

There's Cause to be Hopeful about Education in Alabama

By Thomas Rains

Earlier this month, the Legislature passed a General Fund budget that took money that would have (and should have) been spent on education. It's tempting to shake our heads and grumble when things don't go our way, and we're especially good at that in Alabama. But if we want things to get better, we know we can't just complain. We have to try to succeed under the existing circumstances.

Without question, the state of Alabama needs increased education funding. A [recent presentation to the State Board of Education](#) noted that Alabama not only underfunds its schools, but also inefficiently allocates existing funding without regard to best practices in education. Hopefully, this marks the beginning of a new conversation about education funding in Alabama.

In the meantime, school systems have new tools in their education toolboxes to help them think big and boldly about new ways to educate students—and be more effective with existing resources.

Imagine what schools would look like if we designed them today, from scratch. If we wanted to succeed, we would build schools that fit the needs of today's students using the resources we have. Despite everything that has changed in the last 50 years, education has hardly adapted to meet students' changing needs. Today's students are significantly more likely to have two parents working outside the home, or only one parent or guardian to care for them. In Alabama, a majority of students (52 percent) come from low-income homes, and 11 percent have special needs.

Newly designed schools might have more wrap-around services, or pay the best teachers higher salaries for teaching in high-need areas and subjects. They might follow year-round calendars so children who can't afford summer camp and vacations don't suffer from summer learning loss. Or, perhaps the bulk of learning would take place online. The possibilities are endless.

In March, the Legislature passed a law allowing public charter schools, and the State Department of Education is in the process of implementing that law. Despite doomsday claims about profiteers storming into Alabama to take over our schools, [two thirds of charter schools nationwide were actually started and are operated by local non-profits](#). Among the remainder, most are operated by larger non-profits called Charter Management Organizations (CMOs).

Charter schools can provide a great opportunity for communities to create schools that better serve students, whether by converting existing schools or creating start-ups. And, there's no need to wait for someone else to do it. In our work at A+, we've spoken with superintendents, board members, teachers, parents and other community leaders who see incredible potential to cut through red tape and better

serve students with public charter schools. I encourage them to study it further, and—if it's the right fit—turn that idea into a reality themselves.

We can all benefit from high-quality public charter schools, because the lessons learned there can help us find better ways to educate all students.

Beyond charter schools, the State Department of Education is in its third year of accepting innovation plans from school systems seeking waivers from state law for more flexibility. So far, only about two dozen systems have applied, but this has the potential to be a game-changer. As systems seek to further meet to the needs of today's students, they can get waivers from virtually any statute that might have previously held them back.

Finally, last spring the Legislature also passed a law requiring school systems to offer an online learning option by next fall. Notably, it does not prescribe what this must look like, only that systems must offer an online learning option. This means systems that have already developed their own unique online programs can continue, and other systems have an impetus to find their own solutions.

While we may have cause to feel skeptical about education in Alabama, there's actually plenty to be hopeful about. We still need to work on more funding, but in the meantime, there's plenty we can do to build the case for it.

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