

# **School Choice** and Student Opportunity Act

**Public charter school:** A public school that has autonomy over key decisions like finance, personnel, schedule, curriculum, and instruction, and in return is held to the highest levels of accountability.

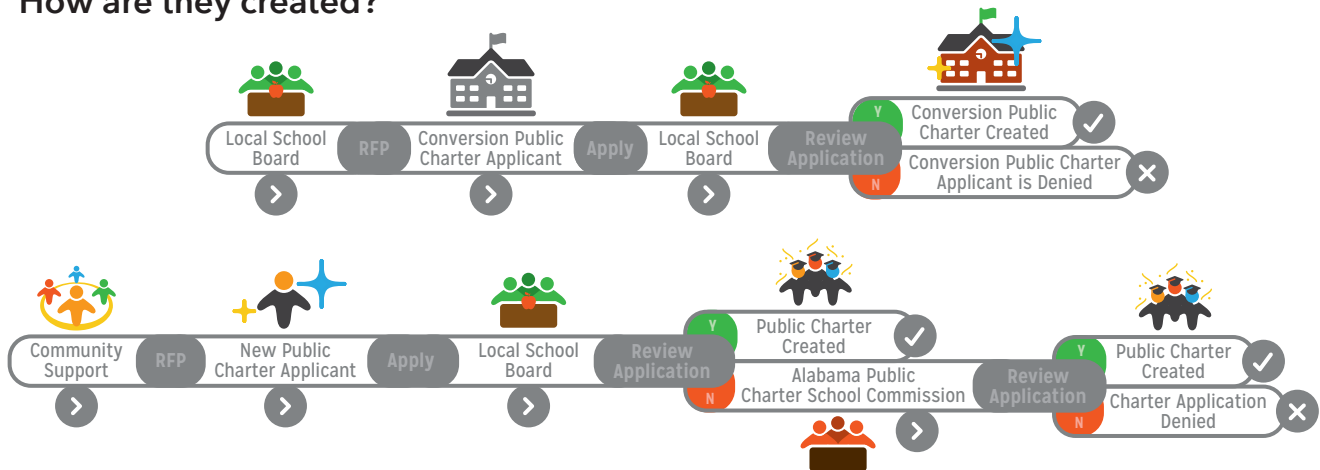
Every single child in Alabama deserves access to a quality education regardless of their race, income, or zip code. No one is more aware of their child's individual needs than his or her parents or guardians. In 2013, Alabama began to expand school choice options for parents through the Alabama Accountability Act with unprecedented flexibility for schools and school systems, tax-credits and a scholarship program for parents with students in failing schools. These options expanded innovation and provided more than 4,000 Alabama students with a better education.

Helping only 4,000 students across the state is not enough; we must continue to expand choice to ensure that every single child in Alabama has access to the best education possible. Alabama is one of only eight states in the country that do not provide public charter schools as a part of their educational toolkit. Although there are no silver-bullet solutions to magically fix every problem in our schools, public charter schools have proven success in states across the country. Students in public charter schools are more likely to graduate from high school than their traditional public school peers. Low-income students in public charter schools perform better than their peers in traditional district schools. Public charter schools give Alabama families another choice when it comes to the best education for their child.

## Overview

This bill will allow for the creation of public charter schools in the state of Alabama. Charter schools are public schools and are part of the public education system in the state. There are two kinds of public charter schools: (1) conversion charter schools which are existing public schools that wish to operate a charter, and (2) start-up charter schools which are newly created public charter schools.

## How are they created?



- No more than 10 new public charter schools can be created in a fiscal year for the first five years of implementation. If the cap is not reached the remaining spots will roll over to the next fiscal year.
- There is no limit to the number of conversion public charter schools that may be approved.
- The Alabama Public Charter Commission is appointed by the State Board of Education and is composed of nine members, two appointees recommended by the Governor, two recommended by the Speaker of the House and Pro Tem of the Senate, and two recommended by the State Superintendent of Education. The ninth member is appointed by the local board where the application originated.

## Who can attend?

- Public charter schools are open to any student residing in the state of Alabama and must enroll every student who wishes to attend unless the number of students exceeds the capacity of the building.
- In instances where enrollment exceeds capacity, students shall be selected through a random selection process at a public meeting.
- Admission may only be limited to students within a given age group or grade level and may be organized around a theme or concept (i.e. vocational training, visual and performing arts, special education, science, mathematics, technology), but competency in that theme cannot be used to determine enrollment eligibility.

## How do they operate?

- Each public school is overseen by an independent governing board whose members have been selected as laid out in the charter application.
- A public charter school's mission and performance standards are approved and agreed upon by the governing board and the local school board or Alabama Public Charter Commission who approves the application.
- Public charter schools have unprecedented flexibility in terms of the state's education statutes or any state or local rule, regulation, policy, or procedure relating to other public schools in the state.
- In return for flexibility, the public charter school is held to high performance standards and is subject to closure if it fails to meet them.

## How are they accountable?

- If a public charter school does not perform to the standards they've set in their charter, the school is closed.
- Performance standards in each contract at a minimum must include: student academic proficiency (including performance on state standardized tests), student academic growth, achievement gaps in both proficiency and growth between major student subgroups, attendance, recurrent enrollment, postsecondary readiness in high school, financial performance and sustainability, and board performance and stewardship.
- Unlike existing public schools, after 5 years, public charter schools must go through a charter renewal process to determine if they are meeting the needs of their student population.
- Each public charter school must also set annual performance targets which are reported by the authorizer to the State Department of Education and the Legislature.
- In addition, each public charter school must annually submit to an independent audit of the school's finances.

## How are they funded?

- Charters are public schools and receive the same per-pupil funding as other public schools, excluding those funds already earmarked for debt service or capital expenditures. If a family decided to send their child to a public charter school, the money would follow the child from their current public school to the public charter school.
- Public charter schools will receive transportation funding in the same manner as it is paid to school systems.
- State or federal aid for special education funding will be paid directly to the public charter school.