



ALABAMA CAMPAIGN *for* Grade-Level Reading

RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNOR KAY IVEY





OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

KAY IVEY
GOVERNOR



STATE CAPITOL
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36130

(334) 242-7100
FAX: (334) 242-3282

STATE OF ALABAMA

February 19, 2020

My fellow Alabamians:

In February of 2018, I announced the formation of the Alabama Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (ACGLR), a comprehensive effort comprised of educational experts that seeks to increase the number of Alabama public school students who are proficient, grade-level readers by the end of the third grade. This group was tasked with developing a roadmap that local communities across Alabama could use to address third-grade literacy. The ACGLR focuses on five primary areas: school readiness, preventing chronic absenteeism, restoring the Alabama Reading Initiative to fidelity, increasing summer learning opportunities for P-3 students, and improving childhood health. The goal of the Campaign is that all of Alabama's students will enter the fourth grade as proficient, grade-level readers.

The ACGLR is an extension of my Strong Start, Strong Finish education initiative, which integrates Alabama's early childhood education, K-12 education, and workforce development efforts into a seamless educational journey for all Alabamians. The initiative's progress will be measured by five benchmarks designed to ensure that all Alabamians are progressing through their education journey—no matter what phase of life they may find themselves. The five benchmarks are: (1) pre-k readiness to ensure that all of Alabama's four-year-old children are prepared for an excellent early education experience; (2) school readiness to ensure that all of Alabama's five- and six-year-old students enter kindergarten and/or first grade with advanced skills; (3) literacy and numeracy by age eight to ensure that all of Alabama's students are prepared to persist through difficult coursework; (4) career exploration and discovery so that all students understand how to connect their interests and aptitudes with academic skills they learn in the classroom; and (5) college and/or career readiness so that all students graduate high school prepared to enter postsecondary education or into an in-demand occupation. The ACGLR is focused on helping to achieve the first three of the Strong Start, Strong Finish benchmarks.

Alabama's comprehensive approach to early childhood education and literacy will allow us to achieve the Strong Start, Strong Finish benchmarks together and ensure that all our students are proficient readers by the end of the third grade. I ask you to join me in making the recommendations contained in this report true for our children by mobilizing your community through joining your local Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. We can only improve as a state if we are all committed to education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kay Ivey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kay Ivey
Governor

Why Literacy Matters

One of the most important predictors of a child's academic and future success is the ability to read by the end of the third grade. Children are learning to read through the end of third grade; beginning in fourth grade, students are reading to learn.

Students who are unable to make this transition in elementary school are likely to struggle throughout the middle and high school years, and sadly, many may never catch up. This weakness is manifested in the student's inability to comprehend more complex texts and a limited capacity to think critically and solve problems, all higher-level skills needed to thrive academically and throughout life.

As a result, a student who is not a proficient reader by the end of third grade is four times less likely to finish high school. Nationwide, students without a high school diploma or equivalent are forty-seven times more likely to be incarcerated than a college graduate. It is estimated that half of all Americans on public assistance are dropouts.¹ Low literacy is said to be connected to over \$230 billion a year in health care costs.² And, in Alabama, more than half of the inmates in state prisons lack a high school diploma or equivalent.³

Never learning to read also has a multi-generational effect. A parent who lacks basic literacy skills is unable to read to their child. As a result, children whose parents have low literacy levels have a 72 percent chance of being at the lowest reading levels themselves, creating a perpetual cycle of illiteracy.⁴

Additionally, low literacy costs the country at least \$225 billion each year in non-productivity in the workforce, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment.⁵ Struggling to read makes it more challenging to complete a job application, complete the coursework necessary to obtain a GED, or to gain employment that provides a livable wage.

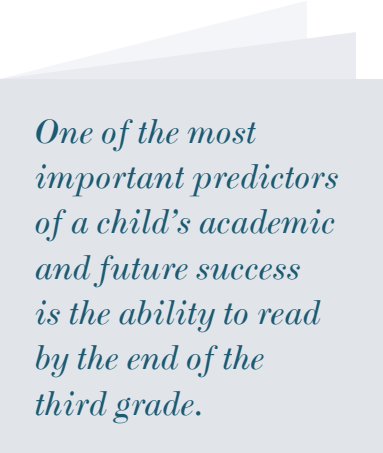
With a strong start and a high-quality foundation in literacy, however, children are more likely to experience success in the classroom and remain engaged in school.

In 2019, the Alabama Legislature approved, with broad bipartisan support, the Alabama Literacy Act (Act 2019-523). This law aimed to give schools more resources to help third graders enter fourth grade as proficient readers. To address this gap, the Alabama Literacy Act seeks to refocus the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), provide additional support for educator professional learning in reading, and strengthen support for struggling readers. The Alabama Literacy Act passed the State House of Representatives, 93-2-2; the State Senate, 26-0; and was signed into law by Governor Ivey on June 10, 2019.

The Alabama Campaign for Grade-Level Reading recommendations build upon the momentum started with the passage of the Alabama Literacy Act. It encourages new collaborations and programs aimed at improving reading instruction for all students.

Alabama has dedicated, caring teachers, yet many lack the intensive training in the science of reading necessary to effectively teach reading. Struggling readers pose even greater challenges to under-prepared teachers. Concerned parents in Alabama love their children but don't always know how to serve as their child's "best and first teacher." Churches and nonprofits want to help, but often aren't part of the "system."

Alabama's Campaign for Grade-Level Reading offers solutions to these problems.



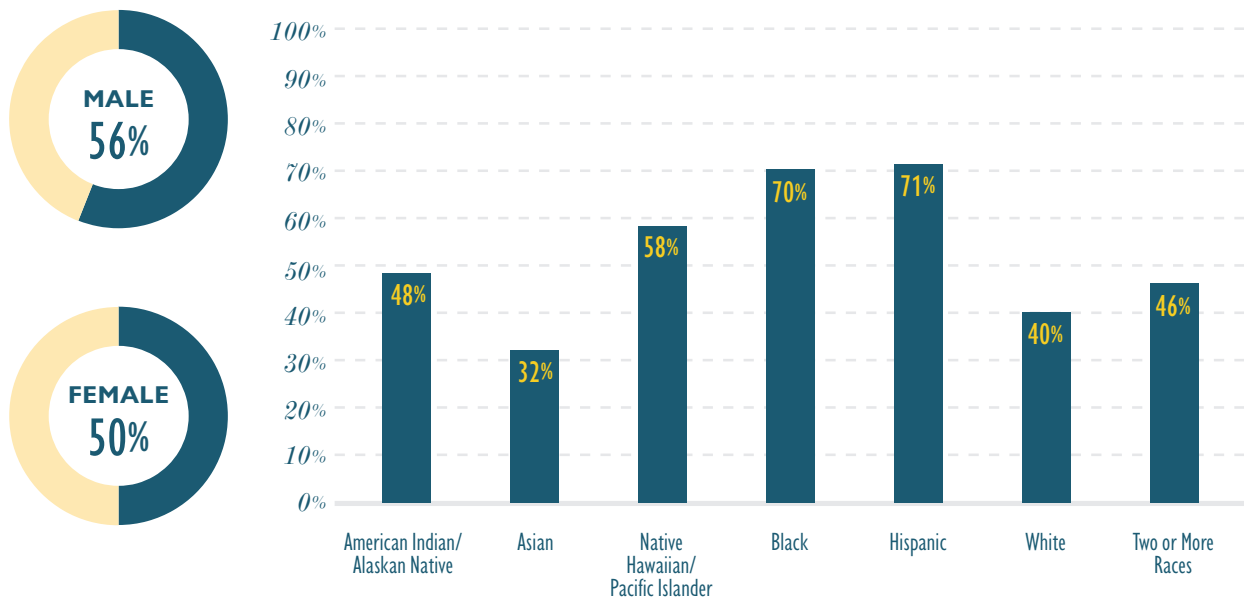
One of the most important predictors of a child's academic and future success is the ability to read by the end of the third grade.

Literacy in Alabama

The single greatest obstacle that can hamper a child's educational progress is lacking the ability to read, and Alabama is falling behind the rest of the nation in reading proficiency. All of Alabama's adjacent states – Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, and Tennessee – are ranked higher according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. If this trend is not reversed, it will have disastrous effects on Alabama.

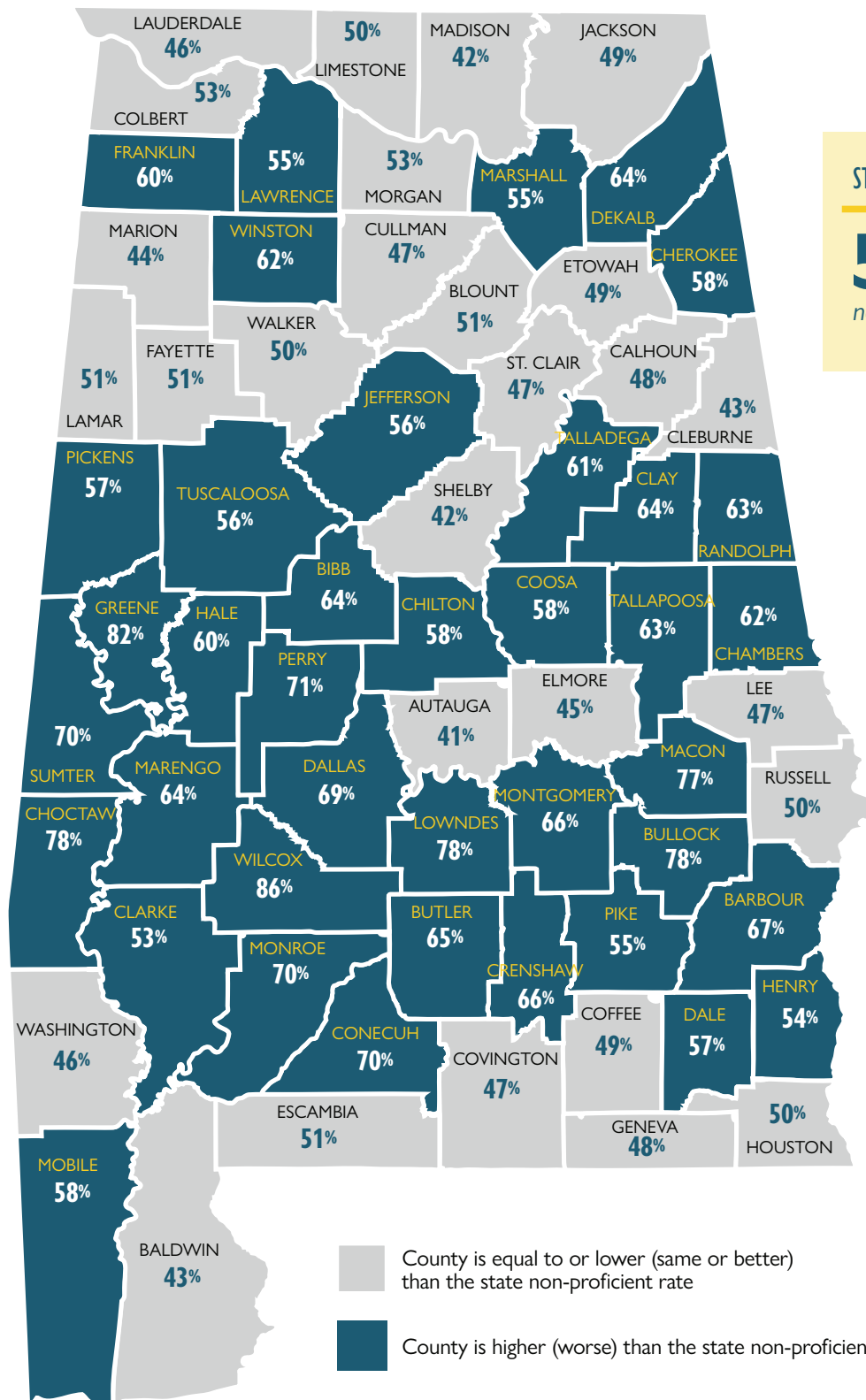


PERCENTAGE OF ALABAMA 4TH GRADE STUDENTS NOT PROFICIENT IN READING⁹



Percentage of Alabama 4th Grade Students Not Proficient in Reading in 2019¹⁰

BY COUNTY



STATE AVERAGE

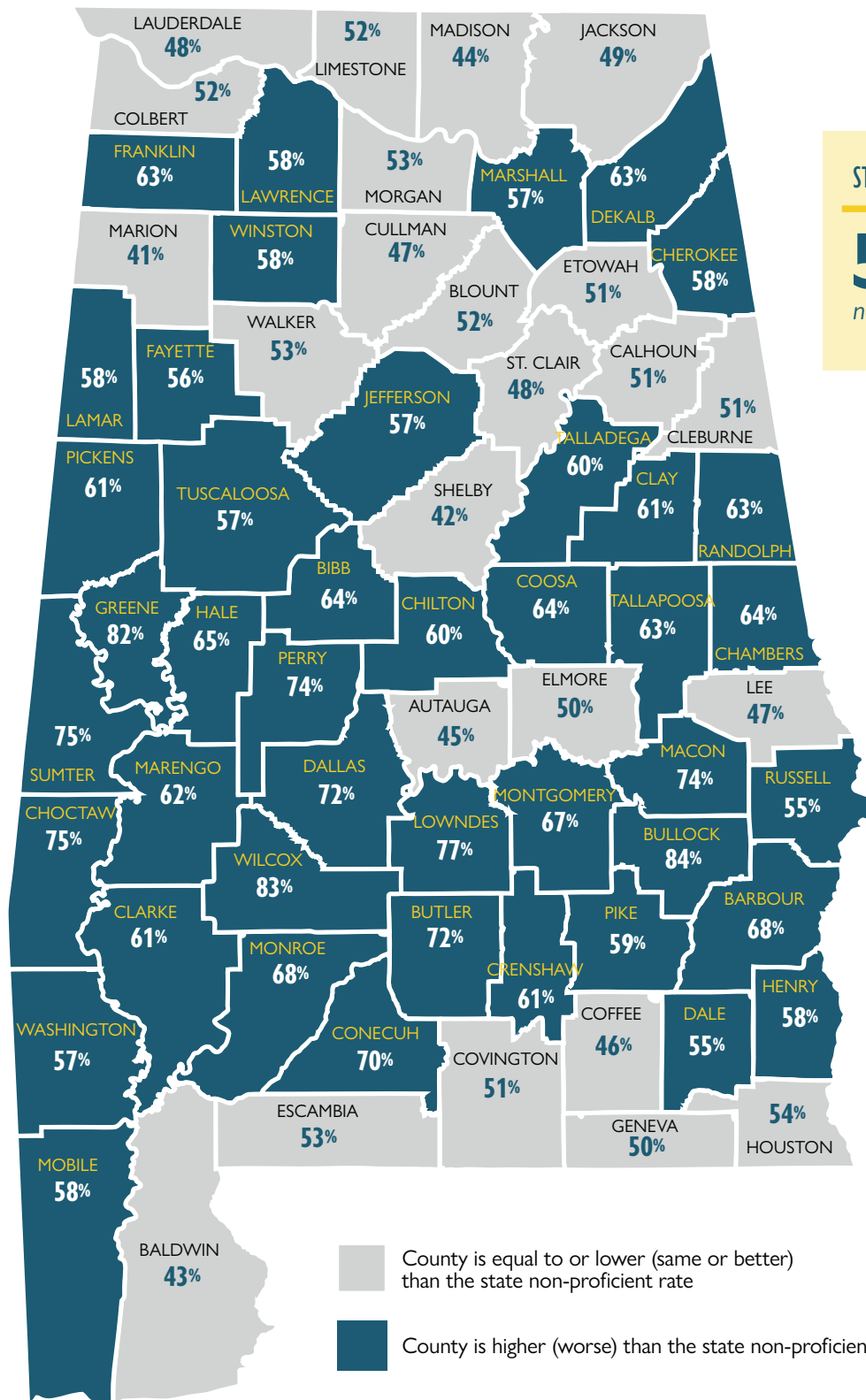
53%
not proficient
in reading

County is equal to or lower (same or better)
than the state non-proficient rate

County is higher (worse) than the state non-proficient rate

Percentage of Alabama Students (All Grades) Not Proficient in Reading in 2019¹¹

BY COUNTY



STATE AVERAGE

54%
not proficient
in reading

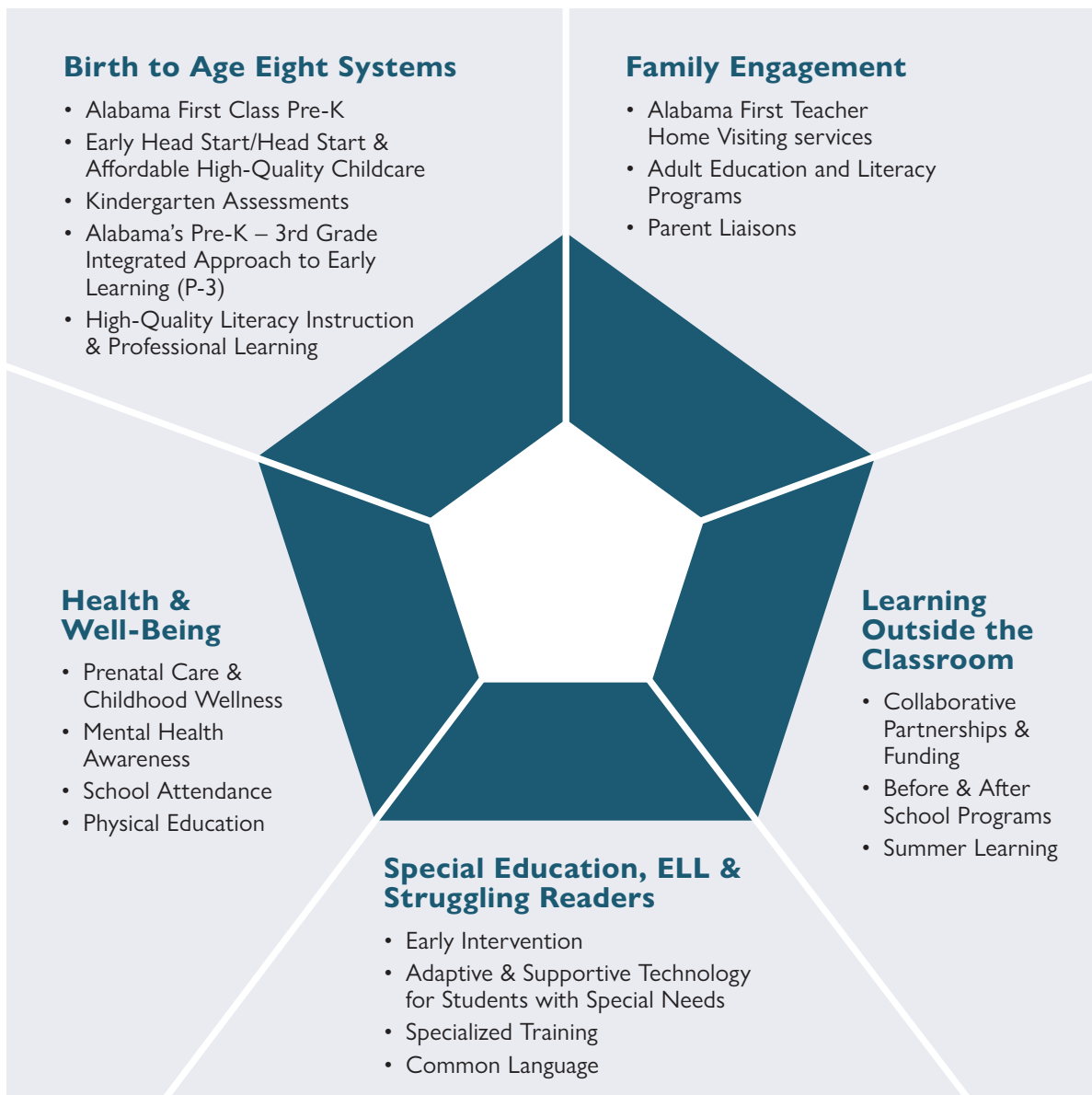
County is equal to or lower (same or better)
than the state non-proficient rate

County is higher (worse) than the state non-proficient rate

Measures of Success Framework

Improving third grade reading requires a coordinated birth through age eight approach including clearly aligned policies and practices focused on the whole child. This visualization demonstrates how the Campaign's focus areas – high-quality birth to age eight systems; family engagement; health and well-being; learning outside the classroom; and children with special needs – are intertwined.

Many factors contribute to low literacy achievement in Alabama. This framework is not an exhaustive list of everything that moves the needle on grade-level reading, nor does it capture everything that impacts each outcome. The framework does, however, present specific measures that the Alabama Campaign on Grade-Level Reading recommends for Alabama and provide specific focus for the Alabama Committee on Grade-Level Reading to concentrate its work.



Birth to Age Eight Systems

To reach the goal of every Alabama student reading on grade level by the end of the third grade, Alabama should create a comprehensive, aligned system of high-quality birth through age eight early education and care programs. This system must include intentional strategies to reduce inequities that children and families face during the earliest stages of language and literacy development.

Ninety-five percent of a child's brain is developed through age five. Yet, Alabama has traditionally only focused on K-12 initiatives when addressing reading challenges.

The Alabama Reading Initiative had a positive impact on reading achievement in the earliest years when the program was fully funded.¹² Although this work is important, the state must adjust this paradigm and combine it with significant new research-based investments that demonstrate the positive impact of high-quality early learning experiences.

Everything that happens in a child's life in the early years has a lasting impact on their future potential. In the first year of life, what children hear from those around them will greatly influence the development of their language skills between 18 and 30 months of age.¹³ This foundation will ultimately dictate what language abilities and pre-literacy skills they demonstrate by the age of five.

Although progress has been made, Alabama does not yet have a comprehensive aligned system of high-quality birth to age eight education and care to fully support all children during the critical early stages of development.

At the urging of Governor Ivey, the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, along with 100 other state agencies and non-governmental organizations, applied for federal funding to address the policies and practices impacting children from birth through age eight. This team completed a comprehensive assessment of early care and education needs in the state of Alabama and constructed a strategic plan to address strengths and limitations in current birth to eight efforts. This work aligns with the Governor's Strong Start, Strong Finish initiative, a comprehensive education-to-workforce plan with a focus on the birth-to-five continuum. Additional federal funding has been awarded to continue aligning efforts and coordinating all birth to age five systems. Support is being provided to existing programs in the delivery of high-quality early education and care while expanding access to programs that support all children, especially low-income, rural, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Alabama's expanded approach to early learning and care is rooted in the strength of its high-quality, voluntary First Class Pre-K program, managed by the Office of School Readiness under the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Over the last decade, Alabama has made significant investments to expand its state-funded, voluntary pre-kindergarten program to serve more families. The state is just beginning to realize the positive benefits of this effort.

A report released in 2019 shows that the Alabama First Class Pre-K is one of only four state-funded pre-kindergarten programs in the country that "comes close to having all the elements of a strong pre-k program."¹⁴ The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) has found that Alabama's

Everything that happens in a child's life in the early years has a lasting impact on their future potential.

program fully meets 14.5 of the 15 “essential elements” characterizing high-quality pre-k programs. This is one reason why NIEER ranks Alabama’s First Class Pre-K program as the nation’s highest quality program for 13 consecutive years. Additional research conducted by the University of Alabama at Birmingham and the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama shows that students who participate in a First Class Pre-K program outperform their peers in reading and math in every grade level through the middle school years.¹⁵

Today, the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE), Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR), and the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) are applying the lessons learned building and maintaining the nation’s highest quality pre-k program to include the entire birth to five continuum. Most prominently, this mindset is embodied in the collaborative efforts to increase the quality of services in the state’s licensed child care providers and in the recently launched Pre-K – 3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning (P-3).

The Alabama Campaign for Grade-Level Reading recommends the state continues to build the infrastructure needed across state agencies to support all children from birth to age eight. This includes aligning public investments into First Class Pre-K; Early Head Start/Head Start and Affordable High-Quality Child Care; Kindergarten Assessments; the Alabama’s Pre-K – 3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning (P-3); and High-Quality Literacy Instruction and Evidence-based Professional Learning.

ALABAMA FIRST CLASS PRE-K

Ensure all families in the state have an opportunity to voluntarily enroll their four-year-old in a First Class Pre-K classroom in a setting preferred by the parent.

Alabama’s high-quality, voluntary First Class Pre-K program is recognized by the National Institute of Early Education Research as the nation’s highest quality pre-kindergarten program in the country.¹⁶ Studies show that students who participate in high-quality pre-k are more likely to attend school regularly and outperform their peers in reading and math, and are less likely to be retained or receive disciplinary referrals.¹⁷ In the 2019-2020 school year, only 38 percent of the state’s four-year-old children were able to participate in the state’s high-quality, voluntary First Class Pre-K program. The state should continue to provide funds so that all families have an opportunity to participate in a high-quality, voluntary pre-k program in a setting in which they are most comfortable.

EARLY HEAD START/HEAD START & AFFORDABLE HIGH-QUALITY CHILD CARE

Identify ways to help families receive high-quality, affordable childcare in their communities.

Alabama families must have access to high-quality and affordable early care and education services for their young children. The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education is leading a significant effort to identify areas in the state with little or no access to high-quality childcare. Increasing the number of high-quality and affordable early care and education services allows more adults to enter the workforce knowing that their child is receiving the highest quality early care. Addressing this gap is essential to rural families and families living in child care deserts. A child care desert is a community that lacks child care options, or has so few providers that there are more than three children per licensed slot.



KINDERGARTEN ASSESSMENTS

Put in place a statewide Kindergarten entry assessment to determine school readiness.

Children who enter Kindergarten with basic foundational learning skills have a greater likelihood of becoming a proficient reader by the third grade. Alabama currently does not have a state-wide Kindergarten entry assessment that determines what a child knows in the five domains of child development: (1) cognitive; (2) approaches to learning; (3) language and literacy; (4) physical health and motor development; and (5) social emotional development. This entry assessment information is critical to addressing literacy challenges at the earliest stages possible.

ALABAMA'S PRE-K – 3RD GRADE INTEGRATED APPROACH TO EARLY LEARNING (P-3)

Expand Alabama's P-3 approach to all public elementary schools.

Now in the third year, the state's Pre-K – 3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning (P-3) establishes an early learning continuum aligning instructional practices, assessment, and leadership from First Class Pre-K through the third grade. Establishing an early learning continuum allows for a successful transition, building upon the student success and identifying next steps to narrow the achievement gap. From an initial pilot of eight districts, seven schools and 13 classrooms in 2017 the P-3 approach has expanded to 124 classrooms in 14 school systems and 23 public schools, both traditional and public charter across the state.¹⁸

HIGH-QUALITY LITERACY INSTRUCTION AND EVIDENCE-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Widen access to evidence-based professional development for early care and education professionals on the science of reading and language.

The Alabama Literacy Act compels state education agencies to provide ongoing professional development to help birth through grade 3 educators teach every student the basic language and literacy skills necessary for school success. Currently, the state is offering an assortment of scientifically based reading programs, including Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), Read Right from the Start, Talk With Me Baby, and Multisensory Structured Language Education (MSLE). These intensive learning experiences are provided, on a voluntary basis, for P-3 educators and coaches statewide. The World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Early Years/WIDA Consortium has also been enlisted to support teachers of dual language learners. Participation in these programs is limited due to funding. All of these opportunities must be expanded to include all birth to age eight teachers of language and literacy.

Family & Student Engagement

To reach the goal of every Alabama student reading on grade level by the end of the third grade, Alabama should enhance support services and resources to help parents and guardians, regardless of socioeconomic status, improve their literacy skills. Well-informed parents are better able to advocate for their children and obtain high-value jobs where they make a livable wage, allowing them to provide adequate support.

Parent involvement is the number one predictor of early literacy success and future academic achievement. With most of a child's brain developing in the first five years of life, it is vitally important for families to help children develop during those critical years before Kindergarten.

A report by the National Endowment for the Arts found that there are more literate people in the United States who don't read than those who are actually illiterate.¹⁹ If a child's parents rarely read to them, the child's reading experience is severely impacted, and their ability to excel is limited. Reading in the home is the foundation for reading in school and in life. Unfortunately, many parents are not aware that reading and talking to their child are ongoing activities in which they should be engaged with their children.

Launched by Governor Ivey, Born Ready™ is an initiative from the Department of Early Childhood Education focused on raising awareness among Alabama parents of the importance of early brain development and high-quality early care and education. Born Ready is not only developed to inform parents, it's developed to empower them and give them access to the tools they need to be their children's first and best teacher.²⁰

In 2019, Alabama was awarded a technical assistance grant of \$25,000 from the National Governors' Association to improve pre-k readiness and childhood health of Alabama's children from birth to age three through bolstering Alabama First Teacher Home Visiting services, well-child visits, Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership, and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.²¹

There is still more to be done to support Alabama families. Personal coaching through First Teacher Home Visiting is an effective way to help parents understand the methods of teaching their child how to read. It has contributed to decreases in many risk factors experienced by Alabama families. According to the 2019 Maternal and Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting Benchmark Data report, more than half of all measures showed performance improvement including decreases in preterm birth, emergency department visits for child injuries, and child maltreatment investigations.²² Alabama has also seen improvement in the following areas: numbers of mothers who breastfeed, parents who use safe sleep positioning and an increase in continuity of insurance coverage, increases in parent-child interactions and increases in the number of children receiving developmental screenings. Families also saw an increase in number of children who have been read to, sung to, and told stories to everyday.²³

The goal of home visiting services is to establish scalable, sustainable interventions within all programs that propel children's healthy development. This includes building upon the internal capacity and existing strengths of families, parents, caregivers, providers, and communities to create sustainability within families to find solutions. The same is true of in-school parent liaisons. Parent liaisons are vital to Family Engagement efforts in Alabama schools. Many schools utilize parent liaisons to assist parents who need assistance navigating the resources and programs already available to them.

The Alabama Campaign for Grade-Level Reading recommends the state supports parents in serving as their children's first and most important teacher and advocate. This includes aligning public investments into Alabama First Teacher Home Visiting services; Adult Education and Literacy Programs; and Parent Liaisons.



FIRST TEACHER HOME VISITING

Increase access to high-quality home-visiting programs to model best practices for families.

High-quality home visiting programs provide a continuum of voluntary services from prenatal care through Kindergarten to improve family health, child development, and school readiness. Alabama currently has several home visitation models that promote parents as their child's first and most important teachers and advocates. These include three national evidence-based home visiting models administered through the Department of Early Childhood Education, the state's lead designated agency for home visitation programs – Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), Parents as Teachers (PAT) and Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY). Due to a lack of funding, however, fewer than 3,000 families statewide can participate in one of the three models.

ADULT EDUCATION AND LITERACY PROGRAMS

Coordinate Alabama's adult education and family literacy programs with youth literacy programs to cultivate a two-generation approach to family literacy to support children and parents together.

Alabama's adult education and literacy programs – including remedial education, ESL, GED preparation, Read Right from the Start, Talk With Me Baby, Born Ready, and Language Environment Analysis (LENA) Brain Building Through Early Talk – must be properly supported and funded in order to provide a comprehensive offering of program opportunities for adults, especially parents. Particular consideration should be given to establishing programs in geographical areas where gaps exist and where families have high needs with a focus on intentionally creating opportunities that address children and adult needs together. The five key components of the 2Gen approach must be employed to support the well-being of the entire family with the following: (1) Postsecondary Education and Employment Pathways; (2) Early Childhood Education and Development; (3) Economic Assets; (4) Health and Well-Being; and (5) Social Capital.

PARENT LIAISONS

Establish a cohort of specially trained parent liaisons to assist families in navigating resources and services available to them to facilitate with their social and economic needs.

Alabama families have shared, during focus groups, that they don't always have knowledge about how to access the resources available to support them in meeting their goals to support their children, receive adequate health care and screenings for their child, advance their education, and achieve economic mobility to support their family.²⁴ These concerns are even more evident in underserved communities and in families experiencing poverty. Alabama should provide staff parent liaisons in schools and other community centers to coordinate services with parents to address their unique social and economic needs, so they can have a greater impact on their child's education.

Health & Well-Being

To reach the goal of every Alabama student reading on grade level by the end of the third grade, Alabama should increase opportunities for children to be fully present at school by focusing on strategies that consider the whole child. Children who are impacted by negative health, social, or emotional wellness issues experience more barriers than their peers academically.

Influences from outside the walls of school have a major impact on a student's academic performance.

Missing meals and experiencing hunger impairs a child's development. A child with asthma, dental issues or other chronic illnesses often misses school more frequently than healthy students. A child with undiagnosed vision issues will struggle to recognize shapes and letters when learning to read.

These are just a few of the health and nutritional concerns jeopardizing a student's ability to be fully present in the classroom. Recognizing these influences, which are often not considered to fall within the scope of formal education, will have a direct impact on educational advancement across the state. Various research demonstrates that students who are not physically active or well-nourished are more apt to be distracted in class, have poor behavior, and attend school less frequently. And, according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, children who are chronically absent in pre-school, Kindergarten, and first grade are much less likely to read at grade level in the third grade.²⁵

Numerous state and community organizations have taken steps to increase access to basic health and medical screenings. In 2017 and 2018, the Alabama Early Intervention Service (AEIS) executed a Public Awareness initiative for identifying new children for early intervention services in each of the seven districts of the Alabama Early Intervention System. These efforts resulted in an increase of 361 referrals made in 2018 and another increase of 726 referrals made in 2019. Through a partnership with the Department of Early Childhood Education, AEIS will expand these efforts to specifically targeted counties with a low health index and higher poverty rates and other communities of high need. Help Me Grow Alabama administers the Ages and Stages Questionnaire® free of charge, and provides resources, referrals, and care coordination for children and families who require further support.

Still, the number of Alabama students challenged academically because of undiagnosed health and nutritional issues remain too high.

The health and well-being of many students across the state is further limited from adverse trauma they are experiencing at home or in the community. Cumulative instances of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can result in a lack of attention by students, as well as amplifying other barriers to learning. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, ACEs have a direct correlation to educational achievement.²⁶ Unfortunately, Alabama educators and schools are not adequately trained and resourced to support students experiencing distress.

Alabama cannot afford to focus its efforts to improve reading proficiency on academic initiatives alone. Academic progress of a child doesn't depend solely on what happens in the classroom. A recent study found that fourth graders who entered Kindergarten with inadequate social-emotional skills were 80 percent more likely to have been retained in a grade, more likely to have received special education services, and seven times more likely to have been suspended or expelled at least once.²⁷

The Alabama Campaign for Grade-Level Reading recommends that the state reinforces efforts to address the health and well-being of children in school. This includes aligning public investments into Prenatal Care & Childhood Wellness; Mental Health Awareness; School Attendance; and Physical Education.



PRENATAL CARE & CHILDHOOD WELLNESS

Increase access to prenatal care for expecting and new mothers and child wellness visits.

The best way to promote a healthy birth is to have a healthy pregnancy. Parents can improve their chances for a healthy birth by receiving comprehensive early and regular prenatal care. Once the child is born, it is important for families to schedule routine wellness visits for their child. This includes scheduling regular preventative health screenings including a review of height, weight, vision, hearing, speech, social and emotional progress and overall development.

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

Require trauma-informed training as part of ongoing teacher preparation.

Many of the challenging behaviors observed in students are linked to adverse childhood experiences. Too many teachers are unprepared to properly respond to the child's conduct. The seriousness of this issue is illustrated in the number of young children expelled from school and child care. An intentional focus on mental health awareness training for teachers is needed. In Alabama, the Department of Early Childhood Education and the Department of Mental Health partner to provide Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) as an intervention. IECMHC promotes the healthy social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of children through supporting nurturing relationships. Mothers who receive quality prenatal care increase their chances of having healthy birth weight infants and improve child mortality outcomes.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Develop community-based initiatives to address chronic absenteeism.

School attendance is critical to academic success. In Alabama, students miss more than 11 million days annually.²⁸ State law requires students aged six to seventeen to attend school daily.²⁹ Yet, more than 11 percent of students statewide miss at least 18 days a year.³⁰ This equals one month of missed classroom learning opportunities.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Ensure local education agencies are in full compliance with the state's daily physical education requirement.

Fitness-based physical education (PE) programs positively impact test scores, improve reading proficiency, and reduce absenteeism. Alabama requires daily physical education for all students in grades Kindergarten through grade eight. For grades 1-6, the law requires at least 30 minutes per day. Schools are applying for and receiving waivers from this requirement, however. All schools must be held accountable to current law.

Learning Outside the Classroom

To reach the goal of every Alabama student reading on grade level by the end of the third grade, Alabama should explore gaps in learning services and collaborate with regional, state, and community based organizations to enrich the quality of experiences they can offer outside of the classroom.

The Alabama Literacy Act encourages a renewed focus on high-quality summer learning and other high-quality programs outside of the classroom. The law rightly sees these initiatives, when implemented strategically, as a way to provide extra support to struggling learners to build on what they are learning during the regular school term.

This is especially true in the summer.

Children regress when they don't practice their academic skills over the summer months.³¹ This is known as summer learning loss. Children from low-income families lose two to three months of grade equivalency in both math and reading every summer. The loss is cumulative.

Alabama schools cannot alone shoulder the burden of improving reading proficiency. To successfully address the goal for children to read on grade level, the state must commit to engaging with other providers outside of the public school system. There are a number of successful before and after school and summer programs located across the state that are managed by entities outside of traditional public schools. These include programs organized by the Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs, faith-based entities, and private businesses, among others. These programs are collaborative, combine public with private funds, and work to incorporate the best of summer camp activities with school.

On average, students participating in high-quality, collaborative, community-based summer learning programs in Alabama have gained 1.7 months in reading every year over the last three years.³² Students in these programs make even greater gains in math.

The success of community-based programs is rooted in a belief that summer school cannot mirror traditional school. Since attendance is not mandatory, programs must think creatively and employ intentional strategies that motivate parents to encourage students to participate in “school” over the summer. What these programs ultimately look like has taken on many forms. Some have centered around specific topics of interest, such as STEM, sports or the arts. Others have organized around providing additional support to struggling readers and students learning english as their second language. However, what is common across all successful programs, regardless of their location or convening purpose, is a commitment to rigorous academics, ongoing assessment, and the nurture of their students’ mind, body, and spirit.

This commitment is also true in before and after school programs. The existence of these programs are not only an important workforce development tool, providing a safe space for children of while their parents work, but also an untapped opportunity to close the academic achievement gaps among students if the state is intentional in its efforts.

Unfortunately, too many before and after school programs lack quality and structure.

The Alabama Campaign for Grade-Level Reading recommends the state works to maximize participation in community-based, high-quality enrichment programs outside of the classroom. This includes aligning public investments into Collaborative Partnerships & Funding; Before & After School Programs; and Summer Learning.



COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS & FUNDING

Leverage community-based before and after school and summer learning programs to offer additional learning opportunities for struggling readers.

The most successful out-of-school programs in Alabama combine the academic rigor of school with the fun of camp. Most local education agencies in the state lack the resources and knowledge base to undertake this approach alone. Instead, many systems have found success combining their financial, intellectual, and social resources with churches, schools, youth organizations, non-profits, government agencies, civic leaders, and others that are already providing summer and before and after school enrichment opportunities. This collaborative, community-centric approach allows each community the flexibility to provide out-of school programming that best meets the unique needs and interests of their children.

BEFORE & AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Adhere to proven research-based markers of quality.

Families and communities benefit greatly by having quality before and after school programs. Parents miss less time from work, communities are safer, and children have better grades and attendance in school. Since two-thirds of Alabama children under the age of six have both parents participating in the workforce, there is a considerable need for safe and engaging places for children to spend their out-of-school time.³³ There are five specific components that should be present in before and after school programs: (1) Fostering positive relationships between students and staff; (2) Blending academic and skill activities; (3) Promoting high levels of engagement; (4) striving for student mastery of knowledge and skills; and (5) providing some structure and opportunities for choice.³⁴

SUMMER LEARNING

Adhere to proven research-based markers of quality.

Alabama has summer programs, but many lack the rigor needed to make measurable progress towards helping students become proficient readers. A review of successful summer learning programs in Alabama have identified five essential markers of quality: (1) Utilize research-based curriculum that is specifically designed for summer learning, relevant to student interests, supports the healthy development of the whole child, and aligns with Alabama's academic standards; (2) Administer a nationally normed and formative pre- and post-assessment of students; (3) Work with certified teachers and use a 1:12 or better ratio of staff to students; (4) Incorporate 72 or more hours of academic instruction; and (5) Engage in a peer-system of continuous quality improvement, collaborative problem solving, and pooling of resources.³⁵

Special Education, English Language Learners (ELL) & Struggling Readers

To reach the goal of every Alabama student reading on grade level by the end of the third grade, Alabama should create a comprehensive system of high-quality, research-based services and strategies for supporting children who have special needs, speak a second language, or have reading challenges.

In Alabama 80,000 students have special needs and 20,000 students speak English as a second language. 70 percent of Alabama's general education students are not proficient on the fourth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).³⁶

Alabama students with disabilities currently receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).³⁷ The IEP provides services, accommodations, measurable annual goals and strategies to support student success. Although the IEP is mandated by law, Washington University reports that 92.8 percent of families in Alabama with a child with special needs faced significant out of pocket expenses beyond what was covered by their insurance provider.

Annually Alabama must report progress made by children with disabilities. All of Alabama's school districts have failed to meet the annual proficiency goal for students in special education, according to the State Performance Report/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR). There were nearly 44,000 students with IEPs in grade 3 through 12 included in state assessments. The number of those students proficient in reading was 6,853; 7,714 were proficient in math; and close to 37,000 students were not proficient in either reading or math, or both.³⁸ The ALSDE State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) outlines the low achievement levels of children with special needs to date, yet the state does not have a strategic plan aimed at improving these results. As part of the special education efforts, Alabama committed to increasing the number of infants and toddlers served through Alabama's Early Intervention System, focusing on assisting identified young children in making progress in the social-emotional domain.

Alabama educators are investing resources in addressing the needs of the emergent bilingual and English language learner (ELL) population, including using the WIDA Early Years/WIDA Consortium to support ELL teachers with professional learning. Alabama Superintendents share that they are underfunded, understaffed and under-resourced for addressing the needs of ELL students. Several districts across the state with large ELL student populations have formed ALA-EL, a coalition that advocates for services for ELL students in Alabama. This group is now an affiliate of the Council of Leaders of Alabama Schools (CLAS), and they are also working with the American Institutes for Research in partnership with ALSDE. Studies suggest that children learning an additional language tend to score better on standardized tests because learning languages develops listening, observation, problem-solving and critical thinking skills. These are transferable skills that are of life-long benefit, both personally and professionally.³⁹

When children face difficulty in reading, schools implement Response to Instruction (RtI) to identify and monitor students at risk, use problem-solving and data-based decision making to provide research-based interventions and adjust the intensity of interventions based on the student's response. RtI shows promise in supporting all students, especially those at risk of failing to achieve state performance standards. Screenings are also a critical part of RtI. Students with dyslexia-related learning challenges or difficulties can be serviced before special education services are required. Students with dyslexia often experience difficulties with reading, writing, and spelling that are unexpected in view of their other abilities.

The Alabama Campaign for Grade-Level Reading recommends that local education agencies provide teachers with the resources and training necessary to correctly identify students who need additional reading services. This includes aligning public investments into Early Intervention; Adaptive & Supportive Technology for Students with Special Needs; Specialized Training; and Common Languages.



EARLY INTERVENTION

Expand early intervention efforts to identify learning deficits at the earliest stages.

As early as 18 months of age, low-income children begin to fall behind in vocabulary development and other skills critical for school success. Instead of addressing the underlying developmental needs, oftentimes these students are mislabeled with a learning disability. This misdiagnosis can be avoided through high-quality developmental screenings.

ADAPTIVE & SUPPORTIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Equip more communities with the adaptive and supportive technology needed to address special needs.

Assistive technology (AT) is defined as, “Any item, piece of equipment, or system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is commonly used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.”⁴⁰

SPECIALIZED TRAINING

Establish a cohort of regional, special education and ELL coaches to provide additional classroom support for teachers serving students in these populations who experience reading challenges.

The state has experienced success improving student outcomes by supporting instructional coaches directly within the classroom environment. These coaches not only ensure there is an additional qualified educator in the classroom, but they also assist with reflective, individualized assessments of a teacher’s instructional practices. This model provides educators with immediate feedback and opportunities to adjust their instructional approach. Additional resources must be provided to establish a cohort of regional support staff to provide language and literacy teachers with special education and ELL coaching.

COMMON LANGUAGES

Create a common ontology of terms to prevent confusion stemming from duplicative terminology.

Alabama should develop a formal structure for terminologies relating to language and literacy instruction, specifically for the terminology relating to special education, ELL, and struggling readers. This will ensure term usage is consistent across agencies and partners, and will avoid the duplication of efforts while maximizing collaboration, integration, and alignment of resources and materials across overlapping entities and state education agencies.

ALABAMA CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE-LEVEL READING

Chair, Governor Kay Ivey

Co-Chair, Nick Moore

Education Policy Advisor & Coordinator, Governor's Office of Education & Workforce Transformation

Co-Chair, Steve Hannum

Literacy Initiatives Director, The Literacy Council

Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Barbara Cooper

Director, Office of School Readiness, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Chief Health Officer, Linda Lee

Executive Director, American Academy of Pediatrics, Alabama Chapter

Chief Information Officer, Dr. Jim Purcell

Executive Director, Alabama Commission on Higher Education

Communications Director, Taylor Nichols

Deputy Attorney General, Alabama Office of Information Technology

Secretary and Parliamentarian, Ada Katherine van Wyhe

Government Relations Manager, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Aaron Milner, *Superintendent*
Saraland City Schools

Cari Miller, *Policy Director*
Foundation for Excellence in Education

Allison Muhlendorf, *Executive Director*
Alabama School Readiness Alliance

Dr. Carol Donovan, *Professor of Literacy Education,*
University of Alabama

Amanda Storey, *Executive Director*
Jones Valley Teaching Farm

Caroline Novak, *President, A+ Education Partnership**

Carolyn Bern, *Community Affairs Director, Alabama*
Department of Public Health

Dr. Andre Harrison, *Senior Director Cognition*

Ann Sikes, *Executive Director*
Montgomery Education Foundation

Christy Colee, *Account Executive, Renaissance Learning*

Christy Swaid, *Executive Director, H.E.A.L.*

Anne Marie Corgill, *Former Alabama Teacher of the Year*

Dr. Autumn Cypress, *Dean, School of Education*
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Cindy Kirk, *Vice President of Educational Services,*
Alabama Public Television

Becky Booker, *Executive Director*
Alabama Association of United Ways

Cindy Merrill, *P-3 Coach, Alabama Department*
of Early Childhood Education

Beth Anne Dunagan, *Executive Director, EAT South**

Dr. Cora Causey, *Early Childhood Education Program*
Director, University of Alabama at Birmingham

Beth Johns, *Program Director, Health Care Organization*
and Policy, University of Alabama at Birmingham

Crystal Jones, *Executive Director*
Sawyerille Summer Program

Betty Peters, *Alabama State Board of Education*
*District II**

Dr. Cynthia McCarty, *Alabama State Board of*
Education, District VI

Brandon Demyan, *General Counsel & Policy Director,*
Office of Alabama State Senate President Pro Tempore
Del Marsh, Alabama State Senate

Dale Quinney, *Founder, Operation Save Rural Alabama*

Dan Stephens, *Vice President of Community Impact,*
United Way of Central Alabama

David Walters, *State Director of Special Projects & System Initiatives, Alabama Community College System*

Denise Knight, *Superintendent, Russellville City Schools**

Denise Moore, *Executive Director
Independent Presbyterian Church*

Drew Nelson, *Epidemiologist & Director, Networks and Quality Assurance Division, Alabama Medicaid Agency*

Donna Hoomes, *Teacher, Pine Level Elementary School, Autauga County Board of Education*

Elizabeth Huckabee, *Associate Director of Physician & EPSDT Programs, Alabama Medicaid Agency*

Ella Bell, *Alabama State Board of Education, District V**

Dr. Eric Mackey, *State Superintendent of Education, Alabama State Department of Education*

Gail Piggot, *Executive Director
Alabama Partnership for Children*

Dr. Gale Satchel, *Superintendent, Colbert County Schools*

Gail Sheldon, *Children's & Youth Library Consultant, Alabama Public Library Service*

Dr. Gay Barnes, *Former Alabama Teacher of the Year*

Gay Finn, *Education Administrator, Alabama Reading Initiative, Alabama State Department of Education*

Gladys Schaeffer, *President, Alabama Dyslexia Alliance*

Heath Grimes, *Superintendent, Russellville City Schools*

Isabel Rubio, *Executive Director
Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama*

J.W. Carpenter, *Executive Director
Birmingham Education Foundation*

Jackie Wuska, *President & CEO
United Way of West Alabama*

Jackie Zeigler, *Alabama State Board of Education, District I*

Dr. Jan Miller, *Dean of the College of Education, University of West Alabama*

Jean Allen, *Innovative Projects & Assessment Director, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education*

Jeana Ross, *Secretary
Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education*

Jeff Newman, *Alabama State Board of Education
District VII*

Dr. Jennifer Summerlin, *School of Education
University of Alabama at Birmingham*

Jera Stribling, *Executive Director, Alabama Giving*

Jerone Wiggins, *Education Director
Jones Valley Teacher Farm*

Jill Tatum, *Programs & Outreach Coordinator
Alabama Partnership for Children**

Jim Wooten, *Chairman
Summer Adventures in Learning (SAIL)*

Joy Winchester, *Director of Early Childhood Education & Professional Development, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education*

Dr. Joyce Stallworth, *Associate Provost Emerita the University of Alabama, University of Alabama*

Dr. Julie Preskitt, *Associate Professor
Health Care Organization & Policy,
University of Alabama at Birmingham*

Karen Porter, *Director, Alabama Reading Initiative, Alabama State Department of Education*

Dr. Kay Warfield, *Education Administrator
Alabama State Department of Education*

Kim Proctor Lawkis, *Director of Policy & Programs, Alabama Food Bank Association*

Kim Turner, *Chief Executive Officer
Boys & Girls Club of Tuscaloosa*

Dr. Kristi Bradford, *Executive Director, Better Basics*

Laura Hall, *Alabama State House of Representatives, District 19*

Laura Lester, *Executive Director
Alabama Food Bank Association*

Lee Johnson, III, *Director of Family Support, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education**

Lisa Woodard, *Government Affairs Director
School Superintendents of Alabama*

Lissa Tucker, *Director of Government Relations
Alabama Association of School Boards*

Lori Frazier Bearden, *Assistance Director of
Federal Workforce Programs,
Alabama Department of Commerce**

Lydia Allen, *Director, Read Write Learning Center*

Maria Kennedy, *Executive Director
The Daniel Foundation of Alabama*

Dr. Martin Nalls, *Director, Camp College*

Mary Scott Hunter, *Alabama State Board of Education,
District VIII**

Melissa Niven, *Program Administrator
Helping Families Initiative*

Meredith Smith, *Education Special Projects Manager,
Alabama Public Television**

Dr. Mike Daria, *Superintendent, Tuscaloosa City Schools*

Misty Trussell, *District Behavior Specialist
Elmore County Schools**

Dr. Nancy Pack, *Director, Alabama Public Library Service*

Nathan Hoffman, *Foundation for Excellence in Education*

Paul Morin, *Statewide Coordinator
Alabama Afterschool Community Network*

Polly McClure, *Statewide Coordinator
Reach Out and Read, Alabama*

Rhonda Mann, *Deputy Director
VOICES for Alabama's Children*

Robin Mackey, *Executive Director
Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers*

Rod Scott, *Alabama State House of Representatives,
District 55*

Roy Clem, *Executive Director, Alabama Public Television**

Dr. Ruth Beenken, *Teacher, Mountain Brook City Schools*

Ryan Hankins, *Executive Director
Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA)*

Ryan Hollingsworth, *Executive Director
Schools Superintendents of Alabama*

Sally Smith, *Executive Director
Alabama Association of School Boards*

Sallye Longshore, *Director, Alabama Department of
Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention*

Sean Stevens, *Program Coordinator, Instructional Services,
Alabama State Department of Education*

Sonya Jordan, *Member, School Library Association and
the Alabama Library Association*

Sonya Yates, *Dyslexia Therapist, Mobile County Schools*

Stephanie Bell, *Alabama State Board of Education,
District III*

Stephanie Pope, *Alta Pointe Health Systems, School
Based Mental Health Therapist, Saraland City Schools*

Stephen Woerner, *Executive Director
VOICES for Alabama's Children*

Tara Preyer, *Government Affairs Director
VOICES for Alabama's Children**

Tara Skiles, *Director of Professional
Development & Adult Learning, Alabama
Department of Early Childhood Education*

Terri Collins, *Alabama State House of Representatives,
District 8*

Dr. Teri Prim, *Director of Elementary Education,
Enterprise City Schools*

Thomas Rains, *Vice President of Policy & Operations
A+ Education Partnership**

Dr. Tommy Bice, *Education Director
Mike & Gillian Goodrich Foundation*

Dr. Tony Thacker, *Assistant State Superintendent,
Alabama State Department of Education*

Tracy Plummer, *Deputy Director, Alabama Department
of Child Abuse & Neglect Prevention*

Dr. Tracye Strichik, *Senior Director, Alabama
Department of Early Childhood Education*

Dr. Vic Wilson, *Executive Director
Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools (CLAS)*

Vivian Davis Figures, *Alabama State Senate, District 33*

Dr. Wayne Reynolds, *Alabama State Board of Education,
District VIII*

Dr. Yvette Richardson, *Alabama State Board of Education,
District IV*

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