Lance Reed is the owner/operator of Chick-fil-A in Oxford, Miss., and one of the driving forces behind the Chick-fil-A Leader Academy program currently being implemented into some Mississippi schools, including many in the Delta.

"Chick-fil-A has a program called the Chick-fil-A Leader Academy, and it's in about 250 schools this year across the country," Reed says. "My involvement in the program came about when I became connected with Tom Pittman, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, and Dr. Albert Nylander, Director of the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement and a Professor of Sociology at Ole Miss. Dr. Nylander is really the one who helped us in securing all of the schools in the Delta."

Since Chick-fil-A doesn’t have a large presence in the Mississippi Delta, other than the licensee location at Delta State, Reed says Nylander was instrumental in bringing the program to the Delta high schools that were chosen, due to his Delta roots and past position as Dean of Graduate Studies & Continuing Education, and Department Chair at Delta State.

Reed’s vision for the program’s implementation in schools is to bring Chick-fil-A owner/operators throughout the state into the effort and make a real impact on people’s lives.

"At Chick-fil-A our corporate purpose is to glorify God by being faithful stewards of all that’s been entrusted to us, and we want to have a positive influence on everyone who comes into contact with Chick-fil-A," Reed says. "So that positive impact on lives is really what this program is all about."

Reed says he began to talk with other Chick-fil-A owner/operators in Mississippi about joining the effort.

"We now have 10 operators across the state who are involved in this effort," he adds. "We have Nick Jones at Vicksburg, Neil Osborne in Clinton; four operators down in Jackson—Keys Hayes, Chris Rosson, Morgan Koon and Chris Salomone; Jon Mungar in Starkville; two operators in Tupelo, Jamey Finley and Justin Flowers; and myself in Oxford."

Reed says what most of the owner/operators from these Chick-fil-A’s have done is adopt a school in their communities and one in the Delta.

"I asked them to choose a Delta school as well as one from their own area," he says. "And all of these participating Chick-fil-A’s are providing the funding for the program in each specific school. And the majority of the 19 schools that we’re in are in the Mississippi Delta."
The Delta Schools chosen for the program are:

- Cleveland High School
- Coahoma County High School
- North Panola High School
- Ruleville Central High School
- Delta Streets Academy
- West Tallahatchie High School
- Gentry High School
- Bayou Academy
- Clarksdale High School
- Coahoma Agricultural High School
- Eastside High School
- Vicksburg High School
- Warren Central High School

The Chick-fil-A Leader Academy Program is designed for 9th-12th grade levels and helps to develop leadership skills with the students.

"We had our Kickoff event recently at Delta State, and we had about 450 students who attended," Reed says. "Delta State was a tremendous partner with this event. Elizabeth Joel, one of the Continuing Education Coordinators at the university, was phenomenal. We couldn't have pulled this event off without Elizabeth Joel's help, and also Delta State's."

The Kickoff event helped students and others learn just what the Leader Academy was all about.

"Students learn about leadership through Leader Labs, which are held once a month," Reed says. "Each month the teacher facilitates the discussion, using the curriculum that's provided, with the students. The Leadership Labs culminate into students mobilizing other students at their school and doing something to impact their communities. So, they're getting taught about leadership, and then this motivates them to go out into their own communities and make a positive impact."

Reed says where the Chick-fil-A Foundation comes in is that the Foundation has $100,000 in micro grants. The schools can apply to the Foundation and possibly get grant money that would aid them in the community-wide projects they set forth for the students through the Leader Academy.

"Our thing was: we have all of these communities in our backyard, such as in the Mississippi Delta, that are in need of these programs," Reed says. "So how could we, as Chick-fil-A operators, come together to maybe do something remarkable over in the Delta? And how could we partner with the schools to help from an educational standpoint, because we felt like if we were going to be able to make a change and an impact, it was going to start with education."

Reed stresses that Dr. Nylander from Ole Miss's McLean Institute was huge in assisting with this endeavor.

"Dr. Nylander is the one who connected us with Elizabeth Joel at Delta State," he adds. "And Delta State was a great partner. They gave away free backpacks to all the kids who came to the Kickoff event, and free T-shirts, and for a lot of the kids it was the first time ever that they had been on a college campus. So this was a big deal for them."

Reed says at the end of the event, through a partnership with a group called "Feeding Children Everywhere," the students who participated in the event packed over 100,000 meals, which were distributed to different foodbanks throughout the Delta.

With the program, the school identifies a teacher as facilitator for the curriculum and then in turn, the teacher/facilitator identifies the students who might be interested in the program.

"There are usually 25-30 students chosen," Reed says, "and they'll meet at various times, sometimes after school. Of course, we let the schools identify the kids for the program."

Reed says the current program is funded through this academic year.

"After that, we'll probably evaluate things and see where we are and where we need to be," he adds. "Hopefully we can grow the program, and of course, that's our vision. But we also have to have those Chick-fil-A operators who are helping to sponsor the program and bringing it to the schools. This is year one, where we're laying the foundation and the groundwork. In the future, we hope to have all of the Mississippi Delta schools involved and more Chick-fil-A operators throughout the state involved, as well." DBJ