

Alexander Russo (00:01.142)

Hi, it's Alexander Russo from The Grey. This is the Education Show and I am so happy to have Rebecca Griesbach from AL.com here to talk about her experiences as an education journalist and also her recent story about Peach City Academy. Rebecca, thanks so much for being on the show.

Rebecca Griesbach (00:20.269)

Thanks for having me. Good to be here.

Alexander Russo (00:22.738)

I am, as you and other people watching this I hope know, a long-time education reporter who started this foundation-funded newsletter called The Great about 10 years ago. I'm fascinated about all things related to the coverage of schools. Tell us a little bit about yourself for people who don't know you.

Rebecca Griesbach (00:42.007)

So I've been covering education for about five years now in Alabama. I'm an Alabama native and have really, well, I guess you could say I've been covering education for about a decade. I was in high school when Nicole Hannah Jones came down and did a big investigation into my school district. And ever since then, I've kind of been hooked on education reporting. But I've been at AL.com.

started through a Report for America fellowship and was covering education equity. Now I kind of cover education more broadly through a data lens.

Alexander Russo (01:22.986)

in school as a student, was pretty indifferent. I came to school so that I could do the theater or sports after school. I'm curious, were you a straight-A kid or what kind of a kid were you?

Rebecca Griesbach (01:34.691)

you

I was, I think in high school I started to slack off a little bit probably because I was so involved in newspaper. know, my high school newspaper, is not, unfortunately in a lot of places is not a thing anymore. But yeah, that's kind of where I put a lot of my energy that in band and I kind of, especially that last semester definitely coasted by, but no, I mean, it's,

It's been really interesting to talk with fellow education reporters who didn't have that background. mean, there's certainly, you know, members of my family, a lot of my friends, you know, weren't straight A students either. And so I feel like I kind of get sort of both, both lenses. but yeah.

Alexander Russo (02:22.67)

I think, I mean, I'm glad you had a good experience. I wish I worked harder. I think it actually helps the beat to have people who were indifferent to school or had mixed experiences because if everyone's class president, then it's gonna sort of affect the coverage and maybe make it harder for people to relate. We're here, I'm a big fan of yours. It's such a delight to talk to you today. I've been looking for an excuse to do this for a long while.

Rebecca Griesbach (02:42.168)

yeah. Yeah.

Alexander Russo (02:50.86)

We're here talking about, in particular, story you wrote, or series of stories in some ways that you wrote, focused on one of these new voucher schools in Alabama called Pete City Academy. Before we get to what you found, can you back us up and tell us a little bit about why you wanted to write this story in the first place? What were you, what was the motivation?

Rebecca Griesbach (03:18.019)

Yeah, so like you said, it was part of kind of a series of stories that's actually still ongoing. We have a few other pieces coming soon. But it was really born out of this big project that we wanted to do around school choice, around the CHOOSE Act, which is new in Alabama this year. It's similar to a bunch of other kind of voucher-like programs that have been cropping up around the state. Arizona is a big one. But we...

First, we wanted to track these private schools because there is no good data on private schools. And so it's really hard to get a sense of just kind of what the landscape looks like. So myself and reporter, Walisha Morris and our editor, Ruth Servan Smith, we all created this database of private schools in the state using

federal data and also kind of cobbled together data from other school choice programs that have collected that in the past in the state and track their tuition. That's kind of how it started was let's just see how much they're charging, whether the \$7,000 voucher would even be worth anything in some of these places. It's not in a lot of them. But then I kind of took a different approach and used that database and started adding on. I just kind of

looking through all the websites. I mean, we were doing a lot of this by hand and just, you know, noticed that a lot of them had very different accreditors. And a lot of them, you know, were very proud of their biblical curriculum. And some of them, you know, you had Montessori. So I just kind of wanted to get that sense of it. Like, what is, what are their offerings? And from there, that kind of just spurred a lot of just phone calls. I was talking with, I don't know, I've probably talked to

over 40 different people just through the course of all this, but accreditors, vendors, parents and students and private schools that are participating in the program. And that's kind of what shaped those stories. But the first one that actually hasn't come out yet is going to be about curriculum.

Alexander Russo (05:34.36)

Okay.

Rebecca Griesbach (05:35.191)

then that inspired like five more stories. So the Peach City story was kind of a part of that original story that we wrote kind of talking about accountability and accreditation. And through those conversations, it's just kind of like a rabbit hole. But through those conversations, I learned that there were just a bunch of private schools cropping up.

Alexander Russo (05:50.658)

Right.

Alexander Russo (06:02.262)

Right. And just to get myself oriented and to make sure I understand and to make sure people who are watching this understand, there were, of course, non-public schools in Alabama before the Act came along. You're tracking schools that are participating in the new program. And in the case of Peach City, this is what I'm going to call a new, new school. This school did not exist.

Rebecca Griesbach (06:14.145)

Yes.

Rebecca Griesbach (06:19.926)
Right.

Rebecca Griesbach (06:25.514)
Right. Right.

Alexander Russo (06:28.582)
It exists now almost entirely because it sounds from the way I read the story, because of the expansion of the voucher or whatever language you like to use. And what I loved about it was that you took us there. We went to school. It's amazing how few stories out there these days take us inside of schools. I'm such a big fan of that.

Rebecca Griesbach (06:44.842)
Yeah, yeah.

Rebecca Griesbach (06:52.896)
I know, and I know you're a big advocate for that.

Alexander Russo (06:56.974)
You did that. Chandler Fritz did that and Harper's Magazine in Arizona. And just this week Stephanie Sims, I think I've got the right name at PBS, took us inside an Arizona school. Like them or dislike them or whether you're unsure, we gotta see inside these schools. So what did you find?

Rebecca Griesbach (07:22.23)
Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Alexander Russo (07:25.198)
And what was it like? Was it a surprise to you or was it just as you expected?

Rebecca Griesbach (07:26.559)
Thank

Rebecca Griesbach (07:33.091)
Well, some of it was a surprise and some of it wasn't. So yeah, so when I learned that these schools were cropping up, I just said, okay, I'm going to try to call, you know, identify. I'd just kind of been tipped off, you know, oh, and then I was able to count at least a dozen, just Google searching. And so I was calling them up and there were a couple that did get back to me and Peach City got back to me.

And they were very proud of their program. This was just a phone call and invited me to come down. So I took the principal up on it. As you know, I wanted to get, like you said, a sense of what it was like. But yeah, I I knew I had the kind of the context that it was sort of like a Jerry Falwell school, you know, kind of church pop up.

situation and I had my kind of preconceived notions of what that might look like. The scene at the end of the story was kind of just an interesting moment for me to see, you know, this principal in a very deeply, you know, not shy about their biblical beliefs, but at least kind of having a conversation that you might not even have in a public school in Alabama because of our DEI laws.

about feminism, they were talking about suicide and all of these things that I don't see when I'm in a public school classroom. So that kind of shocked me. But I think just these themes of freedom and flexibility were very, I was lucky to have a character sort of that was in the principal who was just so open and responded when I challenged her too and was,

Alexander Russo (09:04.695)

Mm-hmm.

Rebecca Griesbach (09:22.774)

very aware of the criticism about her program. That was something I was a little nervous about going in, is like, don't want to make it a fluff piece, you know? I want to challenge her. So, you know, I guess it's up to readers to decide whether I did an okay job at that or not. But yeah, it was just interesting just having those conversations with her and seeing the school and.

I think the big thing for me was just seeing how quickly put together it had been and just all the work that still needed to be done. mean, this was basically they were renovating like trailers, you know, so I wanted that to be seen.

Alexander Russo (10:02.422)

Right. It has. Right. There's very much of a startup vibe. And to be clear, the school you saw was just one of the schools that started new this fall. There are lots of other schools, I'm assuming, who participate in the program that pre-exist, that just can give funding to a different set of kids than they could in the past. So the change at another school is going to be much more subtle. Is that right?

Rebecca Griesbach (10:20.268)

Okay.

Rebecca Griesbach (10:32.8)

Yeah, for sure. And I just kind of wanted to take that angle of, you know, this is enabling more schools to pop up without a lot of regulation or really any regulation. So what does that look like? But sure, you great schools and people will tell you that and you know.

Alexander Russo (10:45.475)

Right.

Alexander Russo (10:49.454)

And in the universe, you talk about the 12, at least 12 new schools have appeared across the state that you know of. And the universe of schools participating in the program, is that the 260 something number that I saw in the story? So those schools pre-exist the universal choice program that exists now. They're participating, but they existed before. One of the things that surprised me

Rebecca Griesbach (11:03.362)

All right, yeah.

Rebecca Griesbach (11:15.359)

yeah, yeah.

Alexander Russo (11:19.458)

was first of all, it didn't feel like a fluff piece or a horror story. So in that sense, I hope your goals were achieved. You were showing us what was good about the school or what the kids seemed to like about the school. It's just started. And also what maybe were unfinished, unverified, to be determined kinds of things.

One of the things you mentioned though is that the kids weren't all previously private school kids. Some of them came from other religious schools. Some of them came from the local public schools. Some of were homeschooled. Tell us a little bit about that and were you surprised by that?

Rebecca Griesbach (11:57.686)
Mm-hmm.

Rebecca Griesbach (12:08.778)

I was a little surprised about that because we know that the majority of kids in the program right now, at least in its first year, previously, you know, were previously enrolled in private school. So it's really just serving a lot of private school kids for now. And I've, you know, I've looked at some of the research on this and I've seen that in other states, it's kind of

opened up to more public school families as they learn about it and kind of get time to make that transition further down. So I would not be surprised if more public school kids are taking advantage of it later down the line. But yeah, I was kind of shocked that it was a pretty even mix there. I do like Peach City as an example, just because it's in a real like rural area. And it kind of, you know, it's not your typical place where you might expect.

private school to be. And so, you know, serving a lot of low income families, which is what lawmakers say the program is for. So I just kind of wanted to see, okay, well, you know, this is a population that they are aiming it at. What does it look like there? So.

Alexander Russo (13:17.334)

Right. Well, I thought it was a great story to see. I encourage people to go look at it. There's a companion piece about the 12 schools in general and about this accreditator process, which a little bit reminds me of charter school authorizers, which is another kind of intermediary that gets set up when public funds are being used. And there have been all sorts of questions and concerns about this is going back a long time about the

Rebecca Griesbach (13:33.152)
Yeah.

Alexander Russo (13:47.348)

who were the accreditors and were they screening heavily or screening very, very lightly. A great set of stories and also a really important topic. Tell us a little bit about, I feel like the stories that you write are not typical, not every story, you you're writing, breaking news stories just like everyone else, but I feel like what you do is a little bit different than the average bear. Are you

trying to do something different? Have you been trained at the paper you're at now to do things differently? Do you comment things a little bit differently or am just making this up in my head?

Rebecca Griesbach (14:29.602)

Well, I appreciate that you have that perception. I mean, that's what I try to do. You know, everyone, like you said, kind of has different, you know, daily and breaking responsibilities. You have to juggle. We've had plenty of that, especially here in Alabama, legislative news and all kinds of stuff. But, you know, I mean, when I first

came on to the education lab, that was kind of my goal is to do more enterprise reporting. You know, we want to

We want to write stories that feel useful to people and that can kind of wrap in these bigger topics. I mean, in a lot of ways, I think Alabama is such a good playing ground, maybe not good, but such a representation of what's going on in the country. So I think we have a responsibility and a role to play there in shaping that coverage as a statewide newspaper.

Alexander Russo (15:28.426)

And how do you stay out of the breaking news hamster wheel or the school culture wars, know, adults fighting about something about schools? How do you stay out of that or how do they protect you from that?

Rebecca Griesbach (15:47.969)

Yeah, I mean, I don't know if I always stay out of it. You know, it's hard. you you have needs as a newsroom and you know, a lot of it is kind of quick turn stuff initially, but we do try to do a good job of coming up and following up after those initial news pieces. I think having a, you know, a defined beat is always helpful, you know, to be able to kind of weave all the context together.

But that doesn't mean that we haven't, you know, stopped to do the breaking news and that sometimes that hasn't, you know, kind of taken a lot of our time, but you just kind of have to make time. mean, I wish there was a better solution, you know, but I think in the kind of ecosystem that we're in, where we already are struggling to have, I mean, we have so many news deserts, especially in our state that, you know, basic meetings don't get covered, you know.

Sometimes you do feel like you have to kind of do it all.

Alexander Russo (16:50.798)

Right. Five years in, I think you said, you're a veteran by the standards of the education, which is a wild thing. I see you laughing. Are there things that you wish you'd known at the beginning or conversely, are there things that you just do differently now that you wouldn't do anymore that at the beginning you did just because someone

Rebecca Griesbach (16:57.557)

you

Rebecca Griesbach (17:02.274)

you

Alexander Russo (17:18.018)

told you that's how you were supposed to do things. Are there big shifts in your coverage?

Rebecca Griesbach (17:23.382)

That's a great question. I would say I'm actually probably a little more cautious now as a reporter. And I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing, but I think especially my second week on the job was all of the CRT stuff going down. And so, and I've kind of been covering that ever since. And so people are definitely a lot more nervous to talk. And, you know, I,

I tend, I think over time I've gotten to be a little more patient with people, especially teachers, especially students who might otherwise just not talk to me. But I think it's balanced out by, you know, I would hope by,

you know, years of kind of building trust and building some credibility there. But I will say, I think I've, yeah, I'm a little more kind of just careful.

with you know

what I am doing with people's words just because I am so like I'm so aware of the consequences in a state like this and in a political environment like this. So I guess that would probably be the biggest kind of.

Alexander Russo (18:33.187)
Mm.

Alexander Russo (18:38.946)
Did you have situa

Did you have situations where people said you can, I'm happy to talk online where things went awry for them or things that you regretted or went sideways?

Rebecca Griesbach (18:57.634)
Not necessarily. think, I mean, there have probably been a couple of times where, you know, I've looked back and been like, you know, like, I don't want to get that person in trouble. But no, I just, I just, I think, especially with everything going on federally now and seeing people being like doxed and things like that, it's just always like top of mind for me.

so like I said, for better or worse, it might be something that's a, you know, hampering me, but I, it's just hard not to kind of be careful these days. So.

Alexander Russo (19:39.862)
And what do you and the paper think about using anonymous sources, quoting people who you know who they are, you trust them, but don't want to be named? Do you all do that or do you not do that? What's the policy over there?

Rebecca Griesbach (19:57.122)
It's very rare. I'll say I'm working on a project right now at EWA fellowship where I'm talking with a bunch of Hispanic and Latino students about going to college and just kind of in the midst of everything going on on our state. We've passed a bunch of anti-immigration laws and everything going on federally. A lot of these, well, some of these kids were former DACA recipients and

you know, we're not going to use their names. But I don't think I've ever maybe one or two times have referred to someone anonymously in a story. But I think

Alexander Russo (20:42.732)
And why not?

Rebecca Griesbach (20:47.637)
I kind of am, I guess a little, I just think, I think in those cases, I've been able to find someone else who could go on the record. so I might've talked to a bunch of people off the record who have kind of informed, you know, or who I can kind of refer, on background. but for me, if I can find someone who is willing to go on the record, I'm going to use that.

Alexander Russo (20:58.892)

Okay.

Alexander Russo (21:16.014)

Right, right. I guess it keeps you from being lazy or getting burned by a source who is using the freedom of not using their name to settle grudges or something like that. The other, I tend to think for what it's worth, this is just me sitting here hundreds of miles away from you, I tend to feel like Anana's quotes are a little bit underdone.

Rebecca Griesbach (21:19.968)

Yeah.

Rebecca Griesbach (21:32.437)

right.

Alexander Russo (21:44.566)

in education journalists, everyone's so careful. And I understand the historic reasons for it, but there are lot of things that people will say that they can't say on camera or on tape or publicly that are just so valuable that just end up not getting out into the world. So it makes me feel a little bit sad. The other thing that people struggle with a lot is access to schools.

Rebecca Griesbach (21:59.842)

in

Alexander Russo (22:10.922)

We've seen an incredible restriction of coverage that takes people inside schools because reporters can't get into schools or feel like they can't into schools or maybe don't even try at this point. How do you get into schools? You got into Peacht City Academy, but it sounds like that's not the first school you've been in as a reporter. How do you do it? What's the trick?

Rebecca Griesbach (22:32.469)

I think some of it is luck. think some of it is, I mean, being in a statewide role where I don't have to go up against a PIO of a local school district every single day, I do have a lot of privilege there. And so, you know, I think it's totally different for local reporters who are covering one or a handful of school districts and have a different kind of relationship there.

Alexander Russo (22:58.51)

Mm-hmm.

Rebecca Griesbach (22:59.061)

That's not to say that, you know, there aren't districts that have shut me out because they don't like the questions I'm asking. But, you know, if one shuts me out, we have 160 something others to try. So I think that's that's part of it. But.

Alexander Russo (23:12.558)

And you seem to think it's worth doing. It's not just adding color at the top of a story, it's giving depth.

Rebecca Griesbach (23:20.223)

Yes, I agree. And sometimes you go there because you do want a little color for that lead. I mean, that's kind of why I took Peach City up. And then I just stayed. I stayed for almost the full day and realized, OK, this is its own story. So, you know.

Alexander Russo (23:35.342)

Right, which I'm so glad you did. One of the things the folks at the Boston Globe did when they couldn't get into a school, couldn't get into a Boston Public Schools school, they did a sort of inside out student journalist kind of thing. I don't know if you saw the story. It's a few years ago now. Jenna Russell was a reporter who I talked to about this. They got the student to report, know, schools are full of kids and cameras, right?

They got the student, I think it was basically one main student to report what was going on inside the school. They verified it and then went to the district and said, hey, we've got this story. They ended up getting a photographer into the school. What are the pros and cons of using student-based reporting when you really need to get into a particular district or a particular school?

Rebecca Griesbach (24:20.852)

Yes.

Rebecca Griesbach (24:33.397)

I love that idea and I'm jealous of it. And we did something not quite like that, but through Report for America, we were teaching a podcast class, myself and Kyra Miles and Savannah Trans-Fernandez, who I came to ale.com with in the Birmingham area. And that was just such a great experience because I feel like we were all education reporters and we were in a high school about once a week.

There was one point where there was like a, like some kind of drill and we had to take up kids phones. You know, so it was, was, you know, a just chance to be in a school every week. I've done things where I've volunteered in schools with kind of like poetry classes and things like that, just, just to be in a school. I using, using it, but having students tell their own stories, I'm always

and advocate of, especially when we have fewer and fewer opportunities for student journalism these days, or that it's looking different. We don't have kind of a traditional school newspaper anymore in a lot of places. I think it's just vital to give kids that opportunity. And if we can work in partnership, that's even better. But I wish we had been able to kick something off the ground. That was more kind of

widespread. We have an internship program with the high schools in our newsroom that's been really great. But I just I love to see that kind of like hard news reporting, you local reporting being done by students.

Alexander Russo (26:14.882)

Yeah, no, it's an amazing thing. I could ask you questions till the end of time, but I promised you a short interview. And so I just want to say thank you so much for being on and telling us a little bit about your work and about Pete's City Academy. It's really exciting what you're doing, and I'm really glad to hear that there's more stories coming along the way.

Rebecca Griesbach (26:36.457)

Yeah, stay tuned. can't tell you when, but I really appreciate the interest in this and it's been great to talk with you.

Alexander Russo (26:46.05)

Thanks so much.

Rebecca Griesbach (26:47.276)

Thanks.