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ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF
Early Childhood
Education

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ANNUAL REPORT

The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE) is a part of the Executive Department of state government, principally established to enable the Governor to effectively and efficiently coordinate efforts and programs to serve children throughout the state. The goal of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education is to advance, support, and deliver cohesive, comprehensive systems of high quality education and care so that all Alabama children thrive and learn. The Department consists of the Office of School Readiness, Office of Early Learning & Family Support, Head Start Collaboration Office, and a new Office of Early Childhood Development and Professional Support.

DECE is the state designee for the federally mandated Early Childhood Advisory Council (designated as the Alabama Children's Policy Council in 2015), home of the Alabama Head Start Collaboration Office, coordinator of Alabama's state and local Children's Policy Councils, administrator of the Children First Trust Fund, lead agency for early learning and home visiting programs, and developer and operator of the nationally-recognized First Class Pre-K Program. DECE has also designed and coordinated the state plan for developing a continuum of home visiting services for children from prenatal to age five, including all relevant state agencies.

TOP FIVE PRIORITIES

- Educating policymakers and families on the **importance of early childhood education** on a child's future academic success and lifetime well-being.
- Providing more opportunities for **children in poverty** to gain access to high quality early learning experiences before starting Kindergarten.
- Creating additional pathways to **recruit, retain and train qualified early learning professionals** in classrooms and related early childhood settings.
- Developing reporting **systems to ensure accountability and the long-term success** of early learning programs and most efficient utilization of resources to maximize services provided to children.
- **Working with families** to improve the early development, learning and health of their children by connecting them with health, education, and development resources.

YEAR IN REVIEW

In 2018 the Alabama Legislature approved an \$18.5 million expansion for Alabama First Class Pre-K, increasing the FY 2019 program budget to \$96 million. This is the program's largest ever single-year funding increase. In addition to funding new classrooms throughout the state, DECE will continue to ensure pay parity for all Alabama First Class Pre-K teachers with the same 2.5% cost of living raise as K-12 public school teachers this school year.

In FY 2018, more than 87% of every dollar invested in First Class Pre-K went directly into the classroom, followed by 7.8% to Instructional Support, 1.55% to Training and Testing, and less than 1% each to Administrative Personnel and Benefits, Supplies, Equipment, Transportation and Travel.

In the 2018-2019 school year, 18,720 children have access to the program in 1,045 classrooms in all 67 counties, serving 32% of the state's eligible four-year-old population. There are more than 2,000 early childhood educators currently employed as a result of continued program growth. The First

Class Pre-K program's diverse delivery model serves children and their families in a variety of settings, including childcare (67 classrooms/6%); colleges and universities (12 classrooms/1%); community-based centers (23 classrooms/2%); faith-based centers (34 classrooms/3%); Head Start (105 classrooms/10%); military bases (2 classrooms/less than 1%); private schools (1 classroom/less than 1%); and public schools (798 classrooms/76%).

Since 2012, investment in First Class Pre-K has grown from \$19 to \$100 million, more than 420%, and likewise, there has been a 380% increase in additional classrooms and number of students served during this same time period.

DECE receives and disperses any funds appropriated by state and federal sources for the establishment, operation, and administration of its programs. DECE is responsible for coordinating and organizing all efforts for the federal Preschool Development Grant and serves as its fiscal agent. DECE was awarded a \$70 million (\$17.5 million per year for four years) federal preschool development grant in 2014 to expand access to quality First Class Pre-K. DECE is also the designated state lead agency for early learning and home visiting programs, with family support services in all 67 counties administered through the Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visitation (MIECHV) grants and additional state funds.

In December 2018, Alabama was awarded a new \$10.6 million federal Preschool Development Grant, Birth-Five to further develop and implement a unified system that includes a comprehensive and coordinated effort to provide from existing resources effective and efficient services to meet the needs of children and parents. Alabama will update and consolidate existing state needs assessments to develop a strategic plan that facilitates collaboration and coordination among existing programs of early childhood care and education. It will realize the vision that all children are healthy and emotionally ready to enter kindergarten, particularly low-income and disadvantaged children, and that strong supports are provided to assist families in making informed choices for successful transitions to schools.

Alabama is nationally recognized as a leader in quality early childhood education and care. DECE leadership and staff are regularly called upon to provide leadership and assistance to other states who look to Alabama as the national leader in quality early learning and care, regularly serving as a model and mentor to other states. DECE is frequently invited to present on the national level and share Alabama's successes in scaling pre-k programs while maintaining high quality.

In this past year alone, DECE leadership: participated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO), and the Zero to Three Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health national conferences; presented at the annual meetings of the National Governor's Association (NGA) and Education Commission of the States (ECS); advised the Governor's Office of Montana and the state departments of education in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Hawaii in developing quality early childhood systems; submitted research on First Class Pre-K and First Teacher Home Visiting program outcomes to national peer-reviewed journals; provided consultation to national education publications on California's expansion plan for universal pre-k and Alabama's exemplar use of PDG funds; and certified the nation's first-ever inaugural cohort of the Pre-K – 3rd Leadership Academy. Alabama's nationally-recognized model of excellence will be included in new coursework and a documentary film developed for the Harvard Graduate School of Education by the Saul Zaentz Charitable Foundation.

Office of School Readiness

DECE provides leadership in the development and expansion of Alabama's nationally recognized pre-kindergarten program. The Office of School Readiness is charged with administering Alabama First Class Pre-K. Since 2012, DECE has overseen the largest ever expansion of Alabama's high-quality, voluntary First Class Pre-K program while maintaining the program's nationally recognized quality standards. DECE's leadership team has grown the state's high-quality pre-K program by more than 980 percent – from 57 classrooms in 2005 to 1,045 classrooms in 2019 located in all 67 counties of the state – using state and federal funds.

EXPANSION OF ALABAMA FIRST CLASS PRE-K

For the 12th year in a row, the First Class Pre-K program was recognized by the National Institute for Early Childhood Education (NIEER) for having the highest quality, state-funded pre-k program in the nation. DECE is proud to report that despite children entering the program with significant early achievement gaps on developmental assessments, Alabama First Class Pre-K students leave ready for kindergarten. They also have higher attendance rates and are less likely to repeat a grade or need special education services, compared with children that did not participate in the program.

A NIEER report released in November 2018 shows that Alabama First Class Pre-K is the only state-funded pre-kindergarten program in the country that “comes close to having all the elements of a strong pre-k program.” NIEER found that Alabama's program fully meets 14 of the 15 essential elements characterizing high quality early learning programs, and that it partially meets the 15th elementary of dual language learning. On average, state-based pre-k programs across the country only met 6 of the 15 elements. This rating highlights Alabama's program leadership, early learning and care policies, and best practices.

All First Class Pre-K classrooms receive: targeted instructional coaching support through the Alabama Reflective Coaching Model (ARC); funding for developmentally appropriate physical learning environments; program monitoring support to maintain high standards of quality in the pre-K classroom. This strength-based approach supports enhancing teacher-child interactions and appropriate early learning environments while being sensitive to the needs of the teachers, students and families in the communities served through First Class Pre-K.

The Alabama pre-k expansion has initiative increased the number of high quality pre-k programs and classrooms that meet high quality standards in the state from 6% (3,800 children) to more than 32% (18,720) of Alabama's eligible four-year-old children in the last eight years.

RESEARCH AND OUTCOMES IN ALABAMA FIRST CLASS PRE-K

A study by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) analyzed student achievement through the 6th grade and found that alumni of Alabama First Class Pre-K program consistently outperformed their peers in reading and math on state assessments. PARCA also found that participation in the First Class Pre-K program closed the achievement gap for lower income students by an average of 25%.

Achievement Gap Closure

An October 2018 study shows that students who participate in Alabama First Class Pre-K are more likely to be proficient in math and reading, with “no evidence of fade out of the benefits of high quality pre-k over time.” The study looked at 3rd-7th grade reading and math scores across multiple cohorts and found that First Class Pre-K graduates had significantly higher proficiency rates, compared with

their peers who did not attend the program. These long-term results held true even after the study controlled for student demographics and other variables, such as poverty, known to impact student achievement.

An in-depth study of Alabama 3rd graders found that First Class Pre-K significantly narrowed the academic achievement gaps that typically exist between children in poverty and their more affluent peers, and between minority children and non-minority children. First Class Pre-K narrows the achievement gap in both reading and math proficiency. Children in poverty who received First Class Pre-K consistently outperformed their peers who did not receive First Class Pre-K, with the largest gains observed for Black and Hispanic children. First Class Pre-K closes the gap in reading proficiency by 28% for children in poverty compared to statewide proficiency levels, with a 12% gain (increase) in reading proficiency. First Class Pre-K closes the gap in math proficiency by 57% for children in poverty compared to statewide proficiency levels, with a 13% gain (increase) in math proficiency.

Cost Savings Associated with Reducing Grade Retention and Chronic Absenteeism

Research completed by PARCA and the University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) examined differences in chronic absenteeism rates between students who received First Class Pre-K and those who did not. Findings from the analyses showed that among low-income children, those who received First Class Pre-K were more likely to attend school regularly and less likely to be chronically absent over their elementary school years as compared to those who did not receive First Class Pre-K.

Research also found that low-income students who received First Class Pre-K were less likely to be retained (i.e., to repeat a grade) as compared to those who did not receive First Class Pre-K. The largest differences in retention were observed for the oldest cohort of children, an especially meaningful finding given that they have been in school longer with more opportunity to be retained and given the increased educational expectations for older students. For all cohorts assessed, students who received First Class Pre-K had lower rates of retention than did students who did not receive First Class Pre-K. Differences ranged from 4.1% to 6.3% across the four cohorts included in the analyses. Potential cost savings ranged from \$11,120,786 to \$17,272,962 for a total of \$59,165,276 across the four cohorts.

These findings were consistent at each grade level and differences were greater for the oldest group of children, a critical observation given the increased educational expectations for older children. Absenteeism has serious implications for a child's academic performance. On average, students who are absent typically: have lower test scores; have lower likelihood of being on track in high school impacting their career and college readiness; have lower likelihood of graduating from high school; and have lower course grades, derailing their ability for college completion. Potential lost costs avoided ranged from \$438,419 to \$1,598,372, for a total of \$5,403,655 during the 2015/2016 school year.

Kindergarten Readiness

Research completed by PARCA and UAB found that children who participated in First Class Pre-K were more likely to be ready for Kindergarten across all school readiness domains as compared to children who did not participate in First Class Pre-K. This is an important outcome given the known association between Kindergarten readiness and later academic success. Initial results suggest that participation in First Class Pre-K increases school readiness at Kindergarten entry, providing a strong foundation for future achievement and success in the classroom. As Kindergarten entry assessment

expands statewide, opportunities exist for a broader understanding of school readiness and the impact of First Class Pre-K.

STRONG START, STRONG FINISH

The goal of Governor Kay Ivey's education initiative "Strong Start, Strong Finish" launched in July 2017 is to support a comprehensive approach of collaboration that improves education from pre-k to the workforce. This initiative will focus on and prioritize three critical stages of education: early childhood education, computer science in middle and high school, and workforce preparedness.

Through Strong Start Strong Finish, Alabama is implementing our nationally-recognized First Class Pre-K model as a bridge to develop and expand a birth to 8 continuum, creating an alignment spanning Pre-K to 3rd grade ("P-3") and prenatal to age 3. As part of the Alabama Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, the Department is building upon our existing efforts: supporting parents as a child's best and first teacher through First Teacher Home Visiting; promoting school readiness in First Class Pre-K; preparing quality teachers through early literacy professional learning; combatting chronic absenteeism and the summer learning slide with the Alabama Summer Achievement Program; and addressing childhood poverty by integrating and aligning supports with the Alabama State Departments of Mental Health, Public Health, Medicaid, Human Resources, and Education.

Alabama Pre-K – 3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning

DECE and the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) are working together to align instructional practices, assessment, and leadership from pre-K to 3rd grade ("P-3"). This collaborative partnership for the P-3 project will develop and implement a strong teaching and learning continuum unique to the needs and expectations of Alabama children and families.

The Alabama P-3 Integrated Approach to Early Learning works to ensure student success and achievement gap closure by expanding access to the high quality First Class Pre-K program model and taking the most successful parts of K-3 initiatives to establish a strong foundation of early learning experiences that promote student achievement and success. By the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, the P-3 program will have expanded from an original 35 classrooms in the 2017-2018 school year to approximately 117 classrooms statewide.

The goal of the P-3 program, now moving into its third year in 2019-2020, is to expand the early learning continuum from First Class Pre-K through 3rd grade. A high quality early education provides the foundation for student success in school. Having a seamless learning continuum from pre-K to 3rd grade will align and integrate a comprehensive educational approach to student learning during the years when children have the greatest growth potential. By applying their knowledge of child development, subject matter content, and pedagogical approaches to align educational experiences along the P-3 continuum, educators ensure that children enter classrooms that promote their on-going educational progress by building on what they learned during the previous year.

This alignment is particularly critical given the new knowledge we have about the developmental sequences of early learning. Knowing this, educators can intentionally integrate the developmental domains into the teaching and learning subject matter for young children. Taken together, research findings from multi-year early education interventions suggest that the components of the P-3 approach can combine to make a positive contribution to young children's learning, providing the pathways through which more children will achieve success by the end of 3rd grade.

Alabama Pre-K – 3rd Leadership Academy

The first collaborative initiative of its kind in the nation, the P-3 Leadership Academy is provided in partnership with Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools (CLAS) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). This high quality professional learning and resource program meets the needs of elementary principals to lead P-3 learning communities. By partnering together, we are able to provide a high-quality professional learning and resource program to meet the needs of elementary principals and pre-k directors serving our children in their most critical age groups. The year-long program cumulates in a Capstone Project that provides participants with an opportunity to apply what they are learning in their current setting.

This is the first program offered through a collaborative partnership with a national principal's organization, and the only such program that participants, upon successful completion of the program, receive a national certification credential. In June 2018, the first-ever such cohort in the country to complete this national pilot program received their Alabama P-3 Leadership Credential, and the third leadership cohort will commence in 2019.

Early Literacy Professional Learning

Alabama is committed to supporting P-3 teachers with the tools necessary to teach every student the basic literacy skills needed to be successful in school. This comprehensive training provides the P-3 teacher a deeper understanding of the science of reading and evidence-based strategies necessary to support all students, especially those who experience language and reading challenges. Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) can be a critical component in the teacher's instructional toolbox of reading strategies. LETRS is not a curriculum or program; instead, LETRS focuses on the science of reading and supports teachers in diagnosing reading issues, prescribing a strategy, and assessing the effectiveness of the instruction provided to support the student. This intensive learning experience is provided, on a voluntary basis, for Alabama P-3 teachers and coaches and is funded through a competitive grant application process.

DECE funds this early literacy professional learning to prepare quality P-3 teachers tasked with teaching the literacy skills essential for academic success. DECE currently supports 123 P-3 coaches, administrators, professors; 124 K-3 teachers; and 43 pre-k teachers. There are 139 educators on the LETRS waitlist and 25 educators who would like to receive additional training in Summer 2019 to become an Alabama Facilitator of LETRS.

EARLY EDUCATOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

In response to the growth of First Class Pre-K and the need for quality birth-3rd grade teachers, DECE is working to create better pathways for a career in early childhood education.

Early Educator Workforce Summits

In 2008 and 2012, the T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship Program conducted workforce assessments to better understand early childhood teacher needs and capacity. The Alabama Early Childhood Advisory Council conducted a needs assessment in 2011 to assess the capacity and effectiveness of the early childhood education workforce. They discovered that a lack of alignment between two-year and four-year institution programs leads early childhood education students to lose credits, take duplicative courses, and lengthen their time to degree completion.

By 2014, the Alabama School Readiness Alliance (ASRA) convened a focus group meeting with representatives of two- and four-year colleges and universities to gather information about the barriers to producing quality early childhood educators in sufficient numbers to serve Alabama's children in First Class Pre-K. Building on these identified needs and barriers to success, the inaugural

Early Educator Workforce Summit in 2015 expanded upon the work of previous groups to define possible solutions and next steps in the process toward building strong transfer pathways, known as articulation agreements, for early childhood majors across Alabama.

Each year, more and more teachers are needed for First Class Pre-K program classrooms, as the program has expanded more than 370 percent over the past five years alone, from 271 classrooms statewide to now more than 1,000 classrooms in the 2018-2019 school year. With a child care Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), higher education levels are required. Quality enhancement for Head Start and child care programs will require higher education attainment, as well. Stakeholders in early childhood education want the best-prepared teachers interacting each day with our youngest learners to ensure each and every child is ready for school success.

Over the years, while progress has been made with articulation agreements, Alabama is simply not preparing quality early childhood educators due to lacking understanding of how to increase articulation between two- and four-year colleges and universities. Successful statewide articulation must include specific provisions that facilitate credit transfer within articulation agreements, including provisions that address the portability of early childhood education credits. Articulation agreements between institutions must define course equivalences to earn transfer credit for their prior coursework in early childhood education and/or child development in order to facilitate student degree progress.

The purpose of the 2018 annual Early Educator Workforce Summit was to develop lofty but achievable goals to advance the articulation of Early Childhood Education (ECE) courses and degrees within and between two- and four-year institutions of higher education in Alabama. Currently, there are 7 individual articulation agreements between Alabama's two- and four-year institutions, and 4 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accredited programs: Calhoun Community College (A.A.S. Child Development); Gadsden State Community College (A.A.S. Child Development); Jefferson State Community College (A.A.S. Child Development); and the University of Alabama (B.S. Human Environmental Studies, Early Childhood Education Major).

Early Educator Preparation in Higher Education

DECE has granted over 200 scholarships in the last three years (2015-2018) to students pursuing early childhood education degrees and early childhood education teacher certification at two- and four-year institutions of higher education. This is in addition to funding 132 TEACH scholarships. During the 2017-2018 school year, 97 bachelor degree-level TEACH scholarships were awarded and the recipients were employed in 66 sponsoring early childhood programs, located in 26 counties.

Based on the top three priorities identified by Alabama's institutions at the 2018 Early Educator Workforce Summit, DECE is committed to working closely with our colleges and universities in these areas: NAEYC accreditation; initiating and maintaining collaborative relationships and articulation agreements between institutions; recruiting and retaining qualified Early Childhood and/or Child Development faculty; and assisting institutions in the process of offering a pre-k certificate for qualified graduates with a degree in early childhood. The Department is also committed to continue working with institutions to identify quality field experience locations for early childhood and/or child development students, and to help institutions establish First Class Pre-K classrooms at their college or university lab centers.

Pursuing NAEYC accreditation was overwhelmingly identified as the #1 priority of Alabama's colleges and universities. As a result of the 2018 Summit, DECE is pleased to announce that one-time grant funds up to \$10,000.00 have been awarded to 13 higher education institutions to pursue

NAEYC accreditation. To apply for NAEYC accreditation funding from the Department, a two- or four-year institution must be regionally accredited and either have an articulation agreement already in place or have the ability to show they are working toward finalizing such an agreement for early childhood and/or child development coursework. These competitive grants for NAEYC Accreditation and articulation agreements are a direct result of the 2018 Early Educator Workforce Summit.

Child Development Associate Credential

A Child Development Associate (CDA) credential allows for a pathway for high school students to receive quality training and education to move from the classroom straight into the workforce. This partnership between the Council of Professional Recognition (the Council) and DECE will support the state's early childhood programs program by recruiting early childhood professionals who have successfully obtained their National Child Development Associate (CDA®) credential for classroom support.

DECE partnered with ALSDE to support implementation of the Child Development Associate Credential as a track in career technical programs. The purpose is to prepare the students to earn the national credential upon graduation and to enter the workforce with a credential that is in high demand and provide auxiliary teachers in First Class Pre-K classrooms. This partnership was started to not only give graduates access to a credential in high demand, but also to fill the need statewide for high-quality early childhood teachers.

This collaboration also includes working with the ALSDE, Division of Career and Technical Education (CTE)/Workforce Development, as they identify opportunities to expand and adopt the CDA credential as part of their educational qualifications for high school students interested in pursuing a career in the early childhood field. The Council will also help the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education to build lists of licensed child care centers where CDA students can earn the required 480 hours of child care experience required to earn a CDA.

In addition, this effort will help increase the number of CDA Professional Development Specialists, who observe CDA candidates during a verification visit as part of the Council's rigorous credentialing process. DECE will also implement the CDA Home Visitor Program, which will help improve the quality of early childhood education in a variety of communities throughout the state.

Teacher Certification

To better meet the needs of children in the earliest stages of life, Alabama adopted a new pre-k certificate option in the Educator Preparation and Educator Certification Chapters of the Alabama Administrative Code.

Certificate options include: Class B Pre-K Certificate (Birth – Age 4) which is a Bachelor's degree from a senior institution of higher education regionally accredited when the degree was conferred that meets standards in the Educator Preparation Chapter of the Alabama Administrative Code relevant to pre-K and early childhood education (P-3); an Early Child Development Certificate (Birth – Age 4) which is a Bachelor's degree from a senior institution of higher education regionally accredited when the degree was conferred, as well as, completion of a baccalaureate program in child development accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Teacher Pay Parity

Teachers are a strong, direct determinant of preschool program quality, and Alabama's pre-k program policies positively influence who becomes and stays an early childhood educator as well as the professional competencies they acquire. Alabama is one of only seven states in the country to

require starting salary parity with primary school teachers for pre-k teachers in both public and private providers. DECE remains committed to ensuring pre-k teacher pay parity with K-12 public school teachers, including salary and paid time for planning and professional development (Friedman-Krauss and Kasmin, NIEER Pre-K Data Snapshot: Lead Teacher Workforce, May 2018). DECE requires that every First Class Pre-K lead teacher have a four-year college degree in early childhood education, at a minimum, and every auxiliary teacher to have at least a CDA or nine hours of equivalent coursework.

Research indicates that “recruiting and retaining good teachers ranks as one of the most significant factors in creating and maintaining preschool quality programs. Inadequate teacher compensation lowers preschool program quality and leads to poorer cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes for children,” (Barnette, NIEER Preschool Policy Matters, Issue 3, March, 2003). We are pleased to continue the process of assisting programs in providing incremental raises for teachers as first steps toward our goal of having all First Class Pre-K teacher salaries in line with those of public school teachers. Supplemental grants are awarded for all First Class Pre-K teacher salaries to be in line with those of their K-12 counterparts in order to recruit and retain the highest quality teachers for Alabama First Class Pre-K.

Professional Development Opportunities

Alabama has improved the training of early childhood teachers and directors by refining training standards and expanding access to training through continuing education scholarships and increasing access to high quality training opportunities throughout the state. Professional development is followed up with individualized coaching and each teacher sets her own professional development goals.

Teachers in early childhood classrooms have applied for scholarships to continue their education with a Child Development Associate Credential or an associate’s or bachelor’s degree in Child Development or Early Childhood Education. After training, instructional coaches use the coaching model to support teachers’ transfer of new knowledge into positive practice change in their classrooms.

In January 2019, DECE hosted the inaugural Alabama Early Childhood Education Conference with over 3,000 participants from across the state and the southeast, expanding the scope of our practice and work beyond pre-k to truly encompass birth-through-eight learning and care.

Alabama Task for the Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Settings

This initiative is to bring state early childhood leaders to develop guidance to promote all Alabama early childhood programs and services working together to embody the values, policies and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to have access and participate in systems of high quality, developmentally appropriate, culturally competent, cohesive services allowing full participation in community and society.

Help Me Grow (HMG) Campaign

DECE links families to community resources, providing effective care coordination and facilitation of partnerships with the state and local communities to improve the accessibility and quality of support services for families and children. Parents or caregivers simply dial 2-1-1 to receive support and information on HMG service referrals. HMG is an intentional and focused set of strategies that builds on existing resources and programs. The 2-1-1 phone network is a point of entry for families and providers to facilitate appropriate referrals and connections. A care coordinator continues to interact with the family to ensure assistance is obtained.

Office of Early Learning & Family Support

DECE is Alabama's designated lead agency for home visiting, aligning it with the agency's other early childhood system initiatives. The Office of Early Learning and Family Support provides grant funding for voluntary home visiting programs that focus on school readiness, family and child health and well-being. DECE helps families access resources in their own communities.

FIRST TEACHER HOME VISITING

The First Teacher Home Visiting program impacts children and their families by improving health outcomes for mothers and babies; reducing emergency room visits for children; improving school readiness; reducing child injuries; and reducing cases of child abuse and neglect.

All DECE-funded programs use an evidence-based home visiting model – Parents as Teachers, Nurse Family Partnership, or Home Instruction for the Parents of Preschool Youngsters – that matches families with trained professionals to provide information and support. Programs may enroll pregnant women and continue to serve the family until the child enters Kindergarten. The home is the primary setting for service delivery. Some First Teacher Home Visiting programs are currently providing telehealth services using both visits to the home and remote visits utilizing technology, including cell phones and iPads. This alternative way of “visiting” with parents is especially beneficial when it comes to serving millennial parents.

First Teacher serves some of Alabama's most vulnerable families. Nearly two-thirds meet the federal definition for poverty and the majority of those are in extreme poverty, 50% or less of the poverty threshold. 65% of families served by First Teacher Home Visiting are single-parent homes. In 2018, 2,477 children received home visiting services with a focus on supporting the child's growth and development. 1,467 families engaged in efforts to increase parent-child interactions that include enriching learning experiences in the home. Overall, 50,000 home visits were provided, offering families a foundation for future success through support, strategies, and relevant community resources. The First Teacher Home Visiting program saw marked improvements in tobacco cessation efforts. Through 22 individual HIPPIY programs statewide, almost 2,000 children received home instruction from parents or guardians, and 1,555 families committed to increasing literacy and parent-child interactions in the home.

DECE increased collaboration and partnership among early childhood providers to develop a report that is the basis for new advocacy efforts related to home visiting in the state and is the foundational report to guide the development of messaging for legislators. Partnerships include: ALSDE, the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (CANP), and the non-profit group Alabama Partnership for Children (APC). The purpose of the project is to understand the home visiting system in Alabama.

Reducing Infant Mortality

Infant mortality rates (IMR) are an important measure of a health within a state, and Alabama has long had very high IMR in comparison to the country overall. There are many underlying indicators that contribute to infant mortality, including medical complications, behavioral, and environmental factors. In December 2017, Governor Kay Ivey convened the Children's Cabinet to address the issue of infant mortality in Alabama. A subcommittee was created to develop an action plan.

This subcommittee was comprised of leaders and staff from the following agencies:

- Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

- Alabama Department of Human Resources
- Alabama Department of Mental Health
- Alabama Department of Public Health
- Alabama Medicaid Agency
- Alabama Office of Minority Affairs

The Children's Cabinet adopted the recommendations of the working subcommittee to implement a pilot program to reduce infant mortality rates by at least 20% in three target counties (Macon, Montgomery and Russell), within the next five years. This pilot includes: expanding and/or outlining evidenced-based home visiting programs.

In 2018, Governor Ivey appropriated \$1 million for the State of Alabama Infant Mortality Reduction Plan, and because of this First Teacher Home Visiting grew from serving 53 counties in 2018 to all 67 counties in 2019. DECE is leveraging state dollars to allow Medicaid to draw down federal dollars to operate home visiting programs in the three target counties and expand access to quality home visiting across the state.

INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

DECE exhibits a strong history of supporting early childhood developmental and socio-emotional outcomes. DECE leadership serves in many capacities to support direct services for infant and early child mental health, as the state's designated lead agency for maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting programs, including: Help Me Grow; the Office of Early Learning and Family Support which oversees First Teacher Home Visiting through the Parents as Teachers, Nurse Family Partnership, and HIPPIY models; Alabama First Class Pre-K which is managed by the Office of School Readiness; and the State Coordinator for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH).

Currently, there are more than 20 Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health endorsed professionals across DECE, including all new Early Childhood Development team mentor coaches and specialized infant-toddler coaches. First 5 Alabama is part of an international group called The Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health. By joining forces with The Alliance, we position ourselves to become equipped to develop a workforce that meets national competencies and standards, allowing our early childhood workforce to earn a nationally recognized endorsement, increase services, and expand access to services to Alabama's birth to five population.

State Coordinator for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

This new position was created in partnership with Alabama Department of Mental Health, the state's lead agency for Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health), to address the need for system-wide change across the state. The State Coordinator for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) maintains awareness of activities that support the establishment of evidence-based strategies for supporting social and emotional competence in all children birth to 6 years old; and provides leadership for the implementation of services that address the mental health needs of children birth to 6 and their families. Additionally, the State Coordinator for IECMH works closely with key stakeholders such as Alabama Medicaid to address gaps in access to mental health services in Alabama. Ongoing collaboration with state agencies, non-profit organizations, and national organizations positions DECE to identify funding sources and assist with policy development that will enhance and expand IECMH initiatives across disciplines.

Alabama Association for the Advancement of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

The Alabama Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (First 5 Alabama) has been established to address the workforce development needs of adults who care for children birth to 5.

Through this initiative, DECE will be better able and equipped to create a more coherent continuum of care and education for children birth to 10-years-old. This continuum would span across all childcare and education settings as well as across home visiting, early intervention and across all linkage systems both health and social service sectors. First 5 Alabama is part of an international group called The Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health. By joining forces with The Alliance, we position ourselves to become equipped to develop a workforce that meets national competencies and standards, allowing our early childhood workforce to earn a nationally recognized endorsement.

DECE is working with six state agencies to build a statewide consortium to address this need. Additionally, Alabama is one of 25 states along with the countries Ireland and Australia that are part of The Alliance for the Advancement of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health.

CHILDREN’S POLICY COUNCILS AND THE CHILDREN FIRST TRUST FUND

Alignment of State and County Children’s Policy Councils (CPC), Early Childhood Advisory Council, and Children First Trust Fund (CFTF). The State and County Children’s Policy Councils were established in the Code of Alabama and were to identify needs and develop strategies for addressing the unmet needs of children from birth to age 19.

Restructuring of the Responsibilities and Functions of the Children’s Policy Councils

Based on the needs and strategies identified, the intent was that the Children First Trust Fund would provide funding for implementing those strategies. Over the course of time, however, the CPC’s and the CFTF were operating independently of each other. Additionally, the Federal Government established the requirement of a state Early Childhood Advisory Council in each state as part of the 2007 Head Start Reauthorization Act. Funding was initially provided by US Department of Health and Human Services to implement these state advisory councils in each state. Alabama’s ECAC federal grant funding ended in 2013.

In 2014, Alabama applied for and was awarded the competitive federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) through the US Department of Education. A requirement of this grant was also to have a state Early Childhood Advisory Council functioning and operating. An in-depth analysis by DECE showed that the functions and membership of the State Children’s Policy Council and the required Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) were similar and consistent with each other. In 2014, DECE requested that the Governor rescind a previous Executive Order which established a separate ECAC and subsequently requested that the Governor designate the State Children’s Policy Council as Alabama’s ECAC.

DECE began an in-depth analysis of the Code of Alabama and the functions of local CPCs and the state CPC. The analysis yielded a set of strategies to ensure that CPCs and Children First Trust Fund were meeting the requirements of the law by effectively assessing the needs of children from birth to age 19, reporting on those needs, and advising that funds from the CFTF be used to address those needs.

Below is a list of those strategies and their timing:

- Designate the State Children’s Policy Council as Alabama’s Early Childhood Advisory Council (2014)

- Provide more robust reporting of the use of Children First Trust Fund to include specific, measurable targets and list of all grantees to ensure transparency and prevent duplication (2015 – present)
- Engage with national groups such as Annie E. Casey Evidence 2 Success practice group to tie evidence based programs to funding from CFTF (2016 – present)
- Provide educational opportunities for local CPC's on the importance of their annual needs assessments (2016 – present)
- Drill down into local needs data from county CPC's and develop a strategic plan in compliance with Code of Alabama and Federal requirements of grants awarded to state for early childhood (2017 – currently in process)
- Incorporate the required early childhood needs assessment components into the county CPC needs assessment (2017)
- Engage County Children's Policy Councils in implementation of Erin's Law in cooperation with the Governor's Task Force for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse (2016 – present)
- Bring State Children's Policy Council together on a quarterly basis to discuss, review, and evaluate needs identified in needs assessment (2016 – present)
- Engage County Children's Policy Councils as the local pre-k advisory task force rather than requiring separate task forces in order to streamline resources and to engage policy makers and administrators at the local level in early learning in their counties (2012 – present)

Office of Early Childhood Development & Professional Support

DECE understands that the early years lay a foundation for all life-long learning and growth. To truly impact children in this critical developmental period, a focus on providing quality services from before birth through age five must be a priority. DECE has developed a strong collaborative partnership with the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) to support children and their families in a variety of child care settings. The creation of this new office will support that collaboration with specialized staff to provide technical assistance to licensed child care programs including family child care. Moving in partnership with DHR, this new initiative allows DECE to effectively reach more children and more efficiently utilize federal grant dollars awarded to DHR within the state.

This partnership will enable DECE to better develop, implement, and expand upon best practices in social-emotional learning and reflective teaching among the state's child care providers, specifically focused on quality early learning and care for infants and toddlers. The purpose of this new partnership is to meet the expectations of DHR in their request for quality technical assistance and provide a specialized staff which will provide support statewide to child care providers and families.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SUPPORT FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

DECE supports DHR through technical support in three main areas: Early Head Start Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) grant, challenging behavior project, and family engagement. DECE will provide quality coaching to 300 licensed child care sites over a three-year period. The focus of the collaboration with DHR is not to only offer technical assistance for their successful implementation of the EHS-CCP grant but to also offer high quality technical assistance to licensed childcares and family child cares statewide to reach more children before school age. This commitment to quality on behalf of DECE led to the creation of the Office of Early Childhood Development and Professional Support.

This technical assistance will be expanded to include support of classrooms to develop strategies for challenging behaviors and to increase family engagement implementation within centers. The collaboration with DHR also includes building an infant and toddler tract for Alabama's Early Childhood Education Conference in January 2019.

Child Care Quality Coaching

DECE supports DHR in the implementation of the federally funded EHS-CCP grant by providing specialized coaches which meet the standards set forth by the Administration of Children and Families through the updated Head Start Performance standards. Technical assistance is provided in the areas of curriculum support of the assessment system Teaching Strategies GOLD®. In 2017, DECE provided technical assistance to 10% of the classrooms included in the EHS-CCP grant and beginning in Fall 2018 DECE will provide technical assistance to 100% of the classrooms included in the EHS-CCP grant.

Challenging Behavior Project

This new technical assistance will be offered to classrooms statewide through an application process to receive strategies to prevent and intervene with challenging behaviors when they arise. Challenging behaviors have become a statewide and national concern not only for child care, but also for K-12 schools. The goal is to provide strategies early as a means of intervention and prevention to see long term impact for children. This project awards stipend money expanded to include support of classrooms to develop strategies for challenging behaviors.

Family Engagement Project

This new technical assistance is offered to programs statewide through a competitive application process to receive individualized family engagement plans designed to meet the needs of a unique community. There is no “one size fits all” model that is effective for all programs. Creating individual plans for programs will increase parent engagement. Parent engagement is a fundamental part of the QRIS system created by DHR as a means to measure quality within childcare. By working with programs on this to fundamental area, DECE will also see an increase in the QRIS rating scales. The goal of the Family Engagement Project is for specialized coaches and early learning and care programs to work in collaboration to create individualized plans designed to increase family engagement, awareness, and community partnerships in more than 300 licensed child care programs by 2020. This project will award stipend money expanded to include support of classrooms to develop their individualized family engagement plans.

High Quality Professional Development

DECE and DHR have worked collaboratively to provide high quality professional development to their state staff and to teachers and directors in the field. DECE provides trainings for DHR conferences for child care teachers and parents in the EHS-CCP program. This collaboration will be expanded to not only include DHR-sponsored conferences but also includes building an infant and toddler tract in the Alabama Early Childhood Education Conference in January 2019. DHR also provided scholarships for childcare providers to attend the Alabama Early Childhood Conference. By providing high quality professional development from national and regional speakers, childcare teachers will have access to information to make improvements to their practice.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS AND MEMBERSHIPS

The Secretary of Early Childhood Education serves as a representative of DECE for the following:

- National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education
- National Association for the Education of Young Children
- Alabama Partnership for Children Board
- Alabama Head Start Association
- Council of Leaders in Alabama Schools
- Alabama Governor’s Children Cabinet
- Early Head Start - Child Care Partnership Governance Committee
- Alabama Campaign for Grade Level Reading
- Alabama Children’s Policy Council, Chairman
- First 5 Alabama (AAIECMH) Board
- ANSWERS for Alabama Advisory Board
- State Autism Coordinating Council
- UAB Department of Curriculum & Instruction Advisory Council
- Alabama Inclusion Task Force
- ALSDE - DECE Collaboration Committee
- P-3 Task Force
- OSR Advisory Committee
- PDG B-5 Steering Committee

ALABAMA LEGISLATURE

The Secretary of Early Childhood Education and/or DECE designated leadership visit the Alabama Legislature weekly as needed during the session for relevant committee meetings when bills impacting DECE are being considered (Ways and Means Education and General Fund, Education Policy, and Finance and Taxation Education and General Fund) and to provide data and answer questions for individual legislators. Courtesy visits are made in the off session to key members. The Secretary meets with legislators on an individual basis, attends committee meetings, and coordinates with the Governor’s Legislative Office and provides leadership for legislative affairs. The Secretary presents the Children First Trust Fund report to legislators and the DECE Annual Report as outlined by law. DECE employs a legislative liaison who organizes a comprehensive governmental relations and information program representing DECE and the Secretary and monitors legislative activity with statewide implications that affect numerous entities.

Special interest groups provide strong advocacy and support for department and its initiatives. These include: Alabama School Readiness Alliance and it’s multi sector Pre-K Task Force; business groups such as Alabama Power and PNC Bank; Alabama Partnership for Children; Business Education Alliance; A+ Education Partnership; Alabama Giving; and VOICES for Alabama’s Children.

NATIONALLY-RECOGNIZED RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

Ernest JM & Strichik T. “Coaching in childhood education: Using lessons learned to develop best practice for professional development.” Submitted to *Childhood Education*, February 2017.

Preskitt, J., Fifolt, M., Ginter, P. M., Rucks, A., & Wingate, M. (2016). Identifying continuous quality improvement priorities in Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, 22(2), E12-E20. doi: 10.1097/PHH.000000000000192 (Advance online publication date, 2014).

Wingate, M. S., Fifolt, M., Preskitt, J., Mulvihill, B., Pass, M. A., Wallace, L., ...McKim, S. (2014). Assessing needs and resources for the home visiting system in Alabama: A mixed methods approach. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 18, 1075-1084. doi 10.1007/s10995-013-1335-5 (Advance online publication date, 2013).

Fifolt, M., Lanzi, R., Johns, E., Strichik, T., & Preskitt, J. Attrition in a home visiting programme: Looking back and moving forward. *Early Child Development and Care*. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2016.1189420 (Advance online publication date, June 2016).