterFolk on June 19, 2026. Used with permission.*



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