

**First Year Evaluation Report**

**University Charter School**

*For the Alabama Public Charter School Commission*

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## *Executive Summary*

### **Summative Finding**

Although opening a new school is always a challenge, opening a new school as a stand-alone entity with its own education paradigms serving students who have faced hurdles in pursuing their education is especially daunting. Overall, it is clear that University Charter School has made strides to accurately and effectively implement all aspects of their program throughout the first year. Indeed, even during its startup year, data collected by this evaluation strongly suggest that the charter adheres to the performance expectations outlined at the time of its Alabama Public Charter School Application and to those established by the resulting Public Charter School Charter Contract.

### **Evaluation Purpose**

The focus of the present report will be on the extent to which the University Charter School (UCS), a public charter school, was in adhering to the performance expectations outlined at the time of its Alabama Public Charter School Application and established by the resulting Public Charter School Charter Contract. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to provide stakeholders, including the Alabama Public Charter School Commission (APCSC) and the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), school employees, students, and parents, with data about the impact of this school during the 2018-2019 school year. The findings of this report are intended to be used to provide information to stakeholders of the program so that future planning and decision-making can be informed.

### **Frameworks for Evaluation**

As part of the charter school enabling legislation and subsequent actualization of the law, the APCSC adopted frameworks for annual evaluations of charter schools in Alabama. The frameworks

form the structure of the current report. In addition, given best practice in evaluation, a site visit was conducted where stakeholders including school leaders, board members, parents, teachers, students, and guidance personnel were interviewed individually or in focus groups. Additionally, a number of classroom observations were made by the team and these are summarized and included in the report. The greatest portion of evaluation time and resources was devoted to identification, collection, and synthesis of appropriate data. In addition to the general approach (for whom, under what conditions, and to what extent the school has or has not met set standards), the questions addressed in this evaluation focused on criteria set within three Alabama Public Charter School Commission (Commission) frameworks: Academic Performance, Organizational Performance, and Financial Performance Frameworks. Each framework is divided into indicator categories. For each indicator measure under the Academic Performance Framework (APF), four ratings are possible, “Exceeds Standard”, “Meets Standard”, “Does Not Meet Standard, or “Falls Far Below Standard.”

<b>Academic Performance Framework Ratings</b>	
<b>Exceeds Standard</b>	<p>Charter school receives a performance designation of “Exemplary” or “Very Good.”</p> <p>School proficiency rate is 10 or more percentage points above the district average.</p> <p>School MGP is 5 or more points above the district median.</p> <p>Charter school graduation rate is 10 or more percentage points above the district average.</p> <p>Charter school proficiency rate exceeds expected performance (effect size <math>\geq .30</math>).</p> <p>The charter school exceeded its school-specific academic goal(s).</p>
<b>Meets Standard</b>	<p>Charter school receives a performance designation of “Good.”</p> <p>School proficiency rate is equal to or is up to 9 percentage points above the district average.</p> <p>School MGP is equal to or up to 4 percentage points above the district median.</p> <p>Charter school graduation rate is equal to or up to 9 percentage points above the district average.</p>

	<p>Charter school proficiency rate meets or slightly exceeds expected performance (effect size 0 to .29)</p> <p>The charter school met its school-specific academic goal(s).</p>
<b>Does Not Meet Standard</b>	<p>Charter school receives a performance designation of “Fair.”</p> <p>School proficiency rate is up to 9 percentage points below the district average.</p> <p>School MGP is up to 4 points below the district median.</p> <p>Charter school graduation rate is up to 9 percentage points below the district average.</p> <p>Charter school proficiency rate is lower than expected performance (effect size -0.01 to -.29)</p> <p>The charter school did not meet its school-specific academic goal(s).</p>
<b>Falls Far Below Standard</b>	<p>Charter school receives a performance designation of “Underperforming” or “Lowest 5 Percent.”</p> <p>School proficiency rate is 10 or more percentage points below the district average.</p> <p>School MGP is 5 or more points below the district median.</p> <p>Charter school graduation rate is 10 or more percentage points below the district average.</p> <p>Charter school proficiency rate falls far below expected performance (effect size <math>\leq</math>-.30)</p> <p>Charter school graduation rate falls far below expected performance (effect size <math>\leq</math>-.30)</p> <p>The charter school fell far below its school-specific academic goal(s).</p>

For each indicator measure under the Operational Performance Framework (OPF) and the Financial Performance Framework (FPF), a rating of “Meets Standard” or “Does Not Meet Standard” will be determined.

<b>Operational Performance Framework Ratings</b>	
<b>Meets Standard</b>	The school complies with and presents no concerns in the evidence statements.
<b>Does Not Meet Standard</b>	The school failed to implement the program in the manner described in the evidence statements; the failure(s) were material and significant to the viability of the school, or regardless of the severity of the failure(s), the board has not instituted remedies that have resulted in prompt and sufficient movement toward compliance to the satisfaction of the authorizer.

<b>Financial Performance Framework Ratings</b>	
<b>Meets Standard</b>	<p>A <i>Meets</i> rating indicates sound financial viability based on the overall financial record. The school may have already met the absolute Financial Performance Framework standard based on the financials under review, or, any concerns have been adequately addressed based on additional information such that the Commission concludes that performance indicates sound financial viability.</p>
<b>Does Not Meet Standard</b>	<p>A <i>Does Not Meet</i> rating means that even based on the most current financial information (recent audited financials and more current unaudited financials), the school is not currently meeting the standard, and/or concerns previously identified and of heightened monitoring and/or intervention have not been adequately corrected and/or, if not currently manifested, have been of a depth or duration that warrants continued attention.</p> <p>A <i>Does Not Meet</i> rating indicates that upon evidence from the performance framework, quarterly reports, notice of concerns, and investigation and review, the Commission identifies significant financial risk such that heightened monitoring and/or intervention are warranted. Appropriate monitoring and or interventions will be determined on a case by case basis, and, in part, by how the rating on the standard in question fits within the school's overall performance on the financial framework.</p>

The first framework, APF, includes measures that allow the Commission to evaluate the charter school's academic performance. These measures include State and Federal Accountability standards. In order to align charter school accountability expectations with the state accountability system, the state's measures serve as the foundation of the APF, supplemented by additional measures required by the Alabama School Choice and Opportunity Act. The accountability system evaluates all students and targeted subgroups on three components: proficiency, growth, and career and college readiness (CCR). It also includes graduation rate, chronic absenteeism, and ELP. Academic performance is also compared to that of other schools within the school's local district.

The second framework, OPF, is divided into six indicators. Each indicator is further divided into specific measures where the school must meet each standard. The framework assesses the school's adherence to the material terms of its proposed education program as defined in its current charter contract. It addresses whether the school is complying with applicable education requirements and seeks to ensure that the school is protecting the rights of students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELL).

The OPF assesses the school's financial viability and financial management by determining if the school is meeting financial reporting and compliance requirements and if it is following Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). An assessment is also made of the governing board's compliance with its governance requirements and its responsibility to hold the school management team accountable. Reviews are also made to ensure the school's adherence to protecting the rights of the students and parents they serve as well as the staff they employ. This framework also aims to ensure the school's facilities are safe for occupancy, that the school (1) complies with student transportation laws, (2) meets state and federal health and

safety requirements, and (3) properly maintains and handles information. Lastly, it (4) evaluates whether the school is meeting its mission-specific organizational goals.

The Financial Performance Framework is a reporting tool that provides the Commission with the necessary data to assess the financial health and viability of charter schools in its portfolio for the purposes of an annual financial trends. The measures are designed to be complementary. No single measure gives a full picture of the financial situation of a school. One of the Commission's core responsibilities with respect to charter schools is to protect the public interest. The Financial Framework is the primary lever for carrying out this responsibility with respect to the allocation of public funds to charter schools.

The indicators for the financial framework are as follows:

<b>1.a</b>	Current Ratio (Near-Term)
<b>1.b</b>	Unrestricted Days Cash (Near-Term)
<b>1.c</b>	Debt Default (Near-Term)
<b>2.a</b>	Total Margin (Sustainability)
<b>2.b</b>	Debt to Asset Ratio (Sustainability)
<b>2.c</b>	Cash Flow (Sustainability)
	Enrollment Variance (Informational)

When reviewing the financial viability of schools, two sets of targets are used. One set is used for schools within Year One and Two of their operation (Stage 1) and the other is for schools at their 3<sup>rd</sup> year and beyond (Stage 2). This is UCS's first year, and such, Stage 1 standards will be used to measure its financial performance. In addition, all data collected will be used as a baseline measure for subsequent years.

## **School Context**

UCS is a public charter school located on the campus of the University of West Alabama in Livingston, AL. The school was opened in August 2018 and it served students in grades Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade in Year One with the plan to add one grade per year until it serves students in Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

## **Evaluation Design, Methods and Limitations**

The Holistic Model of Evaluation was used in the present project. The Model was refined by the Auburn Center for Evaluation to meet the dual and simultaneous goals of: (1) Providing information to school staff and stakeholders that can be used throughout the charter contract term and (2) Providing information to school staff and stakeholders on how well the school is performing (program valuation).

Data collection that occurred over the past year used an electronic database, interviews, and site visit observations. Thus, to conduct such an evaluation, the Center used its expertise in both qualitative (interviewing/observing) and quantitative (numerical data and statistics) to measure the progress of the school: school planning, collection of outcome baseline data, school documents, and school status visits were also examined. The use of multiple methods of data collection supports “triangulation,” which is a systematic process of confirmation and establishes interpretive credibility. Triangulation was used through two strategies: (1) triangulating among methods of gathering data and (2) triangulating using multiple sources of data.

The evaluators will work with UCS staff in future evaluations to analyze any limitations and inconsistencies in data collection and analysis, and to use this data to adjust data collection and analysis in subsequent evaluation reports during the five year re-approval cycle.



## **Academic Performance Framework Findings**

Many of the indicators within this framework will be measured in more depth and with more complete data in later years. Since this is UCS's first year, much of what is reported here will serve as a baseline against which to compare future performance. Some of the categories on the ALSDE framework cannot be answered because the data are not currently available.

### ***Academic Performance***

Academic performance is conceptualized as student performance on the Scantron Performance Series. This test, covering Math and Reading in both the Fall and Spring semesters and given to grades 3-8, is distributed along four proficiency levels: Far Below, Below, Above, and Far Above based on norm-referenced scores for each grade. Given it is UCS's first year, no annual growth scores are available at this time. However, Table 1 below gives the raw scantron score average by grade for each test along with the school targets and score change from fall to spring. Proficiency levels, particularly student change from fall to spring, are shown in Table 2 below. Table 3 demonstrates comparisons of proficiency levels to State and District rates.

Table 1. UCS Scantron Scores, Targets, and Change by Grade Level

<i>Grade Level</i>	Scantron Math				Scantron Reading			
	<u>Fall</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Change</u>	<u>Fall</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Change</u>
Grade 3	2088	2222	2364	134	2201	2335	2518	134
Grade 4	2259	2406	2488	147	2436	2552	2678	117
Grade 5	2414	2529	2589	115	2575	2689	2798	114
Grade 6	2535	2615	2667	80	2764	2856	2883	92
Grade 7	2640	2701	2743	61	2832	2891	2954	59
Grade 8	2765	2805	2788	40	2999	2999	3019	0

Table 2. UCS Scantron Proficiency Level Changes from Fall to Spring

UCS Percent Change in Achievement Levels from Fall to Spring in Math					UCS Percent Change in Achievement Levels from Fall to Spring in Reading				
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4		Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Grade 3	-32%	21%	4%	7%	Grade 3	-18%	7%	7%	3%
Grade 4	-48%	40%	4%	4%	Grade 4	-13%	-10%	11%	0%
Grade 5	-13%	-28%	31%	9%	Grade 5	-9%	-9%	12%	7%
Grade 6	-9%	-7%	-14%	4%	Grade 6	-4%	-19%	8%	15%
Grade 7	-12%	-19%	56%	15%	Grade 7	7%	7%	-11%	11%
Grade 8	-6%	-40%	36%	6%	Grade 8	-29%	0%	54%	-15%

Table 3. State and District Scantron Comparisons by Proficiency Level

Spring 2019 Scantron Reading Performance Comparisons															
	Level 1			Level 2			Level 3			Level 4			Total % Proficient		
	UCS	Sumter	State	UCS	Sumter	State	UCS	Sumter	State	UCS	Sumter	State	UCS	Sumter	State
Grade 3	40	52.04	23.64	20	26.53	28.62	26	18.37	27.05	13	3.06	20.69	39%	21	47
Grade 4	29	60.34	23.93	28	22.41	28.57	28	13.79	27.89	4	3.45	19.61	32%	17	46
Grade 5	30	61.74	26.01	30	21.74	27.68	30	13.04	25.06	10	3.48	21.26	40%	16	46
Grade 6	19	56.9	24.26	27	32.76	28.68	35	8.62	26.79	19	1.72	20.27	54%	10	47
Grade 7	25	58.62	27.5	32	29.89	27.81	14	11.49	26.29	29	0	18.39	43%	11	44
Grade 8	0	46.46	27	3	33.07	28.85	83	17.32	26.1	14	3.15	18.05	97%	20	44

  

Spring 2019 Scantron Math Performance Comparisons															
	Level 1			Level 2			Level 3			Level 4			Total % Proficient		
	UCS	Sumter	State	UCS	Sumter	State	UCS	Sumter	State	UCS	Sumter	State	UCS	Sumter	State
Grade 3	38	46	14.58	38	29.59	27.88	17	22.45	36.58	7	2.04	20.97	24%	24	57
Grade 4	9	47	12.72	70	43.4	37.95	17	7.76	31.86	4	1.72	17.47	21%	9	49
Grade 5	9	40	13.54	47	52.17	41.44	34	6.96	28.1	9	0.87	16.92	43%	7	45
Grade 6	8	38.79	13.21	60	50	40.78	28	8.62	26.2	4	2.59	19.81	32%	11	46
Grade 7	27	57.47	29.5	27	31.03	28.47	31	11.49	22.59	15	0	19.44	46%	11	42
Grade 8	14	56.69	28.27	0	34.65	27.38	71	5.51	24.3	14	3.15	20.05	85%	8	44

Broadly, Table 2 demonstrates that student scores generally increased in reading and math between the Fall and Spring semesters, with the greatest magnitude of change for earlier grades. In terms of translating into proficiency levels, Table 3 shows a generally concomitant distributional shift away from Levels 1 and 2 (Far Below and Below) between the Fall and Spring towards the higher levels of proficiency. Table 3 shows that UCS generally exhibits higher percentages of students scoring proficient on the Scantron Performance Assessments in both Reading and Math compared to Sumter County, while it has lower proficiency rates than the State in general.

Taken together, these assessment results demonstrate that overall, UCS stands at the same rate of student proficiency as the state of Alabama, at respectively 46.3% and 46.4%. However, as a comparison, while UCS had 46% of students scoring proficient, the surrounding Sumter County only had 13.75% of students scoring proficient on the Scantron Performance Assessments.

Table 4 below presents school-specific goals for performance and growth based on the school’s strategic plan, demonstrating roughly half of students meeting personal performance goals in Math and just over 40% in reading.

Table 4. Site Level Performance and Growth Targets

Percentage Meeting Target Score	Holistic Performance Targets	
	<u>Math</u>	<u>Reading</u>
	84 of 154 (55%)	63 of 154 (41%)
<u>Individual Growth Targets</u>	<u>Math</u>	<u>Reading</u>
Far Above	10	9
Above	52	53
Below	58	58
Far Below	24	24

Indicator 1. State and Federal Accountability				
Measure		Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating
1a.1 & 1a.2	Is the charter school meeting performance expectations based on the Alabama Accountability System?	College and Career Readiness (CCR) documentation: 1. ACT Scores 2. ACT Work Keys Scores 3. College credits received by students 4. Numbers and outcomes of students in dual-enrollment courses 5. Industry Credentials received by students 6. Evidence of students being accepted into any branch of the military  Other student performance data: 1. State testing data 2. Graduation outcomes 3. Course grades	1. Scantron Reports 2. Course Grades and passing rates 3. Number of Students enrolled in classes 4. Attendance records 5. Documentation on school-specific goals	<b>Exceeds Standard</b>

		<p>4. Numbers of students enrolled in all classes and sections</p> <p>5. Passing rates for core courses</p> <p>Evidence of administration of state-approved English language proficiency placement test.</p> <p>Attendance records of students.</p> <p>Types of and numbers of students utilizing remediation strategies and the outcomes for these students.</p> <p>Student suspensions and expulsions, as well as outcomes (students returned, did not return, and/or students were repeat offenders).</p> <p>Growth rate data.</p> <p>List and number of dropouts.</p> <p>Student demographic information.</p> <p>Documentation showing Charter school successfully met its school-specific goal.</p>		
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There is no Indicator 2 Category within the APF.

Indicator 3. Geographic Comparisons				
Measure		Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating
3a.1	How are charter school students performing on state assessments compared to the district in which the school is located?	Comparative District State Assessment Data	Comparative District State Assessment Data	<b>Exceeds Standard</b>
3a.2	How are charter school students in subgroups performing on state assessments compared to the district in which the charter is located?	Comparative Subgroup State Assessment Data	Data not available by subgroup	<b>N/A</b>

3b.1	Are charter school students meeting growth expectations compared to the district in which the school is located? (based on subgroup median growth percentiles (MGPs))	Comparative Growth Data	Data not available	N/A
3b.2	Are charter school student subgroups meeting growth expectations compared to the student subgroups in the district in which the charter is located? (based on subgroup median growth percentiles (MGPs))	Comparative Subgroup Growth Data	Data not available	N/A
3c.1	How are charter school student graduation rates compared to the district in which the charter is located?	Comparative Graduation Rate Data	NA	N/A
3c.2	How do charter school student subgroup graduation rates compared to the district graduation rates in which the charter is located?	Comparative Subgroup Graduation Rate Data	NA	N/A

#### Indicator 4. Growth Comparisons: All Students

Measure		Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating
4a	How are charter school students performing on state assessments compared to schools serving similar students?	Comparative State Assessment Data	Scantron Reports	<b>Meets Standard</b>

4b	How did the charter school graduation rate compare to schools serving similar students statewide?	Comparative Statewide Graduation Rate Data	NA	N/A
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Indicator 5. School-Specific Goals				
Measure	Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating	
5a	Did the charter school meet its school-specific academic goals?	School-Specific Goal Data	School specific goals	<b>Exceeds Standard</b>

**Operational Performance Framework Findings**

Indicator 1. Education Program				
Measure	Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating	
1.a	Is the school implementing the material terms of the education program as defined in the current charter contract?	Educational Program Terms-Charter Contract) Board meeting agendas, packets, reports, and minutes Observational data	Educational Program Terms-Charter Contract) Board meeting agendas, packets, reports, and minutes Observational data	<b>Meets Standard</b>
1.b	Is the school complying with applicable education requirements?	Charter contract including <i>Statement of Assurances</i> Academic calendar (including State assessments) Consolidated Program Review Report (if applicable) Observational data	Charter contract including <i>Statement of Assurances</i> Academic calendar (including State assessments)	<b>Meets Standard</b>

1.c	Is the school protecting the rights of students with disabilities?	<p>Observational data</p> <p>Evaluations and eligibility determination</p> <p>Documented implementation of Individual Education Plans</p> <p>Evidence of Prior Written Notice</p> <p>Evidence of Procedural Safeguard Notices to students and families</p> <p>Service Delivery Logs</p> <p>504 evaluations and eligibility</p> <p>Documented implementation of 504 Plans</p> <p>Discipline data</p>	<p>Observational data</p> <p>Evaluations and eligibility determination</p> <p>Documented implementation of Individual Education Plans</p> <p>Evidence of Prior Written Notice</p> <p>Evidence of Procedural Safeguard Notices to students and families</p> <p>Service Delivery Logs</p> <p>504 evaluations and eligibility</p> <p>Documented implementation of 504 Plans</p> <p>Discipline data</p>	<b>Meets Standard</b>
1.d	Is the school protecting the rights of English Language Learners (ELL) students?	<p>Enrollment policy and procedures</p> <p>Home Language Survey</p> <p>All school enrollment forms and packets in English and any translated version the school uses</p> <p>A description of the process the school uses to ensure that interpretation and translation services are provided to communicate vital information with LEP parents</p> <p>Evidence of ELL training for staff, participation, and Implementation</p> <p>Parent Notifications forms: initial placement, continued eligibility transition from English development services</p>	<p>Enrollment policy and procedures</p> <p>Home Language Survey</p> <p>All school enrollment forms and packets in English and any translated version the school uses</p> <p>Evidence of sstate-approved English Language proficiency test – WIDA</p> <p>Evidence of ELL training for staff, participation, and Implementation – E. Reed certificate of training</p>	<b>Meets Standard</b>

		<p>Updated Staff Qualifications</p> <p>Evidence of progress monitoring of exited ELL students and service delivery as required</p> <p>Roster of eligible ELL students, indicating language proficiency level and the type and amount of English language development services provided for each student</p>		
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**Indicator 2. Financial Management and Oversight**

Measure		Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating
2.a	Is the school meeting financial reporting and compliance requirements?	Auditor Report	Auditor report	<b>Meets Standard</b>
2.b	Is the school following Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP)?	Auditor Report	Auditor report	<b>Meets Standard</b>

**Indicator 3. Governance and Reporting**

Measure		Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating
3.a	Is the school governing board complying with governance requirements?	<p>Charter contract</p> <p>Articles of incorporation (including bylaws)</p> <p>Board meeting schedule, agendas, announcements, packets, reports, meeting discussions, notes, and minutes</p> <p>Board roster, board resumes and disclosure forms, conflict of interest policies and forms (if applicable)</p>	<p>Charter contract – charter tools 100% compliant</p> <p>Board meeting agendas, attendance lists, packets, minutes,</p>	<b>Meets Standard</b>



		<p>Annual F1 Personal Finance Disclosure Statement</p> <p>Accountability Audit Report</p>	<p>reports, board roster &amp; resume.</p> <p>Academic calendar</p>	
3.b	Is the governing board holding the school management team accountable?	<p>Board meeting reports, and minutes, meeting discussions and notes</p> <p>School leader evaluation or template</p>	<p>Board meeting agendas, attendance lists, packets, minutes, reports, board roster &amp; resume.</p> <p>Board &amp; school leader performance evaluations</p> <p>Instructional materials policy review</p> <p>Leadership meeting minutes</p>	<b>Meets Standard</b>
3.c	Is the school complying with reporting requirements?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting agendas, discussions, and notes</li> <li>• Annual Compliance Calendar</li> </ul>	<p>Board meeting agendas, attendance lists, packets, minutes, reports, board roster &amp; resume.</p> <p>Charter contract – charter tools 100% compliant</p> <p>Annual compliance calendar</p>	<b>Meets Standard, Does Not Meet Standard</b>

<b>Indicator 4. Students, Parents, and Employees</b>				
<b>Measure</b>	<b>Possible Evidence Artifacts</b>	<b>Sources Reviewed</b>	<b>Rating</b>	
4.a	<p>Is the school protecting the rights of all students?</p>	<p>Observational data</p> <p>Nondiscrimination Statement visible in all widely disseminated publications.</p> <p>Sexual harassment policy and educational rights of homeless children and youth visible in easily accessible areas of the school.</p> <p>Student and Employee Handbooks</p> <p>Staff list, and evidence of training such as training materials, meeting minutes, sign-in sheets, certificates of attendance, agendas, etc.</p> <p>Application and enrollment forms</p> <p>Evidence of adequate provision of services to students in foster care (i.e. transportation services, provision of support services to promote academic progress and on-time grade-level progression).</p> <p>Recruitment and enrollment materials translated into major languages of surrounding community</p> <p>Student Housing Questionnaire and intake forms</p> <p>Comprehensive policy related to serving the educational needs of homeless children and youth in accordance with the McKinney-Vento Act</p> <p>Ongoing and regular contact with community agencies and entities, e.g. service groups, social service agencies, faith communities, etc. Evidence may include logs, meeting minutes, correspondence, agendas, etc.</p>	<p>Nondiscrimination, harassment, and rights of homeless children policies reviewed.</p> <p>Student and employee handbook.</p> <p>Staff list, and evidence of training such as training materials, meeting minutes, sign-in sheets.</p> <p>Translated materials regarding policies &amp; procedures</p> <p>Student housing questionnaire and intake forms</p> <p>Policy related to serving the educational needs of homeless children and youth in accordance with the McKinney-Vento Act – eGap McKinney-Vento Act document</p> <p>Comprehensive student and parent surveys</p> <p>School Mint Contract in multiple languages</p>	<p><b>Meets Standard</b></p>
4.b	<p>Does the school's recurrent enrollment rate indicate equitable access to the school?</p>	<p>Enrollment data</p>	<p>Demographic enrollments</p>	<p><b>Meets Standard</b></p>

4.c	Is the school meeting teacher and other staff credentialing requirements?	Staff list and evidence of credentials/training	Roster/certificate details	<b>Meets Standard</b>
4.d	Is the school respecting employee rights?	Signed Employee Handbook	Employee handbook signed	<b>Meets Standard</b>
4.e	Is the school completing required background checks?	Current employee roster and proof of background check clearance for employees, board members, or contractors who will have unsupervised access to children	Employee roster & background clearances	<b>Meets Standard, Does Not Meet Standard</b>

<b>Indicator 5. School Environment</b>				
Measure		Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating
5.a	Is the school complying with facilities and transportation requirements?	Inspection reports, permits, and certification collected during pre-opening.	Facility accessibility and Foster Care Plan	<b>Meets Standard</b>
5.b	Is the school complying with health and safety requirements?	Collected through Annual Compliance calendar through Emergency Contact Information, Training on Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting.  School safety and emergency preparedness plans.	School emergency plans, employee handbook	<b>Meets Standard</b>
5.c	Is the school maintaining and handling information appropriately?	Detailed policies that comply with all federal, state, and local laws pertaining to privacy and security.	Compliance monitoring, test security plan, bylaws, charter contract	<b>Meets Standard</b>

<b>Indicator 6. Additional Obligations</b>				
Measure		Possible Evidence Artifacts	Sources Reviewed	Rating
6.a	Is the school meeting its mission-specific organizational goals?	Observational data  Interview data	School specific goals listed in Charter plan	<b>Meets Standard</b>

## **Financial Performance Framework Findings**

For the 2018-2019 school year, UCS reported financials using the Next Gen Accounting Software. All public funds (state and federal), as well as philanthropic funds, were accounted for on a month by month basis using the state approved financial system and process. UCS's budget and quarterly financial reports have been reviewed and approved on an ongoing basis by the Alabama State Department of Education's Accounting Division.

While no formal audit was available, current ratio (near-term) was 1.05 (Indicator 1.a). Unrestricted days cash (Indicator 1.b) showed over a month's operating expenses at 46.5 days coverage, and there was no outstanding debt (1.c). Given that UCS is following compliance requirements and Generally Accepted Accounting Principles, these indicators show that UCS is in a strong financial position.

## **School and Classroom Observation Findings**

The following sections of this report include data on (1) the physical space and materials present and used throughout the school, (2) the instruction and pace of the separate activities and of the program as a whole, (3) the quality and nature of staff interactions, and (4) the quality and nature of the perceived student experience. These data include findings from both formal observations as well as the incidental observations that took place throughout the two days of on-site data collection.

1. There were consistently sufficient materials and supplies for the number of youth participating in each observed academic activity. Those materials and supplies being used were in good working condition. The layout of the physical space was generally well organized and the layout of individual spaces within the school were organized as well. The work of program participants was displayed throughout the area and the physical space somewhat reflected cultural diversity through artwork and decorations in common areas.

2. The pace of the program was organized, relaxed, and flexible; students and teachers seemed busy but not rushed. The observed classroom and activity times were almost always free from interruptions and distractions (and when there was one interruption/distraction, it was a considered to be within acceptable limits and was related to the time of year that the observation took place). Tasks and assignments for students offered a balance of group sizes and incorporated a range of instructional approaches including individual work, work in pairs, work in small groups, and whole-class work. The observed activities always seemed to be part of a curricular unit. The tasks were successful at stimulating student thinking because the activities offered youth choice and the opportunity to employ and develop decision-making skills (especially in an observed project on Susan B. Anthony).

3. Staff members were energetic, enthusiastic, and respectful. Interactions between staff and staff as well as interactions between staff and students were positive and consistent. Staff members were actively engaged during all observations and they helped youth think through problems themselves rather than immediately offering solutions. Rules and limits seemed fair and consistent when applied across groups of students. Staff members were observed to always be closely supervising the youth and activities throughout the observation blocks, staff always used a neutral or positive tone of voice, and staff generally held students in high regard. Staff were flexible in their management of youth, and staff used simple reminders to redirect problematic student behavior when necessary. Staff engaged in friendly verbal exchanges with students and with each other, they encouraged and listened to individual youth, and they exhibited professional conduct at all times.

4. Students tended to show an interest in staff, students were generally cooperative and compliant with staff requests, and students listened attentively to staff. Youth were generally busy and engaged throughout the activities and rarely seemed off-task. Students appeared in control of themselves and they followed program rules throughout the observed activities.

### ***Supports for Instruction***

Throughout the site visit, it was observed that activities offered students choice and decision-making where available. This autonomy was expertly coupled with enthusiastic support from teachers and staff members, and in one case, fellow students. Classmates were observed to be cheering and clapping for their peers after each taking turns presenting projects without prompting from the teacher. The supportive culture among teachers and students was affirmed throughout all interviews and observations, too. It was the most impactful support for instruction because through the climate of support, instruction could be precise and time could

be intentionally structured because motivation and engagement remained high.

Teachers were thoughtful in their whole-group explanations, and teachers provided a good amount of attention to all students during times of individual instruction as well. In one observation, a student was struggling with the assigned task. The student seemed to be getting frustrated and they were escalating quickly. The teacher was able to quickly intervene and provide support in a way that minimized disruption to the whole class while also helping the individual succeed. Teachers were observed to be praising students frequently using behavior-specific and individualized comments in those praises.

In another observation, there was a structured time for feedback on and reflection about an activity. This dedicated feedback time incorporated physical movement along with the presentation of exemplar student work to the group. These few minutes seemed to help ease the transition between activities for students while also providing space for feedback and continued learning.

### ***Possible Barriers to Instruction***

The most salient possible barrier to instruction had to do with the number of interruptions to regularly-scheduled classroom time. For example, there were groups interrupting instruction time to collect money, and although this was a usually calm exchange, it is recommended that non-academic activities take place outside of instruction blocks.

The materials and decorations throughout the school did not represent a wide variety of cultures, ethnicities, races, and religions. There was a Bible verse displayed in the entry way to the school, there was a flag from another country on display in one classroom, and there were sometimes different skin tones on posters in various classrooms and common areas. While this is not directly linked to instruction, it is an area for growth and development that may help

students feel more comfortable and ready to learn.

## **School Leadership and Guidance Counselor Interviews**

### ***Summary of Findings***

In spite of administration changes in the middle of the academic year, school leadership noted many strengths and successes during Year One of University Charter School. The relationships built with the community, the transparency as an educational institution, and the school's financial model were three of the most impactful successes from the first year. In addition to the things that went very well, University Charter School experienced a time of rapid growth as they progressed through Year One.

One school leader summed up the year by saying, "I think it's been a great year- we've learned a lot, we've seen a lot of growth within our staff." This staff growth and development was made possible in part through regular professional development, and that is a notable strength of this school. There were curricular elements that developed and changed during Year One including elements of Reading, Math, and Special Education. In addition, school leadership discussed plans to move forward with adding an athletics component to the school through the eventual hiring of an Athletic Director. Indeed, it was reported over and over again that the areas of growth have necessitated a move in the direction of adding athletics to the culture of the school.

In addition to, or concurrent with, staff growth and development was the capacity for student growth and development. The character education programming included monthly themes and weekly events that included incentives such as Chick-Fil-A coupons for students who had achieved school goals. School leadership noted that this program has been so influential for students at UCS that parents have been commenting on the behavior changes they have



noticed at home.

The leadership team also reported that parent involvement has been a strength of Year One. A school leader said, “[parents are] engaged with us in lots of different ways, with parent involvement, just the culture of making sure their students are here.” It was also described that school leaders and guidance counselors run into parents of students in the community. These incidental interactions have been described as positive and personal interactions, and one person talked about supplementing other methods of communication (parent-teacher conferences, notes home) with these community-based interactions.

### ***Preliminary Findings***

One area of concern for school leadership includes student tardiness. It was suggested that because of a long history of no accountability for tardiness (in previous schools settings), students and families may be less concerned with getting to school on time in the mornings. It is recommended that this be a focus of Year Two planning and implementation.

Another area of concern regarding student behavior was physical contact. Although it was reported that fighting is consistently less than at other schools, school leadership noted how difficult it is to enforce rules about not touching other students. It is recommended that this issue remain a priority for policy revision and creation in Year Two. It is recommended that students have a clear understanding of the rules and that there be consistent and reliable consequences for violations of those rules.

School leadership discussed plans to collect and implement data from faculty and staff at the school. It is recommended that this practice be prioritized in subsequent years to help mitigate the potentially negative effects of rapid growth and development on faculty and staff.

While parent involvement was noted as a strength and key finding of this report, it was

also noted that more upfront communication with parents might strengthen and streamline the process of communication and involvement. School leadership reflected that looking back, they “would have communicated with parents more from the beginning.” Ensuring that communication is prioritized may help increase understanding among parents, among teachers, and among students from the beginning of Year Two and beyond.

While there were many areas of growth in Year One that necessitated additional time being added to the calendar for faculty and staff training, it is recommended that the length of the calendar be revisited for subsequent years. Other areas of focus for subsequent years include interscholastic athletics, school lunches, and the timing for the lottery and student enrollment.

### **School Teacher Interviews**

#### ***Summary of Findings***

Teachers generally seemed highly satisfied with their experiences at UCS. One teacher expressed their feelings of satisfaction by saying they have experienced working at the school as “more of a team effort- we all have to work together in order to make things run- it’s not just one person with all the answers.” Other teachers talked about team-building and the environment in the school. One teacher noted, “everyone wants to be here and chooses to be here” and another said [this school is] “way more positive than any other place, we came together for some pretty extensive professional development- it was very apparent we were on the same page.” One teacher in particular talked about how they were considering leaving the profession before coming on at UCS. The individual decided that this would be a good, new start for them, and they then talked about the successes they’ve had in their classroom at UCS compared to the rest of their career. Student success was attributed by teachers to their extensive professional development (including 3 afternoons a week), superior communication between the school (and

teachers) and the parents, and the focus of educating the whole child throughout every aspect of the school day.

The interviews with teachers also indicated that their relationships with school leaders are positive. One teacher described this dynamic by saying, “the administration here supports the teachers in every way- I know that I can count of them for anything- every time I’ve gone to talk to them, I know that they’re really listening.” Another teacher indicated their satisfaction with the school administration by sharing, “the administration trusts you to do your job.” In fact, teachers talked about how teaching at UCS has impacted their presence and approach in the classroom. One teachers said, “in previous schools, I knew on this date at this time I had to cover this topic- I don’t feel that way here, if someone comes in to evaluate me, it’s okay if I need to slow down or if [a student’s] idea took us somewhere else.”

Teachers reported that they feel safe at UCS and that they believe students also feel safe. When asked to explain why and what makes them feel safe, teachers talked about how the administration supports teachers being involved in ways that lets students know they are cared for by teachers. “Kids know we care about them, they know we care and one thing I’ve tried to do is let them know that because I try to go to their baseball games, basketball games, church- they are so surprised to see me show up at their church on Sunday.”

Teachers report that relationships “go beyond the school walls” and that the community has been receptive and supportive of UCS so far. One class was invited to visit a local restaurant in the community because the teacher collected supplies from that business. This community support and the freedom within the lessons helps teachers feel like they are making the biggest possible impact on their students: “I don’t feel the heat of me doing what I’m supposed to be doing, there’s a sense of relief, kids are getting authentic learning experiences because it’s things

they enjoy and it's okay if we go off on that tangent that day.”

### ***Preliminary Findings***

While teachers tended to think there were fewer behavioral issues at UCS compared with the other schools where they've taught (e.g., “our discipline issues are nothing like anywhere else, [the incidents] are minor, nothing major, minor compared to other schools because we are consistent here,” it is worth noting that there is no school-wide discipline policy. While this gives teachers the freedom to find what works in their classroom, the lack of consistency from room to room might inevitably create inconsistency in consequences for students as they move from class to class or teacher to teacher. It is recommended that teachers have a lead role in creating a school-wide discipline policy so that the most successful parts of what works in each classroom can be combined to strengthen the consistency of discipline for all UCS students.

The curriculum element of character education came up across interview groups. Teachers displayed enthusiasm around this aspect of the school and recalled times when students incorporated the lessons into their conversations and behavior. One teacher explained, “Character Ed is more united, it's the atmosphere not just a lesson.” Another teacher added, “we had Character Ed at all previous schools but here it's genuine and not just like something you do to just do it.” It is recommended that this element of the day remain central to the morning meetings and the culture of the school.

Teachers also reported that the biggest challenges of Year One included finding out what works. The logistics of the day, from what the secretaries do to how to run carline, have been stressful for faculty. This struggle was articulated by a teacher succinctly as, “we've been working to establish the systems.” However, it was reported that “faculty and staff want to help each other, those relationships, everyone is on the same page.” It is recommended that some

Professional Development time be spent in Year Two to ensure that the systems that are becoming engrained as part of the system do work for everyone.

## **Student Interviews**

### ***Summary of Findings***

Students across all interview groups reported that they enjoyed the atmosphere at UCS. When asked what it was like to be a student in the school, responses included, “it’s awesome!,” “it’s amazing!,” “it’s good,” “it’s really beautiful,” and “it’s really fun.” Students elaborated that “it feels special to go to school here [because] we were the first students in University Charter School,” and “it’s a good learning environment—it’s like no other school I’ve ever been to before.” Interviews with students made it seem like UCS feels different to them at least partly because of the teachers and the fellow students. It was reported that teachers “don’t treat you differently” and that students can “actually feel when [teachers] stop and take time- if I have my hand up they make sure they come help you and give you what you need.” Teachers were described as helpful (e.g., “my teacher helps me out and tells me that ‘you can do it!’”) and as prepared (e.g., “I really enjoy all my classes- especially in [subject omitted] the teacher is prepared to do the work” and “[subject omitted] is good because when we get our books [from the teachers] then we have fun working”). Another student reported that they “feel like I can go and talk to everyone because the staff is so welcoming.”

Many students talked about the quality of relationships among peers at UCS. One student noted that fellow students “who come here have a good heart- you become best friends. We came from different places so we have a lot to share with each other, we want to know more about each other.” Another student said that their favorite thing about UCS is that the people don’t talk badly about people when they are absent. Another student recalled that “what I think

about this school is that at my old school we didn't have good friends, my old school wasn't good because if we had friends, they didn't treat us well. My friends here treat me well, like if I'm sick or something they stick by my side." Several other students echoed that sentiment by declaring their favorite thing about UCS was the friends, the teachers, and that "everybody's nice."

Students were not the only ones satisfied with their UCS experience. When asked what their parents thought about the school, every single student indicated that their parents liked or had positive feelings about the school. One student said that when they "wake up worried about going to school, [my parent] says go back to sleep, you're going to a charter school" as reassurance. Another student shared, "I would say [my parents] feel good about my school because I have [siblings] and I think they will come next year because I love it here so much." Students reported that their parents like how much the school kept in contact with parents. One student spoke to that by saying, "if anyone does something bad, [the school will] email [parents] or call [parents] – they're on social media." When asked specifically how their parents keep up with the school, students called out the names of social media platforms including apps (e.g., Dojo, Remind), the Facebook page, checking grades online, as well as participating in in-person events like Olympic Day, field trips, parties, and PTA.

Students tended to have a positive perception of the instruction at UCS. Indeed, students said they "get more one-on-one attention" here and the teachers "find different ways of letting us do the work- we had a different learning experience at the other schools, I always got behind before." While students chatted about having homework sometimes, the general feeling was that it was appropriate in amount and effort required. Students also seemed to have a positive impression of the peer helper system. When asked to describe how their teachers teach them,

students talked about making and presenting PowerPoints, doing “fun activities,” taking spelling tests, doing reading passages, having discussions, and working on projects.

When asked about safety, students unanimously reported feeling safe at UCS. Specifically, students recalled rehearsing a tornado drill and described it as “great.” Students reported this in spite of a few stories about their classmates being suspended for bullying, hitting, and fighting. Perhaps the feelings of safety prevail because of the many ways UCS outscored their previous schools in terms of atmosphere and support. Additionally, students said that they recommend the school to their friends and family members by encouraging them to attend University Charter School.

### ***Preliminary Findings***

Many of the concerns students raised during the focus groups included aspects that any first year school (or any student in a time of transition) might face. Several students talked about how their schedules have changed throughout the year. One student noted, “our schedules have changed a lot, but I think everyone is trying to figure out the schedule- not having the same schedule all year has been a challenge.” Another particularly articulate student said, “going to a new school is really fun but sometimes it’s challenging because we didn’t have a homecoming or any dances like other middle schools- we don’t have the same things as schools that have been running for a couple years, I know it takes time to get those things but I wish we did.” Other students expressed a longing for a weight room and athletics in addition to the other things they might be missing out on by attending UCS instead of their previous school.

Other areas of concern for students included more typical answers that weren’t related to specific challenges faced by students attending a new school in its first year. One student said they miss books sometimes and other complained about the dress code. One student said, “I wish

we could add more things to do that aren't education- more field trips involved with culture, more experiments [in science] to make it more fun, not that it's not fun, but it would make it more fun." One student complained about feeling too warm all day on the day of the week when they have to dress up for school, and others wished the grounds included a playground and more classrooms (or a separate space for middle school). Another student said they felt safe at UCS, but if they could wish for things to add, they wished the doors had better locks in order to make students feel even safer.

Even though students were quick to share areas where they would like to see improvements, they also had a hard time coming up with a single answer to the question, "What's your least favorite thing about learning at this school?" In general, interviews with students reflected mostly positive experiences with some negative aspects that are to be expected during an assessment of a first year school.

## **Parent Interviews**

### ***Summary of Findings***

Parents indicated that they are generally very satisfied with the program. When asked to "share a word that comes to mind in describing the school," parents used descriptors like "dynamic," "engaging," "friendly," "enlightening," and "refreshing."

When asked to elaborate, parents indicated that they felt that their children were supported and cared for at UCS. Parents reported feeling like teachers know their children well and also like they (parents) knew the teachers at UCS well, too. When asked "how well do you think the teacher(s) at this school know your child," all parents answered a 10 out of a 10. When asked on the same scale of 1-10 how well they (parents) knew the teachers, parents all said 10, too. Parents talked about getting to know teachers through social media (e.g., classroom



Instagram pages), through interactions at big school events (e.g., Christmas Tree lighting, Fall Fest), and through the carline.

When asked on a scale of 1-10 how much they as parents know about what is going on in the school, almost all parents answered an 8 or higher with a majority answering a 10. The parents who were below a 10 explained their answer: “teachers keep us in the loop for sure and with all the emails I don’t feel like I’m missing out on anything- if I am I will ask.” One parent who answered a 5 said that they missed some things because of their work schedule. The overall impression from the focus groups was that parents were satisfied with how much they feel like they know about the happenings of UCS. When asked to list the ways parents and administration communicate with them, parents named emails, newsletters, the PTA, phone calls and texts, the Facebook page, and the Remind App. Parents reported frequently using internet resources to find out information about the school. It was clear parents appreciated teacher Instagram pages as well as the Class Dojo functions.

Parents reported feeling safe when they visit the school because of the locked points of entry and because of the video surveillance. One parent talked about visiting the police station where the feed from all cameras is monitored. They said, “the thing that makes me feel most safe is the video- [video cameras] are everywhere except maybe not in the bathroom. University police is the one who monitors that.”

Some other areas where parents are satisfied include homework, discipline issues, and character education. Parents in general seemed satisfied with the school even though they all decided to enroll their child/children for different reasons. One parent said, “[UCS] is so engaging, which is every parent’s dream, [my child is] never bored, [students here are] not sitting like ducks quietly in a row.” Another parent said their child “just really enjoys it [and] is happy

when I pick her up every day.”

### ***Preliminary Findings***

While parents could easily name multiple avenues that teachers and the school use to communicate with them, it was also noted that streamlining this process might improve communication. One parent described the room for improvement in this way: “I would change if we could have a unified system, it’s not consistent [currently], different passwords and logins for every little thing- having one sounding board (Dojo for this, Remind for this, pay bill this way, for afterschool there is another system, tee shirt or field trip is another way) – one sounding board [for communication between families and the school] would really help.”

When asked to share one thing that could be done to improve the school, parents mostly talked about the lunch program. One parent noted that there isn’t a lunchroom facility because the building is temporary. Another parent talked about the inconvenience of having to order lunch a week beforehand, and other parent added that “if you forget to pay or something like that- they will send a reminder but will still give the kids the food.”

In spite of these recommendations, parents seemed to genuinely understand that these concerns are inherent with having a student attending a new school during its first year. One parent put it this way: “It’s hard because this is the first year, there is going to be some hiccups that they are going to be working on, we have been real pleased, it’s gone a lot smoother than I thought it would, I thought there would be a lot of hiccups!”

### **Conclusions**

Because this report reflects data from UCS’s first year of operation, a number of the indicators within the Academic, Operational, and Financial Frameworks were unable to be rated. These indicators are set to be measured in later school years and the data necessary to determine

success in these future years have been collected this year as baseline data by which comparisons will be made in subsequent years.

A great deal of information about the day to day supports and barriers to education at UCS was gleaned from site observations and interviews with students, parents, and staff of UCS. Throughout the time spent on campus and analyzing data remotely, areas of improvement were consistently noted. From these findings, the panel makes the following recommendations:

1. It is recommended that efforts be focused on increasing the representation of a wide variety of cultures, ethnicities, races, and religions throughout UCS. This is an important aspect of developing a space for all students and it can be accomplished with buy-in on the importance from teachers and administrators.

2. Professional development opportunities focused on teaching and enforcing physical boundaries might help improve physical interactions at UCS. It is also recommended that the administration consider collecting comprehensive data specific to all incidences that occur in Year Two. Being able to reference the name and number of students involved, the estimated duration of the incident, the location on campus, the time of day, and the consequences for students could provide insight on any potential trends in such a way that physical violations and aggression might be better addressed and managed. This could be couched within the current school-wide discipline policy, which if created, would help ensure the potential for more consistent implementation of rewards and consequences for students who demonstrate desirable or undesirable behavior.

3. Continued efforts should be made to improve the extracurricular offerings for students and the lunch program.

**Important Note:**

A special aspect of the school's opening is that it is the first truly desegregated school in the county, some 55 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. Several board members commented that they had been working for decades to bring this about. The school team is to be commended both for the national attention it has received for its program (the school was featured on the "Today Show") but also its perseverance in recovering from the resignation of a key administration member midyear and the fallout from a lawsuit filed by the local school district.

Beyond these recommendations, efforts in Year Two should focus on the continued streamlining of data collection for efficient analysis in subsequent years of the program.

Overall, it is clear that UCS has made great strides to accurately and effectively implement their program in Year One. This report finds that UCS adheres to the performance expectations outlined at the time of its Alabama Public Charter School Application and to those established by the resulting Public Charter School Charter Contract.

**Appendices**

The following pages include the interview protocols used with parents, teachers/staff, and students at this school (Appendix A). As interview guides, the following pages were referenced during informal conversations and were not always followed verbatim. Additionally, every question may not have been asked to every evaluation participant. Appendix B includes biographical information about each of the Auburn Center for Evaluation's panel members.

## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

### **Behavior Management Coordinator**

#### **I. General Background**

1. Tell me briefly about your professional experiences and responsibilities, both at this particular school and others, ending with your role here?

#### **II. Parent Involvement**

1. Can each of you describe the contact you have with parents of your students, especially in regard to student behavior issues.

2. Is there anything else I need to understand about parental involvement at this school and how it impacts your job?

#### **III. Student Discipline and School Culture**

1. At what point do you become involved in discipline or safety issues?

2. Tell me what you think are some common student discipline or safety issues here? Which are unique to UCS?

3. How are behavior management issues communicated to staff, parents, and students?

4. Tell me about some common ways of dealing with behavior problems.

5. Tell me about some successes dealing with student behavior.

6. What kinds of initiatives exist to address school culture issues?

## **FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **PARENTS**

#### **I Introductions**

1. Let's go around the table and have everyone introduce him/herself. While doing that, tell me briefly about the child or children you have attending UCS, ages and grade levels, and just a little about their learning experiences here at this school.
2. If someone asked you to describe your school, what words come to mind? *Probe further.*
3. How did you learn about UCS?
4. What were the some of the reasons you decided to send your child here?

#### **II. Parent Involvement**

1. How much do you think you know about what is going on in your son or daughter's school?
2. Can you tell me about your experiences with this school; field trips, parent conferences, join your child for lunch, other types of school visits?
3. Can you tell me how the school communicates with you?
4. Do you ever go online to find out about the school? If so, how often?
5. How well do you think the teacher(s) at this school know your child?
6. How well do you know the teachers at this school? How have you gotten to know them?

#### **III. School Climate**

1. Are there any school discipline issues that are of concern to you? (*Ask for elaboration*)
2. If your child experiences any type of problem at school, how do you find out about it?
3. Do your children feel safe in this school? Why or why not?
4. What does your child tell you about the school?
5. When you tell other people about your child's experience here, what do you tell them?

#### **IV. Teaching and Learning**

1. What can you tell me about how your son or daughter's teachers conduct classes? Are you happy with their school experience?

2. What's the best thing you've heard about teaching and learning in this school during this year? What's the worst?

3. Tell me about your child's homework- how often do they have homework?

4. If you could do one thing to improve this school, what would it be?

5. Is there anything else I should know about your child's experience here?

## **FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW**

### **TEACHERS**

#### **I. Introductions**

1. Let's go around the table and have everyone introduce him/herself. While doing that, tell me briefly about your experiences here at this school, e.g. how long you've been in the field of education, your current role here at the school.
2. If I asked you to describe the way this school operates and how students and others experience UCS, what would you say?
3. Starting with the opening last year, what have been the biggest successes you've had?
4. What have been the largest challenges?
5. How does being a teacher here compare to other places you've taught?
6. Tell me about a typical school day here.
7. How has UCS approached professional development?

#### **II. Parental Involvement**

1. Can you describe the kinds of contact you have with parents of your students?
2. How do you communicate with parents about their children's progress?

#### **III. Student Discipline and School Climate**

1. Tell me what you think are some student discipline issues here at UCS?
2. Describe some discipline interventions that have been successful for you.
3. What kinds of things do you as a staff do to promote a positive school climate?
4. Do you and your staff always feel safe at this school? Do your students feel safe?

#### **IV. Teaching and Learning**

1. What would you say the staff's primary mode of teaching? What percentage of the time do



your colleagues lecture? Use group work? Other activities?

2. How has teaching at UCS impacted your approach in the classroom?

3. When colleagues from other schools ask you what it's like to teach here, what do you tell them?

4. What else should I know about your experience as a teacher in this school?

## **GUIDANCE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW**

### **I. General Background**

1. Can you briefly tell me about your role here?
2. What has your involvement with the startup of the school been?

### **II. Parent Involvement**

1. Can you describe the contact you have with parents of your students?
2. What have you or the school done to address the issue of parental involvement and communication?
3. What are the most common kinds of contact you have with parents?

### **III. Student Discipline and Safety Issues**

1. At what point do you as a counselor become involved in discipline or safety issues?
2. How do student discipline or safety compare to other places you've worked? What approaches do you employ to address these issues?

### **IV. Teaching and Learning/Environment**

1. What would you say is the primary method of teaching in this building?
2. What are the most common and pressing daily issues that your students bring to you?
3. Tell me about career guidance in this school. What are some of your successes and failures after the first year? What is your approach to student career guidance?
4. What can you tell me about your experiences recruiting and retaining students?
5. If you had only a sentence or two to sum up your experience of UCS's first year, what would it be?
6. What else would you like to share with me about last year's experience and this year's opening?

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ADMINISTRATORS/BOD**

### **I. General Background**

1. What can you briefly tell me about yourself and your involvement with UCS?
2. What were some of the frustrations in opening the school?
3. What were your largest successes?
4. Tell me how you have approached professional development for your staff.
5. Tell me about how you've built community with the school.

### **II. Parental Involvement**

1. Can you describe the kinds of contact you have with parents of your students?
2. What steps are you taking to increase communication with parents?

### **III. Student Discipline and School Culture Issues**

1. Tell me what the most prominent student discipline has been over the past school year. Do you feel that those issues are common in this area or district, or are they unique to this school?
2. Do you and your staff always feel safe at this school? Do your students feel safe?

### **IV. Teaching and Learning**

1. What would you say is your staff's primary mode of teaching? What percentage of the time do they lecture? Use group work? Other activities?
2. Which elements of curricular delivery have changed since school opened last year? Why and how were they changed?
3. What were some challenges with teaching and learning in the opening year?
4. Describe the experience you have had with the ALSDE. What support have they given you?

5. Can you tell me about your experiences recruiting students for the school? What have been some successes and failures in this regard?
6. Can you tell me about student attendance? How have you, as a school approached this issue? What have been some successes and failures in this regard?
7. How did your experiences from last year inform your planning for this school year? What are your goals for this year?
8. What else should I know about your experience as a leader in this school in conjunction with the last year's opening?

## **Appendix B: Biographies of Auburn Center for Evaluation Panel Members**

### Daniel Henry, Ph.D.

In his last 40 years as an educator, Daniel Henry has been a high-school English teacher, a community college writing teacher, and a professor of educational psychology at Indiana, Central Michigan, and Auburn Universities. He began his career in program evaluation at the Indiana University Center for Evaluation where he directed the Michigan Small Class Size Evaluation, the Ohio Local Report Card Project, The Learning Perspectives Initiative, and several other large educational evaluations. He also directed the Kelly School of Business' evaluation of the Cisco Networking Academies. Dr. Henry has taught research and program evaluation at the graduate level, and he serves as a grant reader for the US Department of Education. He has conducted program evaluation for entities as diverse as the USDA and Stenden University in Port Alfred, South Africa. In 2014, he founded the Auburn Center for Evaluation which has since its inception conducted large-scale evaluations for the ALSDE (Alabama Reading Initiative evaluation), the National Science Foundation, Murray State, and McGraw-Hill Incorporated.

### Lisa Simmons, Ph.D.

Lisa Simmons is an Assistant Research Professor at the Auburn Center for Evaluation. She began her career in education working at a residential school for students with severe to profound developmental delays. After earning her Masters in Developmental Psychology from Teachers College, Columbia University, Lisa began teaching in an early intervention classroom while she earned her K12 Exceptional Education teaching credential from the University of West Florida. Lisa then earned her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Auburn in 2017 where she worked as a graduate research assistant at the Auburn Center for Evaluation. Upon graduation, Lisa accepted a full-time position at the Auburn Center for Evaluation to continue her work there. During her tenure at the Auburn Center for Evaluation, Lisa has worked on many federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grants and she has also spent time collecting data in public charter schools in Alabama.

### Andrew Pendola, Ph.D.

Andrew Pendola is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Auburn University. He began his career as a Middle School Social Studies teacher. While earning a Masters in Political Science from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Andrew was awarded the Norman Gill Fellowship to evaluate program equity and postsecondary matriculation in the Milwaukee Public Schools and coordinated city-wide educational goals with the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. Later Andrew worked as a researcher in educational philanthropy the Argosy Foundation, designing and evaluating STEM programs for historically disadvantaged student populations. While earning his Ph.D. in Educational Theory and Policy from the Pennsylvania State University, Andrew began work evaluating state-level teacher production and shortages and has written several articles and legislative briefs on educational labor markets.

### Brenda Plympton, M.Ed.

Brenda Plympton is a Research Assistant at the Auburn Center for Evaluation. She began her career in education as a Georgia State Law Enforcement Instructor where she taught both officers and community stakeholders. Brenda earned her Masters in Adult Education from Auburn University. Following her 20-year career in law enforcement, Brenda began pursuing her doctoral degree at Auburn. She currently acts as a consultant and aids organizations with staff development and training. While working at the Auburn Center for Evaluation, Brenda has assisted with federal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center grants and data analysis for public charter schools in Alabama.