

CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**



Jonta Morris

Founder & CEO,
Legacy Prep

I was born in a small town in Arkansas. I didn't really know what educational inequity meant, but I knew that when you went across the train tracks, it was a different lifestyle with all White families. For Black citizens, the town was plagued by poverty and drug/alcohol abuse. I relocated to Topeka, Kansas in search of a better life outcome. I attended Sumner Elementary School, which is the school Linda Brown integrated via the historic Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education case.

During my junior year in college, I met with a recruitment team from Teach for America. I wanted to sign up, but my parents discouraged me, because they were concerned about my safety and the low teacher pay. Per my parents' recommendation, I entered into the sales industry post undergrad. While I was a top sales rep, the role was not fulfilling, and I knew there was a greater purpose for my life. Fast forward two years later and in the midst of soul searching for my life's work, I came across The Ron Clark Story, a film about an educator with a mission to serve disenfranchised youth. As soon as the movie ended, I heard God say, "You're supposed to teach." I knew that was the confirmation I had been seeking, so, without hesitation, I applied to Teach for America the next day.

I worked in Atlanta Public Schools for two years as a 2008 Metro Atlanta Corps Member. When my TFA commitment was done, I moved to New York to become a kindergarten teacher at KIPP Academy Elementary in the South Bronx. That's where I learned what it means to be an instructional leader and build a village focused on kids. I thought I would stay in New York, but my now husband drew me to Denver. In Denver, I became a founding 5th grade reading teacher and then the founding assistant principal for KIPP Montbello College Prep, the first African American school leader for KIPP Colorado. I later joined Denver Public Schools where I worked at a priority turnaround elementary school and K-8 Principal Resident.

I didn't expect to leave Colorado, but my husband and I began having conversations about me opening a charter school and realized our next destiny move was supposed to be in Birmingham where my husband grew up. I didn't know how to start a school from the ground up; especially without a team or network.

BUILDING A THRIVING VILLAGE

I was a team of one until last year, and I hit every major challenge that probably every charter school faces across country (politics, lawsuits, facility search, application, appeal, funding, etc.). There was a miracle on the other side of every obstacle. Legacy Prep was the first charter school to become approved in the state of Alabama.

After a relentless pursuit, Legacy Prep opened on August 5, 2019 as Birmingham's first public charter school with 120 K-2 PREPsters. We call our community a village. Our powerful village is through a loving and committed partnership with parents and caregivers who want the absolute best for their children. I believe our PREPsters have

limitless potential. It is imperative for them to have individuals who see their potential and create the conditions for them to thrive. We have three very intentional ways for families to be involved: Empowered Voices is a parent-run group that works to educate the community about what charters are and share about their experiences at Legacy Prep; Family Advisory Leadership Council gives input on what’s happening at the school level; and, 20% of our Board is made up of parents, which is mandated in our charter.

During the beginning of the year diagnostic assessments, the data showed that 29 of the 1st and 2nd graders didn’t know letter names and sounds. In three and a half months, we moved 20 of those 29 two STEP levels in the University of Chicago STEP Assessment. On the MAP Assessment, 89% of our Prepsters showed growth on reading assessment, and 94% showed growth on Math assessment.

BUILDING A LEGACY

As a charter school leader of color, I’ve definitely faced challenges. I thought it was going to be peaches and rainbows when I moved to Birmingham, but even within the Black community there are cultural dynamics that exist. Coming to Birmingham and not being from here, there’s an emphasis of “Did you grow up here?” You have the Scarlet Letter of O, Outsider. People say, “You’re trying to impose in a city where you didn’t grow up.”

In spite of this resistance, I know that I have a responsibility to show up and remain in the fight and do the work. Defying the odds was and continues to be in service of building something greater than myself. I want our kids to see representations of themselves doing historic work that’s not solely in the entertainment space, not in the athletic space. Our voice matters as school leaders of color. We have the responsibility to lead and speak on behalf of those who matter most and have been under served by systematic oppression. It’s beautiful thing to reflect on the fact that I not only have a seat at the “table”, but that I created the “table.” Collectively, we can continue to rewrite the narrative for leaders and students of color and have a transformative impact on the educational system in America.

Legacy Prep



Location	Birmingham, AL
Year Opened	2019
Student enrollment	112
Grades served	K-2
Website	legacyprepAL.org

Student Demographics

Asian	1%
Black/African-American	96%
White/Caucasian	1%
Hispanic/Latino	2%
Free and Reduced Meals (FRM)	86%
Students with Disabilities	12%



CHARTER
LEADERS
OF COLOR
MATTER.