

**Why Support the Alabama Reading Initiative?**  
**It's Smart Money Well Spent –**  
**A Proven Program with a Big Return**

*A Research Brief*  
*Prepared by the A+ Education Partnership*  
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## **Why Support the Alabama Reading Initiative? It's Smart Money Well Spent – A Proven Program with a Big Return**

Difficult choices confront legislators as you consider the K12 public school budget for 2012.

Ideally, the result of your efforts will:

- Limit the impact of budget cuts on student learning,
- Limit job losses resulting from a reduction in teaching positions, and
- Safeguard and build on Alabama's recent gains in student achievement.

Meeting these three goals will be very challenging – and many worthy programs are under intense scrutiny.

Questions have been raised about the necessity of several teacher training initiatives – including the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative (AMSTI), and Advanced Placement (AP) support.

The argument goes something like this: *These programs are targeting practicing teachers. If they didn't learn how to teach these subjects in college, then we need to fix the education schools. Why are we paying for all this remedial training?*

We want to answer that question. To do so, we'll focus on the reasons why our state's investments in the Alabama Reading Initiative over the past decade have been – and continue to be – smart money well spent on a proven reform strategy that continues to yield a big return on investment.

### **What is the purpose of the Alabama Reading Initiative?**

Remember the day that you graduated from college full of learning, optimistic and eager? Remember your first day on the job, unsure and struggling? For most of us, the real learning process for our life work began at our place of work, with our education providing the strong foundation for our maturing skills.

Remember also when the new employee came on the job filled with technical skills and computer savvy that were foreign and even somewhat threatening? Remember thinking: How can I learn this? They didn't even have this when I was in school!

This is also true for the teaching profession. The ARI is designed to ensure that *all* of our teachers, new and seasoned, are armed with the skills they need to provide our children with the literacy skills they will need for our changing world.

### **How does the ARI work?**

Alabama was one of the first states in the nation to address its reading challenge. In its early years, the ARI introduced research about effective reading instruction to teachers and principals

in grades K-12 during two-week summer academies. It soon became clear that more than two weeks in the summer was needed to support and sustain continuous improvement. Capacity had to be built at the school level to implement truly effective instructional practices in reading.

Relying on national research and best practice, schools created positions for reading coaches who were trained and supported by the ARI regional staff. The coaches ensured that professional learning continued throughout the year at the school site and during the school day so that *proven research and teaching became effective practice*. The ARI regional staff also provided on-going professional development to school leadership teams who became more adept at sustaining change and growth at the school level. By 2006, the state provided the resources to give this structured support to all teachers in grades K-3.

Once the coaches and support were in place for K-3, the ARI began to address the task of increasing reading comprehension for all content areas (social studies, science, math, and language arts), and to expand support for intervention for struggling readers to grades 4 - 8. Comprehension materials for grades 4 and up have been developed and piloted with a variety of districts. The ARI is working to fine-tune and make them available to anyone online.

Most of the over 800 schools with a coach are currently being served school-wide whether they are K-5, K-8, or K-12. These coaches and schools are provided support by the ARI regional staff. In addition, middle schools and high schools that were a part of the ARI in the early years have participated in statewide training. Other high schools and systems are now requesting this support. In a move away from a “one size fits all approach” the ARI provides differentiated support that is developed in collaboration with local school leaders.

## **Impact of the ARI**

Our state saw the results of this investment when Alabama led the nation in 2007 in gains in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). That year Alabama increased 8 points on the composite scale score from 208 to 216 and began to close the gap with the national average score of 220. All groups made gains including an 8 point gain for black students and a 13 point gain for students receiving special education services.

In 2009, the “wave” of improvement extended to the middle grades as only three states had greater gains in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading. For 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Alabama scored higher than 9 states, not significantly different than 12 states and lower than 30 states. These gains demonstrate that we can make progress when we focus on a goal and provide educators support. But as the *accompanying charts* demonstrate, we still have work to do to close the achievement gaps with other states and among groups within Alabama.

The training for middle and high schools has just begun but is already having impact. Listed below are some excerpts from the evaluations for this year’s ARI professional development and support for leadership teams in grades K-12:

- “The content was exactly what we needed, and the delivery was exactly right for the secondary administrators/teachers.” (Sandra Spivey, Madison County Schools)

- “Monday's ARI training was wonderful! It was especially beneficial having coaches, teachers, and administrators all at the same training. The day was very productive and the content was very appropriate and useful.” (Stacie Pace, Arab City Schools)
- “Last week’s session was SO informative and interactive... I appreciate all that your team does to bring us the best in professional development.” (Jeanne Welt, NBCT, Instructional Coach, Bob Jones High School, Madison City Schools)
- “The content, facilitation, and value to participants scored a big success in all areas! The secondary schools are especially grateful for the training.” (Nancy Curry, Madison County Schools)

### **Why is reading such a high priority?**

Reading is the cornerstone to all learning. Competence in reading is essential to all other areas of understanding – math, science, the arts, even citizenship.

Education reform expert Mike Schmoker, author of *Results Now*, says we make a mistake when we think of “reading” as just about deciphering words on a page. Comprehension is the key. Students have to be able to make sense of non-fiction text that’s packed with ideas and information. He says schools today must:

ensure that students read, write, and discuss, in the analytic and argumentative modes, for hundreds of hours per school year, across the curriculum. We aren't even close to that now. All students should be reading deeply, discussing, arguing, and writing about what they read every day in multiple courses.

Preparing all of our teachers – in and out of college – to teach students with this level of professional skill is a huge undertaking.

***And lack of fundamental reading skills is a major economic development issue.*** Most high school dropouts are poor readers. Their economic impact is staggering.

- In the U.S., 1 million students drop out annually (twice the size of the U.S. Army).
- Each dropout costs about \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity over the course of his/her lifetime.
- More than 50% of these dropouts are not in the labor market. Unemployment leads to incarceration, a reliance on social services, and lack of health insurance.
- Nationally, the dropouts from the class of 2008 *alone* will cost the U.S. more than \$319 billion in lost lifetime earnings.

## Why is literacy so difficult to achieve?

Dr. Louisa Moats addressed this question in a 1999 article entitled “Teaching Reading *Is* Rocket Science.” Reading, she said, is an acquired skill – unlike spoken language, which is learned with almost any kind of contextual exposure.

Contrary to the popular theory that learning to read is natural and easy, learning to read is a complex linguistic achievement. For many children, it requires effort and incremental skill development. Moreover, teaching reading requires considerable knowledge and skill, acquired over several years through focused study and supervised practice.

***Nothing illustrates this better than the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).*** This assessment has been given to children aged 9, 13, and 17 across the country since 1970. Student performance at those three age levels has not changed substantially in over 30 years—consistently between 24 percent and 39 percent of students have scored in the "below basic" category (depending on the age tested), and between 3 percent and 7 percent have scored in the "advanced" category. Other investigations have found that literacy rates have not really changed in this country since World War II. This from “Ten Myths of Reading Instruction” SEDL Letter, Putting Reading First, Volume XIV, Number 3, December 2002, by Sebastian Wren.

Students living in poverty are at an immediate disadvantage. In a large, long-range study, two researchers (Hart & Risley) discovered that by age three, there was a vocabulary gap of more than 1,500 words between children of disadvantaged or working class families and the children of professional families. Effective reading instruction can help overcome this oral language gap and get young students from disadvantaged backgrounds on a level playing field. By third or fourth grade, we want all students to be proficient at “reading for understanding.” They should be:

- *Code Breakers* - they can recognize and pronounce written words.
- *Meaning Makers* - they understand words and use them to communicate effectively.
- *Text Users* - They can read fiction and non-fiction texts efficiently.
- *Text Critics* - They can analyze what they read and apply what they learn in critical thinking, debates, and discussion.

By the time they finish high school, young adults need to be able to persuade, debate, clarify, explain why, evaluate, and make judgments about what they read and hear. Teaching students to be effective readers is challenging. But it is do-able in our state because of the extra training and support provided to educators by the Alabama Reading Initiative.

## Why do teachers need ongoing training?

The best new teachers move into our classrooms with talent and promise – and a good beginner’s grasp of the fundamentals. But respected researchers Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers tell us that the knowledge and skills teachers gain during their initial preparation will increase significantly ***only*** when continually supported by skillful coaching.

They also found that most traditional forms of teacher training don't "stick." Even the combination of practice and feedback, by itself, results in fewer than 20% of teachers adopting and using a new practice. It's only when ongoing coaching is added that most participants improve and continue to use whatever they have learned.

In fact, Joyce and Showers found that **95 percent** of those that receive coaching use what they learn in the classroom. Their conclusions are reinforced by a recent study from the National Reading Technical Assistance Center, "How Does Coaching Affect Classroom Practice?"

Sustained professional development that focuses on specific academic subject matter and gives teachers integrated opportunities for hands-on practice is more likely to increase teacher knowledge and produce positive student outcomes.

Jim Knight, University of Kansas Center for Research and Learning, finds "Professional learning fails when leaders underestimate how complicated change can be. Just telling people what to do and expecting them to do it might work for simple tasks like stocking shelves in a grocery store, but such an approach is seldom motivating or effective for professionals."

Jim Knight, *Unmistakable Impact* (2011), p. 20.

### **Life today is constantly changing – and so is teaching**

We agree that many colleges of education can do a better job preparing new teachers. But changes in college training programs won't be enough to continue the significant progress in reading made by students since the legislature began its support of ARI.

A lot has been learned about effective reading instruction in the last two decades – and we still have thousands of veteran educators who finished college without all the tools and know-how they need to be highly effective reading teachers. ARI has helped many of these teachers improve through on-the-job training. But there's still work to be done.

And consider this: Today's competitive global economy demands that our graduates be more literate than ever before. Add in the rapid changes forced on society by the Internet and the explosion of digital technologies. Everything is speeding up, and ***even the very best undergraduate teacher education*** isn't going to prepare a teacher for an entire career.

Just think of a teacher you know in his/her early 40s. That teacher finished college before computers and email were widespread, before mobile phones and Wii videogames, before young people began constantly texting (using a lingo unknown a decade ago). Now think how much more will change before teachers currently in the classroom reach retirement.

***Bottom line:*** Meeting the educational needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century students is a complex task that requires continuous training of practicing teachers at every level from kindergarten through high school – *as well as* better preparation of teachers before they enter the field.

### **ARI partners with Colleges of Education to improve preparation programs**

The State Board of Education's Teacher Education program approval standards include the research and instructional strategies referenced as the ARI's Knowledge and Skills document.

But ensuring that these standards are actually moved into the schools has been strengthened by a partnership with the ARI.

In 2007 in response to requests from preparation programs, the ARI developed a partnership with 5 of the 27 institutions that prepare teachers to begin building a strong bridge between pre-service and in-service teacher training. During the 2010-2011 school year, the Alabama Reading Initiative has provided professional training to more than 2000 pre-service teachers enrolled in 22 (of 27) colleges of education to improve the actual delivery of instruction for students.

In the future, we hope that this partnership will expand the opportunities to improve preparation by addressing two key strategies: Admitting more qualified candidates and providing extensive time learning in school settings similar to how prospective doctors and nurses learn.

### **Why does quality teaching make a difference for *all* students?**

And finally, while considering the choices required for adopting a responsible budget, it is important to remember that the quality of instruction is the most important factor in learning. Good teaching matters most in our schools. Research about the true impact of quality teaching first emerged in the late 1990s. In a 1996 study, Rivers and William Sanders, who were then employed at the University of Tennessee, tracked thousands of elementary students' test scores year-to-year and used them to rate teachers as "effective" or "ineffective."

Then, they tracked two random groups of similar students who happened to be assigned to either three good or three ineffective teachers in a row between third and fifth grade. The result: a 50-percentage-point difference over three years in the average test-score changes of the two groups, with kids who had the effective teachers doing better. Research continues to affirm the importance of recruiting, preparing, selecting, evaluating and supporting teachers to assure the highest possible quality of performance.

“More can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor.”

*Wright, Horn and Sanders, 1997*

“Having a high-quality teacher throughout elementary school can substantially offset or even eliminate the disadvantage of low socio-economic background.”

*Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain, 2002*

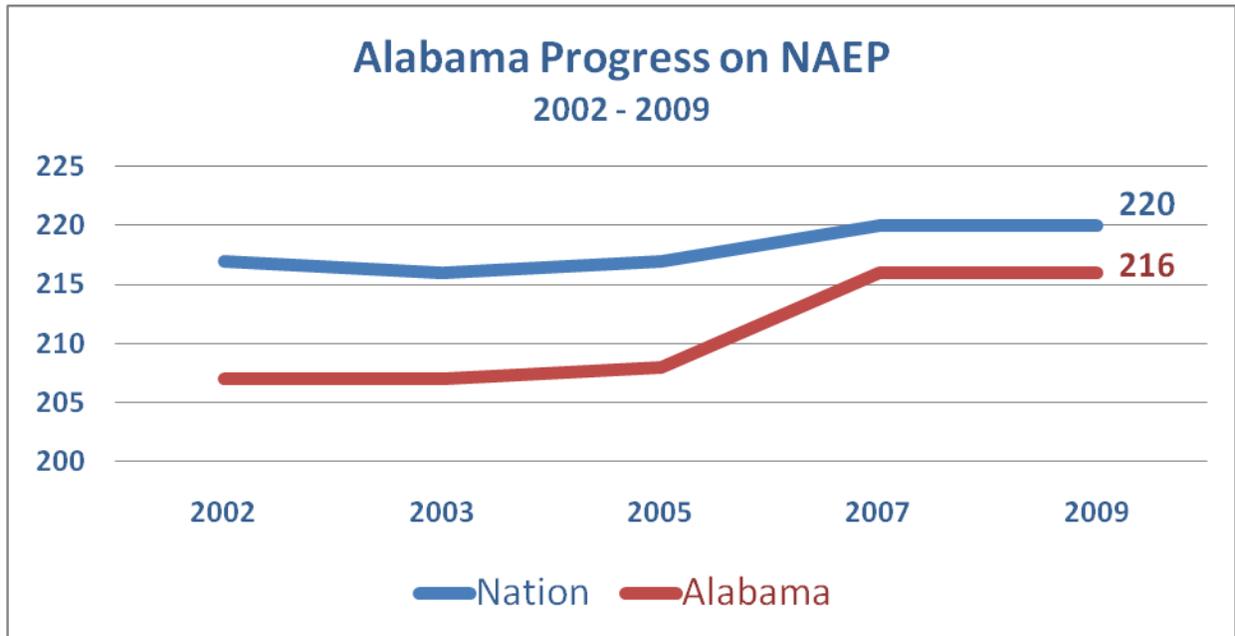
“Having a top-quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher four years in a row could be enough to close the black-white test score gap.”

*Gordon, Kane and Staiger, 2006*

“The effect of increases in teacher quality swamps the impact of any other educational investment, such as reductions in class size.”

*Goldhaber, 2009*

## Alabama Progress on NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading Changes in Average Scale Scores 2002 – 2009 Compared to the Nation



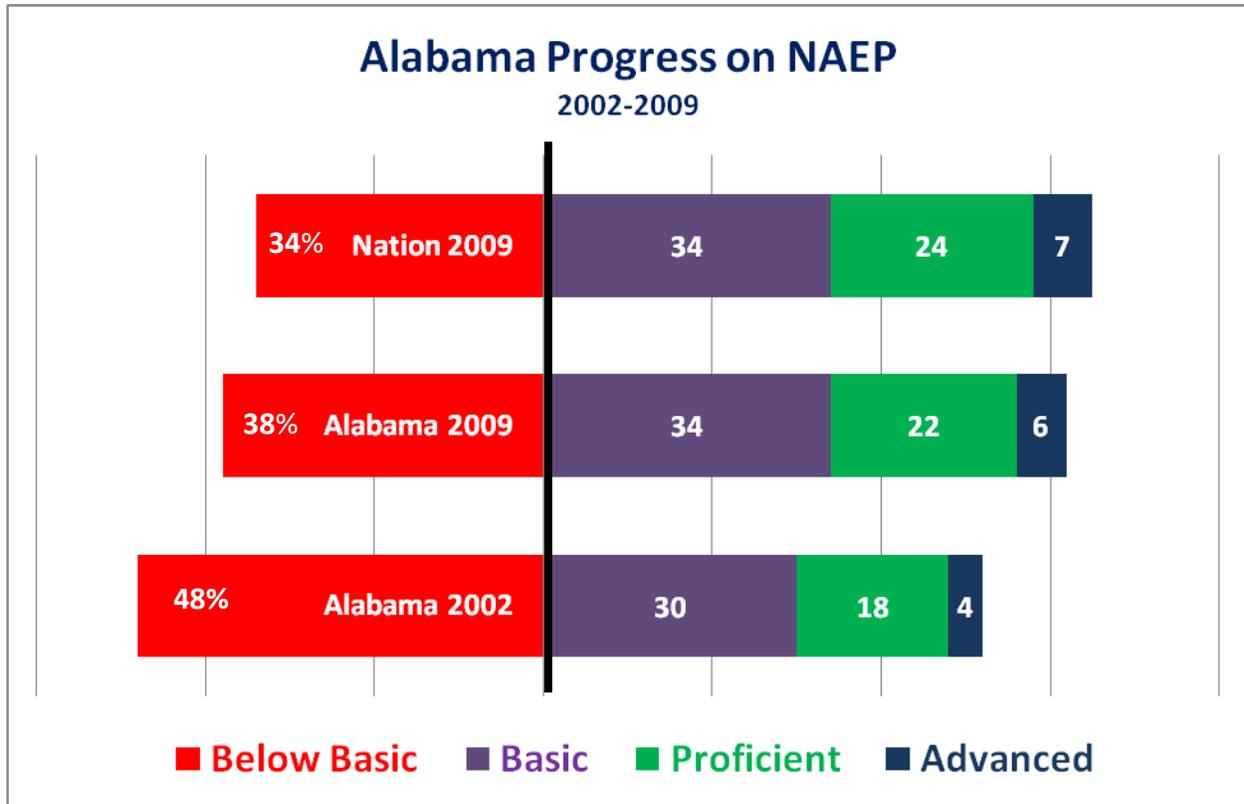
### NAEP: A Common Yardstick

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas.

Since NAEP assessments are administered uniformly, NAEP results serve as a common metric for all states and selected urban districts. The assessment stays essentially the same from year to year, with only carefully documented changes. This permits NAEP to provide a clear picture of student academic progress over time.

The Commissioner of Education Statistics, who heads the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) in the U.S. Department of Education, is responsible by law for carrying out the NAEP project. The [National Assessment Governing Board](#), appointed by the Secretary of Education but independent of the Department, sets policy for NAEP and is responsible for developing the framework and test specifications that serve as the blueprint for the assessments. The Governing Board is a bipartisan group whose members include governors, state legislators, local and state school officials, educators, business representatives, and members of the general public. Congress created the 26-member Governing Board in 1988.

## Alabama Progress on NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading by Performance Level - Changes in Percentages of Students Scoring Basic and Above 2002 – 2009 Compared to the Nation in 2009



### Defining NAEP Achievement Levels:

The [National Assessment Governing Board \(NAGB\)](#) defined three levels for each grade tested in 1990: *Basic*, *Proficient*, and *Advanced*. The *Basic* level denotes partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at a given grade. The *Proficient* level represents solid academic performance. Students reaching this level demonstrate competency over *challenging* subject matter. The *Advanced* level signifies *superior* performance at a given grade.

Editor’s note: The setting of achievement levels has been criticized and NAEP notes that caution should be exercised when making interpretations about performance levels. Also the expectations are thought to be unreasonable by some groups. Only a few states have similarly rigorous expectations for their accountability exams so there are usually large differences in the percentage of students scoring at proficient and above on state exams. However tracking performance on NAEP over time and comparing states to the national average and other states provides useful information about progress.