

# CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**

## LaKendra Butler

Founder and Executive Director  
STRIVE Collegiate Academy



When I began my career in education, I wasn't sure that I was going to continue down this path. I had attended the University of Texas at Austin on a scholarship for academics and community service, then became a teacher with Teach for America in Atlanta, and then taught for KIPP TRUTH Academy in my hometown of Dallas. During this time, I became passionate about inequities in education, and I wanted to go to law school to help address this.

It was the KIPP TRUTH Academy founder, Steve Colmus, in Dallas, my school leader at the time, who changed my mind. I will never forget the words he said to me: "I know that you want to change the world, but I know that you can still change the world one child at a time." Under his mentorship, I went on to become Assistant Principal of the school, and then Principal following his transition. In transitioning to Tennessee, I joined a fellowship program with the Tennessee Charter School Center, previously called the Tennessee Charter Incubator, for young school leaders with some leadership experience. I was the only woman in my fellowship class.

In 2015 I founded STRIVE Collegiate Academy, with the goal of empowering a highly diverse group of students to become owners of their learning, contributors to their communities, and lifelong learners.

### **STRIVE FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING**

By the time students leave our school, they are performing above grade level. Four-year STRIVE performance results showed increased Math and Reading skills. As fifth graders (2015), only 33% of students performed at or above grade level in Math and only 53% in ELA. Upon completion of eighth grade (2019), this rose to 69% at or above grade level in Math and 80% in ELA.

As a leader, I am consistently focused on making sure that students become drivers of their own learning before they leave us. There are many schools whose primary success metric is sending students to college. But this can be misleading. Are the colleges the right fit for students? I've seen many students "go to college" only to leave, or to be buried in student debt but unprepared for careers they would have liked to pursue.

We are very intentional about the curriculum we choose—it is always at or above grade level, and then we put the supports in place to get the students there. One practice that has been very effective in advancing student literacy levels is assigning reading every single night. Our students read for 30 minutes and write about it as part of their homework, every night for the four years that they are in our school. I remember one student who came to us with behavioral issues. She loved the focus on reading, and with us valuing her work and pushing her further, she grew tremendously, both behaviorally and academically. We were proud to name her Student of the Year in the eighth grade, and she now attends a private high school on scholarship because of her hard work.

# INVESTING IN A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

STRIVE is a very diverse school. The income levels of our students' families, for instance, run the gamut. I have the opportunity to expose students on both ends of the spectrum to one another, and I see them form friendships that last beyond STRIVE.

As we nurture our diverse students as self-driven learners, and as we build their leadership skills, it is so important that all students see people who look like them in positions of leadership. Once they have this visual, they start advocating for what they think is best, and for what they believe to be possible. This is especially important for our current generation of young people, where visuals (e.g., social media) penetrate their experience even more-so than for previous generations.

Aside from my own mom—who worked for the Dallas Independent School District when I was a child and exercised her right to school choice—I hadn't seen an African American woman leader when I was young. It is so important that we invest in support systems and mentorship for charter school leaders of color, to set them up for success, sustainability, and longevity.

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## STRIVE Collegiate Academy

**“An academically rigorous, family-like environment, committed to serving students academically and culturally.”**

Location Nashville, TN  
Year Opened 2015  
Student enrollment 380  
Grades served 5-8  
Website [strivecollegiate.org](http://strivecollegiate.org)



### Student Demographics

Asian	2.9%	Homeless Youth	2%
Black/African-American	43%	At Risk Students	70%
White/Caucasian	26.4%	Students with Disabilities	12.4%
Hispanic/Latino	27.4%	ESL Students	9%
Two or More Races	2%		
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	.3%		



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