

A Mississippi Teacher Created a School in an Empty Storefront. Students Showed Up.

Summary

Leora Hooper, a former public school teacher, founded Abundance Educational Academy in Yazoo City, Mississippi. The school, which started in a storefront, offers a Christian-based education with a focus on empathy, curiosity, and spiritual resilience. Despite limited resources and no public funding, Abundance has attracted students seeking a better learning environment and has a growing waiting list.

The desks came out of a dumpster, and the computers are hand-me-downs. But students say Abundance Academy is a haven from bullying and crowded classes.

Dec. 7, 2024



The Abundance Educational Academy has about 50 students, ranging from prekindergarten to 12th grade. There is a growing waiting list as parents call nearly every day to ask about enrolling their children.

WHY WE'RE HERE

We're exploring how America defines itself one place at a time. In the Mississippi Delta, education has long reflected the region's socioeconomic struggles, but as history here shows, hardship has been a mother of invention.

Leora Hooper, as usual, had a busy school day ahead of her.

She would use a catchy cheer to teach her fourth and fifth graders to add and subtract fractions, and would introduce her high schoolers to critical race theory in a history lesson. The holiday show, a few days away, needed some direction. And the pipes in the bathroom were acting up again, so she had to track down a plumber.

But first, Ms. Hooper stood before the student body at Abundance Educational Academy in Mississippi and closed her eyes.

"I ask in Jesus' name that our students supernaturally learn everything presented before them on today," Ms. Hooper, a longtime teacher who founded the small private school about three years ago, said in a prayer on a recent morning, savoring that peaceful moment soon after everyone arrived.

"Amen!" the students replied.

Not long ago, the space occupied by Abundance was a neglected storefront in Yazoo City, another town in the Mississippi Delta where opportunity has dwindled, along with the population, for as long as anyone can remember.

Ms. Hooper, 42, dragged out the abandoned detritus and painted the corridors bright shades of gold and green, the school colors she picked out. In 2022, the first few students showed up.

This year, there are about 50 students in prekindergarten through 12th

grade, and a growing waiting list as parents call nearly every day to ask about enrolling their children.

"I would have way more if I had the room," Ms. Hooper said.

It might strike some as foolhardy, Ms. Hooper conceded, for a public-school teacher to give up a modest but steady paycheck and retirement plan and start a school of her own, on her own. "It's illogical!" she said.

Still, the fact that parents have pulled their children out of public school to place them at Abundance speaks to the frustration and even desperation that have made the risk feel worth it. Even some of the teachers that Ms. Hooper used to work with in local school districts have enrolled their children.

The tuition this year is \$300 a month, which helps cover other teachers' and employees' salaries, the rent and supplies. The school gets no public funds.

Yazoo City, population 9,750, is the threshold of the Mississippi Delta, a flat expanse largely defined by its fertile farmland and entrenched poverty. Communities have been molded over generations by an inheritance of racial inequality.

But those enduring struggles have also fostered ingenuity. Whether it is mining woes to create blues music or taking advantage of easy access to cornmeal and pork to make hot tamales, hardship has been a mother of invention in the Delta, and some see Abundance as embodying that tradition.

Sign up for the Race/Related Newsletter Join a deep and provocative exploration of race, identity and society with New York Times journalists.

"It may not look like anything," said Goldie Jackson, a volunteer at the school whose granddaughter, Moriah Beckford, started at Abundance this year as a

high school senior.

“It may look like it’s rundown or whatever, or makeshift, but the quality that these kids get,” she said, adding, “This is a cut above.”

Schools have long been a reflection of the region’s imbalances. Wealthier white families put their children in private schools, while the public schools — with student bodies that are almost entirely Black — have teacher shortages and scarce resources. In Yazoo City, student performance was consistently bad enough that the [state took over the district in 2019](#).

The biggest class at Abundance is fourth grade, with 15 students. Mississippi requires third graders in public schools to pass a standardized test to move up, but private schools are exempt. Nearly two-thirds of the fourth graders at Abundance were in public schools last year and did not pass the test.

Students have also migrated to Abundance for other reasons: to escape bullying or feeling like they were invisible. Ms. Hooper saw students who were bright, curious, eager to learn, but also lost.

Deareon Moore, 13, said that he had found the environment in public schools chaotic and that he had struggled to absorb the curriculum. “I’d have to guess on some tests and pray I got some answers right,” said Deareon, an eighth grader who started at Abundance last year.

Tell Us About Where You Live

Ms. Hooper had taught special education at one local public school, and sixth-grade social studies at another. At the end of the day, she would come home and plant herself in bed. Her passion withered. She quit in 2021, in the middle of the school year, which led to the suspension of her public-school

teaching license.

Parents across the country, empowered by technology and more motivated after the coronavirus pandemic, have embraced alternatives beyond traditional classroom settings, including [informal "microschools."](#) Three years ago, that was how Abundance started out; the initial six students included two of Ms. Hooper's own children.

Such start-up schools are largely unregulated, and there is little data on their performance. Anyone can open them, and they can teach anything they'd like. Abundance has no standardized tests — for many families, that is a major draw — and no systematic way to gauge whether students are improving academically, other than grades.

Nevertheless, by its second year, the school had 20 students. Ms. Hooper found desks in a dumpster at a school in Greenwood, Miss. The laptops were outdated castoffs from a school in West Point, Miss. She bought the school van for \$1,300 through Facebook Marketplace. The drums for the band came from Walmart.

Ms. Hooper's title is executive director, but in actuality, she is a math, social studies and language arts teacher; registrar; guidance counselor; co-director of the drum line; janitor and receptionist, pausing class to answer the phone.

The one thing she is not, she makes clear, is a lunch lady: Students either have to bring food from home or have their parents drop off McDonald's at lunch time.

She relishes a lot of the work, like organizing the schedule, devising curriculums and teaching. "I was born to do it," Ms. Hooper said. "But the financial part? Lord!"

She had to figure out how to get the school accredited by the National Association of Private Schools, an organization of Christian academies. Then, there was payroll — she has a small staff that includes a few other teachers and aides. Last year, she had to take out a \$20,000 loan against her husband's retirement fund to pay them. She has not been paid since she left her old teaching job, she said, meaning her family has had to get by on her husband's income.

"What I don't get here," Ms. Hooper said, "I'll get on the other side."

Her Christianity informs her approach to teaching and is central to the school's mission. The Wi-Fi password is "Learn4Christ."

But the biggest goal, she said, is to make Abundance students empathetic, curious and spiritually resilient.

"Who do you need to forgive first?" she asked a class one day last month, addressing "even my sleeping kids in the back."

"Yourself!" the students replied.

Jurnee Burke, 18, plans on enlisting in the military as soon as she graduates next spring. She believes she could use the structure and is enthralled by the possibility of adventure. Still, she acknowledged her angst over being unsure of what she wanted from life. Ms. Hooper encouraged her to look inward for answers.

Moriah, whose grandmother volunteers at the school, had moved from Texas to live with her while her father was away for work. She first went to the high school in nearby Humphreys County, where she was bullied and ostracized, she and her grandmother said.

Coming to Abundance, a much smaller school, was an adjustment for

Moriah, 18. She played basketball at her old schools, and Abundance didn't have any sports teams. Starting a new school for her senior year was also a gamble. She wants to go to Baylor University in Texas and study music, her passion.

"Here," she said of Abundance, "I can just breathe."

It is not a utopia. A plumbing meltdown forced classes to be canceled one day. The day before, during lunch, the simultaneous use of a space heater and a microwave tripped a circuit breaker. The lights cut out, as did the monitor that was playing educational YouTube videos for students.

"We've got to get a building one day!" Ms. Hooper huffed. She wanted newer accommodations, preferably owned by the school.

Ms. Hooper has higher hopes, too: Someday, she would like to have the space and staff for up to 150 students. The financial stability to finally pay herself would not be bad, either.

"Sometimes, I'm tired," Ms. Hooper said. "Really tired."

Yet she does not feel drained in the way she used to.

She was startled by the clock — it was almost 3 p.m. already — and dashed downstairs. Classes had finished. It was time for after-school tutoring, and she did not want to leave students waiting.

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 9, 2024, Section A, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: Turning an Empty Storefront Into a School With a Waiting List. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)