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MOBILE BAY BRIEF

# Rebuilding Barton

State's oldest public school could house students again by 2021

BY JASON JOHNSON



**W**ith less than a \$1 million to raise and a nearly completed construction plan, Barton Academy — Alabama's first and oldest public school — could be holding classes again by August 2021.

That's according to Elizabeth Stevens, president of the Barton Academy Foundation, who said despite a few "quiet" years in the media, philanthropic donations and grants have continued to come in to help turn the 183-year-old building back into a learning center in Downtown Mobile.

The Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS) owns Barton, which operated as a school from 1836 to 1965. It was then converted into MCPSS' central office before being vacated in 2007. It had begun to fall into disrepair before the current renovation efforts started in 2014.

"The initial goal was simply to find a use for the building, but it was always an underlying thought that the use should be educational," Stevens said. "[MCPSS] leadership really stepped up and said this can be an academically rigorous school for Mobile County children again, and that has the potential to create so much magic for downtown and its continued development."

While the fundraising for the interior renovations at Barton have been handled by the foundation, MCPSS has continued to play an integral role. It spent \$4.2 million to renovate the exterior in 2015, and has also helped chart the course of what the school will be in the future.

As it stands, the "Barton Academy for Advanced World Studies" (BAAWS) will act as one of MCPSS' signature academies and aims to provide "a diverse, multicultural learning experience for approximately 300 students in grades 6-9." The curriculum will include high-level courses but will also have an emphasis on foreign language, world geography and global economics.

Under the foundation's leadership, more than \$4.2 million has been raised by individual, foundation and corporate gifts, and another \$2 million in state historic tax credits have been obtained. Stevens said she's confident Barton can reach its \$10 million goal by the end of 2019.

"Other than a minor amount of what will happen next year that's outside — like a parking lot, a fence — the vast majority of funding will be spent turning the building back into a school," Stevens told Lagniappe. "It was turned into an office building back in the early '70s, so some of the rooms will be laid out differently and we're also having to create the infrastruc-

ture needed to support a modern classroom. That's really what this fundraising effort is and always has been about."

Stevens said the foundation still needs to raise a little less than \$1 million after a recent pledge from the Wayne D. McRae Fund to contribute \$250,000 to an outdoor classroom on Barton's campus that will be located just outside of what is currently slated to be the cafeteria.

The Wayne McRae Fund, handled through the Community Foundation of South Alabama, is named after a former city architect. He had a strong interest in historic architecture and renovation, according to Irving Silver, who chairs the fund's committee.

Silver said saving Barton Academy's Greek Revival structure would have been something McRae supported but also said he and the other members of the committee were swayed by the plan that MCPSS has put together for BAAWS and its future students.

"I wasn't initially enamored with the idea of fixing up Barton Academy just to have a fixed-up building," Silver said. "However, our committee met with the foundation, and we were very impressed with the goal and purpose for the building, which would create a unique learning environment for children throughout Mobile County."

Silver encouraged other institutions and philanthropists to follow suit in supporting the project.

Stevens, who also serves as president of the Downtown Mobile Alliance, said she's confident a renovated, thriving Barton Academy could have an impact beyond the school system and the future students it serves, too.

According to her, the impact on development in the area could be "enormous."

There are around two dozen empty buildings in the area that were not empty when Barton was operating as a school, and Stevens said an empty landmark — especially one covering an entire block — can cause an economic drag on neighboring properties.

"Just going from empty to occupied is an economic boost," she added. "But then add to that students and parents being there and interacting more with the downtown business community and the impact could be significant for development downtown."

More information on the history of Barton Academy, its ongoing renovation and ways to support the project can be found at [bartonacademy.org](http://bartonacademy.org).