

CHARTER CONNECT

MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 2020

JONTA MORRIS **FIRST Black Woman** **Charter School Founder/ CEO in Alabama**

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**What a New
Harvard
Study Shows
About Student
Performance in
Charter Schools**



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i3 Academy Kindergarten teacher, Ms. Alexander, is famous for her virtual "letter hunts," and here she is on a spontaneous hunt for the letter S.

charter

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Congrats to Mrs. Johnson & Mrs. Sisa at University Charter School for receiving the Alabama Gifted and Talented grant for \$30,000!! The Gifted class will provide students hands-on, project-based learning opportunities including how to run a successful business, culinary arts, and the food-to-table lifestyle. WELL DONE!

spotlight

WHAT WE DO

» New School Development

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

» Technical Assistance

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.

BHAM'S FIRST

charter
school leader

Trailblazer. Visionary. Innovator. Change Agent AND The FIRST Black Woman to Open a Charter School in Alabama

BY CANDIE A. PRICE

I first met Jonta Morris in the Spring of 2019 toward the end of my first year as a high school English teacher at Teach for America's annual Opportunity Summit, an event that brings together corp members, alumni, local nonprofits, businesses, school districts, charter schools and universities. I recall her warm, welcoming personality as she passionately shared the mission of Legacy Prep, the new school she would soon open, Birmingham's first charter school. She spoke with such eloquence and unwavering commitment to the cause of educational equity and justice, and it is wonderful to see her vision come to fruition. Legacy Prep has officially finished its first year of operation and is soaring into its second, despite the presence of an unforeseen nationwide pandemic.

As the Founder and CEO, and first black woman to open a charter school in Alabama, Morris has extensive experience in building excellent educational opportunities for children. Prior to her current role, Morris served as an assistant principal at a priority turnaround elementary school and principal resident at a K-8 innovation school with Denver Public Schools. Before joining DPS, she served as both the founding middle school reading teacher and founding assistant principal at KIPP Montbello College Prep in Denver, Colorado. Morris was the first African American school leader within the KIPP Colorado region. Morris has also served as a kindergarten teacher at KIPP Academy Elementary in Bronx, New York. Morris is a proud 2008 Teach for America Atlanta alum, having taught first grade within the Atlanta Public Schools district. In the summers of 2009, 2010, and 2018 she was able to engage her love for developing a strong adult and student culture and high-quality instruction as a Teach For America Atlanta Institute staff member. Morris holds a Master of Education with a specialty of Administration and Supervision. Morris has participated in prestigious national fellowships and organizational portfolios—most notably are KIPP Fisher Fellowship, New Schools Venture Fund, and Charter School Growth Fund.

I was excited to talk with Morris about her journey and what's been happening since Legacy Prep opened its doors last fall:

CANDIE: Thanks, so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me, Jonta. I always like to start out by asking this question, "Who are you?"



JONTA: Thank, you, Candie, for the opportunity. Who am I? I am my ancestors' wildest dreams. I am a proud Black woman. I am the daughter of Tony and Tresha Burnett. I am my Granny's baby. I am a mission-driven, servant leader who is creating an institution that uplifts, affirms, and empowers children and families of color. I am a lifelong educator who is committed to relentlessly pursuing access and equity for all children, particularly children who look like me and/or living in economically and educationally disadvantaged communities; beautiful and brilliant children who have every gift, talent, and limitless potential already inside of them. Children who deserve champions to cultivate their gifts, talents, and potential so they are prepared and inspired to leave their individual legacy. I am a Black female CEO. While I am not one to boast about a title, I am proud, as a Black woman to hold such a role. As we know, Black female CEOs are woefully underrepresented in their ranks and their work is often overlooked or unappreciated as they try to attain top levels. I'm humble, yet proud to not only have a seat at the table, but to have created the table. I am a Black girl who rocks!

CANDIE: YESSSS!!! KUDOS and major props on your accomplishments.

Tell me a little bit about Legacy Prep.

JONTA: Legacy Prep is a school built on love, joy, and excellence. A school that is student-centered, community focused, and impact driven. Legacy is unapologetically providing scholars opportunities to understand and release their strengths and gifts in the pursuit of navigating pathways of greater opportunity in academics and life. Legacy Prep is more than a school—it was birthed as an institution with the utmost desire to transform lives and transform a city. Legacy was a purpose-driven passion six years in the making before we even opened our doors in 2019. Legacy Prep is not about me, it never has and never was. It's truly about building something greater than myself. It's about defying the seemingly insurmountable odds that come with being a trailblazer, especially in an emerging charter market. For the 2020-21 school year, we have 260 scholars across grades K-3. We will add a grade level each year until we grow to become a Pre-k through 8th grade school with the plan to expand to a high school. Legacy Schools, our emerging Charter Management Organization (CMO) affords us the opportunity to scale and replicate the core components of our model across the city, state, country, and world. Hey, I dream big! We're really reimagining the educational

experience for children and we do so in five distinct ways: life-changing academics, powerful community, authenticity and self-actualization, revolutionary innovation, and social justice leadership development. Our entire school model is wrapped in those five core design pillars with an emphasis on inquiry-based and personalized learning instructional models.

CANDIE: How does that play out in the day-to-day school setting?

JONTA: Through life-changing academics we recognize the importance of making thinking visible. We believe authentic learning happens beyond the textbook and classroom...and classrooms should be filled with productive noise. We provide meaningful opportunities for scholars to master foundational skills while grappling with higher-order conceptual learning skills, and truly understanding the why behind the content. We have a "flipped classroom" approach, which means scholars are the owners of their learning while the guide (teacher) facilitates with rigorous and discourse-driven lessons. The combination of having high expectations for all scholars and the integration of 21st Century skills: creative expression, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking creates a magical medley of transformative

“I am extremely proud to be a Black female CEO, who has created an institution that uplifts, affirms, and empowers children and families of color.”

academic and life outcomes for our scholars. We also equip our guides with the tools necessary to move the academic needle. Guides have access to multiple culturally relevant curricula that is research-based and proven to move the academic needle, engage in over eight hours of targeted and personalized coaching and professional development per week, and have multiple collaboration touch points with colleagues across the day and week.

We provide a holistic learning experience for our scholars--the knowledge, skills, habits and mindsets necessary to define their own life path once they graduate from Legacy, whether that's career or college. We're also focused on fostering a sense of self-pride and self-love, which is the foundation of the authenticity and self-actualization pillar. Once those skills are cultivated, our scholars are able to empathize and build authentic relationships with others, utilize habits

of success necessary to thrive as a citizen. Words have power. As such, we're very intentional with the words we use to ensure our scholars embrace their identity: we don't say students we use "scholars, kings and queens, and PREPsters". It is important for our PREPsters to seek and develop their authentic self and one that is not predetermined for them and know who they are and know the greatness from which they come. For this reason, we name our classrooms after individuals who have or currently are "legacy creators" (e.g. Michelle Obama, Jesse Owens, The Tuskegee Airmen, Freedom Riders, etc.). Consequently, because of that firm foundation they're standing on, they now can propel their movement or their legacy further. Authenticity and self-actualization is interwoven throughout our day and a cohesive part of the academic program. Our Exploratory Arts program is essential to our scholar's success, critical because

it supports the full development of our children. The visual and performing arts offerings engage different spaces in scholars' brain that then enhance their capabilities in all content areas while simultaneously developing their passion and interests. Our current offerings include music, dance, physical education, art, iLab (coding, STEM makerspace, project-based learning), and will grow to include martial arts, world languages, and more. All in all, these experiences empower scholars to find their voice and walk in their power.

We also have a powerful community. We recognize that we are a village and there is no physical wall between home and school; there is a fluid partnership. The old adage says it takes a village to raise a child. I like to say it takes a village to teach a child. So, at the core of who we are we recognize that we're stronger as a community and as a village and "I am because we are" is our mantra. At the core of Legacy Prep's mission is the idea that every child has an authentic journey and story and it's our responsibility as their village to champion them along the way. We have a rich school culture with our families and community and there's intentional opportunities for interaction throughout our school day.

We are also guided by revolutionary innovation to boldly reimagine school and redefine what is possible for children and the school setting. The pandemic is really pushing us on that level, and so far we're holding up to this pillar. Innovation challenges our staff and scholars to embody intellectual curiosity to disrupt the status quo and formulate their own theories of change and action. We're always thinking

PREP

of how we do school differently so that it's not the same kind of spoke in the wheel, but where we are paving the way to excellence. Take our school schedule for instance, the longer school day allows for over two hours of reading instruction per day, over one hour of math instruction per day, and two exploratory arts offerings per day.

Also embedded is our focus on social justice leadership development, which is three-fold. First, recognizing that education is the primary vehicle for equal access and full participation in a society that systematically and structurally oppresses entire demographic groups. Equity is at the center of our work and responsibility as a school—promises to kids and families are sacred. We promise to give every child what he or she needs and creating the conditions to meet high standards and succeed in school and beyond. As an organization, we are constantly evaluating our mindsets and actions to ensure we hold true to our promise of creating an equitable education for all children. Whether that's a series of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional development sessions for our staff; examining our practices as individuals and as school to make sure they're equitable, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive. Second, having scholars understand that they have a right to a world-class education and how to advocate for themselves and others. Third, it's about creating a safe and nurturing space for our PREPsters to release what they're seeing in the world. Children are brilliant in their observance, so they're seeing the racial and

social unrest that is playing out on a daily basis in our country. Giving a safe space, for even a five-year-old to sit in a circle to unpack and release what they're seeing, feeling, and experiencing is powerful. It is in these moments in which our tiny community catalysts and change agents are more fully aware of our community's and country's inequities, the concrete tools that are available to bring about change and, most important, their own power and responsibility to contribute to ushering in the better world that they both deserve and uniquely imagine.

CANDIE: Very meaningful stuff and it seems you have a great platform through this school, but what brought you to this kind of work? I mean, you're brilliant and you could have sprinkled your black girl magic in any field in the world. Why education?

Morris: Education found me. After completing my undergraduate degree, I went into sales and worked for top companies, Nestle and Hershey for 13 years. I knew months into the first year, that sales was not my life's work and calling. I yearned for something more fulfilling. I began to do some intentional soul-searching about what truly was I put on this Earth for - what is my purpose? What is my destiny? At the end of those two years, the answer was very clear—teaching was a direction in which I was supposed to go. I uprooted and left everything back in 2007 and embarked on my journey to become a

lifelong educator. As I stood in front of a class of 23 first graders on the first day of school, I cried. The tears were confirmation tears—my soul was at peace. I found my purpose. Joining Teach For America was certainly a destiny move and as I've matriculated from position to position, organization to organization, I didn't leave those organizations because I was forced to or because there was misalignment - there certainly was alignment. It's just that I was being moved and pushed further into my destiny and purpose and so I think one would look at my resume or bio and see that I've been all over, but I believe those experiences - good, bad, and indifferent - have prepared me for the right here right now to create and propel Legacy Prep's mission and vision.

CANDIE: So now that you have these past seven months under your belt, what have you learned? What was most challenging? What was most rewarding?

JONTA: Most challenging? I've learned that you have to go slow to go fast. My relentless desire to give our children the very best, prove what is possible, and the nonstop planning over these past four and a half years, I came in full steam ahead like ready, set, go we're running - tennis shoes, Nike outfit -just running. I had to tell myself that going slow to go fast doesn't mean I'm sacrificing your model or your vision, and that we will get there. It does mean that you have to focus and prioritize on what's that one thing that we're going to do really well and not saying we're going to negate the other needs, but what can we do well and build upon from there. I am still practicing the leadership skill of slowing down to create space for my team to catch up. Another challenge was founder's syndrome. I was holding on too tightly and not allowing my team to thrive in their respective roles. I think when you hold onto something that you've created from birth - you're protective, especially being victorious through the curvy and adventurous journey. For the first few

Continued on Page 12

LEGACY

SHOUT OUT



Dr. Henry Nelson stepped down as Chair of the APCS Commission, but will remain on the commission until his term expires May, 2021. We take this time to say, Thank you, Dr. Nelson, for your leadership and faithfulness as Chair!

ALABAMA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION

Congratulations to the new officers of the Alabama Public Charter School Commission! A warm welcome to Chair, David Marshall and Co-Chair, Alison Alexander! Many thanks to Dr. Henry Nelson for your service as Chair and for your long service on the commission.



Dr. David Marshall

Chair

Dr. David Marshall is currently a faculty member in Auburn University's College of Education where he teaches coursework related to educational research and program evaluation. His current research focuses on charter schools and school choice, innovative approaches to teacher preparation, and how K-12 schools have adapted during the COVID-19

pandemic. He has conducted evaluation work in K-12 and higher education contexts that have been funded by federal, state, and regional grants, as well as by industry.

Dr. Marshall worked with the Richmond Teacher Residency program in Virginia which intentionally prepared and placed teachers in the City of Richmond's public schools. Prior to that, he taught middle and high school social studies in the City

of Philadelphia, in both the traditional public schools, as well as in the city's public charter schools.

Dr. Marshall earned a PhD from Virginia Commonwealth University in educational research and evaluation. He also earned two master's degrees in education - one from La Salle University and one from Virginia Tech. He earned a B.A. in political science from Virginia Tech.



Allison Alexander

Co-Chair

Allison Alexander is the principal of Corley Elementary School located in Boaz, Alabama. She has served as a building administrator for eight years, instructional coach for four, and a classroom teacher for six years. Her school was chosen a CLAS Banner School of Distinction and presented at the Closing the Achievement Gap Conference.

Ms. Alexander holds a Ed. S and a M. Ed in Instructional Leadership from the University of Alabama, and a M. Ed as a Reading Specialist from Jacksonville State University. Allison earned her Bachelor of Science in Education in the area of Secondary Language Arts from Jacksonville State University. She is the current Region V President of the Alabama Association of Elementary School Administrators.

She served on multiple school and system accreditation review teams.

months I didn't do a great job of allowing my team to carry the vision and was fearful to release the reigns. I realized that metaphorically this was my baby for over six years and didn't want to let go. I'm now in recovery from founder's syndrome! I have the most amazing, authentic, supportive, and passionate staff and want them to know how much I appreciate, value, and need them—they make Legacy, Legacy!

Most rewarding: There isn't one specific moment that I can say has been the most rewarding, it's a collection of moments. If I had to call out a few moments, I can distinctly remember key moments from our founding year. The ribbon cutting ceremony with community members and my family; the first day of school with me giving a lot of high fives and smiles to our PREPsters and families. The excitement and energy was palpable; the quotable lines of satisfaction from our PREPsters, families and staff. Quotes like, "I want to stay at Legacy Prep forever." "There is no experience like the Legacy experience. We feel the love just as much as our kids do." or having a staff member say, "I'm with you until the wheels fall off," or "I'll jump off a cliff for you." It still feels so surreal...to have created Legacy. There are times when I literally stop to take it all in and observe the beauty that is transpiring. There are no words to describe the emotions that I'm overcome with during those moments. I cry each time I think about the sacrifice, tears, years, threats, early mornings, late nights that went into turning my dream into reality. And, you know what? I'd do it all over again for our babies to have a place to call home and a place for a families to feel that their most precious gems are loved and receiving an exceptional education.

CANDIE: That's awesome! I can imagine that this is all so surreal, yet incredibly rewarding. What do you think is the most misunderstood perceptions about charter schools? And what's your response?

JONTA: One of the most common misconceptions about charter schools is that charter schools are not public schools and are taking funding away from traditional

districts. My response is that charter schools are public schools and operate under the same legal mandates. Charter schools receive federal and state dollars. Some charters also receive public dollars through local funds—Legacy currently does not. My hope for our city and state is to recognize that they're all our kids. If we operate from a student-centered lens, we'd recognize the impact and power of unity for the sake of the kids in Birmingham and Alabama as a whole. I am optimistic that we will get there in the near future, and as a result, create a more comprehensive universal approach to education in our city.

I believe the second common misconception is that charter schools select scholars. Charters are required, at least in Alabama, to have open enrollment and we don't dictate nor manipulate that enrollment process. There's also a belief that teachers are unqualified or there's a lack of accountability for charters. In fact, there's higher accountability and higher stakes. In addition to following Alabama Public Charter School Commission and authorizer mandates and requirements, charters are still required to complete state and federal mandates. Charter schools are also being monitored and at the end of their five year contract, can face nonrenewal for poor performance. With the higher level of accountability comes a higher level of autonomy. The autonomy allows us to create an educational model that is based on community and scholar demand. The autonomy allows us to consider a teacher's credentials, background, experience rather than just a placement test that deems them certified. Remember, we're reimagining education. The only way to reimagine is to be innovative and disrupt the status quo.

CANDIE: Great points! Okay, so what do you hope will be the legacy of Legacy Prep?

JONTA: This question gives me chills. I'd have to say, our Legacy Prep mantra: We are bold. We are who we say we are: educators, innovators, trendsetters, and champions. We are disruptors who are intentionally making a difference in changing the status quo. We were created to pave the way to excellence through unity, strength, and hope. This place, this time

and the people here deserve this because we are the ones the world was waiting on. We are a village that's humbled but ready to embrace each new day through love, equity, and empowerment. We are the change we need to see. Failure is not an option. We can and we will. The revolution will be televised.

CANDIE: Come on now. Yes, drop the mic!!! What has been a major accomplishment for this inaugural year?

JONTA: First, we literally opened our doors after four and half years of nonstop planning! Second, our data. Within seven months of our first year, we saw astounding growth! We administer the NWEA MAP assessment in reading and math three times per year. The diagnostic was administered in August and the mid-year was administered in December. Of course, we were unable to complete end of year assessments due the spring school closure. Within five months, 94% of our PREPsters made growth on the MAP reading assessment and 89% made growth on the MAP math assessment. It's worth celebrating when we call out the heartbreaking fact that 29 incoming first and second graders came to us in August didn't know letter names and sounds. The other celebrations worth noting is around culture and climate--we have 95% student retention and 96% staff retention.

CANDIE: That's great. So now I'm going to shift to some personal questions. What are your hobbies and ways you self-care?

JONTA: Haha, self-care?! When is the last time I did that? I don't do a great job of consistently practicing self-care. I'm constantly pouring into other people, my mind is constantly going a hundred miles per hour, and am always pulled in so many different directions as CEO, Mama, wife. I refuel by being alone and shutting everything off-- binge watching TV shows or getting monthly massages makes me happy! Hobbies: I'm a legit foodie...I love to eat good food! I love to try new restaurants and go back to old favorites, often ordering the same meal. Birmingham's restaurant game is the truth! I also love to travel particularly to warm climates. More than anything, I love to

spend time with my family! Whether it be date nights and goofy moments with my hubby-- just laughing, talking, and being friends - and with my babies, my two kings, Hamilton (8) and Pierson (5) - just being the best mommy and wife I can be.

CANDIE: What would you go back and tell your teenage self?

JONTA: Girl, you are enough!

CANDIE: Amen, alright, more teenage girls need to know that don't they? What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

JONTA: To be my authentic self.

CANDIE: What does that mean to you?

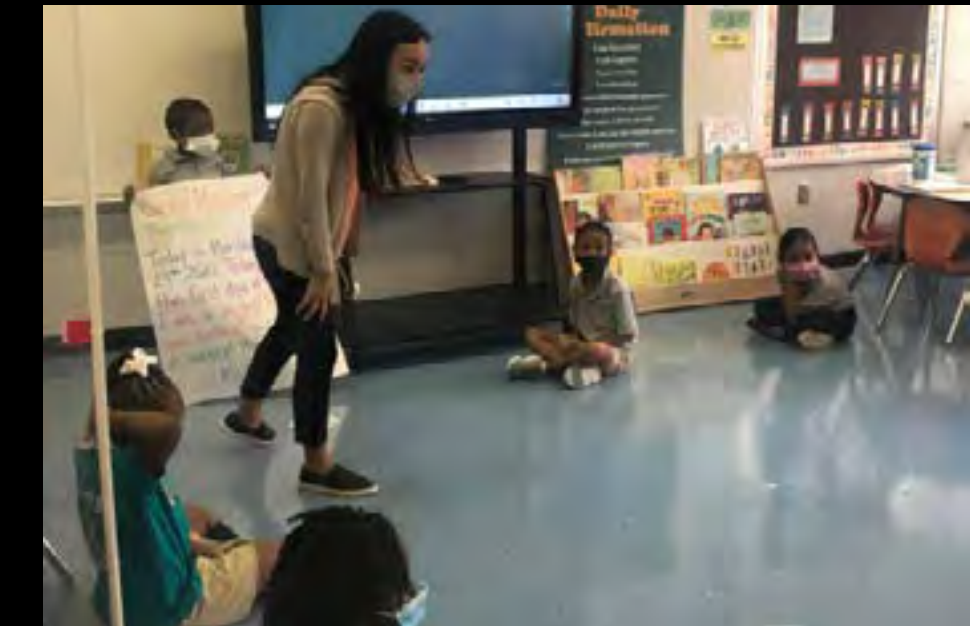
JONTA: Being my authentic self means being me anytime, anywhere, and with anyone. To be content with what I know to be true about myself and do not settle for what other people believe to be true. To operate with integrity at all costs and be comfortable speaking up when it conflicts with my inner beliefs and moral compass. To not underestimate my voice and my right to be at the table.

CANDIE: Any last thoughts you want to leave about Legacy Prep?

JONTA: Our mission is to educate and empower our scholars to embrace their identity, lead lives of choice and opportunity, and impact their communities as the next generation of socially-conscious leaders. We envision an exceptional educational experience in our scholars' lives that readies them to establish their legacy, prepared and inspired to create a life full of opportunity, choice, connection and meaning. Shameless plug for our social channels: Follow and like us on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, & Twitter with the handle @legacyprepal or visit our website at www.legacyprepal.org

CANDIE: Thank you for spending this time with me.

JONTA: Thank you, too, Candie. It was refreshing!





What a New Harvard Study Shows About Student Performance in Charter Schools

BY CHRISTY WOLFE

The evidence—both anecdotal and quantitative—has consistently shown that public charter schools use the flexibilities in their school models to best serve students, especially those who are historically underserved by public schools. Now we have even more.

A new study from Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance leverages data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to look at trends in charter school student performance compared to district school students. The results are significant and demonstrate how charter schools have improved as a sector and made a significant positive impact on students.

At the National Alliance we follow studies of student achievement at charter schools closely: this is the first nationally significant study since 2015. But not only is it a key update, it looks at charter school performance in new ways, utilizing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress that have only recently become available to researchers. Here are some of the most significant findings:

1.

This is the first study to use nationally representative data to track changes in student achievement within public schools.

This is important because the authors look at the pace of improvement—student performance growth over time. Up until now studies have typically compared the average performance of students. With that lens, the findings show the pace of improvement in charter schools is faster over the 12-year span. The sample examined by the researchers include more than 4 million test performances.

2.

Charter schools have improved over the years.

On average, district schools outperformed charter schools in 2005 in both the 4th and 8th grades—particularly in math. By 2017 those differences had disappeared. While the study doesn't address all the possibilities explaining the improvement, it suggests the closure of lower performing schools and replacing them with more effective ones is a factor.

3.

Overall students are advancing at a faster pace in charter schools – especially Black students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Overall eighth graders attending charter schools show learning gains that are 3 months ahead of their district school peers from 2005 to 2017. Black students in particular were an additional 6 months ahead. Given that one in three charter school students is Black, this is especially noteworthy. Scores of those in the bottom 25% of the socioeconomic distribution increased nearly twice as much as those of

4.

Charter school growth slowdowns are likely due to political resistance and increasing concerns about the charter schools as innovative disrupters.

One reason the authors undertook the study was to identify whether performance is tied to the decline in new charter school growth that we've seen since 2017. And their findings show that the answer is no. Given rising achievement levels at charter schools—it is unlikely that any slowdown in growth is due to declining productivity.

What the data from this study shows us is that—as we have already seen in prior research—charter schools are largely working for students, but especially students who are historically disadvantaged. In addition, aligns with the findings from a recent study from Bellwether Education Partners looking at federal funds for opening up new charter schools and how it has evolved and contributed to opening more high-quality schools.

Taken together, the research shows charter schools are finding what works through innovation, replicating their success, and ultimately producing accelerated achievement gains for students.

Christy Wolfe is the vice president of policy and planning at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

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 September 11, 2020.

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Charter School Board Training

New Schools for Alabama held its second statewide charter school board training on Sept 24th. Thanks to all of you who attended! If you are a school leader or board chair, please reach out to Debbie Lister with Ed Board Partners to schedule your complimentary 5 hours of 1-on-1 board coaching for your school: debbie@edboards.org.

If you were unable to attend, email us for a link to the video conference and materials: candie@newschoolsforalabama.org.

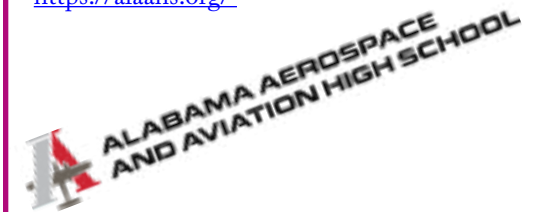
Empower Community School

Empower Community School will open its doors in Fall 2022! Students currently in the 4th and 5th grade will be eligible to attend. Intent to Enroll forms are now available! Check out their website for more information. [www.http://empoweral.org/](http://empoweral.org/)



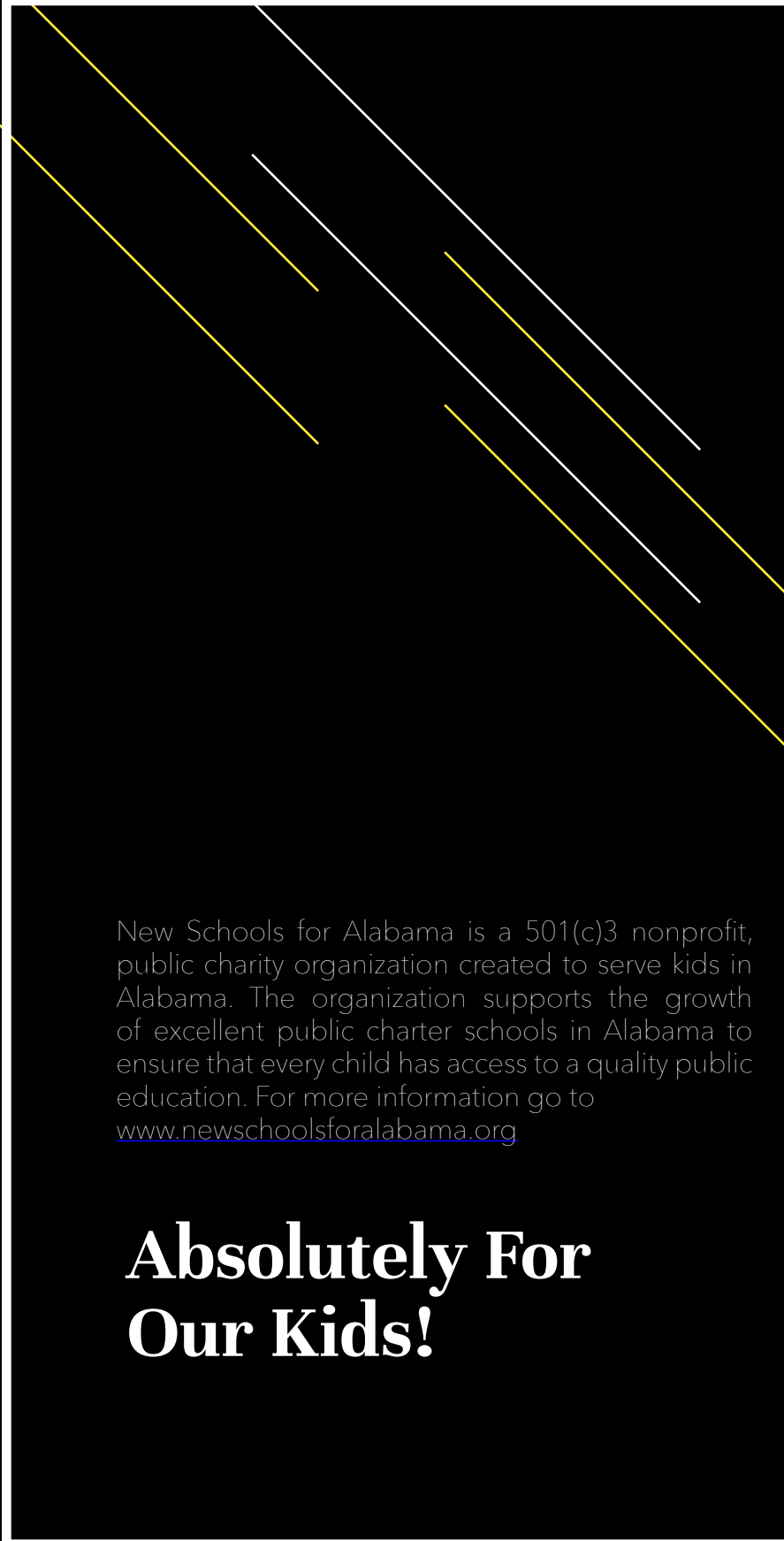
Alabama Aerospace & Aviation High School

Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School is opening Fall 2022! The school will prepare students for successful careers in aerospace and aviation. Students currently enrolled in 7th grade will be eligible for the first 9th grade class. Complete Intent to Enroll Forms at <https://alaahs.org/>



“Dreams do not come true just because you dream them. It’s hard work that makes things happen. It’s hard work that creates change.”
– Shonda Rhimes

bite size
SCOOP



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

**Absolutely For
Our Kids!**

CHARTER CONNECT MAGAZINE