



FLORENCE
CITY SCHOOLS



YOUR SYSTEM. OUR COMMUNITY. ONE FLORENCE.

CITY OF LEARNING

FLORENCE CITY SCHOOLS:
AN ALABAMA SUCCESS STORY



OUR VISION

*To serve our students
better than any school system
in Alabama—and give students
the opportunities of their
tomorrow, today.*



LETTER FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Reader,

Great things are happening in the Florence City Schools of Alabama—as always. Our riverfront city in the famed Shoals area, rich in history and culture, has prided itself on the quality of education provided here for many decades.

Our city has come together many times over the years to pursue and preserve a high-quality public school system.

I'm from here. I grew up right here in Florence and played football at Bradshaw High School. I'm a graduate of Northwest Shoals Community College and the University of North Alabama right down the street.

I didn't start out as an educator. I returned to Bradshaw High to help coach football. Later I started to teach, became an assistant principal, and then head of instruction for Florence City Schools.

Our previous superintendent, Dr. Janet Womack, was a remarkable leader who came to Florence in 2010 to lead our schools. She challenged herself and all of us to make Florence's schools even better, especially for children who hadn't always thrived in the past. She challenged her colleagues to do the same and empowered us to learn and grow to help meet that challenge.

We're all learners here in the Florence City Schools. From the team in our district office, to the devoted principals and teachers and other valuable staff in our schools, we're constantly reading, discussing and implementing new research-based ideas to make our schools better.

In Florence, we always strive to do what's best for students—even if it's inconvenient or causes headaches for adults. We'll never be satisfied, and we aggressively strive to pursue improvement every day. Our students, parents and the community can see and feel it every day.

To share some of our lessons and insights with other school systems—and to show off our wonderful community—we asked national education writer Alan Richard to spend time in Florence and to share our story of determination, growth and improvement. My hope: Educators in my community will gain the national recognition they deserve, and that other school systems in Alabama, the South and across the country can learn from our journey. As we share what we're learning, our self-reflection also becomes a learning experience for us.

Thank you for reading, and for all of your support.

Sincerely,

Jimmy Shaw, Ed.D.
Superintendent, Florence City Schools



FLORENCE
CITY SCHOOLS

HOW FLORENCE CITY SCHOOLS SET AN AMBITIOUS PATH FOR GROWTH

Atop a ridge by the Tennessee River, in the northwest corner of Alabama, the city of Florence and the entire Shoals area—named for the river rapids where a giant dam holds back nature—stands a city of learning.

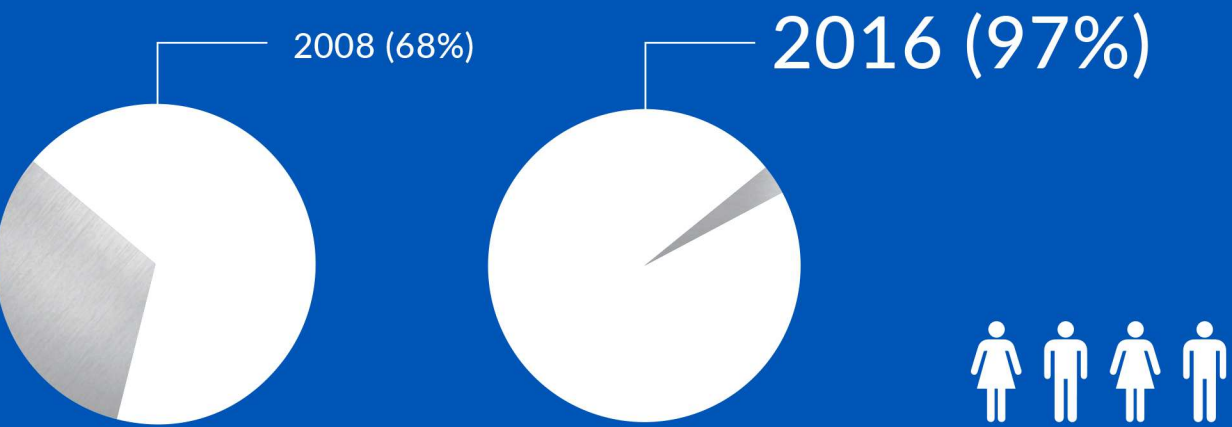
Most of the world knows the Shoals area for the classic soul, rock and country music that's been made here. Aretha Franklin, the Rolling Stones, the Allman Brothers and hundreds of others have made records here. The documentary film *Muscle Shoals* tells of that local legacy. Florence also was home to Dred Scott and is the birthplace of W.C. Handy, the father of the blues. Helen Keller grew up nearby.

The largest of the four Shoals-area cities and the Lauderdale County seat, Florence is also known for education. The University of North Alabama, or UNA, a stately, historic institution and the first public college in the state, stands in downtown Florence.

**BUT THIS STORY IS ABOUT THE
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM THAT'S A
LEADER IN INNOVATION, PROVIDING
UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITIES FOR
STUDENTS. HERE, A SUCCESS STORY
IS UNFOLDING THAT THE NATION
DESERVES TO KNOW.**

FLORENCE’S STRENGTH *in Numbers*

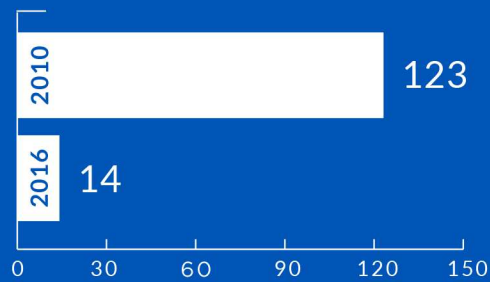
ON-TIME GRADUATION RATE



TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS

4,400

NUMBER OF DROPOUTS



The number of students dropping out of school before graduation has fallen by 88% since 2010.

ADDITIONAL PHILANTHROPIC FUNDING RAISED

\$160,000
2006-2010

\$1.6M
2011-2015

% OF STUDENTS WHO QUALIFY FOR FREE-AND-REDUCED-PRICE MEALS (indicating low-income families)

59%



“Our vision has been, really and truly, kids. People are always saying that, but saying that and doing that are two different things.”

~ Dr. Jimmy Shaw

Together, local educators and the entire Florence community decided to build the best school system in Alabama—and one of the best in the country. The key to the schools’ improvement and success in recent years has been a great team of educators who have worked to overcome “red tape” and bureaucratic blockades.

“I can’t say that anyone thought she was in her right mind” when Dr. Womack arrived six years ago, joked Dr. Jimmy Shaw, the assistant superintendent for instruction from 2015 to 2017, overseeing academics and classroom teaching. It was Shaw’s job to challenge teachers and principals to continually sharpen classroom instruction for every student. Every last one.

In spring 2017, Dr. Shaw was named superintendent by the elected school board. The schools here and their strategies for improvement aren’t always flashy, but they’re working. Many educators here and people in the Florence community say they’re just getting started.

Other factors also help Florence City Schools (FCS). The district has more resources and local tax revenue than many school systems in Alabama and across the South. Support from local leaders such as the mayor and city council has been critical, especially as Alabama has dealt with major statewide education budget cuts. The school district has the 10th-highest rate of local revenue in the state.

“As a parent, the growth and the community support here is unlike anything I’ve ever seen,” said Leslie Howard, former executive director of the Florence Falcons Foundation, which has provided teachers with grants for special projects and supplies. “It’s just amazing the things that are available here for such a wide variety of kids.”

“As a parent, the growth and the community support here is unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

~ Leslie Howard, former executive director of the Florence Falcons Foundation

How Florence City Schools are **RELENTLESSLY STRIVING TO GO ABOVE AND BEYOND** for All Students

Technology is plentiful.

A leader among districts in the South, Florence provides a digital device for every student in grades pre-K-12—not just in middle and high school—through the Florence City Schools Digital Transition program.

Teachers, principals and the district’s leaders are required to keep learning.

Partnerships and donors make it more affordable for educators to earn graduate degrees to increase their knowledge. The entire district also is focused on building “learning communities” within each school and across the system to challenge old habits and introduce new ways of teaching to help all students improve. Teachers work together to examine students’ work and to discuss instructional strategies that work and which ones don’t. This is done through the districtwide Falcon Learning Conversations Network, a remarkable undertaking.

Fine arts abound.

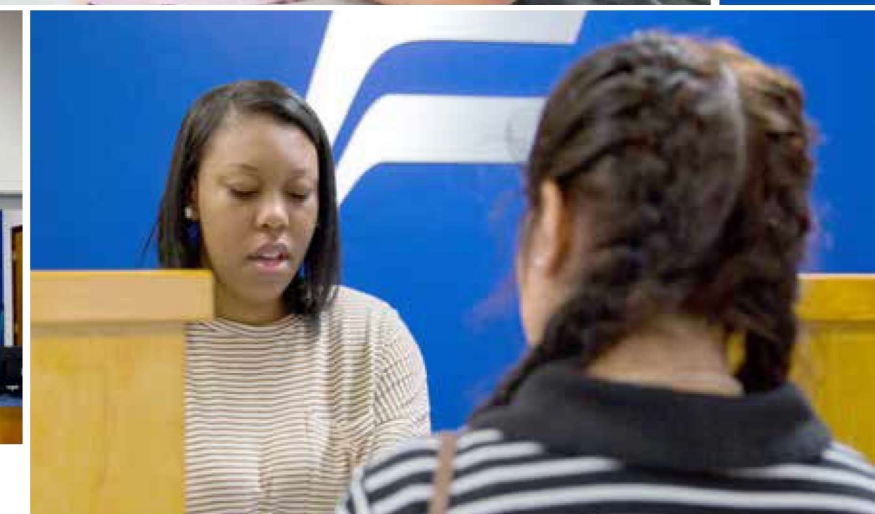
The Florence Academy of Fine Arts, within the city’s only high school, offers more than 116 arts courses, many at advanced levels—an incredible accomplishment for a 4,400-student school system or almost any school system. And it’s still growing.

Rules can be broken—or changed.

To help transform education in Florence, the district was granted its Innovative Systems Waiver from the state. In turn, the district has become a pacesetter for all of Alabama. The district even uses a different standardized test than the rest of the state, because it helps teachers measure classroom learning throughout the year.

Career and technical courses are pacesetters.

Students can earn industry certification in many different fields and can take about 65 career courses (and counting). Some students earn class credits while working full time through the “12 for Life” program that gives at-risk students extra support inside an actual workplace. Other students intern for a leading national fashion designer or learn in one of the nation’s best TV broadcasting programs. The district also is expanding its “Launch” program that matches students with experiences outside of school based on their own interests. And the district is establishing new partnerships with Northwest-Shoals Community College to help students actually earn degrees or career credentials *while they’re in high school*.



‘Pouring Into’ Principals, Teachers, Students HELPS THE WHOLE CITY RISE

One of the biggest challenges was regarding the state’s testing system. In the 2013-14 school year, Alabama began to use the ACT Aspire test to measure how well students met the state’s new, more challenging academic standards. But FCS had begun their own computerized tests using the Scantron Global Scholar Performance Series to measure student achievement throughout the year, tailoring instruction based on what the data showed students need.

The new test seemed redundant and cost extra money and made students take another test. FCS approached the state for a waiver to allow the district to use Scantron as its state-required test. It was approved.

And when major budget cuts hit the state a few years ago—called proration in Alabama, when the state education budget restricts with the economy—the district didn’t fret.

We don’t care who you are, where you came from, what challenges you’re up against—we are bound and determined that we’re going to get you to a place where you can be successful. We have very high expectations for every student.”

~ Dr. Janet Womack



In fact, during that period, FCS decided to open the Florence Academy of Fine Arts, expanding arts courses by the dozens. The district also invested more in teachers’ and principals’ professional learning by partnering with the nonprofit Alabama Best Practices Network, the College Board and the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform (which stresses how to engage students more deeply in their learning) and others.

Most important of all, FCS invested in its own educators during a period of no state pay raises for teachers. Philanthropies across the state and locally were approached to cover two-thirds of the costs for teachers and principals to further their own learning. UNA and Samford University in Birmingham also partnered with FCS to provide discounts for graduate-level programs, and for some of Samford’s classes to be offered locally.

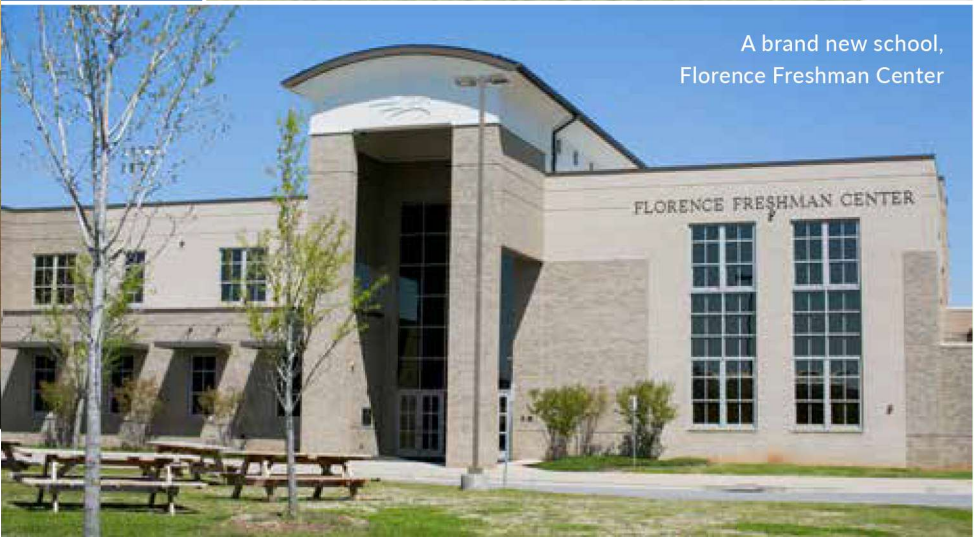
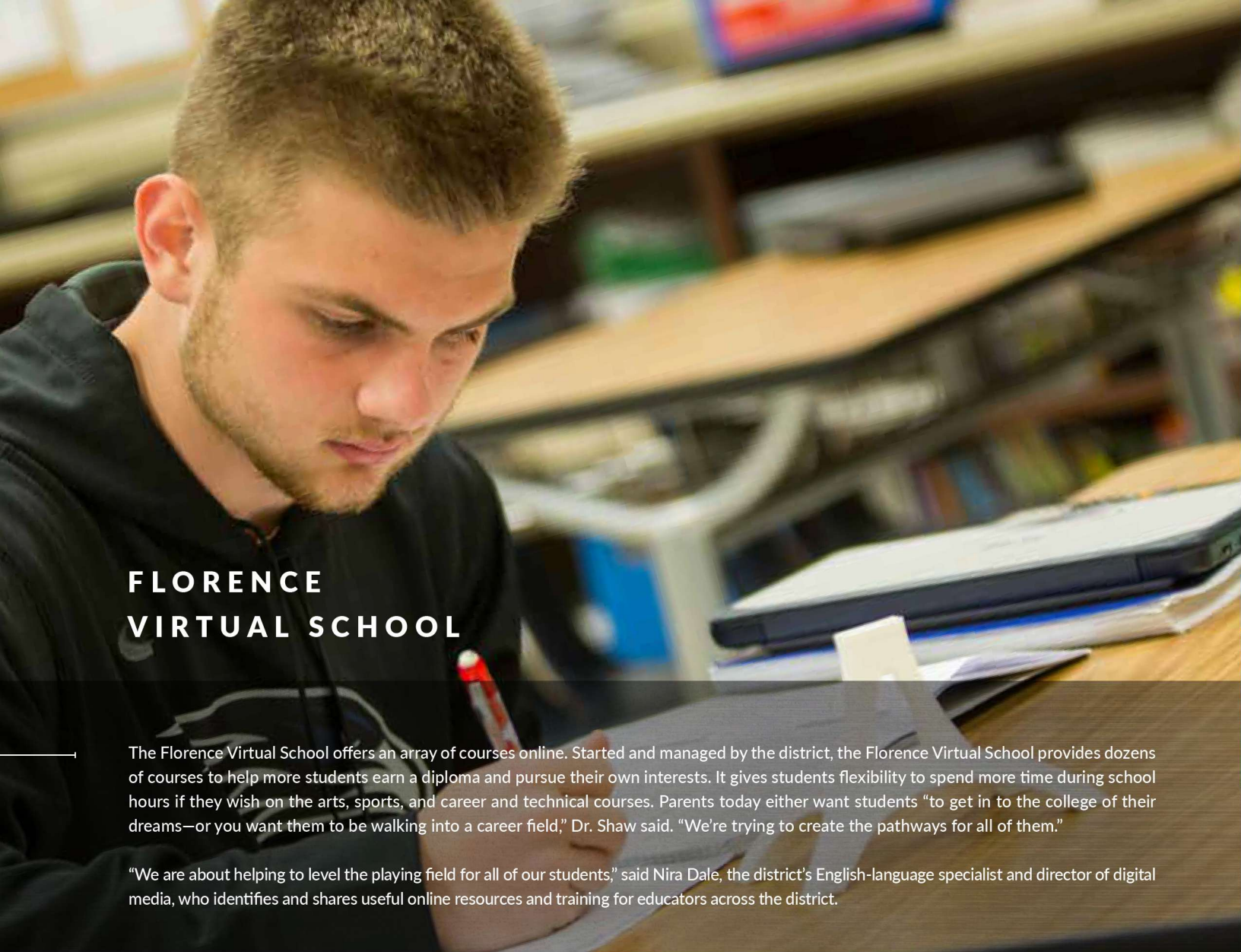
That strategy has worked better than anyone had dreamt. The Advance 12 and Impact 80 programs have helped about 100 FCS educators earn doctoral, specialist and master’s degrees. Educators in Alabama can earn higher salaries based on their level of education—and schools are provided with better-prepared teachers and leaders who know the latest in leadership practices, education research and instructional strategies. Educators must work in Florence for three years after completing the program or pay back the tuition costs.

These programs have stabilized the teacher and leadership workforce in a time when many districts struggle with high rates of turnover. In 2017, the district could boast that 71 percent of its teachers had advanced degrees, giving many of them additional training in their academic subjects and the field of teaching. “It touches so many people in so many ways,” said Dr. Shaw, who earned his own doctorate in education in 2015.

Dr. Shaw’s intellectual approach to building a system to support growth in teachers’ and school leaders’

skills has been a central reason for FCS’s continued improvements. The leadership training programs are helping FCS keep many of its best school leaders and teachers in the profession and in the local schools.

When making a major decision about technology for classrooms, the district surveyed students to seek their guidance. Every student in grades K-12 now has a digital device, either an iPad or Chromebook, opening a world of learning and access to new resources for both students and teachers.



FLORENCE VIRTUAL SCHOOL

The Florence Virtual School offers an array of courses online. Started and managed by the district, the Florence Virtual School provides dozens of courses to help more students earn a diploma and pursue their own interests. It gives students flexibility to spend more time during school hours if they wish on the arts, sports, and career and technical courses. Parents today either want students “to get in to the college of their dreams—or you want them to be walking into a career field,” Dr. Shaw said. “We’re trying to create the pathways for all of them.”

“We are about helping to level the playing field for all of our students,” said Nira Dale, the district’s English-language specialist and director of digital media, who identifies and shares useful online resources and training for educators across the district.

A brand new school,
Florence Freshman Center

FLORENCE CITY SCHOOLS HAS UPGRADED ITS SCHOOL BUILDINGS IN RECENT YEARS

Major renovations across the district, including a
new entrance and office at Florence High School

A new Florence Middle School, coming soon

All of what FCS offers would be impossible without strong community support. The school board, city council and mayor continually back funding requests from FCS.

In the 1980s, the area lost Ford Motor Co., Union Carbide and other employers, and the Tennessee Valley Authority moved many of its jobs 175 miles downriver east to Chattanooga. Enrollment in Florence City Schools dropped as people moved away. The city had about 8,000 students until the early 1980s, and at one time dropped to roughly 3,500.

These days, nearly half of FCS’s budget is funded by local taxpayers—another factor that impressed Dr. Womack when she first visited. The

city has always valued the schools as the greatest economic development tool there is available.

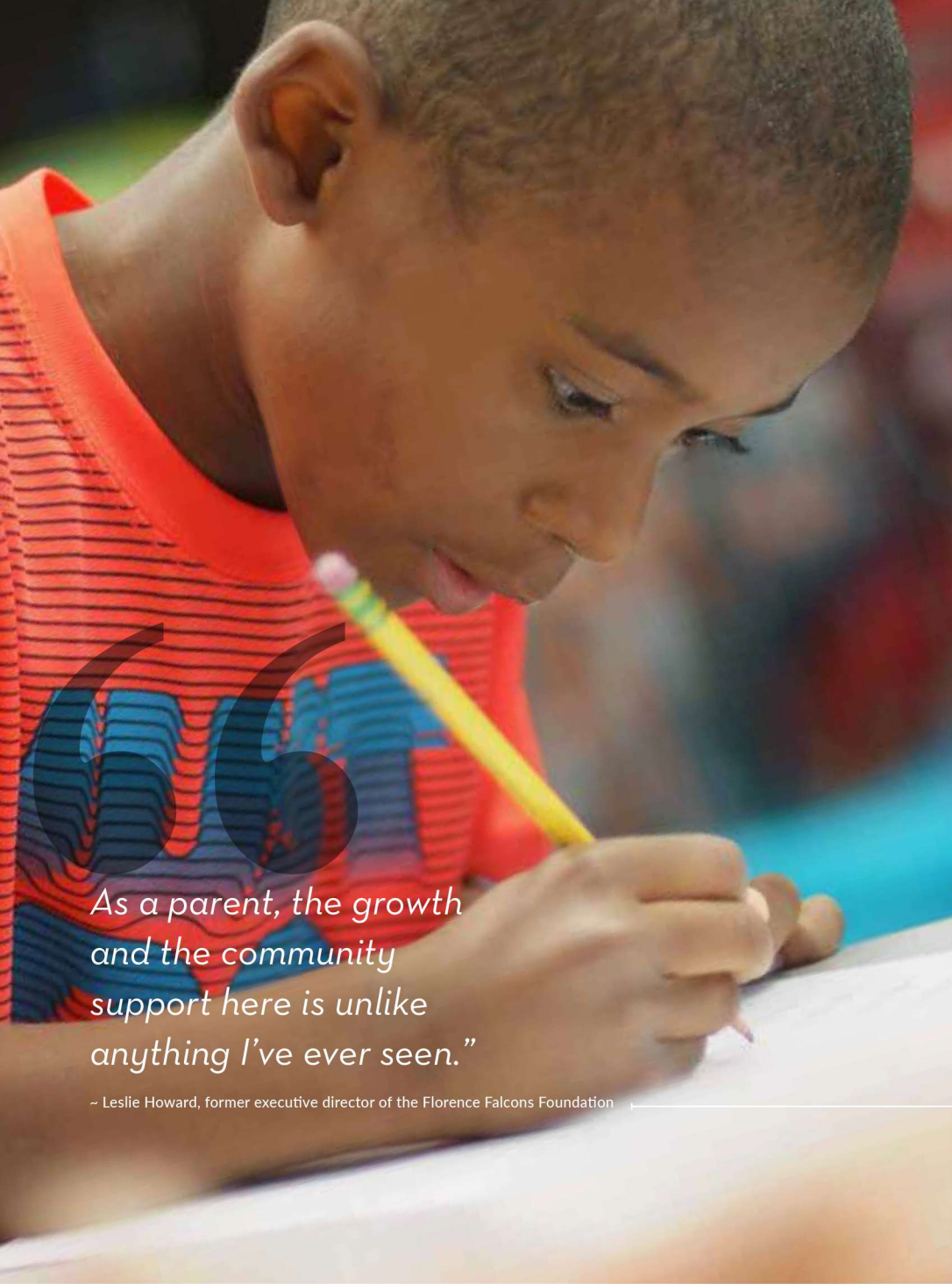
That’s in part why Florence’s economy now thrives. The city has a much lower unemployment rate than Alabama as a whole. And in downtown Florence, unlike many small cities in the South, it’s hard to find parking. Storefronts are packed with restaurants, shops and offices. They’re as busy as the shopping mall at the edge of town.

Connie Wallace, the district’s assistant superintendent and chief financial officer, has had to find funding for many of Dr. Shaw’s and Dr. Womack’s ideas. She almost always helps find a way.

FCS offers students and their families seven long weekends during each school year. The purpose: to reserve those days for the Falcon Learning Conversations Network. In those Friday sessions, teachers and principals can learn together and strategize about helping students. They spend time examining student data from their classroom assignments and periodic state test scores, and discuss challenges students face. Florence accomplishes this while still meeting state requirements for student instructional hours.

Dr. Chris Westbrook, the district’s director of instruction, technology, and career-technical education now also oversees Florence’s career and technical education programs. Dr. Shaw said he knew Westbrook was right for the position

because he understands where many children come from. The superintendent and Westbrook both were factory workers for a time as younger men. Westbrook said he likes how FCS isn’t just trying to excel in one area—advanced courses, sports, or the arts. “It’s that we’re going to try and excel in every area, because not every child fits into one box,” he said.



“As a parent, the growth and the community support here is unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

~ Leslie Howard, former executive director of the Florence Falcons Foundation



The ‘LEARNING COMMUNITY’ among educators **REACHES STUDENTS, too**

The day before school began in fall 2015, the entire faculty of Florence High School and the 9th-grade school gathered in the cafeteria at the Florence Freshman Center for a kickoff day of learning. Educators were less preoccupied with bus schedules and handling last-minute class-schedule requests from students. Instead, they were knee-deep into their own type of school: the **Falcon Learning Conversations Network (FLCN)**.

Jackie Walsh, a nationally known author on classroom instruction, stood at the front of the cafeteria and introduced the central question for the day: “How can we plan for and nurture a classroom culture that intentionally incorporates high expectations for student academic engagement, and structures to scaffold these expectations?” This is the topic teams of educators spent part of the morning discussing and connecting with their own schools. The idea behind the FLCN was to build a learning community districtwide.



While many schools across the nation were building “learning communities” of educators on each campus, the goal in FCS is for educators from different schools, grade levels and academic subjects to meet and learn together.



Dr. Shaw led the team that plans and organizes all the FLCN activities, and as superintendent has continued that role. He challenges principals and teachers to examine student data and take action to address students’ academic weaknesses. He employs the strategies he’s learned in graduate courses, and soaks up books and articles on leadership—and thinks constantly about how to engage students in classrooms better.

That day before school started in 2015, in Florence for the daylong professional learning sessions with teachers and principals, the author Walsh reflected on what’s happening here. “Every Florence teacher is learning, focusing on the same things—and that’s not happening anywhere in America,” she said.

“I see the leaders in this district really starting to sing off the same page, not just the same

hymnal,” Walsh continued. “There’s a vision. There’s an extraordinary work ethic.”

Kathy Gassenheimer, the executive director of the Alabama Best Practices Network, which provides professional learning for educators across the state, huddled with Walsh and Shaw at the end of the day. Gassenheimer turned to Shaw and said: “I have never met such a strong instructional leader as you, Jimmy. People know that in Florence, their leaders care and that they’ll do anything possible” to help students.





From FRESHMAN YEAR to 'FLO-U':
TRANSFORMING HIGH SCHOOL

YOUR SYSTEM. OUR COMMUNITY. ONE FLORENCE.



Dr. Roderick Sheppard, native of Lauderdale County outside Florence, the father of four led the Florence Freshman Center—the new \$8 million school for 9th graders adjacent to Florence High School. Every Monday, Sheppard, a ball of fire, spoke to all of his students in the school cafeteria. “Hard work!” he shouted. “Pays off!” students replied in unison.

Like many freshman academies sprouting across the nation, the school gives the youngest high schoolers their own space to prepare academically and navigate socially.

Sheppard was the perfect principal for this type of school. He was serving as the president of the statewide secondary school principals association.

“You can give more. You haven’t even begun to tap all of your potential yet,” Sheppard was told by an admin. Taken aback, he soon realized he was being pushed to take new actions such as more carefully monitor student achievement data to make sure all students are moving along.

Now, Sheppard works even harder and smarter, he said, and has finished a doctoral program through the Advance 12 program. Recently, he was promoted to be the principal of Florence High School.

“What I do, it’s not for me,” said Sheppard, who first met Dr. Shaw when the two were teenage bagboys at the Big Star grocery. “It’s for carrying Florence into the future.”

Jourdain Johnson was about to start 10th grade, but on the day before school started, he stopped by the Freshman Center to see his old teachers. “They’ll try to help you improve,” said the young man, who played percussion in the marching band.



FLORENCE FRESHMAN CENTER

GRADE: 9
ENROLLMENT: 370





FLORENCE HIGH SCHOOL

GRADE: 10-12

ENROLLMENT: 1,100

Across the parking lot at Florence High, the school year began with Principal Lynne Hice in her office. She was busy inventing courses, sometimes for only a single student to take. If students have an interest and the school can find the right instructor, then the school will provide it.

"We've just kind of blown that up," Hice said of old-style school schedules. "It's all about mastering the standards. It's more like a college campus atmosphere and the kids really appreciate the responsibility and the ownership of their time."

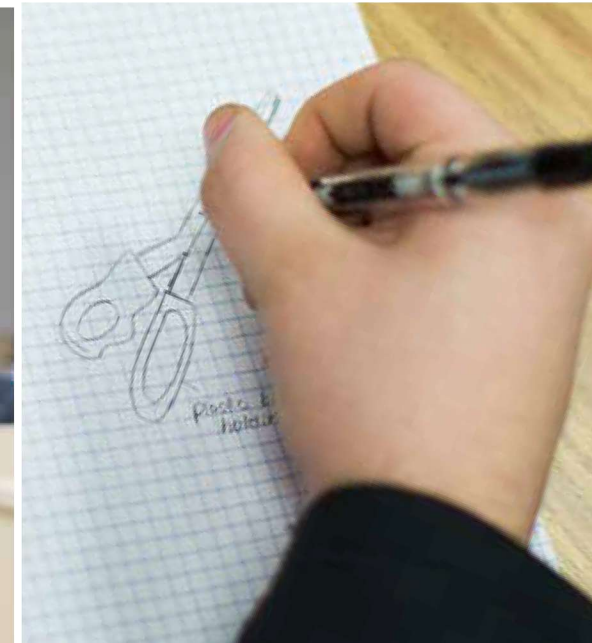
Students now sometimes call the high school "Flo-U" because it seems more like a college. Unlike many schools, students have 24-hour access to digital devices and network privileges that most districts prohibit. "You don't punish the masses for the sins of a few. We don't lock down the technology," Hice said. "Our students, they rise to the occasion."

Hice grew up across the river in Muscle Shoals and always knew as a child she wanted to teach. But life interrupted her plans. She married and had children, then later started classes at Northwest-Shoals Community College, transferred to UNA and taught 14 years in her hometown and another year in Florence. She then was the principal at Florence High until 2017 and worked with district leaders to expand the course offerings for the 1,100 students, especially in careers and the arts.

"It's just been a real culture shift. You can't 'do' school the way you used to do school when we were in school. We can customize education for every child," Hice said.

The high school administration works to find educators from throughout the community, some of whom aren't certified as teachers. But if they're experts in their fields, waivers allowing the practice are sought from ALSDE.

Hice completed her doctorate in education through the Advance 12 program, and loved the emphasis in FCS on educators being learners, too. "We do a lot of promoting of the learning of adults to the children. They're hearing their teachers talk about being in school," said Hice, recently promoted to succeed Dr. Shaw as the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "The kids see me as a learner. It kind of changes the role a little bit. We're all learning together."





Keeping the SHOALS MUSIC LEGACY ALIVE—at School

Onstage at the front of the Florence High auditorium, all the rows of seats dark, stood a man in a t-shirt, jeans and boots, with several students seated in a half circle, guitars balanced on their knees. Gary Nichols didn't look much like a teacher. That's because he's really a rock 'n' roller. He was one of the legions of non-teachers teaching in the Florence schools. The former lead singer and songwriter of the soulful bluegrass group The Steeldrivers, winners of a Grammy Award in 2016, was on the road part of every week. But at his weekly classes, he fit right in.

"I started teaching when my 8th and 9th graders were in 1st grade. I'm a big kid myself," said Nichols, born in Tuscumbia and a lifelong Florence resident who has made his own country records in Nashville and Muscle Shoals. "There have been times I've gotten off the bus at 5 a.m. and driven to school."

On this morning, Nichols led several students in an intermediate guitar class. He also was teaching songwriting and how to read and play from musical charts—just like professional musicians do at the renowned Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals.

Besides the music legends who recorded in this area in decades past, a new generation of prominent artists has roots in the Shoals. The band Alabama Shakes and singer-songwriter Jason Isbell have had No. 1 albums on national charts in recent years. Music isn't just history here; it's alive—and a career for some.

A few days later, Nichols' guitar class moved from the auditorium across the hallway into a brand-new, state-of-the-art recording studio that rivals studios 130 miles up the road in Nashville, with hardwood floors, a control room and separate performance pods. Few schools have such a thing.

"We have an actual studio here, and people who work in actual studios," said freshman Emmett Redding, a gifted young guitarist.

After warming up with a blues jam, along with fine arts academy facilitator Jerry Foster and then school resource police officer Gary Smith on drums, Nichols counted off and led students in a stirring version of "The Weight," a rock-and-soul classic recorded by The Band, Aretha Franklin and the Staples Singers (who recorded in Muscle Shoals) and others. Custodian

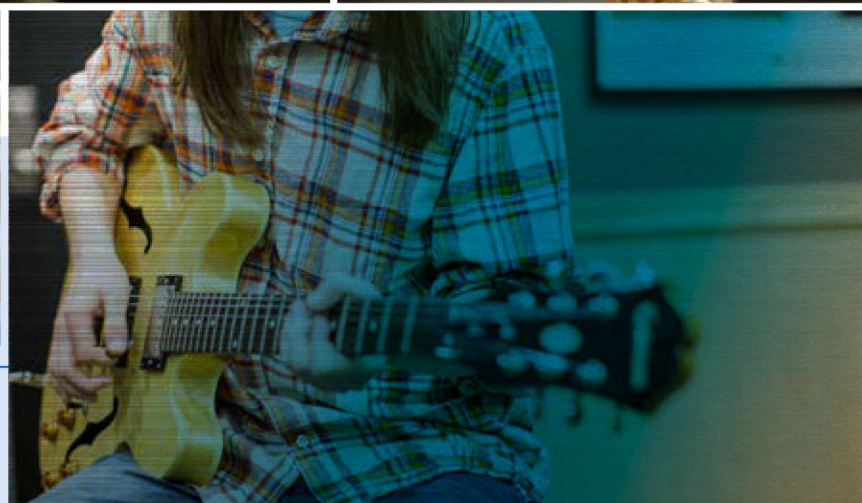
Oliver Roy of The Midnighters joined in on saxophone and killed it. "I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't see some hits coming out of here," he said. (Later, when Mr. Roy retired, he was awarded his high school diploma. He'd had to quit school as a young man to join the service.)

"I can't think of another school anywhere that gives you the opportunity to do things like this," said David Craft, a junior who played guitar and bass during the session. "It doesn't feel like schoolwork when you get to do things like this."

Emmett's mother, LuEllen Redding, listened from the corridor outside the new studio, where a crowd of students had gathered. She said she couldn't be happier with the options her four children have in the schools here. "We've been blown away."



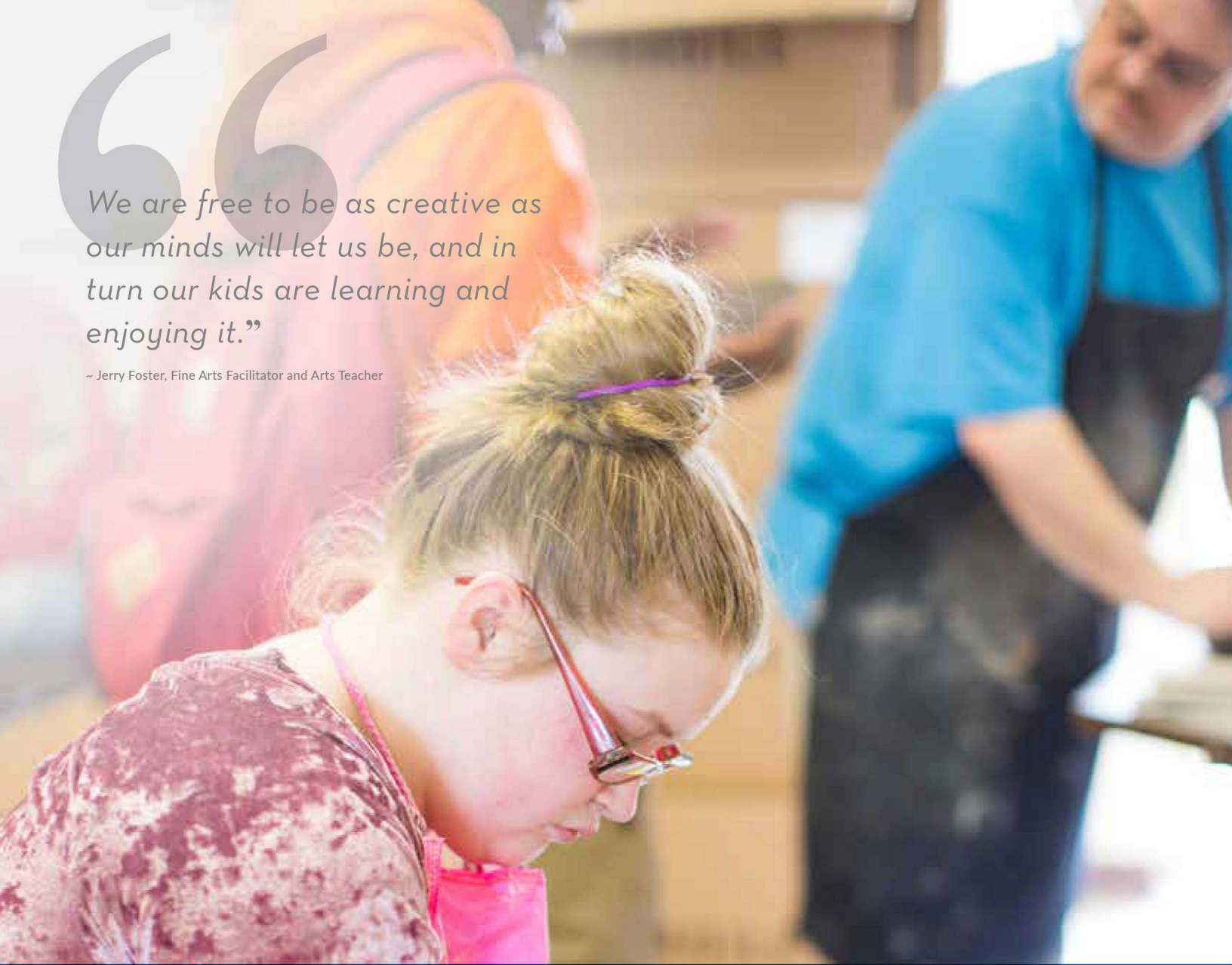
Jerry Foster
Florence Academy of Fine Arts
Academy Facilitator



“

We are free to be as creative as our minds will let us be, and in turn our kids are learning and enjoying it.”

— Jerry Foster, Fine Arts Facilitator and Arts Teacher



Fine Arts at Home IN FLORENCE SCHOOLS



YOUR SYSTEM. OUR COMMUNITY. AND FLORENCE.



Arts teacher Jerry Foster had bugged the school district for years about starting a fine arts academy. For a long time, it seemed too big of an idea to try.

The district originally considered seeking federal funding for such an endeavor. Then they realized they could do it themselves. Foster and others spent many hours developing ideas for what the academy could be. Then-superintendent Dr. Womack and Principal Hice traveled to New York City to visit the school that inspired the films and TV show *Fame*.

The Florence Academy of Fine Arts, referred to endearingly as FAFA, officially opened in fall 2012. “Our story is kind of like in *The Wizard of Oz* when it went from black and white to color,” said Foster, the facilitator of the fine arts academy who also teaches visual arts, fashion design and photography.

They began with 30 classes and expanded to an incredible 116 courses in just a few years. Students must apply, present a portfolio, and maintain good grades to stay in the academy. Hundreds of students from Florence High and the adjacent Freshman Center take classes at the academy. Students have won hundreds of national and state awards. Some also take art classes through the Florence Virtual School.

Walk the halls of FAFA—housed in classroom wings at Florence High until they can build their own facility one day—and the arts offerings abound, from visual arts and photography to creative writing to orchestra and AP music theory to performing arts and dance.

High school senior Anna Robertson, a published playwright through the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and a photographer and editor of the *Signatures* school literary magazine, said she was taking multiple high school writing classes at the same time. “My boyfriend is a poet and photographer” who attended another local school. “He doesn’t have as many opportunities as I do,” she said.



In a room with a huge mirror, dance instructor Matthew Kiel led his class through some ballet-style steps to the dance tune “Disco Inferno (Burn Baby Burn),” blasting from a boom box. Dance classes are now offered in grades 5-12.

Casey Reed, the district’s federal programs, transportation director and data guru, came to work in Florence in part because of his daughter’s interest in dance. The arts are available “to everyone,” not just the elite, Reed said.

Down the hall, there’s a piano lab with 16 pianos. There were acting and stagecraft classes happening in the auditorium. “If we can do this in Florence, you can do this, too,” Dr. Shaw said of all the arts programs. “There’s something special happening here. We’re prepping kids for this community.”

“What’s fun is to have kids tell you they like coming to school,” Foster said. “If I’d have let them, they’d have been here all summer long.”

Students have graduated and now work for the likes of Marvel Comics, the Savannah College of Arts and Design and on film crews. “People are seeing the results of our work here,” said Foster, who hopes to keep expanding the arts courses. “It’s just the beginning.”

FLORENCE STUDENTS AT WORK, PURSUING *What They Love*

Just as FCS provides students with an abundance of courses in the arts, the same is true in career and technical education.

The Launch Program now has about 40 partnerships with local businesses and organizations, allowing students to have internships in fields that interest them while still in school. Students intern with a local engineering company that specializes in spinal and hip implants, the Marriott Shoals Resort overlooking the Tennessee River, and in information technology at the City of Florence.

“If you want to be an attorney, we’ll get you an internship as a clerk in an attorney’s office,” Dr. Shaw said. “We want to put you in your environment of tomorrow, today.”

A team from the district office visited the Early College model in a Texas school system that helps hundreds of its students each year graduate high school with a career certification or associate’s degree already in hand. Such programs could help to address shortages of workers in local fields such as nursing.

Every autumn Friday night, young voices and faces appear in front of and behind the cameras for Florence High School Falcon football. People who can’t attend the games glue themselves to local cable TV, where students form a sports-broadcast team that’s more accomplished than those on some networks.

FCS has invested in leading-edge equipment that many TV stations don’t have. The results are in: Florence High’s broadcast TV program was named the nation’s best live sports broadcast for two years straight by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS). It also was named one of the top four sports broadcasts in the country.

“I’m a constant learner. You’re going to be a constant learner,” teacher Randy Bruce told his students huddled around two large TV screens. A local musician and sound engineer who played with greats such as George Jones and Percy Sledge, Bruce has helped FCS establish a broadcasting program that just keeps expanding.

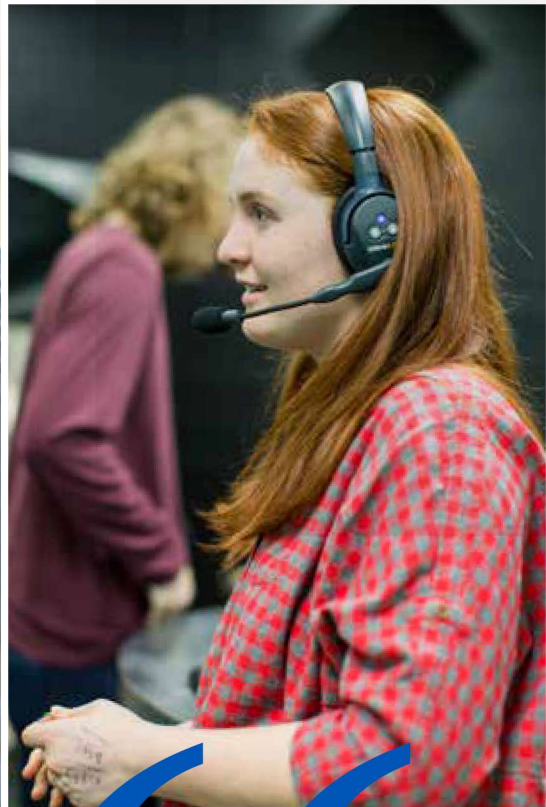
Jennifer Kilpatrick, a former TV news producer for a station in Huntsville who teaches TV production and theater, gathered a second crop of students in an adjoining room—the newsroom. “They’ve just gotten their first job assignments,” she said during a break.

Students make videos for community groups, and even out of state. The broadcasting program’s success has led to related activities; students are even shooting their own short films to enter in a festival.

“It’s no longer a chore to go to school because I really have something I love and am passionate about,” said Jackson Sneed, who was a senior in his third year of broadcasting courses. A young musician with a studio at home, he and classmates were allowed to spend up to three periods a day in TV broadcasting-related courses. “You decide what you want to take and they try to make it work for you.”

“It’s taught me about public speaking and being in front of a camera,” added Madison Haney, a senior at the time, who said she planned to study aviation at Auburn University.

There are plenty of other career-oriented classes at Florence High: information technology, an engineering program, industrial building arts (which includes architecture), and more. “Not many districts are seeking out professional people and bringing them into teach,” said Dr. Darrin Lett, until recently the director of career and technical education. >>



We meet our students where they are instead of where we think they should be.”

~ Beth Dickerson, Shoals-area native and longtime executive assistant to the city’s superintendents





In Marsha Carter's culinary instruction class, home to a state-of-the-art industrial kitchen, students were getting serious about becoming chefs, caterers and entrepreneurs.

"I started with 13 kids in 2007," said Carter, whose program expanded to include about 100 students in culinary classes all day long, including a new baking and pastry course. Named the national family and consumer sciences teacher of the year in 2013, Carter said students can finish at Florence and attend UNA, the state's only college offering a four-year culinary degree.

Florence's program was ranked by Sullivan University as one of the top 100 hospitality programs in the nation. "It's actually a class I'm looking forward to every day," said Katie Baker, who was a senior and member of Florence High's award winning student culinary team.

"I, for real, just come to school every day for culinary," said senior Adams Woods, another team member who himself was considering a career as a culinary arts teacher.

Student Sarah Green couldn't believe the level of culinary instruction she found after moving to Florence. "My last school (in Mississippi) didn't offer it," said the senior, in her third year of culinary courses. "They explained in great detail what was involved and what it could do for you. You can even start your own business."

"I'm falling in love with school every day."

~ Brook Murgatroyd, student

Across town in an industrial park, more than 90 students were hard at work, earning class credit—and attending a program that has actually saved some students' lives.

At **Southwire's 12 for Life** program, run in collaboration with FCS, students work four hours a day and earn a salary to help support their families. They can usually work a shift that allows them to spend the mornings or afternoons at school for their academic coursework.

But the lessons they're learning here may be the most valuable.

Sisters Abbey and Brook Murgatroyd wore goggles and used high-tech machinery to cut short sections of wire from spools and package them in little plastic bags and boxes. If you buy wiring for your home at Home Depot or Lowe's or the hardware store, this is probably where it comes from.

"I'm falling in love with school every day," said Brook, who was then a senior and young mother, and also worked at Pizza Hut to support her family. "I thought it was a good chance to get work experience for life after high school."

12 for Life director of community partnerships Corey Behel said the program allows students who

need to work an opportunity to do just that—and gain valuable confidence and experience—but while also finishing high school. The program retention rate for students is 99 percent. "We focus on their potential," Behel said. "They don't want to leave us."

The program's guidance counselor, Cynthia Casteel, was a dropout herself who later earned two master's degrees. "Some kids need a momma," she said, happy to answer that call on occasion.

Scott Williams, formerly the Southwire plant manager, said his company started the program in Carrollton, Ga., when the local Southwire plant couldn't find the employees it needed. They started the same program in Florence in 2009, investing in a nearly \$1 million facility, with plans to expand to Tupelo, Mississippi and Charleston, South Carolina.

Dr. Shaw said 12 for Life has helped to improve Florence's high school graduation rate drastically, to 95 percent.

It's a perfect model of how business and industry and K-12 schools can work together. The 12 for Life program "impacts the whole community. All of the things that make a better society, that's what this program is doing.



THE BRIDGE TO SUCCESS:

New Opportunities in the Middle Grades

Former Principal Dr. Aimee Rainey, girls' basketball coach Marc Johnson, career-preparedness teacher Jill Johnson (they're not related, but the staff calls them Johnson & Johnson), school resource officer Kevin Garner, attendance clerk Susan McGee and others were there—abuzz with what was happening at the school and laughing out loud.

"Everybody can't work in a middle school. You have to love it," said Rainey, who was in her sixth year as principal, had been a recent state middle school principal of the year, and was a 2016 American Association of School Administrator's national women in leadership award winner.

When she attends principals' conferences, Rainey said peers from other schools are amazed to hear about all the different courses available to Florence's students in grades 5-8.

"We don't just have four or five electives. We have over 30," said Rainey, explaining the school's array of Encore

courses. Rainey grew up in south Alabama near Mobile, where she worked as a speech pathologist before becoming an elementary school teacher and principal. She was attracted to FCS because of its record of success and as a good city to raise a family.

There's dance, chorus, band, guitar, orchestra, art, creative writing, theater, sculpting, Spanish, French, Latin, debate and a full-slate of career-tech courses.

How does this school of 700 students 7th and 8th graders do it? Many of the same arts and career teachers at Florence High spend their first couple of periods each day in the middle schools. "This is the age where you capture children and let them explore," Rainey said.

In dance class in Florence Middle's auditorium, students twirled their way onto the stage. Their dance teacher would spend 1st and 2nd periods there—and then teach high school arts courses in the afternoon. The middle school students have access to the same artists as older students.

"They get this in their public school for free," Rainey said, looking on proudly.



We don't just have four or five electives. We have over 30."

~ Aimee Rainey, Former Principal,
Florence Middle School

There are 15 competitive sports for middle-grades students, too. "There are more opportunities here than in any school system that I've ever known," said Ashley Bowling, Florence Middle's assistant principal.

Most of the same opportunities in the arts and other elective courses also are available across town at Hibbett Middle School, which serves about 625 students in 5th and 6th grades. But academics don't take a back seat in either of FCS' middle schools, even though students have so many choices.

Florence City Schools students also get extra help and support when they need it. At Florence Middle, for instance, classes last 50 minutes each, but teachers can adjust the schedule to provide extra time when needed. Seventh grade reading is taught in every subject, not just English, and some students have math intervention classes before their regular math course to provide them extra help.

"Rarely do you enter a classroom in which students aren't on task and the teacher isn't actively, gregariously teaching and engaging students," said Melanie Harris, the FMS leadership team chair who also was teaching 7th grade honors math.

In 8th grade, the Pathways program helps students behind in their courses or grades to catch up in an expedited way—and stay in school. It's sort of a leadership development program for those who need a lift.

Harris, a former teacher and now an Instructional Partner at an elementary school in Florence, helped start the Pathways program. She likes that FCS uses its own standardized tests rather than opt for what the state uses. She gets immediate feedback on students' performance rather than waiting several months for results—after those students have moved to the next grade.

"That doesn't help me. I don't even have those kids anymore," she said.

Using its own test also saves FCS students and teachers time, they'd otherwise need to spend on additional tests, said Hibbett Middle School Principal Dr. Cindy Jackson. Now, students can take each subject's standardized tests in one 75-minute period.

But most important is the 60 minutes—every day—of planning time for teachers by subject, Jackson said. Teachers confer about lessons and how to reach students better, and how to help more students perform better on their assessments.



FCS started online courses for middle school in the 2015-2016 school year to great success. About 40 students enrolled that year. Students can start taking courses that can help them enter college with their freshman and sophomore years behind them, saving time and money, said Rainey, who was the principal at Florence Middle at the time. She recently became the principal at Weeden Elementary School in the district.

"Our teachers teach the classes and create the virtual content," she added. The online teachers meet in person with students at least once a week, to get to know their students (if they don't already) and provide extra help when needed.

All students at Florence Middle track their own progress in each subject. They use "playbooks," a football analogy that connects with many Alabama children. In an advisory class period, students examine their achievement in their four core academic classes—grades on classroom tests and the Scantron tests taken three times a year. They set personal goals and write reflections on how they're doing, learning to be more reflective learners.

The result after just one year: Lower failure rates. Only three students failed a grade out of 700 enrolled at Florence Middle, Rainey said. >>





Florence Middle also is getting a new home. It had to relocate from its older campus into a series of portable classrooms behind Hibbett Middle for a couple of years. A new modern Florence Middle School is slated to open in early 2019 on its former site near downtown Florence.

The school also has a new principal, after Rainey transferred to Weeden Elementary. Principal Kevin Wieseman was commuting all the way from Huntsville just to work in Florence because he believed in the system's dedication to its students.

A former longtime football coach, teacher and high school principal in Huntsville, the new principal said Florence functions well as a community and the schools reflect that. "In Florence, it's our kids. I don't care where they come from," Wieseman said. "If you're not taking care of the kids, you'll stick out here (as an educator)."

Meanwhile, Hibbett Middle has begun small-group instruction based on students' classroom test data. Teachers are more focused on differentiated instruction. Smaller groups also are helping close the gap for students with disabilities. There was a "data room" at Hibbett where educators gathered to see how students were doing. Posters covered the walls showing test data by grade and class. Some of the posters carried the title: "Are We Moving Kids?"

"It's exciting to see we have an awareness of data in our school like never before," said Jackson, the Hibbett Middle principal.

One afternoon, a group of 5th grade math teachers at Hibbett Middle gathered for their weekly meeting—to discuss classroom strategies that work and those that didn't, and share ideas about what's ahead in their classes.

"I can't handle this by myself. It's a lot," said teacher Scotty Brown. "The expectations are very high, very high" in the district.

"This profession has changed. You don't need to be in it unless you're really committed," said Ida Leigh Trousdale, a special education inclusion teacher.

"It pays off when you see it start to work," Jackson added. "After they come to us, they're ready for the rest of the journey."

Back in the lobby at Florence Middle, the staff chattered excitedly about what was happening at the school. Jill Johnson described the ambassadors program she leads, selecting 25 students for a yearlong leadership program. She discussed the Future Business Leaders of America chapter she co-sponsors with Coach Johnson, which has one of the highest membership rates in the nation. Their conversation is audible from down the hall, their joy contagious.

"It takes everybody from the top to the bottom to make things work," said McGee, the attendance clerk. "It takes everybody working together."

Florence is not trying to produce robots. We're trying to serve individual students with individual interests and needs."

~ Kevin Wieseman, Florence Middle School Principal





At Forest Hills Elementary School, winner of the prestigious National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence award from the U.S. Department of Education, the use of student data dominates decision-making.

“Teachers on a weekly basis are looking at student data in small groups,” said Principal Michael South, now in his fourth year at Forest Hills.

At Forest Hills, the additional teachers provided by federal funding provide instruction for small groups of students who may be behind in reading or math in all three FCS elementary schools. The goal is for all to be reading on grade level by the time they reach 3rd grade, said South, whose school was an Intel School of Distinction finalist for math.

It's Elementary: Helping Students Start School
READY TO SOAR



Dr. Joey Dawson, a Florence native and the director of elementary school instruction, said teachers are becoming much more intentional about how they approach classroom instruction and in tracking student data. “We are really focusing on developing our teachers into becoming learners of their craft, having ownership in their learning also,” said Dawson, previously the principal at Weeden Elementary.

Across the district, elementary school students also keep “data notebooks” that allow them to track their own individual progress in reading and math. They can examine scores with their teachers to look for areas in which to improve.

Class sizes in FCS elementary schools are usually limited to 18. Extra teachers hired using federal Title I funds assist regular classroom teachers with reading and math, especially for students who may be behind. There’s a summer reading program through the 3rd grade.

Every FCS elementary school also has an “instructional partner,” a teacher-coach who works alongside teachers to help them improve classroom lessons. Teachers have a collaborative planning time where they examine student data and compare strategies for helping students on the first Friday of each month; parents take over cafeteria duty.

Janice Jackson, the former principal of Harlan Elementary School, warmly greeted teachers, students and guests like a member of her family. Born and raised in Florence, she previously worked her whole education career across the river in Tuscumbia.

A mother of two, Jackson lost her husband and became a single parent, then worked for the cable TV company until she went back to school and became a teacher. She felt teaching was her calling—in the same way she felt compelled to come and lead Harlan Elementary.

“There was a tug in my heart,” she said. “The work is challenging. The rigor is really high. I’ve learned more these past two years than I ever would have thought.”

First-grade teacher Rebecca Sullivan admitted all the professional learning in Florence can sometimes be overwhelming, but she likes the additional planning time for teachers. “If we’re a learning community and working together as we should, that’s going to feed down to the students,” she said.



Both Weeden and Harlan Elementary Schools in Florence have been named Torchbearer Schools by the Alabama Department of Education, designating them among the few in the state that outperform schools with comparable students on test scores.



PROVIDING THE RESOURCES Schools Need

Florence City Schools couldn't do all they do—and chase their path toward improvement—without enough resources to pay for everything. In small southern cities, sometimes resources for schools can be very limited. But time and time again, Florence city leaders have gone to bat for their public schools.

It's paying off—literally.

Mickey Haddock, who was the mayor at the time of this interview, said the city's history of strong support for public schools has benefitted the area with better jobs and economic development. "It's given our citizens an opportunity to prepare themselves for the future," said Haddock, elected in 2012. "I feel like we're just continuing that." New Mayor Steve Holt also is very supportive of the Florence schools, FCS leaders say.

While money may not be the only thing that contributes to FCS's success, it certainly helps, said the former mayor at the time. "You've got to have the resources to be able to do things," he said.

Among the projects FCS has funded locally: Adding "instructional partners" in all the schools in 2014. These teacher-coaches who help guide teachers' classroom instruction are partially funded by the state, which provides limited resources for a reading coach in each elementary

school in the state. FCS has added similar positions in its additional schools.

The district pays its teachers 6 to 8 percent above the state average.

"It's exciting. The things we're doing for our kids, it's unbelievable. And not just for our kids, but for our teachers also. We give them so many tools to take students to the next level," said Connie Wallace, the Assistant Superintendent CSFO.

Former school board member Bill Jordan said that district leaders helped build the expectation of continual improvement. "We have teachers and administrators who truly love what they do, and they push the kids to do the best that they can," said Jordan, who was born and raised in Florence and is the father of two school-age children.

The district strives to be the best, whether in academics, athletics or the academy of fine arts, said Dick Jordan, the city council president first elected in 1979. "There's a program for everybody."

Bill Griffin, the school board president and a former middle school principal in Florence, said the city is fortunate that its leaders work together toward the same goal: providing an excellent education for every student.

When I was an administrator, I used to think the people (at the capital) in Montgomery had forgotten about us. But not anymore. The state calls us for ideas. If it's going to happen in Alabama, it's happening at that little dot on the map called Florence."

— Bill Griffin, Florence City Schools Board President



FLORENCE'S STRENGTH in Numbers

The proof of the Florence City Schools' recent success is in the numbers. The graduation rate climbed by 30 points from 68 percent in 2007 to 97 percent in 2016.

Educators here have a clear path toward career growth and to expand their own learning through the Falcon Learning Conversations Network and the graduate-level college programs available to them.

The city itself supports FCS with the resources it needs to change and grow. Local partnerships and donors are helping make many of these achievements possible. And students are learning more, the data show—every type of student.

The path toward improvement isn't always common in American public school systems. The commitment to professional learning and growth is now set in stone in Florence. A willingness to reflect—and to take meaningful steps to work on improvement—makes FCS a pacesetter for all of Alabama and beyond.

"We had a tendency to rest on our laurels, and of course we don't do that anymore," said Darrin Lett, now the principal of the Florence Freshman Center. "We're challenged to think differently and we're not held back," said special education director Becky Odell.

"Florence is not a wealthy town, not at all ... but our offerings are stellar," said Dickerson, the longtime assistant to superintendents in Florence. "I think our town is coming around, I hope, to thinking education has to be a priority. These kids who are graduating, we want them to stay here.

"I want these people to have the best education they can," she continued. "It's best when our kids don't all have to leave town to find good jobs, where they can raise a family with a lifestyle they're proud of in this city of learning."





FLORENCE
CITY SCHOOLS

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