

## FEDERAL CHARTER SCHOOLS PROGRAM DRIVES GROWTH IN ALABAMA'S EMERGING CHARTER SECTOR

In just two years, the Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) effectively jumpstarted charter school growth in Alabama. In 2019, the U.S. Department of Education awarded New Schools for Alabama, a nonprofit charter school support organization, a \$25 million state entities grant to support the launch of 15 new, high-quality charter schools over five years to serve students in some of Alabama's highest-need communities. So far, New Schools for Alabama has awarded start-up funds to two schools and anticipates making awards to four additional schools this summer.

The CSP has proven to be a critical source of charter school funding for a state in significant need of high-quality public schools. Alabama's educational outcomes are consistently among the

worst in the nation. On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), for example, Alabama dropped from 47 to 52 in the nation, placing it behind 49 other states, Washington, D.C., and the Department of Defense. Even so, Alabama has been slow to embrace charter schools. After a failed attempt in 2012 to pass a charter school law, then-Governor Robert Bentley signed the School Choice and Opportunity Act into law in 2015. However, charter schools struggled to gain a foothold in the state. Access to start-up funding was a major barrier to opening new schools, and charter schools were met with hostility from state and district leaders.

Schools funded by New Schools for Alabama's CSP award have the potential to infuse innovation





and quality into an education system sorely in need of both. The first two were slated to open in fall 2020. These small, community-operated schools with innovative models are reminiscent of the schools seen in the early days of the charter school movement. One grantee, the Montgomery Education Foundation, worked with the local school district to convert a low-performing district school into a charter school — which would be the first such conversion in the state. For years, district leaders throughout Alabama were hostile to charters opening in their communities, but this work demonstrates the promise of district-charter collaboration: “This is significant because it will likely have a ripple effect across the sector, demonstrating to other districts what’s possible and encouraging them to take advantage of this opportunity to get federal funds to improve schools for students,” says Tyler Barnett, executive director of New Schools for Alabama.

The second grantee, i3 Academy of Birmingham, launched a charter school as part of a community revitalization effort in a low-income urban community. In addition to serving local students, the new school will serve as a hub for housing, wellness, and job programs intended to directly address some of the root causes of poverty in the

community. “The state-of-the-art facility, located in a long-abandoned community church, represents the first major renovation project in this community in more than 40 years and will house at least 420 students in a highly personalized environment. The school is based on the Drew Charter School model in partnership with Purpose Built Communities, and was adapted with input from community residents,” says Barnett.

Though the number of charter schools in Alabama remains small, it will grow quickly because of CSP funds. “None of what we’ve accomplished is possible in Alabama without the CSP grant,” explains Barnett. “[Without it] we would continue to see slow growth. We wouldn’t see a cohesive or concerted effort to start charter schools and we wouldn’t see talent willing to step out on that ledge and consider creating a charter school. Not having access to [CSP] funds would leave a devastating impact on the growth of new, high-quality, tuition-free schools in Alabama. No question about it.”

