

People In The News

New Orleans educator to lead charter school

By Randy Southerland
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Just now the new charter school is a stand of hardwoods and the principal's office is a table at the local coffee shop. The realities of building a startup school are familiar to Duke Bradley, who arrived in the southwest Fulton County community of Chattahoochee Hills just three weeks ago.

The winner of a nationwide search for the first headmaster of **Chattahoochee Hills Charter School**, Bradley's job is to transform a proposal, 15 acres of donated land, and a groundswell of community enthusiasm into a high-performing school with a racially diverse student body.

It's a familiar challenge.

"I've spent the last four years in New Orleans in probably one of the most expansive educational reform initiatives the country has ever seen," he said. "There you have these pockets of communities actively engaged in their schools. And so you can't get a school open down there if you haven't done the right groundwork and connected well with those communities."

Bradley founded the **Benjamin Mays Preparatory School** in New Orleans' hard-hit Ninth Ward. Mays was one of Louisiana's first TYPE 5 transformation charter schools. These institutions replaced low-performing public schools in the city.

After working in a city that sometimes seemed to be housed in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers, Bradley isn't worried about when the innovative, environmentally friendly school building now being designed by Atlanta architects **Perkins+Will Inc.** is finished. His primary job is building local support and hiring a new faculty that can teach the charter school's unusual curriculum.

"Up until now there has been no public face to speak on behalf of the school," Bradley said. "Much of my work has been in community engagement."

Convincing New Orleans parents to support a charter school was one of the toughest jobs he faced there. After all, they had been sending their children to the local public school for generations and were skeptical of this out-of-town stranger.

"You have to sit on front porches and eat shrimp étouffée and red beans and rice before you can talk about educating their kids," Bradley said.

He began his career in education as a high school English teacher with DeKalb County. Following a stint with the Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education, he decided to join the effort to rebuild education in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. As a student at **Morehouse College**, Bradley had often visited friends in the Big Easy and grew to love the city.

Following Katrina, a number of educators went to New Orleans to help with the recovery. Among them was Atlanta native

EXECUTIVE PROFILE DUKE J. BRADLEY III

Title/Company: Principal, Chattahoochee Hills Charter School

Born: Columbus, Ga.

Education: Morehouse College; Brown University, John Marshall Law School

Past jobs: English teacher, DeKalb County Schools; administrator, Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education; principal, Benjamin Mays Preparatory School

Matt Candler, a former charter school company executive, who was leading an effort to create more homegrown charters.

Candler helped Bradley develop a plan for a new school that would be centered in the hardest-hit area of the city, but open to all students citywide. Now in its fourth year, Mays Prep is among a cadre of charter schools that serve more than 70 percent of students.

"One of the bigger components to what we've done is not only the curriculum aspect of schooling, but also the culture-building," said Mays Prep Board Chairman Sidney Barthelemy. "In our school, we make it a point to drive home with the students an attitude of expected success. Each class is named after a college or university and these kids take ownership of that particular university that their classroom represents."

A good school that provided quality education for students could also serve to revitalize a community to which many residents did not return after fleeing Katrina, Bradley said.

His success at startup education was one of the primary reasons Chattahoochee Hill's search committee selected him, according to John Reid, vice president of corporate social responsibility for **The Coca-Cola Co.**, who serves as the Chattahoochee Hills school's board chairman.

Bradley also proved that he could convince parents to take a chance on a new school with a different approach to education, which is one of the prime features of Chattahoochee Hills.

"It is built around the idea that this is a school steeped in nature," Reid said. "Learning can occur by virtue of kids being exposed to mathematics in nature, or to science in nature or to reading in nature or writing in nature."

When the school opens in September, officials expect about 180 students in grades K-5. Students will be drawn from the local community as well as five



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surrounding counties. As grades 6-8 are added, the school will expand to 405 students, which is planned to be the total enrollment, according to Russell Kiefer, the school's volunteer executive director.

"We will take [students] and explore all of the different subject areas through themes," Kiefer said. "So instead of having math class, science class, social studies class, or English class, we'll explore all of those subject areas through the theme."

This area of southwest Fulton County is largely rural and undeveloped and organizers say the school will make good

use of this setting to teach its primary focuses — the arts, agriculture and the environment. The school's buildings will be environmentally friendly and LEED-certified, said Steve Nygren, managing partner of the Serenbe community, where the charter school will be located.

While the approach may be unconventional, the bottom line is still student performance. Just as in New Orleans, the school's success will be

measured beyond the classroom.

"Great schools serve as the catalyst for great communities," Bradley said.



Kiefer
Chattahoochee Hills
Charter School

Julie Bryant Fisher BIO

Julie Bryant Fisher is the managing editor of Atlanta Business Chronicle. She began her career in television before moving on to radio and newspaper reporting. In her 20+ year career in journalism she has been a staff writer for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the Tulsa World and a news director and morning show co-host at radio stations in Greenville, SC and Tulsa, OK. She is a graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University, a 2008 German Marshall Memorial Fund Fellow, a member of the Leadership Atlanta Class of 2007 and an active community volunteer.

(Bryant Fisher is married and proud mother to son Palmer. She grew up in Charlottesville, VA and her family is from Charleston, SC.)