

**C H A R T E R**

# CONNECT

**MAGAZINE**

DECEMBER 2020

**AAAHS**

**How a childhood dream  
has inspired the 2022  
launch of a unique  
aviation high school  
in Alabama**



**WHO SHOULD  
BE THE NEXT**

**Secretary of  
Education?**

**Alabama  
Charters**

**CELEBRATING  
HOW FAR  
WE'VE COME**

NEW SCHOOLS FOR  
ALABAMA



# CHARTER CONTENT

DECEMBER 2020

MAGAZINE

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# charter



**Darren Ramalho,  
Founding Head of School**

**Breakthrough Charter School, Perry County**

**COMING 2021**

<https://breakthroughcharterschool.org/>

**D**arren 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 served on a number of committees advocating for students, including the Student Fee Advisory Committee and Faculty Executive Committee. 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 also served one year on the school's budget committee. During his teaching career, Darren completed a two-year Rural School Leadership Academy cohort program, funded by Teach For America and the U.S. Department of Education. He has represented Perry County at the state level on multiple occasions, serving on the inaugural ALSDE State Superintendent Teacher Cabinet and the ALSDE English-Language Arts Course of Study Committee and Taskforce. Outside of K12 education, Darren also worked as an adjunct instructor and assistant librarian at Marion Military Institute, the nation's oldest

military junior college. 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 is being hosted by Citizens of the World Charter Schools.



**BREAKTHROUGH**  
CHARTER SCHOOL

# spotlight

Competitive startup grants of up to \$1.5M each to support new, expanding, and replicating high-quality charter schools

# CSP GRANT

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This edition of our monthly magazine will be the last of 2020, and what a year it has been. Undoubtedly, every one of us has been personally affected in one way or another by the many challenges this year has presented. But as we look towards a better (and hopefully more stable) 2021, we have a lot to celebrate as partners in this movement. So, I want to take a moment to reflect on how far we've come.

## Alabama Charters:

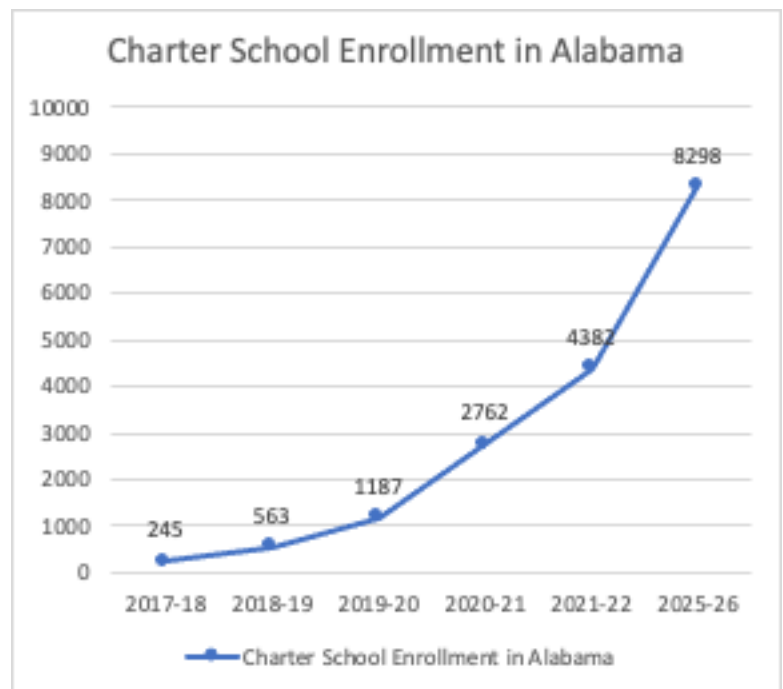
# CELEBRATING HOW FAR WE'VE COME

BY TYLER BARNETT

It is hard to believe that Alabama passed its charter school law just over five years ago, becoming the 43rd state in the nation to allow charter schools. In the 2017-18 school year, Accel Day & Evening Academy launched the state's first charter school in Mobile with just 245 students. Now, just four school years later, charter school enrollment in Alabama has grown by over 1,000%, increasing to a statewide enrollment of 2,762 kids.

When today's schools reach their maximum enrollment capacity, over 8,000 kids will be enrolled in Alabama charter schools, representing just over 1% of the state's public school student enrollment. And more schools are coming—we can celebrate the fact that not only are our current schools growing, but we have at least seven more schools coming onboard next fall, bringing the state to a total of twelve charter schools (including the new middle schools at i3 Academy in Birmingham and Accel).

But we have much more to celebrate than the simple fact that our movement is growing—I am proud and excited to see such a diverse portfolio of excellent, innovative charter schools serving the needs of their communities. First, and perhaps most importantly, charter schools are serving the kids they are designed to serve—students who are historically under-resourced. To date, 68% of students attending charter schools in Alabama qualify for free or reduced lunch, compared with a state average of 49%. And 11% of charter school students have special needs, which is roughly commensurate with the state average of 13%.



In our sector, we have both startup charter schools and district conversion charter schools; we have charters offering personalized learning, project-based learning, place-based learning, social-emotional learning, arts-infused education, and trauma-informed education; we have traditional college prep models as well as charter schools focusing on social justice, service-learning, and leadership development; and we have rural and urban charter



schools alike spanning from Birmingham all the way down to Mobile.

Our movement is inspiring unique partnerships with other organizations that bring all sorts of unprecedented resources and amenities to Alabama kids. I've outlined a few (but not all) of the more compelling partnerships below.

All of this means that we have a lot to be proud of today, and we are well on our way to radically improving public education for over 8,000 Alabama kids in just a few short years. Undeniably, we have a lot more work to do to ensure that every child has access to a quality public education. But as you re-energize over the holidays, I hope you proudly reflect on all of the incredible

new opportunities we are creating for kids to get an excellent public education. Please join me in applauding all of our charter school leaders, teachers, and students, and raise a glass to a brighter, healthier, more equitable 2021 and beyond.

Cheers!



Charter School	Partners	Partnership Offerings
University Charter School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of West Alabama</li> </ul>	Lab school environment, giving teachers access to the college of education and students access to a collegiate environment
Breakthrough Charter School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marion Military Institute</li> <li>• Judson College</li> </ul>	Leadership training and university amenities at Marion Military Institute and Judson College, potentially leading to postsecondary pathways
Magic City Acceptance Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magic City Wellness Center</li> <li>• Birmingham Aids Outreach</li> </ul>	Access to full medical staff, counseling staff, and many other resources available at the Magic City Wellness Center and Birmingham Aids Outreach
Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tuskegee University</li> <li>• Southern Museum of Flight</li> <li>• Delta Airlines</li> </ul>	Access to dual enrollment at Tuskegee University, a flight simulator and aviation environment at the Southern Museum of Flight, and an industry certification partnership with Delta Airlines



# MEET RUBEN MORRIS

**Founder/CEO of Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School**

**Candie:** Okay. Tell me a little bit about who you are?

Ruben: I am a Birmingham native and I graduated from Shades Valley High School. I'm a graduate of Morehouse College and a Teach for America Alum. I've taught in public schools across the country, including Atlanta public schools, and Houston Independent School District and I've been a principal for Denver Public Schools. Since returning to Birmingham, I was the director of the Woodlawn Innovation Network, was principal at Cornerstone, and was instrumental in the inception, planning and opening of Legacy Prep Charter School, the first charter school in Birmingham and supportive of my wife, it's Founder/CEO. Recently, I was the Program Director for Build Up. I am also an associate pastor at The Worship Center. I'm the son of a public school teacher, my mother taught for 46 years with 25 plus of those in Birmingham City School and my sister is the principal at Holy Family Cristo Rey.

**Candie:** So education is practically in your DNA!

Ruben: Education has been around my whole life - my great-grandfather was actually a principal at a one-room schoolhouse. It's a generational vocational calling. So that's what I've been put on earth to do.

**Candie:** Although you've been surrounded by education your whole life, what brings you to the work of opening Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School?

Ruben: When I was in elementary and middle school, I had a desire to be a commercial pilot. I wanted to fly for Delta, Southwest, or American. By the time I got to high school nobody could tell me what classes I needed to take, what steps, or what's the process for becoming a commercial pilot. So that dream was put on the shelf and I don't hold a pilot's license and I've never worked in the aviation industry and it's really because I never got the opportunity. I want to change that for my own children. I want to change that for kids in Birmingham and I want to change that for the entire state.



Alabama has one of the most advanced Aviation and Aerospace Industries in the country, particularly in the Southeast with NASA, Boeing, Airbus, Northrop Grumman, with several military Air Force bases and here in Birmingham with the largest airport in the state, but yet there's currently no direct workforce pipeline for high school graduates to move into these high-paying aviation related careers, and my goal is to create that pathway and, particularly, to create a diverse leadership force that is poised to lead in any industry.

**Candie:** Have you identified a location?

Ruben: We are in the final stages of finalizing a partnership with the Southern Museum of Flight and being co-located in that facility with them and the community college system of Alabama.

**Candie:** What's the school's mission statement?





Pictures from AAHS community event

Ruben: The mission of Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School is to provide students with a unique curriculum that integrates aerospace and aviation into their academic courses. Our curriculum will provide students with the opportunity to engage in multidisciplinary projects, enroll in dual credit courses with local colleges and universities and working apprenticeships with local aerospace industry firms, putting them on a pathway to industry-recognized credentials.

**Candie: How will you know when you are successful?**

Ruben: We've got some pretty specific measurable outcomes that we're working towards. We want a hundred percent college acceptance rate, if we hit that mark we know we're successful. We want at least 50% of our graduating class to become licensed minority pilots. We know that we've been successful if we hit that mark. And we really want at least 95% of the

kids that finish our program to move and persist into some aviation-related career. There are all kinds of social-emotional goals that we will set that will be based on perception surveys and we will start tracking apprenticeships and feedback from our partners within the industry. We're also going to create an advisory board that is going to hold us accountable and keep us locked into the pulse of what's going on in the industry.

**Candie: It's going to be amazing to see all of this come to fruition. On a personal note, what has been the best piece of advice you've ever been given?**

Ruben: Be quiet and listen. It seems pretty simple, but I will say it was the best.

**Candie: Thank you so much and I'm looking forward to hearing all of the great things that will come out of Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School.**

Ruben: Thank you!

For more information about this exciting new school, check out this feature Morris has received recently: <https://bhamnow.com/2020/11/05/new-birmingham-aerospace-aviation-public-charter-school-will-touch-down-in-2022/>

# CHARTER HEROES

Celebrating Alabama Charter School Champions



## NATHANIEL DUNN, 2ND GRADE TEACHER

### [I3 ACADEMY](#)

#### **What grade and subjects do you teach at i3 Academy?**

I am a second grade classroom teacher. I have the opportunity to teach all subjects: Reading Literature, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science and Caring School Community to all of my students.

#### **What inspired you to become a teacher?**

I was inspired to become a teacher by watching all of my teachers throughout the years. I've always wanted to become the teacher that I've always wanted when I was in school. Being fun, empathetic and consistent brings the best qualities out of my students. I was inspired by many teachers I've observed over the years. Taking a part of each of them allowed me to create my unique teaching style. I have to give credit to my many mentors who've encouraged me to give my all to my students. Through their encouragement and motivation, I was inspired to become a fun energetic teacher who allows all students to be themselves. Students learn better when they feel a sense of comfort and trust from their teacher.

#### **What is the most rewarding part of your job?**

The most rewarding part of being an educator are the relationships that I build with my students. I meet them where they are and allow them to be themselves. I love to see students growth academically. Holding my students to a standard is critical to the successes of all of my students. Watching them grow as good people warms my heart, along with seeing genuine smiles on their faces. I love when children are happy and comfortable with being themselves!

#### **What is the most challenging part of your job?**

The most challenging part of my job is making sure that I provide rigorous material for all of my students during this pandemic. The pandemic has taught me to become a more versatile teacher who can have the ability to teach students on any platform effectively. As a teacher I always want to make sure that I've gone above and beyond for each child. although the pandemic has its challenges for teachers, it has taught me to develop new teaching strategies for our new normal.

#### **What would you want others to know about i3 Academy?**

People must know that I3 Academy puts students and families first. I3 Academy advocates for ALL children, by providing a healthy learning environment for the individual student. All of the faculty and staff display pure empathy and love to all of our students. I3 Academy is an institution that allows its students to take full control of their education by providing them with all of the resources they need to be successful in the classroom and beyond.

# Charter CONNECTION



Want to see the action? Click the picture for video!

**Rosa Parks** class at Legacy Prep got to “Pie The Principal” for having the highest reading log percentage! Mrs. Morris was unprepared, but PREPsters were not!!! She’ll do anything for our scholars to win.”





## WHO SHOULD BE THE NEXT SECRETARY OF EDUCATION?

by CASSIE BRIGHTER



AS THE PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION BEGINS, ONE QUESTION IS ON EVERY SCHOOL LEADER'S MIND. WHO WILL BE THE NEXT SECRETARY OF EDUCATION?

For charter school leaders, the question is even more critical. Once universally accepted 20 years ago, charter schools have become—as many other issues have—an issue deeply divided across party lines, across the country's varied geographic regions and demographic segments. The current uncertainty surrounding who takes the job makes for uncertain times for all those associated with the educational choice movement.

Charter school leaders are mavericks, charting their own course, often in the face of big challenges, often with odds stacked against them. And yet, in spite of it all, charter schools grow, the movement grows, and students thrive.

All of this can be made easier or more difficult by the Secretary of Education.

Last year, Biden promised his pick would be an educator.

“First thing, as president of United States – not a joke – first thing I will do is make sure that the secretary of education is not Betsy DeVos,” he said at a National Education Association forum for presidential candidates. “It is a teacher. A teacher. Promise.”

As early as May of this year, [Forbes Magazine](#) speculated that Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Michael Bennet, Sonja Brookins Santelises, currently CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, or even the soon-to-be First Lady, Jill Biden – a college professor herself – could be President-elect Biden's top choice for the job.

The May article in *Forbes Magazine* also mentioned:

Lt. Governor Jacqueline Coleman — Kentucky's lieutenant governor and former public school teacher and principal.

Governor Tony Evers — Wisconsin's governor and former superintendent of public instruction.

Lily Eskelsen Garcia — president of the influential teachers' union, the National Education Association.

Randi Weingarten — president of the influential teachers' union, the American Federation of Teachers.

Michael Sorrell — president of Paul Quinn College and alumnus of the Clinton Administration.

Freeman Hrabowski — president of the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

Should the position be offered to her, Randi Weingarten is unlikely to accept. In an interview Monday, she said, “I'm really happy doing what I'm doing. I'd be happy working with the Biden administration as president of the AFT (American Federation of Teachers).”

In September, [DiverseEducation.com](#)



featured the list of potential picks. This list included former U.S. Secretary of Education and now president and CEO of the Education Trust John B. King Jr., and former U.S. Assistant Deputy Secretary of Education Jim Shelton, Rep. Alma Adams, who leads the Bipartisan Historically Black Colleges and Universities Caucus, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Rep. Joyce Beatty and Rep. Frederica Wilson.

In early November, [Chalkbeat](#) floated names, including Janice Jackson, the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, Sonja Brookins Santelises, the head of Baltimore schools, and William Hite, Philadelphia superintendent. These candidates have worked harmoniously with charter schools in the part, and are also the preferred candidates of DFER – Democrats for Education Reform.

Several commenters in this article mentioned Carol Corbett Burris.

However, at a recent event Biden campaign's policy director Stef Feldman said that "the vice president is pretty committed to the concept that we need to be investing in our public neighborhood schools and we can't be diverting funding away from them."

According to [InsideHigherEd.com](#), Lodriguez Murray, the United Negro

College Fund's vice president of public policy and government affairs, said that if asked by the transition, he'd suggest Rep. Alma Adams, a Democratic congresswoman from North Carolina and a former professor at Bennett College, a historically Black institution for women in Greensboro, N.C., who was instrumental in pushing to make federal funding for HBCUs permanent.

The Washington Post reported pointed at Tony Thurmond, the California state superintendent of public instruction; Congresswoman Jahana Hayes, a Democrat from Connecticut and a former national teacher of the year; Betty Rosa, New York state's interim commissioner of education; and Seattle Public Schools superintendent Denise Juneau are under consideration.

[EducationPost.org](#) gives a nod to many of the main names mentioned thus far, but adds a few names to the list: Sarah Boham – president of Salish Kootenai College in Montana, Fidel Vargas – president and CEO of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, Susan Bunting – former superintendent of the year, Rep. Susie Lee – founder of Afterschool All-Stars in Las Vegas, NV, and former Governor of Massachusetts Jane Swift – who's been focused on educational improvement through

classroom innovation and technology solutions at [LearnLaunch](#).

As one can see, there is no shortage of potential picks. The President-Elect has affirmed he'll pick a teacher, which narrows it down to some extent. Whoever is chosen will shape the future of education for at least the next four years and, potentially, years to come.

Depending on that person's opinions of school choice, charter schools could be more accepted – and the divide between teacher unions and charter schools could become less hostile. Alternatively, should President-elect Biden's Secretary of Education pick not to advocate for the school choice movement, charter schools could face a myriad uncertainties in their future.

*This [article](#) was posted with permission by Charter School Capital and was originally published on its blog on December 2, 2020 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/no-cost-bond>*





# STUDY ANALYSIS:





## ➔ Charter School Funding Gap Contributes To Surging Inequity

BY CHRISTY WOLFE

The most recent in a series of reports from the University of Arkansas, [Charter School Funding: Inequity Surges in the Cities](#), paints a grim picture of inequality for charter schools in urban areas, where charter schools tend to serve the greatest number of students.

The report takes a close look at the different types of revenue streams and how they close or widen funding gaps. Looking at 18 cities, it found the following:

Following a recent surge in funding disparity between district and charter schools, the overall gap in these cities has reached \$7,796 less per pupil if they attend a charter school—a 33% funding gap.

For the eight cities tracked since 2003, the funding gap has more than doubled.

Out of 18, six states receive a "C" or lower grade for overall funding equity.

At the local level, only Tennessee's Shelby County, which includes Memphis, received an "A" for equity. Atlanta and Little Rock, Arkansas were identified as the least equitable.

State funding overall is the most equitable, and local funding is the least. Local funding disparities are not surprising given that many charter schools are their own school districts and have limited access to local tax dollars. These gaps have recently expanded and stand to only worsen as we enter into a recession and the likelihood of significant budget cuts.

# Overview Charter School Funding Disparities by Funding Source

Funding Source	Funding Gap per Student	Funding Gap for Charter Schools	Least Equitable (City)	Most Equitable (City)
Local	(\$7,491)	68% less	Boston, MA	Camden, NJ
State	(\$428)	5% less	Shelby County, TN	Houston, TX
Federal	(\$654)	37% less	Washington, D.C.	Boston, MA; Phoenix, AZ
Nonpublic	(\$1,412)	46% less	Los Angeles, CA; Little Rock, AR	Washington, D.C.
<b>Total Average</b>	<b>(\$7,796)</b>	<b>33% less</b>	<b>Atlanta, GA; Little Rock, AR</b>	<b>Shelby County, TN</b>

## Dispelling Funding Myths: Demographics and Philanthropy

The report rebuts several arguments that are often used to dismiss funding disparities between charter schools and district-run public schools.

One such argument is charter schools serve fewer students that require additional services, such as students with disabilities, and therefore one should expect that they receive less funding. After taking a closer look at special education expenditures, however, the study found that differences in special education populations only explained the funding gap in two cities out of the 18 in the report—Boston, MA and Shelby County, TN. In 10 cities it accounted for less than a third of the difference.

The study also looked at the impact of demographics overall and found that the difference in low-income students enrolled in district schools and charter schools in this study was only 1% and thus would not explain funding differences. It's also worth noting charter schools serve more economically disadvantaged students nationwide (59%) than district schools (54%).

It also provides evidence that contradicts a common perception that charter schools have access to larger pools of non-public funds, such as private philanthropy. Previous research by the authors shows private philanthropy is concentrated on only one-third of all charter schools. This most recent study demonstrates that philanthropy and other non-public sources of funds, such as food service fees and private donations, are not “filling the gap.” In fact, in some places they are widening the gap: Los Angeles, for example, shows a dramatic increase in non-public funding for district schools

(\$2,035 per student) fully accounts for their growing local funding gap.

## Charter Schools Lack Equitable Access to Funding Increases

These gaps are not a result of funding cuts. Instead, the study finds that, for these 18 cities, they are a result of inequitable access to funding gains experienced by district schools. As one example, Denver charter schools experienced a dramatic increase in local funding inequity from \$8,911 in 2016 to \$15,445 in 2018 because of recent increases in local revenues that were not shared equitably with charter schools.

It also raises significant questions about federal formulas intended to target Title I funds to high concentrations of poverty and whether charter schools are well served by them. The report doesn't examine the role of LEA status and equitable allocations, but it would be interesting to see if there are lessons there for policymakers.

## Are Charter Schools More Efficient?

While the report's authors do not directly address this question, its findings raise important questions about educational efficiency. The report calculates that district schools in this study would have to trim \$22 billion in revenue to equate charter school funding levels. Despite this, urban charter schools have been able to [produce significant achievement gains](#), such as the gains found for students of color and English language learning students by CREDO, with significantly less funding.

Ensuring all public schools have access to equitable resources that lead to a high-quality education is much more complex than simply trying to balance inputs between

district and charter schools. Nevertheless, this report provides policymakers with an important lens on the potential impact of funding decisions, as well as the need for greater transparency in the allocation of funds to schools.

The compounding impact of different funding streams that are not allocated fairly between all public schools has a significant impact. Not just on charter schools, but on the students attending them.

It is important for policymakers and state and local leaders to understand that state and local funding policies do not treat charter schools equitably. Moreover, unless federal funding accounts for this inequity—such as allocations related to the pandemic and Title I—the gaps could get worse and inequity can grow.

*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 December 3, 2020.*



# WHAT WE DO

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We recruit high-quality charter school operators and develop homegrown leaders to build great schools throughout Alabama.

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We provide applicants and operators with expert guidance on technical needs such as developing an application, finding a facility, managing the back-office, and more.

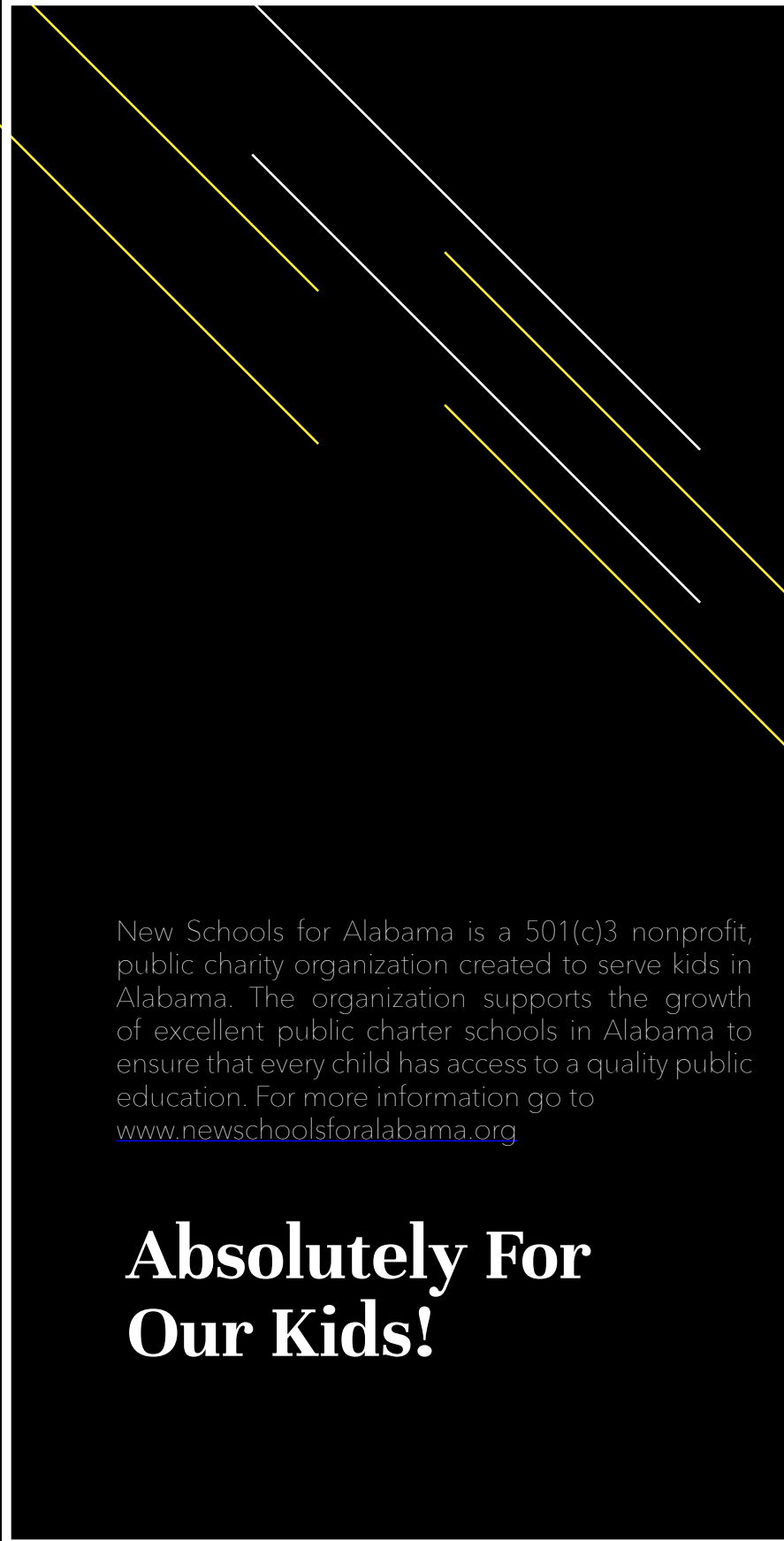
## » Community Engagement

We ensure that parents and communities have access to clear information about school quality and the benefits that other options may present.

## » Policy Advancement

We work with policymakers and administrative agencies to ensure that the regulatory landscape is supportive of high-quality charter schools.





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!**

# CHARTER CONNECT MAGAZINE

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