

*Portrait of a*  
**BLACK SCHOOL  
FOUNDER**

JUNE 2023



*Insights from the first-ever survey of Black educational entrepreneurs*



Black Minds Matter is a project of the American Federation for Children,

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Who are the Black school founders?** They're often former public school educators. Politically, they lean heavily Democratic and independent. Most are engaged in advocacy for school choice.
- **Who are they serving?** Most are serving students who are Black and low-income. Most of those students are former public school students, and significant numbers were below grade level when they enrolled in the founders' schools.
- **What is motivating them?** To better serve Black students, all students, and their communities. To better teach Black history and the Black experience.
- **What have they created?** The learning options they've built are diverse with respect to curriculum, pedagogy, and school type. Many have created private schools and charter schools, but more than 1 in 5 have created microschools and/or options that tie into home schooling. The Black founders' schools are also likely to have far higher rates of Black teachers and male teachers than traditional public schools.
- **What do they need?** The Black school founders face many of the same challenges as other education entrepreneurs. Among the biggest: securing start-up funds, paying themselves and their employees a decent salary and benefits, and finding adequate facilities.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1975, veteran public school teacher Marva Collins took \$5,000 from her retirement savings to start a modest yet extraordinary private school in Chicago. Collins was tired of watching Black children being mislabeled “disabled” and falling through the cracks of the public school system. So in the brownstone where she lived, she created what we now call a learning pod.

Westside Preparatory School [began with five children](#), including two of Collins’s own.<sup>1</sup> It had the feel of the one-room schoolhouse Collins experienced growing up in Alabama, and Collins used a classical curriculum to engage her students. The results were so good, “60 Minutes” came calling, and not long after, the Collins story became a movie starring Cicely Tyson and Morgan Freeman.

Alas, the school did not last. It closed in 2008, the modest tuition too much for too many families.<sup>2</sup>

A half-century after Collins blazed her trail, though, the Black education entrepreneurs who are heirs to her legacy – and to the unsung legacy of so many other Black educators who created better learning options for Black students – are on the rise.



*Marva Collins, Westside Preparatory School founder*

**Education entrepreneurship is [having a moment](#).**<sup>3</sup>

After decades of frustration with traditional schools, after a pandemic that magnified the inadequacies and inequities of public education, and now with the rapid expansion of education choice programs in multiple states, education entrepreneurs are remaking public education with a dizzying array of innovative models. These models are ever more customized to the students they serve, ever more responsive to families who want something different, and, thanks to school choice, easier than ever to sustain and scale.

**Black education entrepreneurs are in the thick of this phenomenon.**

**This report is about them.**

It’s a first glimpse into who they are, what motivates them, what models they’ve created, what students they’re serving, and what challenges they face. Our snapshot is based on responses to a survey we sent to Black school founders who are part of a growing directory maintained by [Black Minds Matter](#), a national nonprofit dedicated to the development of high-quality school options for Black students.

The respondents are diverse in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and school type. They include incredible charter schools like [Noble Minds Institute](#) in New Orleans, [Pasadena Rosebud Academy](#) in California, and Legends Charter School outside Washington D.C.; highly regarded private schools like [Discovery Lane](#) in Maryland and Crossover Prep Academy in Oklahoma; and innovative microschools like [The Lab School](#) and [Eminence Academy](#) in Memphis. There are STEM-focused schools like [Anderson Academy of Math & Science](#) in Las Vegas, STEM-based and African-centered schools like [The XYAYX Institute](#) in Brooklyn, and even more eclectic schools like Florida's [Kind Academy](#), which fuses project- and nature-based learning with flexible scheduling.

These respondents are representative of the broader universe of Black school founders. And the survey advances the work of understanding what policy makers, philanthropists, and other supporters can do to help it expand.

It should surprise no one that so many Black education entrepreneurs are doing their best impression of Marva Collins right now.

The pandemic (and how school districts responded) [rolled back student achievement](#) to levels not seen in decades<sup>4</sup> – and [hit Black students particularly hard](#).<sup>5</sup> According to the most recent [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), 16 percent of Black eighth-graders are proficient in reading, and 9 percent are proficient in math.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, instruction about race and Black history is [under fire in numerous states](#),<sup>7</sup> and there is sobering evidence that Black students are [disproportionately struggling with rising rates of mental illness](#).<sup>8</sup> Given that backdrop, it's obvious why [Black homeschooling is skyrocketing](#),<sup>9</sup> and why in Florida, with its robust school choice programs, Black families are in the midst of [a “great migration” away from district schools](#).<sup>10</sup>

The story of [Icon Preparatory School](#), a Black-founded, K-8 private school in Florida, is instructive.



*Former public school teachers founded Icon Prep in Tampa in 2018.*

In 2018, a handful of former public school teachers in Tampa pooled \$300,000 to start the school. They thought they'd enroll 60 students the first year. They enrolled 200. By year four, they enrolled 400, with 99 percent using state-funded school choice scholarships. Last year, Icon Prep set up a second school in another Florida city and immediately enrolled 350. Now it's expanding to Ohio.

Clearly, word gets around.

Icon Prep is modeled after the milieu of an HBCU (most of the founders earned degrees from Florida A&M University), and among other innovative features, it partners with a private university to offer a college dual enrollment program – for its middle schoolers. Last fall, five of them [completed their first year of college](#).<sup>11</sup>

As Dr. Dwayne Raiford, one of Icon Prep's co-founders, noted, "Things of that nature are not happening at the neighborhood schools that they come from."<sup>12</sup>

**Black education entrepreneurs are uniquely poised to deliver the alternatives Black families want. This is their time. And this report offers insight into what can empower even more Black school founders to emerge.**

## **METHODOLOGY**

We emailed surveys in March and April 2023 to Black school founders across America who are listed on the Black-owned Schools Directory maintained by Black Minds Matter. Black Minds Matter is a national nonprofit founded in 2020 and led by Denisha Allen, co-author of this report. We received 61 completed responses from founders in 19 states. This report focuses on those answers. The report is not a complete summary of findings but a spotlight on data the authors deemed the most noteworthy. Demographic information about the survey respondents can be found in the appendix.

## RESULTS

### WHO ARE THE FOUNDERS?

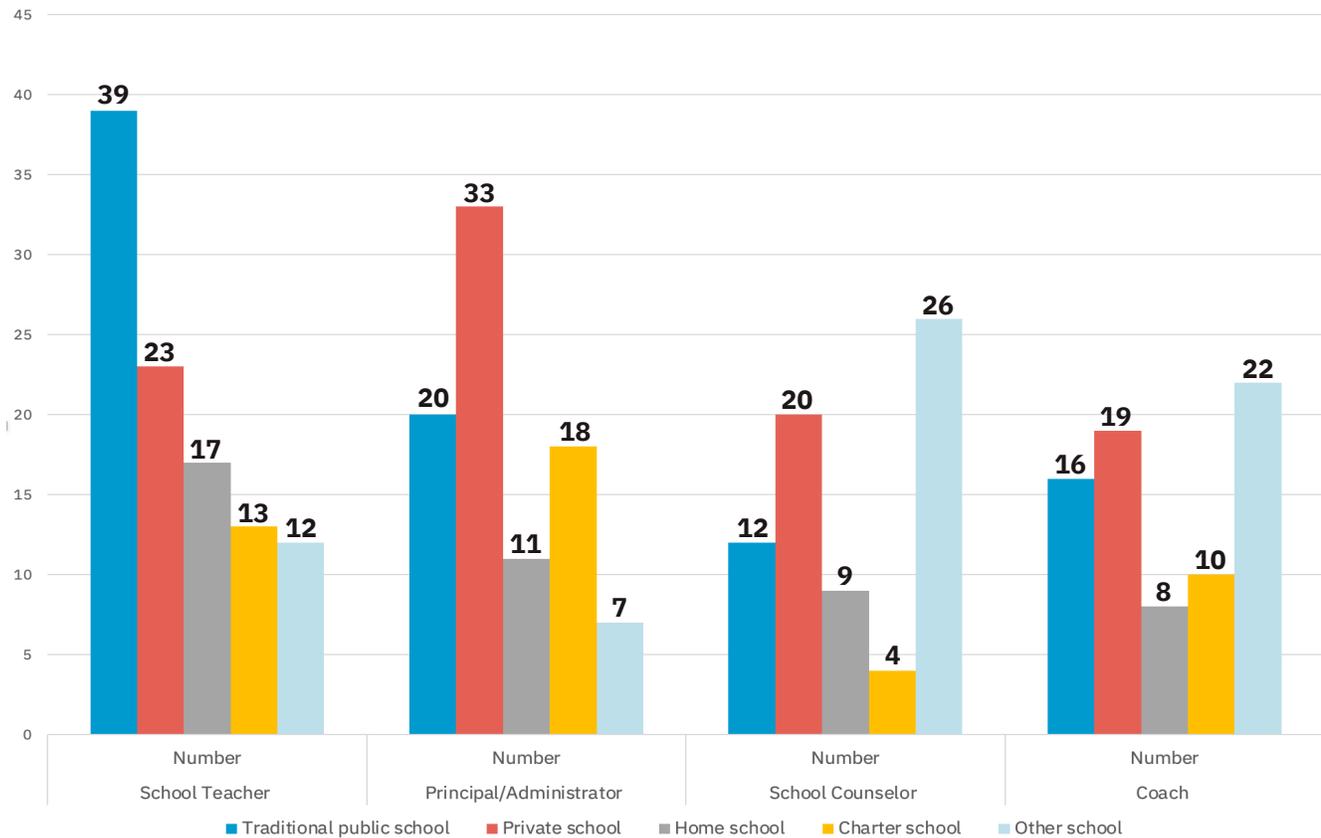
The Black school founders are many things. They're more likely to be women than men (73.8 percent to 26.2 percent). They're highly accomplished by traditional educational measures (75.4 percent have advanced degrees). Nearly a third (32.7 percent) previously worked in business fields. But two things about them stand out as particularly distinctive:

Their professional education backgrounds. And their politics.

A significant number of survey respondents indicated they are former public school educators. In this regard, they are not unlike [a growing number of other education entrepreneurs](#).<sup>13</sup> In fact, 63.9 percent indicated they are former teachers in traditional public schools, 32.8 percent are former principals, and 26.2 percent are former coaches. (The respondents were allowed to select as many job titles as were fitting, and some had multiple roles in their prior public schools.) See Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Education Experience by School Type**

*In the past, what positions did you hold in the education field by school type?*



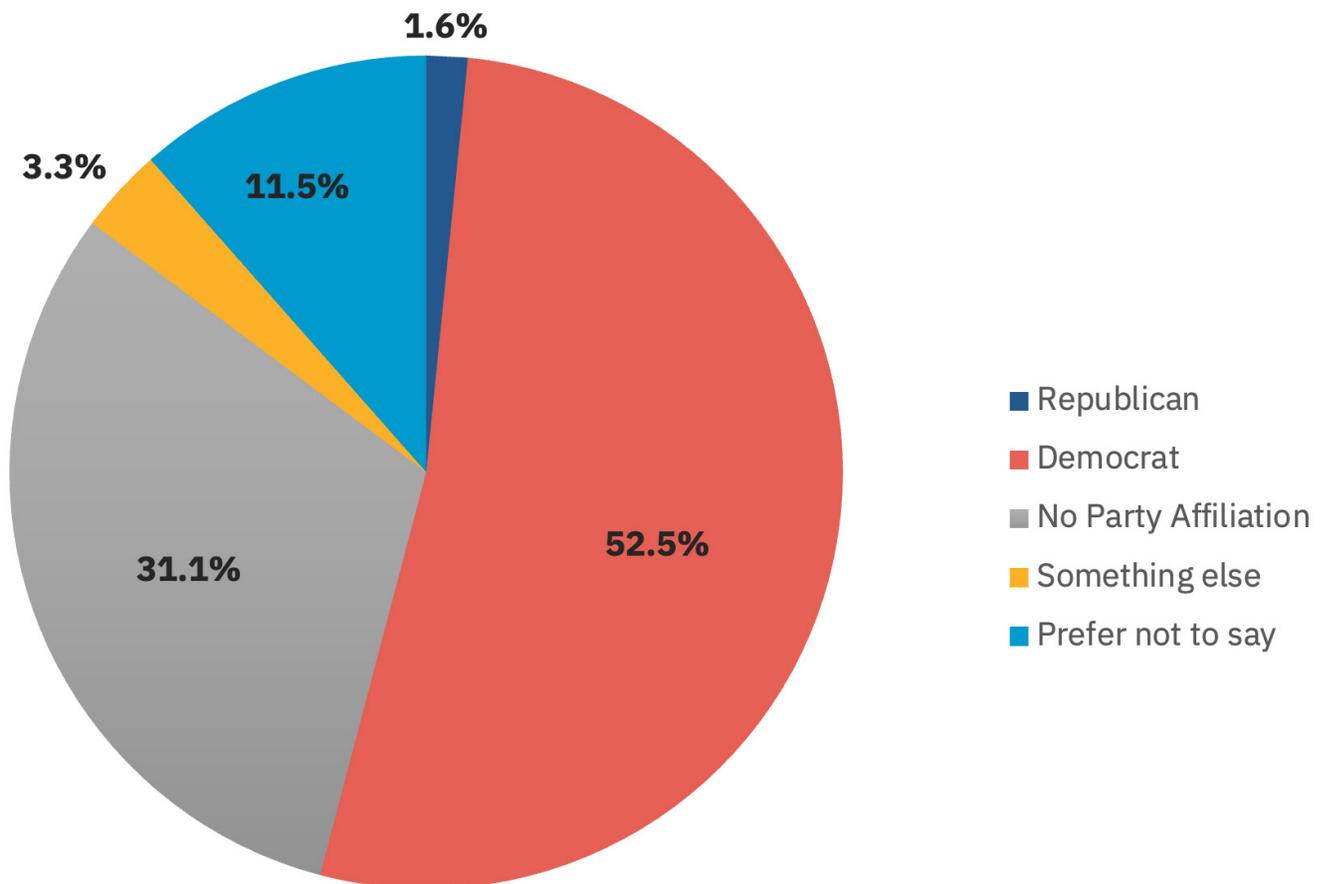
The respondents' political affiliations are also noteworthy.

On the one hand, it is perhaps not surprising that the group leans Democratic. Black voters have long been the most reliably Democratic voters. On the other hand, [strong Black support](#) for school choice is often obscured by choice opponents and media coverage,<sup>14</sup> which tends to portray school choice as an exclusively conservative policy (though clearly it is not).

In this case, it is notable that 52.5 percent of the survey respondents identified as Democrats, and 31.1 percent identify as No Party Affiliation. Only about 2 percent identified as Republican. See Figure 2.

Also noteworthy: 66.7 percent of respondents said they engage in state-level advocacy for school choice. In doing so, they are strengthening the school choice coalitions in their respective states, adding educators, Democrats, and people of color to the mix.

**Figure 2. Political Affiliation**



## WHO ARE THEY SERVING?

It is a long-standing myth that private schools, charter schools, and other independent schools are cherry picking the “best and brightest” students. School choice opponents continue to perpetuate that myth despite strong evidence to the contrary.

In Florida, for example, [14 years of standardized test data](#) annually analyzed by education researchers has found students participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program – the nation’s biggest private school choice program – were typically the lowest-performing students in their prior public schools.<sup>15</sup> (The same students are now making the same learning gains as students of all income levels nationally.)

Similarly, the survey responses from Black school founders suggest that if they set out to cherry pick the least struggling students, they missed the mark.

More specifically, they are serving students who are:

- **Predominantly Black.** Twenty-eight respondents said their enrollment is 90 percent or more Black. Thirty-seven said their enrollment is 70 percent or more Black.
- **Predominantly low-income.** Sixteen respondents said their enrollment is 100 percent low-income. Twenty-three said their schools are 70 percent or more low-income.
- **Mostly from public schools.** Twenty-five respondents said 90 percent or more of their students were previously in public schools. Thirty-five said more than 70 percent were.
- **Often coming in below grade level.** Twenty-five said a majority of their students were below grade level when they enrolled. Eighteen said more than 70 percent were.

On the other hand, many survey respondents also indicated they were serving a diverse mix of students:

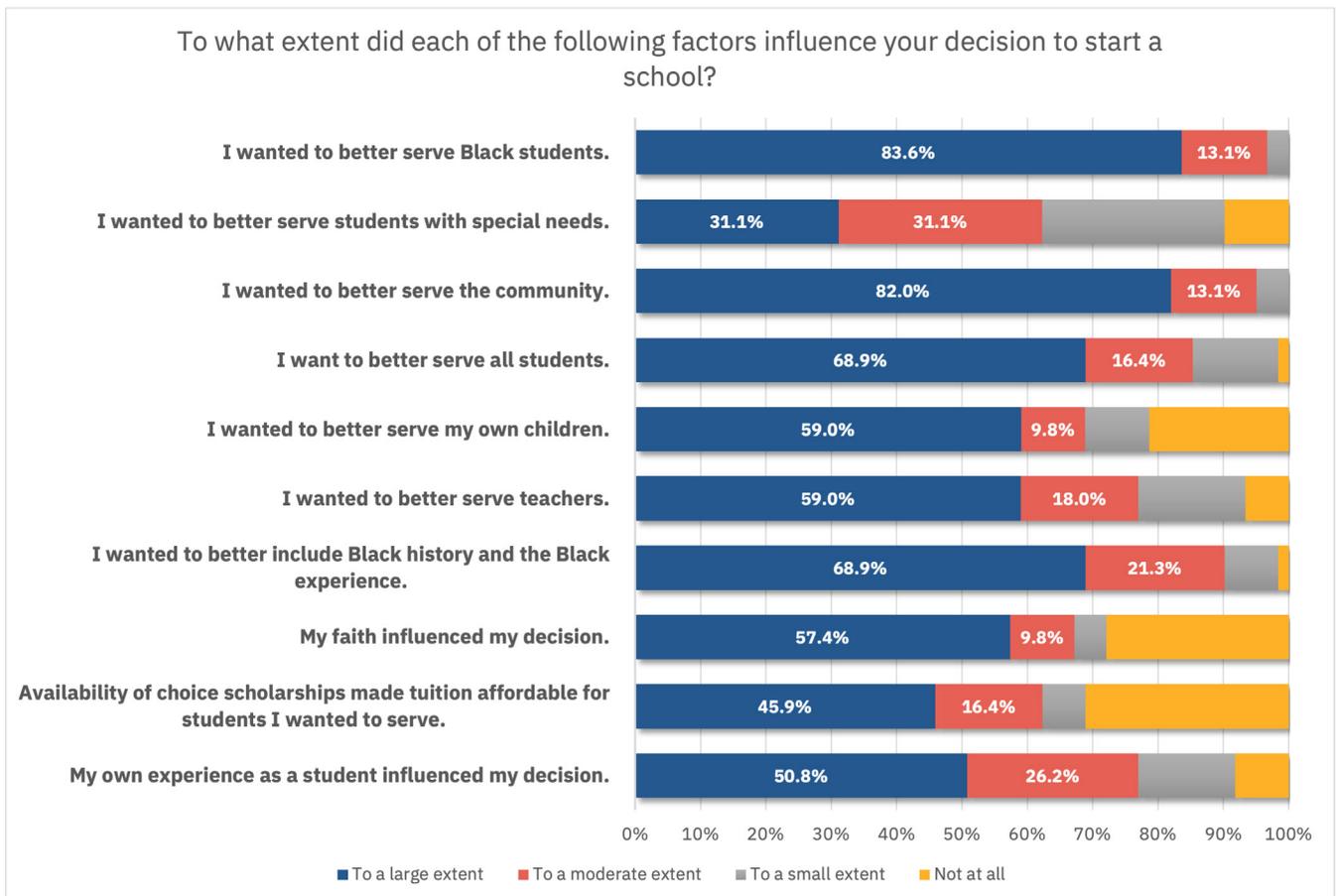
- Seventeen said 20 percent or more of their students are non-Black minority students. (In one case, the figure was 70 percent non-Black minority students.)
- Thirteen said their enrollment was 50 percent or less Black.
- Twelve said their enrollment was 30 percent or less low-income. (Five have no low-income students.)
- Twenty-five said 20 percent or more of their students are students with special needs. The average in public school nationwide is [15 percent](#).<sup>16</sup>

### WHAT ARE THEIR MOTIVATIONS?

The Black school founders who responded to our survey have myriad reasons why they created their own schools. But strong majorities indicated they were motivated “to a large extent” by a handful of factors. See Figure 3.

- 83.6 percent wanted to better serve Black students.
- 68.9 percent wanted to better serve all students.
- 82.0 percent wanted to better serve the community.
- 68.9 percent wanted to better include Black history and the Black experience in their curriculum.
- Tellingly, 97.4 percent of the former public school educators in the group said they were motivated by this last factor to a “large” or “moderate” extent.

**Figure 3: Motivations for Starting a School**



In addition, more than 50 percent indicated that “to a large extent” they wanted to better serve teachers (59.0 percent); better serve their own children (59.0 percent); were influenced by their faith (57.4 percent); and/or were influenced by their own experience as students (50.8 percent).

For the former teachers in the mix, 80.0 percent wanted to better serve teachers either to a “large” or “moderate” extent, versus 54.5 percent of the non-teachers. That also is telling.

One other response deserves to be highlighted:

70.0 percent of the non-charter-school respondents said availability of school choice scholarships motivated them to a “large” or “moderate” extent. As more states either adopt or expand state-funded school choice and education choice programs, the opportunities will continue to grow for education entrepreneurs, including future Black school founders.

### **WHAT HAVE THEY CREATED?**

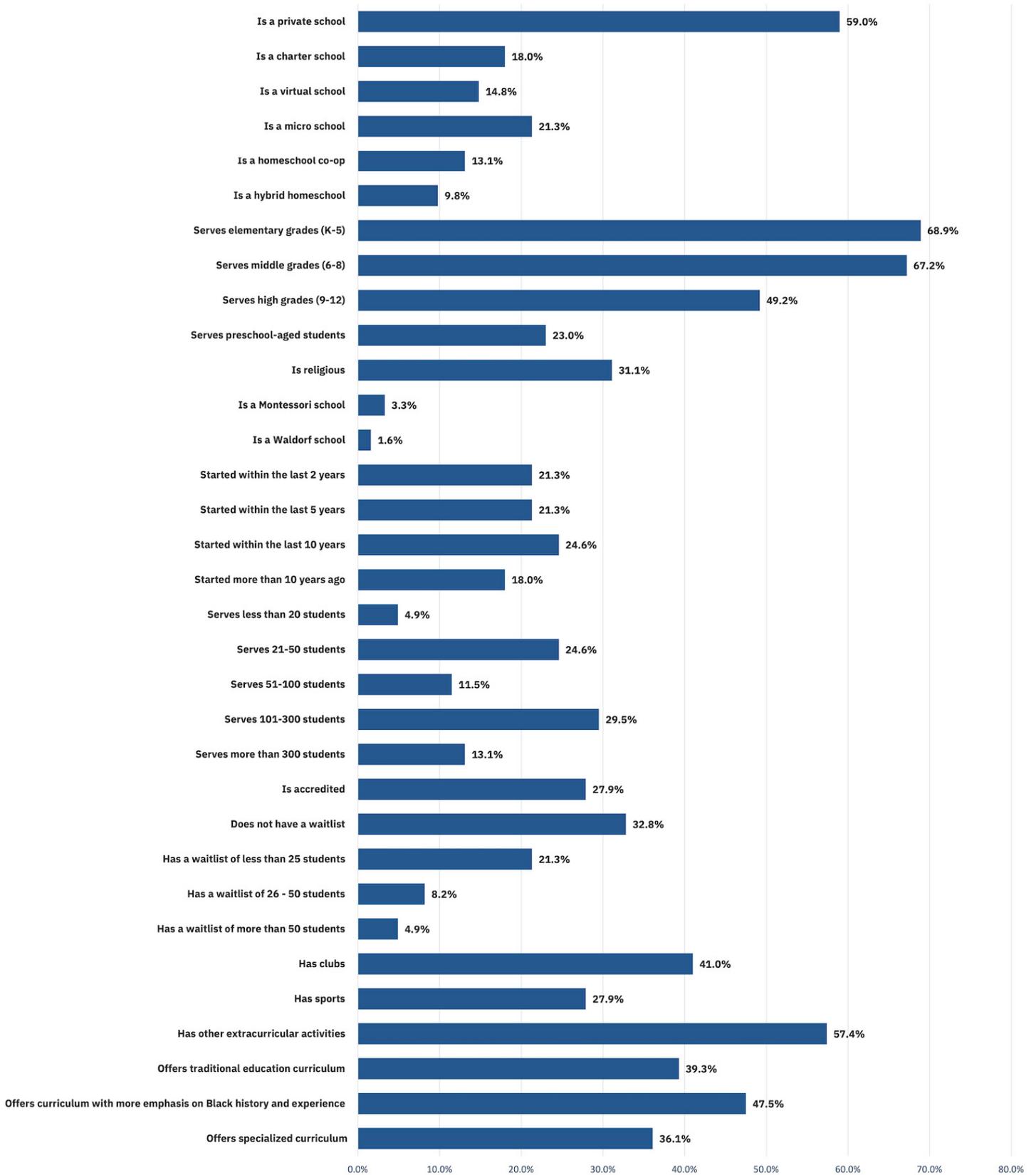
Black school founders have created an incredibly diverse array of schools and other learning options.

Of those responding to our survey, 59.0 percent said they created private schools, while 18.0 percent created charter schools. Beyond those broad categories, the details get even more interesting. (Please note: Respondents were allowed to check multiple categories to describe their schools. So it’s possible, for example, that some checked both private school and microschool.) See Figure 4.



- 22.9 percent created a homeschool co-op or hybrid homeschool.
- 21.3 percent created microschools.
- 21.3 percent created their schools within the last five years.
- Interestingly, given [66 percent of private schools in America are faith-based](#), only 31.1 percent indicated their schools were faith-based.<sup>17</sup>
- Only 32.8 percent indicated they did not have a waitlist.

**Figure 4. School Characteristics**



The founders' schools also offer tremendous diversity in curriculum.

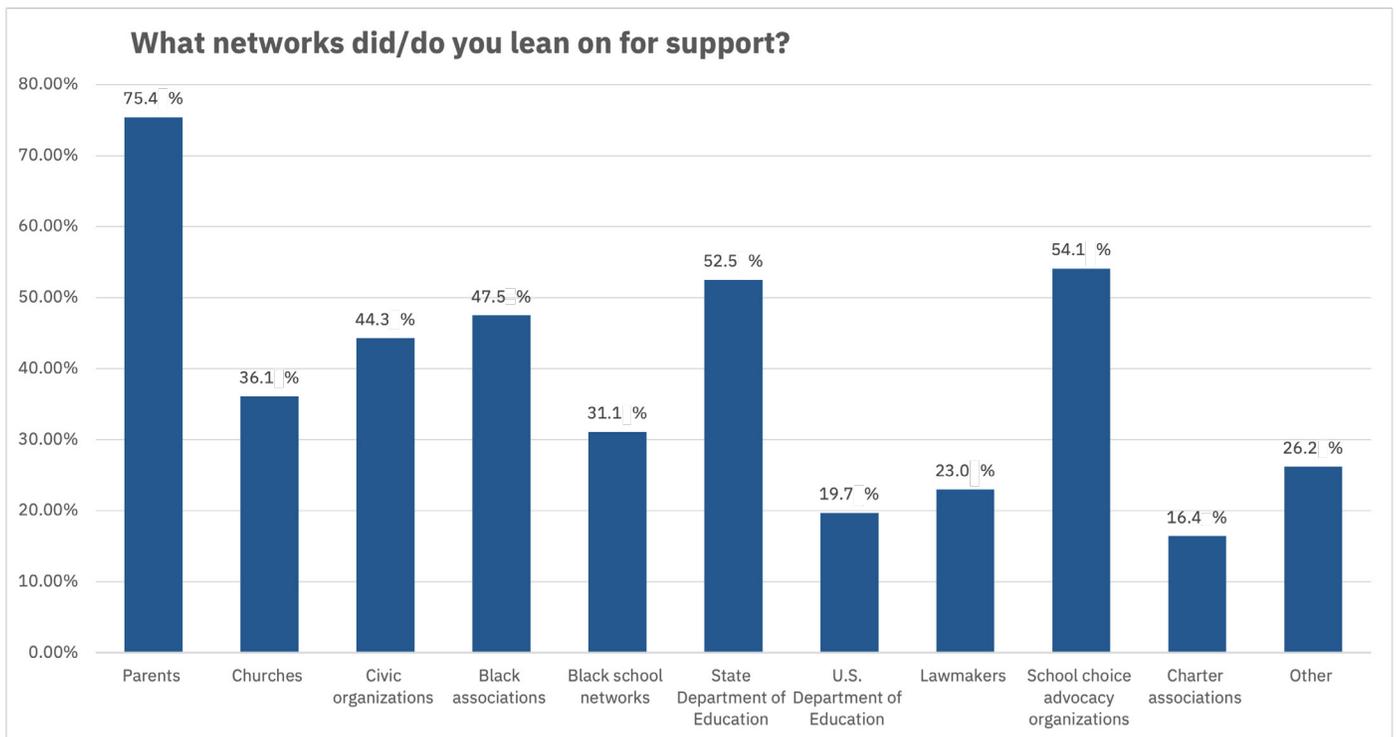
About a third - 39.3 percent - said they offered a traditional education curriculum, while nearly half - 47.5 percent - indicated they put more emphasis on Black history and the Black experience. Beyond that, the responses splintered, with more than 22 different write-in answers. Some founders' schools emphasize STEM, the arts, entrepreneurship. One is project-based.

One is tech-based. One is nature-based. There's a school that's focused on social justice. There's another that follows the Reggio Emilia style, a student-directed approach inspired by preschools in Italy. In the growing community of Black school founders, 1,000 flowers are beginning to bloom.

On a related note, we asked the respondents what types of groups, networks, or organizations they leaned on for support. More founders cited parents than any other group, at 75.4 percent. This is perhaps not surprising, given the founders all created models that require parental buy-in to survive.

But coming in second was support from school choice organizations, at 54.1 percent. That again underscores that school choice and education choice programs have become instrumental in spurring and sustaining alternative modes of education. See Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Support Networks**



We also asked respondents what percentage of their teaching corps is Black, and what percentage is male. Forty-four of the respondents, or 72 percent, said more than two-thirds of their teachers are Black. Fifteen said at least 40 percent of their teachers are male.

Across America, [about 7 percent of public school teachers are Black](#),<sup>18</sup> [about 24 percent are men](#),<sup>19</sup> and less than [2 percent are Black men](#).<sup>20</sup> Research shows Black students taught by Black teachers [are likely to experience better academic outcomes](#),<sup>21</sup> and that Black students in charter schools are [about 50 percent more likely to have a Black teacher than their peers in district schools](#).<sup>22</sup> Given that backdrop, this finding from the Black founders survey should be marked with a star and investigated further.

### **WHAT DO THEY NEED?**

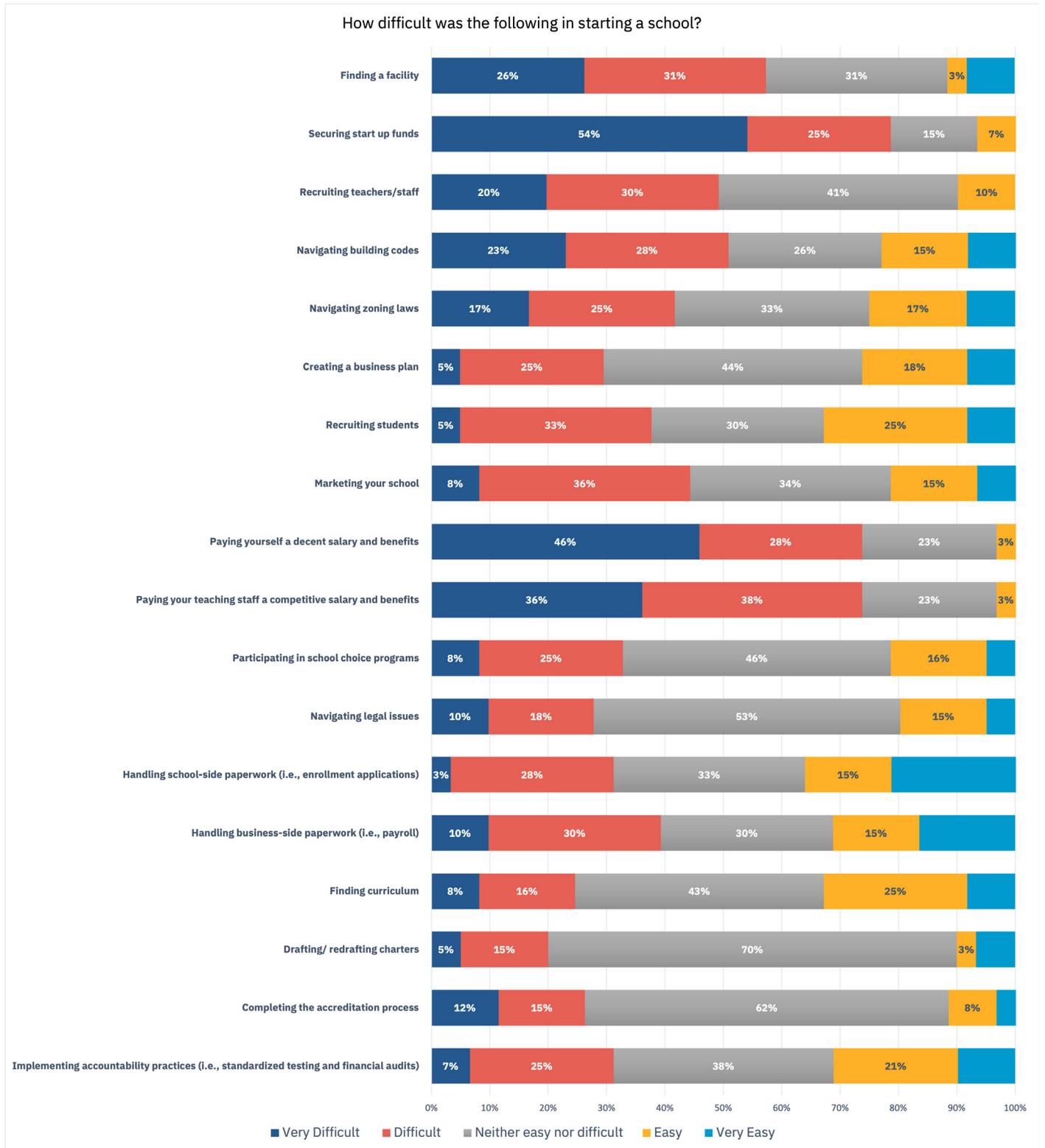
Like educator entrepreneurs everywhere, Black school founders face multiple barriers to entry.

We asked them what their biggest challenges were. Securing start-up funds topped the list, with 78.7 percent citing it as difficult or very difficult. That was followed by paying themselves a decent salary and benefits (73.8 percent), paying their teachers a decent salary and benefits (also at 73.8 percent), and finding a facility (57.3 percent). See Figure 6.



*Cameron Frazier, Becoming Collegiate Academy, Jacksonville, FL*

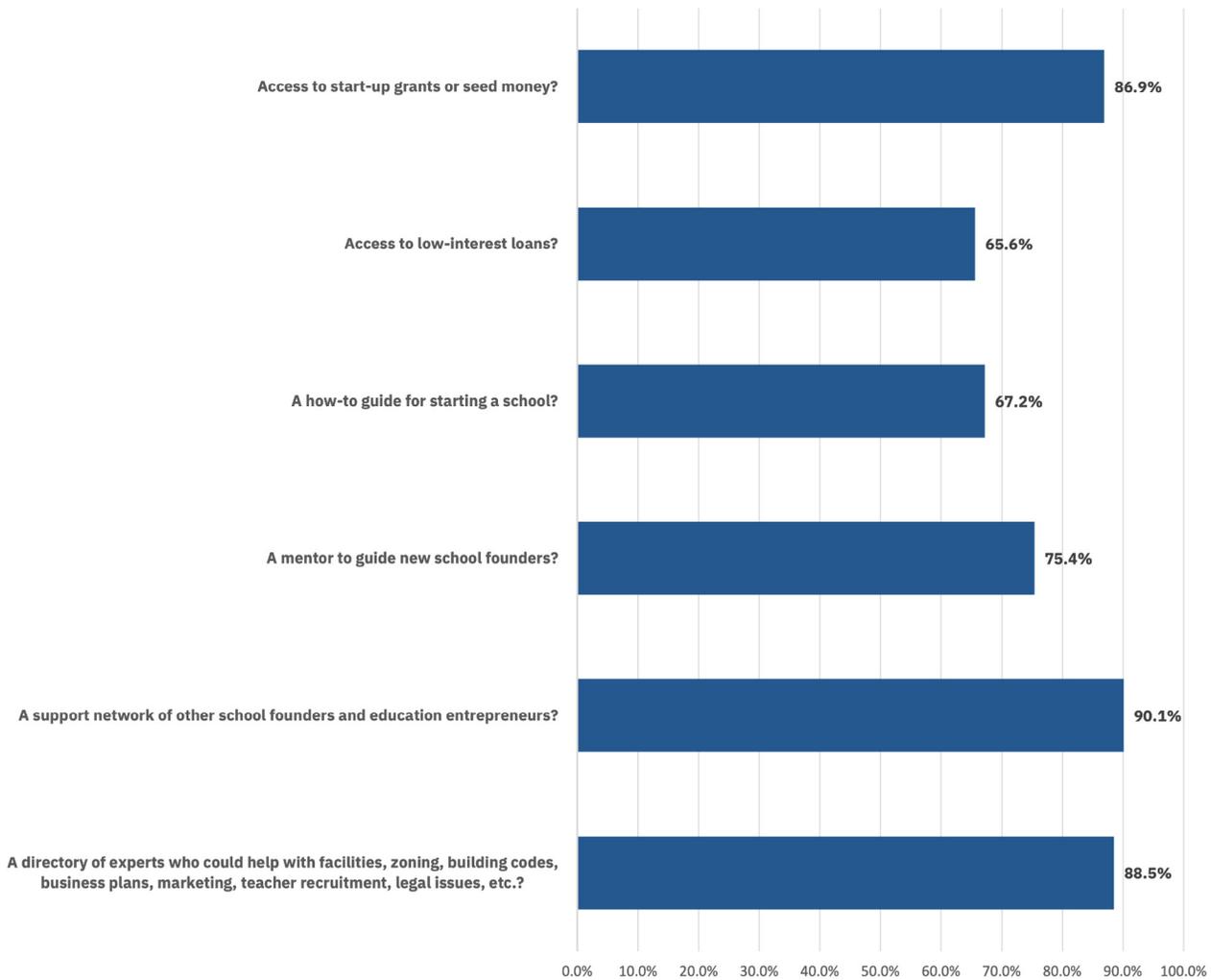
**Figure 6. Challenges in Starting a School**



We also offered a short list of possible remedies that could help with these challenges, and asked the founders to weigh their value. A support network of other founders and entrepreneurs came in at No. 1 (90.1 percent indicated it would be helpful or very helpful). That was followed by a directory of experts who could help with challenges like finding adequate facilities and marketing (88.5 percent), and access to start-up funds (86.9 percent). See Figure 7.

**Figure 7. Helpful Resources**

Percent of respondents that indicated the following resources would be Helpful or Very Helpful to school founders and leaders



## DISCUSSION

If Hollywood wanted to make a new movie about an entrepreneurial Black educator like Marva Collins, it would have trouble picking just one.

In 2023, there are Marva Collinses across America.

Black school founders are emerging from coast to coast, often enabled by state-funded school choice programs, but sometimes, like Collins, finding ways to create effective learning models without them.

Their survey responses underscore diverse approaches and common needs.

In terms of school types and students served, there is no monolith. Many Black school founders are serving low-income Black students who were previously enrolled in public schools and struggling, but that's not the case across the board. Many created traditional private schools and charter schools, but microschoools, hybrid homeschoools, and homeschoool co-ops are also emerging. Some founders are sticking with traditional academic offerings, but about half are putting more emphasis on Black history and culture, and nearly two thirds are offering a different approach to curriculum and/or pedagogy.

At the same time, the vast majority of founders are facing the same hurdles as other education entrepreneurs.

It's not easy finding start-up funds, navigating building codes, and ensuring decent wages and benefits. Philanthropies like [Vela Education Fund](#) and [The Drexel Fund](#) are doing heroic work helping non-traditional education providers. Some Black school founders have already benefitted from their support. But the survey responses suggest there are opportunities to help even more founders overcome common challenges – from easier access to seed money; to lining up support networks; to curating directories of experts who can assist with everything from finding adequate facilities to recruiting high-quality teachers.

Policy makers and philanthropists should pay close attention to this special group of entrepreneurs.

Black families and communities have been fighting for generations to access high-quality learning options for their children. The proliferation of school choice programs and powerful new tools like state-funded education savings accounts are making it easier for education entrepreneurs to create and sustain those options. But there's still work to be done to expand choice, and to continue mitigating or eliminating the other barriers entrepreneurs face.

The good news is, the momentum is real.

And the potential upside – public education living up to its promise – has never looked so possible.

**APPENDIX A****Respondent Demographics**

		<b>n = 61</b>	
		<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>State</b>			
Alabama		2	3.3 %
Arizona		2	3.3 %
California		3	4.9 %
Florida		14	23.0 %
Georgia		7	11.5 %
Louisiana		4	6.6 %
Maryland		3	4.9 %
Michigan		1	1.6 %
Mississippi		1	1.6 %
Missouri		1	1.6 %
Nebraska		3	4.9 %
Nevada		1	1.6 %
New York		3	4.9 %
North Carolina		1	1.6 %
Oklahoma		2	3.3 %
Pennsylvania		2	3.3 %
Tennessee		2	3.3 %
Texas		6	9.8 %
Virginia		3	4.9 %
<b>Gender Identity</b>			
Male		16	26.2 %
Female		45	73.8 %
<b>Level of Education</b>			
High School Diploma		2	3.3 %
Some College		4	6.6 %
Associate's Degree		3	4.9 %
Bachelor's Degree		6	9.8 %
Master's Degree		28	45.9 %
Doctoral Degree		18	29.5 %
<b>Age</b>			
20-24		1	1.6 %
25-29		3	4.9 %
30-34		4	6.6 %
35-39		10	16.4 %
40-44		13	21.3 %
45-49		7	11.5 %
50-54		11	18.0 %
55-59		3	4.9 %
60-64		4	6.6 %
65 and over		5	8.2 %

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Denisha Allen** is the founder of Black Minds Matter. She is also senior fellow at American Federation for Children; a member of the board of directors for Step Up for Students; and a former recipient of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, one of the oldest and largest education choice scholarship programs in the country.



**Dava Cherry** is the former director, enterprise data and research, at Step Up For Students, and a former public school teacher.



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## ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS



**Black Minds Matter** is a national movement to celebrate Black minds, support excellence, and promote the development of high-quality school options for Black students.



**Step Up For Students** is a nonprofit that administers four education choice scholarship programs in Florida: the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship, the Hope Scholarship, and the New Worlds Scholarship Account.



**American Federation for Children** is a nonprofit advocacy group that seeks to empower families, especially lower-income families, with the freedom to choose the best K-12 education for their children.

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