

For the Sake of Our Children

The Future of Alabama's Public Schools

A Five-Year Report from





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Foreword

“We must recognize that our children must achieve at higher levels—that’s a given now. The real question is, how do we move forward so they don’t get discouraged? We must understand that children, regardless of their background, can achieve. We have to challenge those children and bring parents into this discussion in a very active way. We should accept no throw-away children.”

These are the words of Alabama’s state school superintendent Ed Richardson, speaking at the first annual Outstanding Educators Symposium in Montgomery in the spring of 1996. While Alabama still has a long way to go to realize Dr. Richardson’s vision, we have made real progress since A+ began this effort five years ago.

During this time, education has dominated the public and political agenda in Alabama like no other issue. The debate over the best ways to improve Alabama’s public schools has been vigorous, and sometimes emotional. But we believe the state is better off for it. A+ and other supporters have championed the idea that a retreat into the past is not enough—that Alabama must redesign its schools to meet new job demands and create a higher standard of literacy. Not change for the sake of change, but change for the sake of our children.

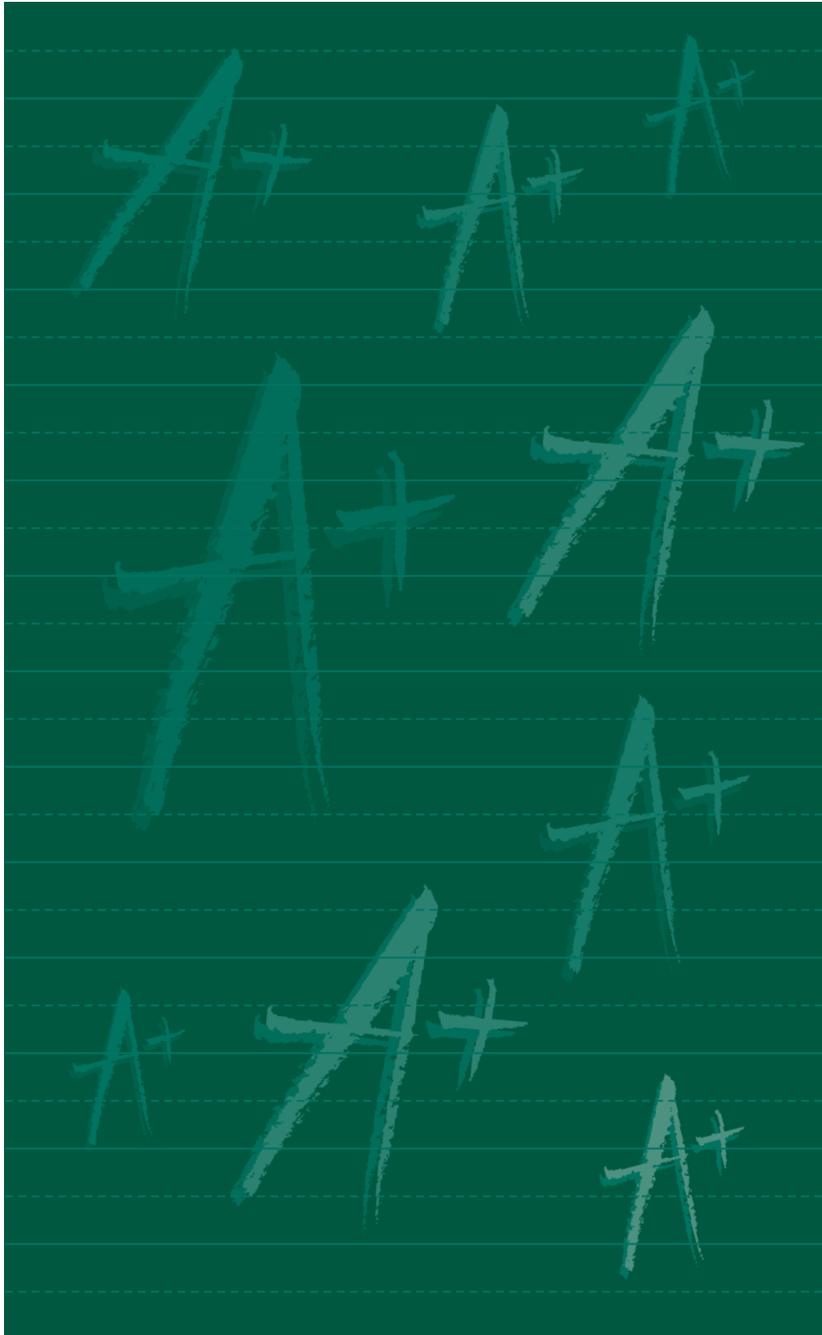
This report traces some of the history of the last five years, as Alabamians struggled to find consensus about how best to improve public education. It is also an honest assessment of A+’s accomplishments, mistakes, and aspirations. It considers where we need to go and what we need to do **now** to make our schools and our children ready for the 21st century.

For long-time A+ friends, this report serves as an overview of the important contributions you have made to Alabama’s progress, as well as an update on the work A+ is doing today. We are tremendously grateful for the help you gave. For those new to A+, this report will give you a sense of our history and purpose, and why we believe A+ still has an important role to play in helping shape the future of our public schools. We encourage your involvement and commitment to our continuing effort.



Bill Smith
A+ Chairman

“**Not change for the sake of change, but change for the sake of our children.**”



Introduction

Who's Going to Push for Better Schools?

“You could smell victory in the air.”

When a spirited crowd of 2,000 students, parents, teachers, and other members of the community packed the gymnasium of Tuscaloosa Middle School on a warm April night in 1993, the campaign to rejuvenate Alabama's public schools seemed almost certain to succeed.

A+ had worked for over a year to get Alabama to this point. It began with interviews of over 50 key Alabamians with a stake in public education—from parents to CEOs—to talk about their aspirations for public education. Visits were made to a variety of public schools and school systems to see first-hand the successes and needs of Alabama's schools. After listening to a cross section of Alabamians, and with the help of experienced experts, A+ drafted a plan to improve our public schools.

Members of A+'s Executive Committee and Policy Committee reviewed and revised the draft plan—*A Blueprint for Successful Alabama Schools*—in preparation for a Stakeholders Meeting scheduled for November 1992. Leaders from business, education, and the political arena—including Alabama Education Association (AEA) head Paul Hubbert, Speaker of the House Jimmy Clark, and seven top Alabama CEOs—met for two days to review the draft *Blueprint*. At the end of the retreat, all 25 participants agreed that the education *Blueprint* offered the type of comprehensive framework our state so desperately needed.

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To get additional feedback, in January 1993, A+ co-sponsored regional meetings in Alabama's four largest cities with AEA, the Alabama PTA, the Alabama Association of School Boards, and the local chambers of commerce. These were attended by over 500 additional stakeholders from the business, education, and political arenas. It was at those first meetings that broad and enthusiastic support for the *Blueprint* emerged.

And then to get even more feedback, A+ held Town Meetings around

the state. The first town meeting was in Tuscaloosa, and even the press was impressed. Reporters wrote with enthusiasm about the large turnout of over 2,000 people and their apparent determination to see our schools change permanently for the better. Discussion groups—some of them led by students—called for more pre-school programs, more principals and teachers “who know the answers without looking in the books,” more computers and science equipment, more “hands-on” learning, and fewer lectures.

“For all those in the state who think the people don’t really care about better schools, you have sent them a wake-up call,” A+ Chairman Bill Smith told the overflow crowd.

The public continued to demonstrate its eagerness to improve the schools over the spring and summer, as over 23,000 Alabamians turned out for A+-sponsored town meetings across Alabama—in Jasper (1,100), Selma (600), Decatur (1,200), Birmingham (2,400)—nearly two-dozen cities in all.

“I was in Jasper at an A-Plus rally,” *Birmingham News* editorial page editor Ron Casey wrote in May 1993 about the grassroots nature of the meetings. “It was one of those affairs where the microphone occasionally squeals, and the high school kids perform to help draw a crowd. There was a crowd, though. More than a thousand people. Black people. White people. People in short-sleeve rayon. People in expensive suits. Parents. Grandparents. Teachers. Children. Many with a missionary zeal to make something happen. It will.”

“Because it was an election year, overnight, school reform became inextricably linked to gubernatorial politics.”

But it didn’t happen...not the way A+ members and other supporters of school reform believed it would and should. As summer turned into fall, a newly installed governor saw the enthusiasm for A+ and its plan and drafted the *Blueprint* into a legislative package known as the Alabama First Plan. Because it was an election year, overnight, school reform became inextricably linked to gubernatorial politics. Support for the *Blueprint* that developed in the original meetings splintered as AEA’s Paul Hubbert declared his candidacy for governor and decided to oppose what had become the sitting governor’s education reform package.

By winter, traditional special interests and politicians jockeying for votes began to play on the public’s natural anxiety about change. Opponents from the far right clouded the debate by making baseless and outrageous claims. Education associations and unions misled teachers and administrators by distorting tenure issues. Groups that traditionally

oppose property taxes fanned the flames of opposition by incorrectly claiming the reform plan would cost an average Alabama family over \$1,000 a year. Lost in the emotional rhetoric was meaningful deliberation and compromise around the core components in the *Blueprint*: tougher coursework, tougher testing and stricter accountability, coupled with more money for professional development, technology, and programs for at-risk students.

Politics became the driving force, and helpful dialogue about how best to improve our schools became impossible. Support for the Alabama First Plan began to fade.

It had become too much, too fast....

“In the absence of a clear understanding of why schools had to be different than they were in ‘the good old days,’ the people who oppose change and additional taxes won.”

Better schools, it turned out, meant very different things to different people. In the absence of a clear understanding of why schools had to be different than they were in “the good old days,” the people who opposed change and additional taxes won. While the Alabama First Plan was approved twice by the Alabama Senate, it was killed twice in the Alabama House. A combination of gubernatorial politics, the new national mood, and resistance to new taxes was too much to overcome; and the Alabama First Plan joined a lengthy list of unsuccessful school improvement initiatives dating back to the “Plan for Excellence” in 1984.

The political failure of the Alabama First campaign left A+ asking two important questions: *What have we learned?* and *What should our role be now?* A+ looked for those answers not only by examining the organization’s own efforts and the political environment within Alabama’s borders, but by learning more about school reform campaigns across the nation.

A+ emerged from this soul-searching wiser and more determined to rejoin the effort for the future of Alabama’s schools with new energy and a commitment to a long-term effort.

“It would have been easy to give up,” says Bill Smith. “That’s what a lot of people expected us to do. But every time we talked about quitting, we ended up wrestling with the same question: Who’s going to push for better schools if we don’t?”



What We Have Learned

A+ weathered the first stormy years of Alabama school reform and came away wiser and even more strongly committed. Here are three of the most important lessons A+ learned.

1st A+ got too far out in front. To succeed, A+ must make the case for school improvement in a way that is clear to the people of Alabama.

In retrospect, A+ got out too far in front of the public. Resistance to systemic school reform has been growing across America for the past several years. While many business and civic leaders who have scrutinized the shortcomings of our schools call for sweeping, complex, often interlocking changes, the typical American (and Alabamian) recalls a simpler day when schools seemed to work better and students knew how to behave.

In a series of education surveys, the Public Agenda Foundation uncovered sharp differences between the public attitude and the attitude of most business and education-support organizations. As part of these surveys, this non-partisan foundation, founded in 1975 to study public issues, questioned a cross-section of Americans and staged in-depth conversations with people in four U.S. cities, including Birmingham.

While many leaders who worry about jobs and the future of American families see a need for major changes in the traditional school structure, the public is chiefly concerned about safety, discipline, and teaching the basics. Until schools are safe and orderly and the basics are covered, says the average voter and taxpayer, changes in teaching and learning are a waste of time.

What's more, the public finds the terms used by reformers confusing. During the campaigns for school reform in 1993 and 1994, A+ relied too heavily on jargon, first in presenting its *Blueprint* for reform and later in promoting the Alabama First Plan. Terms like *performance-based education*, *school-based decision-making* and others are not in most

people's vocabularies. Over-reliance on these confusing terms only helped opponents shift the focus of the debate. Those opposed to change were able to fit their own, misleading definitions to these unfamiliar terms and change the entire tone and content of the public discussion.

Public Agenda's research helps explain why, even after many thousands of Alabama citizens turned out at A+ town meetings to show their support for better schools, the same citizens did not speak out forcefully and with a single voice as legislators debated the merits of the Alabama First Plan. Alabamians agreed wholeheartedly about the need for change, but they were far from agreement about the kind of change needed.

This same phenomenon has taken place in other states. Those who fight redesigning American education to make it work better for today's families and today's jobs have had considerable success exploiting the "disconnect" between the advocates of change and the general public about what's wrong with America's schools and how to fix them. The only way for organizations like A+ to get in sync with the public is by listening to and addressing each public concern using clear, easy-to-understand language.

A+ must make it crystal clear that in addition to helping students learn at higher academic levels, comprehensive school reform includes **more** basics, **more** discipline, and a high school diploma that really means something for **every** student who earns it. We've also learned that when we listen carefully to people talk about what they want for their schools, they generally understand and agree with the principles behind the kind of comprehensive changes advocated in the *A+ Blueprint for Successful Alabama Schools*.

2nd Americans are riding a wave of public distrust and anger at government at all levels. We must speak frankly and honestly about what's best for our schools.

Distrust of government and an opposition to increasing taxes is not new in Alabama or in other parts of the country. What is new, however, is the role some organizations often play to build on that distrust. And, like in other parts of the country, these organizations and special interest groups in Alabama used fear and distrust to build a case against improving our schools. The mainstream media, in an effort to present a balanced news coverage, sometimes contributed to the confusion and misunderstanding by reporting these groups' statements as fact. So, while people

expressed interest in improving schools, there was no consensus on what school improvement really meant. Instead of finding common ground where we could all stand for Alabama's children, the public divided over emotional and often-misunderstood issues.

During the debate on Alabama First, the discussion about education changed from talking about what we wanted for our schools to what we didn't want...be it "OBE," distribution of condoms at schools, or dumbing down the curriculum.

A+ can and must help bring the discussion back to a dialogue about what we **do** want for our children and our schools. We need to end the whispering campaigns and contribute to open and honest conversations among the tens of thousands of Alabamians who have demonstrated their commitment to better schools. We need to speak neighbor to neighbor across our state and find consensus.

3rd Schools don't get better by simply passing laws. You have to build capacity to support this improvement. Attitudes have to change, too. It's a difficult but not impossible task, requiring patience and coordinated effort.

Laws don't automatically change people or practices. To make a difference, it is critical that teachers, parents, students, and other citizens not only understand the need for change, but are given the information and skills needed to respond to the change. Teachers and principals are skeptical when outsiders call for major changes in the way schools do their business. Like the public, they have to be convinced that reforms will work and that schools will have the support they need to make them work. Too often, those who call for change fail to bring progressive educators on board, only to discover too late that change is impossible without the full support of those who are being asked to change the most.

We must help the average Alabamian understand that we no longer can be content with Alabama being a little better than Mississippi. It is clear to A+ that neither the status quo nor a return to yesteryear is a solution. Our schools today serve a vastly different population of students.

And unlike days-gone-by, today's schools have a mandate to serve **all** young people. In the "good old days," many thousands of students dropped out and were absorbed into a low-wage, low-skill economy. But that economy is fast disappearing. If we want to keep young people off the streets and off the welfare rolls, we have to **keep** them in school.

We have to reach the kids we used to “throw away,” and that means we have to demand more of our teachers and schools than ever before.

Attitudes of parents, educators, students, and citizens must also be changed about the skills and knowledge the average person will need to prosper in the next century. Today’s students are growing up in a world of computers, videos, high-tech agriculture, space shuttles, and an ever-changing workplace that requires workers to constantly adapt to new technology. Survival in today’s world demands an academic foundation that’s broader and deeper and more solid than ever before. Most schools in Alabama today aren’t providing that kind of foundation. But we believe our schools **can** provide it.

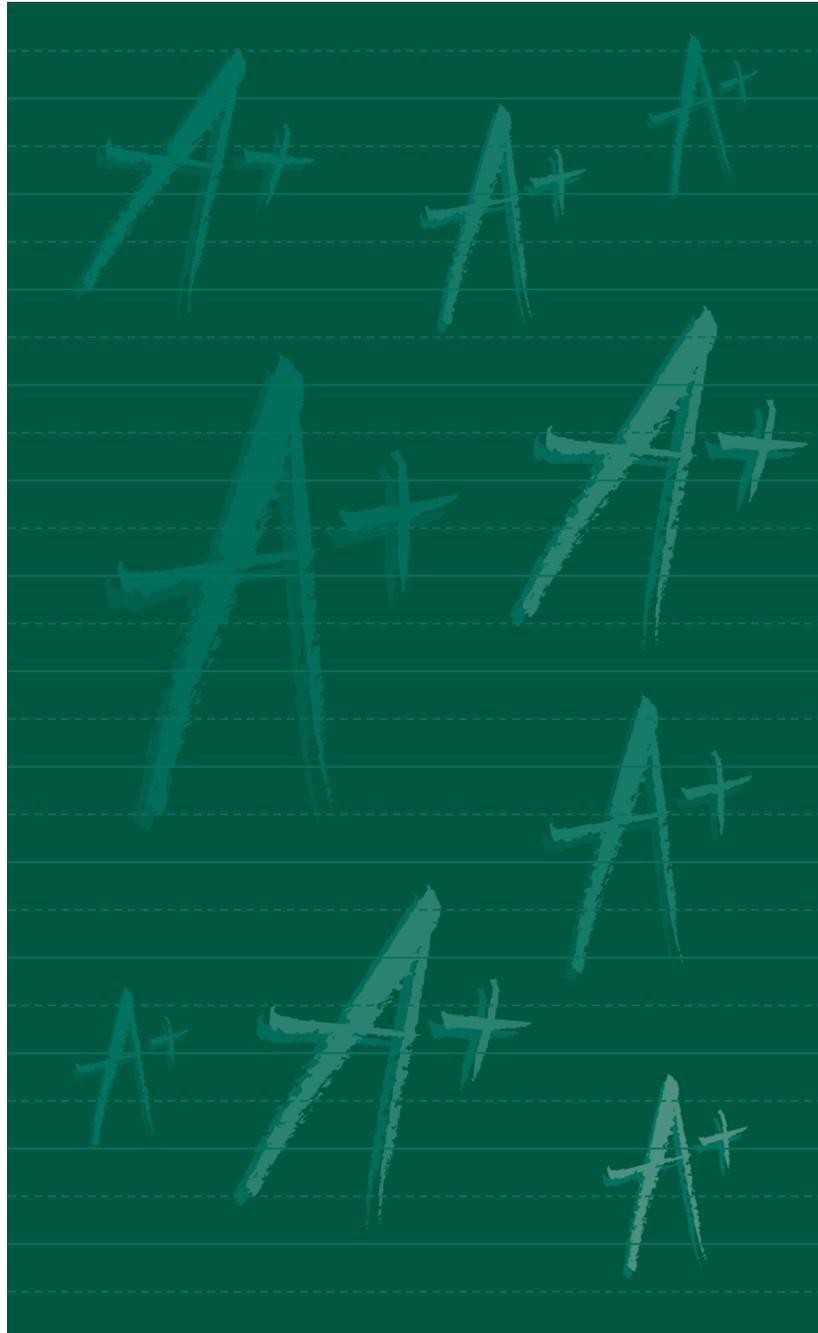
Great progress has been made in understanding how to raise student achievement. Schools in Alabama are beginning to improve, and some test scores are going up. But we can’t be satisfied with small gains. To continue this progress, attitudes must change and teachers, students, parents, and citizens must make a commitment for the long term. It means strengthening the skills of teachers and principals, making more efficient use of school time, carefully designing the curriculum so that students build on the basics and master challenging subjects. And, it demands adequately funding all schools and spending the money on the things that really make a difference in learning.

Without question, the knowledge we need to improve our schools is out there. What we have to do is convince a solid majority of the people of Alabama that it’s in everyone’s best interests to act on this information.

What Makes Schools Successful?

People who have studied successful public schools all over America have found some common ingredients. A+ believes they make a good checklist as we periodically examine our progress on the road to reform:

- ✓ **High Expectations.** First, and perhaps most important, successful schools are staffed by principals and teachers who really believe that every child can and must learn at higher levels. They expect every student to achieve more — from the most likely to succeed to the most likely to drop out.
- ✓ **Schoolhouse Leadership.** Successful schools have leaders with a shared vision who are unencumbered by bureaucratic red tape and have the freedom of action and resources necessary for high performance and true accountability.
- ✓ **Safety and Discipline.** Successful schools provide a safe, well-disciplined and caring environment for student learning. They understand that unless students and teachers feel safe and secure, high achievement isn't possible.
- ✓ **Standards.** Successful schools set high academic standards that are well-known to students, parents, and teachers.
- ✓ **Performance and Assessment.** Successful schools focus on results. They measure and report on student and school performance in ways that make it possible for students, parents and teachers to understand and act on the information.
- ✓ **School Accountability.** Successful schools result when school systems help them as they struggle to improve, reward them for effective practices, and hold them accountable when they fail persistently to educate their students.
- ✓ **Professional Development.** Teachers and administrators in successful schools continuously improve their knowledge and skills through high quality professional development focused on the needs of the school.
- ✓ **Parent Involvement.** Successful schools aggressively involve parents in the life of the school, making it possible for parents to support the learning process, influence decisions, and make choices about the children's education.
- ✓ **Early Learning Readiness.** Successful schools are part of a network that provides high-quality pre-kindergarten education for disadvantaged children and works with other public and private agencies to help every child get ready for school.
- ✓ **Technology.** Successful schools use technology as a tool to increase the knowledge and information available to students and teachers, and to make it possible for teachers to use their time more productively.



What We Have Accomplished Over the Past 5 Years

Twice during its first five years, A+ lobbied for education reform. In 1992, A+ worked on Governor Guy Hunt's education and tax-reform task force, led by Birmingham attorney Tom Carruthers. While neither that effort nor the subsequent Alabama First Plan were successful, A+'s efforts in other arenas have produced positive results.

 ***A+ has assembled and can now call upon a large, statewide network of talented and committed people from a range of backgrounds and constituencies who are willing to work for better schools:***

 A+ organized town meetings that gave over 23,000 Alabamians a voice in school improvement. These town meetings provoked intense, often difficult public conversations about what Alabamians really want for their schools—at a level unprecedented in Alabama's history. Thousands of these citizens remain committed to public education.

 A+ helped expand the number of community leaders who understand the value of public education and who are now committed to working for the survival of public education. Their knowledge of school improvement issues enables them to work more effectively in their community.

 ***A+ helped raise the standard of expectations for public education by broadly communicating the set of principles needed to improve Alabama's schools:***

 A+ spoke up for core reforms in its *Blueprint* that became part of the Alabama First Plan. Some of these core reforms in the areas of

fiscal accountability, academic intervention, and making schools safer are being implemented through the 1995 legislation developed by the governor and approved by the legislature. With that authority, an action-oriented State Board of Education and the state superintendent are working for higher standards through a more demanding high school curriculum for all students, as outlined in the Alabama courses of study. They have also instituted tougher graduation requirements and more direct accountability for local schools and school systems.

✓ A+ changed the content of the conversation about school improvement in Alabama. Alabamians are not just talking anymore about adding a few days to the school year or raising teacher salaries. Today, the conversation is about systemic changes in the areas of academics, school readiness, use of time, and technology, about giving parents and teachers a greater voice—about changing expectations for what kids can learn and schools can do.

 ***A+ renewed the energy required for change by working with and encouraging dedicated educators.***

✓ A+ worked for stronger state educational leadership and helped raise awareness among Alabamians about the important role of the State Board of Education in improving student achievement. As a result, Alabama has its most dynamic board in years, with pro-active, independent-minded members who devote long hours to educating themselves about effective teaching and learning.

✓ Through its support of the independent Alabama State Teacher Forum, A+ helped create a voice for teachers and spread the word about our state's best teaching practices. With funds provided by A+, a former State Teacher of the Year spent a sabbatical year helping develop the Teacher Forum into a highly visible statewide organization. She worked with other members of its leadership council to design and conduct a statewide symposium for outstanding teachers as well as "Teachers as Leaders" workshops.

 ***A+ has become a strong independent voice identified with educational progress in Alabama. It has a single agenda—educational excellence for all of Alabama's children.***

✓ A+ has earned a high degree of credibility. It has a reputation for factual integrity and accessibility. Journalists, state education leaders, education advocates, and other people who care about Alabama's schools rely on A+ as a knowledgeable, reliable source of information about education issues—a source that can translate “educationese” into language everyone can understand.

✓ A+ has no vested interest, only to represent **children**. A+'s unique public voice speaks directly to the pressing needs of children and schools. As one reporter said, “If A+ didn't exist, to whom would we turn for the reform side of the story?”

Looking at what we've learned and accomplished, it is clear that Alabama citizens must continue to be involved in efforts to improve our schools. We should not leave the task only to educators, politicians, and the special interests. A+'s role is to continue its work in the areas discussed above so that, in the not-too-distant future, all children in Alabama will benefit from the type of high-quality education which is needed for the next century.

“Even though some have not always agreed with every position that A+ has taken in the past, without them, we would not have made the progress we've seen so far”, says Elmer Harris, president of Alabama Power Company. “Governors, superintendents, and elected officials come and go, but we must recognize that it will take a long-term effort to improve our schools. Somebody has got to keep pushing, and that is the role that A+, and all of us, can play.”

A+ Works for Better Schools in Alabama

What A+ Works For	What We <u>Don't</u> Want
Safe and disciplined schools.	Schools that are value-less, dangerous, and serve more as baby-sitters than places where children learn.
Good teachers who are well-trained, well-equipped, and have many opportunities to improve their professional skills.	Ill-prepared, ill-trained, or complacent teachers who don't want to be successful or don't know how to be. Teachers who lack the resources and training to meet high teaching standards.
A balance between state accountability and local control—with more decision-making by school boards and by principals, teachers and parents who are well-prepared to lead their schools.	Bloated bureaucracies that stifle innovation and excellence.
Academic results as the top priority. Let's make sure a student with a high school diploma has 12th grade skills and knowledge.	Abandoning the basics.
A more challenging academic curriculum that demands more of all students—even the best and brightest.	A “dumbed-down” curriculum that lowers standards so all students can meet them.
Accountability for local school systems through measures like the new state cost-accounting system that traces dollar expenditures all the way to the school.	Waste and inefficient use of scarce tax dollars.
Technology in the classroom that can make the dollar go further—and training to make sure teachers use it well.	Children who fall behind their peers in other states because they don't have access to the information highway.
Emphasis on early childhood education to guarantee that students learn the basics and are prepared for more advanced academic work in middle school and high school.	Social promotions. Large numbers of students leaving schools without the skills they need to survive in today's competitive workplace.
Tests that provide national comparisons—and other challenging tests that tell us more about whether our students know and can do what Alabamians expect.	Abandoning tests that tell us how our students compare with students in other states or failing to use tests that challenge our schools to meet high standards that Alabamians agree are important.

What Is A+'s Role Now?

Reflecting on the lessons learned by A+, the defeat of Alabama First wasn't a complete disappointment. In fact, good things did happen. In some ways, the chances of making fundamental changes in the system are probably better today than they would have been if the Alabama First Plan had passed. We have only to look at some of our southern neighbors to understand why. Too much change too fast, without enough understanding and support from educators and the public, often leads to backlash—slowing down progress and lessening the positive impact of the reform effort.

The first four years of A+ helped us understand the need to focus our present and future activities in four areas: building capacity, communicating with the public, networking, and advocacy.

Building Capacity

A+ provides support for progressive leaders who are working for education improvement. A+ played a key role in building awareness of the need for a stronger, more active State Board of Education, resulting in the 1994 selection of a team of progressive board members committed to improving the quality of Alabama's schools. A+ stood solidly behind these board members when they resisted pressure to name a new state superintendent of education without a thorough search for the best candidates. The board's forward-thinking members—and the board's selection of Ed Richardson, one of Alabama's most progressive local superintendents, as the new state superintendent—gives new momentum to the school improvement movement. This momentum must be sustained.

A+ is lending its support to Dr. Richardson's push for more financial and educational accountability at the district and school level, for better teacher and principal training, and for greater access to high-quality early childhood education for disadvantaged children.

 ***A+ is empowering teachers.*** Through its support of the Alabama State Teacher Forum and the Outstanding Educators Symposium, A+ helps provide a vehicle for some of our state's most successful educators to become leaders of school improvement. At symposiums, workshops, and retreats, these outstanding teachers share their innovative ideas and successful practices. To expand the involvement of teachers in reform even further, A+ serves as chief organizer of the "Teachers as Leaders" program. This series of summer workshops, underwritten by the BellSouth Foundation, involves teachers from across Alabama in meaningful and in-depth professional development that is rarely available elsewhere.

 ***A+ is connecting the private sector to the education community to intensify professional development and training for principals and superintendents.*** A+ also recognizes the vital link between school improvement and educational leadership. Studies of effective schools underscore the importance of a competent, well-trained, and energetic principal to the success of every school. A collaboration with some of the South's largest corporations, including AmSouth Bank and the Southern Company, coordinated by A+, is working with the State Department of Education and educators from K-12 and higher education to upgrade the certification program for school superintendents and principals. We are also working to improve and intensify a continuing education program for existing principals.

Communications

 ***A+ helps highlight our state's best educational practices.*** A+ continues to highlight effective programs already in place in Alabama schools by publishing their success stories in A+'s newsletter, *The A+ Report Card*. A+ also circulates more detailed reports to the media and other opinion leaders, and works in partnership with the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama on special research projects.

 ***A+ is working to build public consensus.*** Drawing on the hard-won wisdom that comes from experience, A+ now has a strategic communications plan designed to reduce the misunderstanding about education reform and to build public consensus. At the heart of the plan are a series of listening sessions, to be carried out over the next year, that can help communities come together to identify strategies that will improve student learning.

 ***A+ provides clear, reliable information about reform.*** The media and the public rely on A+ as an accurate source of information about Alabama schools. Facts and figures aren't enough; people need help understanding what the numbers mean. What do the state's new report cards really say about schools? What do the Stanford Achievement Test scores tell parents and taxpayers about how well students are learning the basics? And what else do we need to know that these tests do not show us?

A+ calls on the experience of its own staff and the expertise of other researchers in Alabama and the nation to dig into the facts and deepen the discussion about school improvement and the best use of scarce resources. For example, anticipating Alabama's current discussion about the use of technology in schools, A+ commissioned a report exploring educational technology planning issues. This report was provided to state school board members and the superintendent to use as a resource in the development of a state technology plan.

Networking

 ***A+ builds bridges between the business community and the schools.*** A+ Chairman Bill Smith, chairman of Royal Cup, Inc., organized a group of CEOs to support the reform initiatives of state superintendent Ed Richardson, such as the principal training program. The ad-hoc group, chaired initially by AmSouth Bank Chairman John Woods, draws membership from business leaders across Alabama and meets quarterly with Dr. Richardson. Additionally, A+ works with local chambers of commerce and other business groups on specific projects.

 ***A+ represents the interests of progressive Alabamians in school-related legal issues.*** A+ is involved in the many legal fights over efforts to improve Alabama's public schools. The A+ Coalition has helped raise money for a legal defense fund on behalf of a majority of State Board of Education members whose elections have been challenged on technical grounds in several cases. This legal defense prevented special elections being forced mid-term, which could have halted or slowed the progress of reform. Additionally, as a "friend of the court" in Alabama's long-running school equity lawsuit, A+ has been able to speak to the inequities of the current educational system and their impact on children and the future of the state.

Regardless of what actions are taken by the court, A+ will continue to work for equity and adequacy.

 ***A+ teams with other Alabama reform groups to push for high-priority changes.*** A+ is joining with the Alabama PTA, the Children's Trust Fund, Voices for Alabama's Children, and other organizations to make early childhood education and school readiness a top state priority. Many of Alabama's children enter school far behind and never catch up. Experts say that the preschool years are critical to future academic success. Careful investments in parent education programs and in health and education for preschoolers most likely to fall behind are fundamental for their future success. These programs can contribute to school readiness and help parents learn ways that they can become more involved in their children's academic success. A+ also works with the state PTA and Voices for Alabama's Children to look closely at successful parent training programs in other states and tailor them to Alabama's specific needs.

 ***A+ is staying on top of developments across America.*** The best way to learn what's working well and to avoid making others' mistakes is to stay in touch with school improvement efforts across the nation. A+ representatives meet regularly with the Columbia Group, a loose-knit coalition of organizations like A+ from eight states across the South who are working to improve schools in their own states. A+ frequently communicates with the staffs of the Southern Regional Education Board and SERVE, the regional education research laboratory. A+ representatives are also asked to share with regional and national groups the knowledge and insights Alabamians have gained from five years of working on educational improvement at the grassroots.

Advocacy

 ***A+ advocates for programs and actions that can speed up the change process.*** Educational excellence occurs when there are clear standards, high quality professional development, and direct accountability. Alabama has some of these pieces in place. The Alabama "courses of study" describe what students should know and be able to do, and a few subjects have "end-of-course" tests that hold students and teachers accountable for what is learned. A+ is pushing for more of this kind of testing, which can give us detailed information about the

advanced knowledge and skills our students are gaining and provide an important supplement to the Stanford Achievement Test—our national comparison test.

Alabama's commitment to professional development is weak in comparison to the nation and most other southern states. A+ believes that schools will not improve without high-quality professional development which matches the needs of students and teachers. If Alabama is going to ask more of its teachers and principals (and we must), then they must have more support. Currently, Alabama spends only about \$100 a year per teacher on professional development. A+ advocates a much larger investment, as much as \$500 per teacher, with safeguards built in to make sure that every professional development dollar is spent on high-quality programs that upgrade educators' skills and knowledge and don't just waste their precious time.

 **A+ fights "business-as-usual" education.** A+ consistently supports the many teachers in Alabama who want to put children first. At the same time, A+ fights the forces opposed to change who put their special interests and ideology over the good of children.

 **A+ stands up for what is right.** Even though the current political landscape is not as friendly to children and comprehensive reform as in the past, A+ believes it is critical to become involved in important issues. In the past year, A+ supported the State Board of Education in its efforts to adopt a new, more rigorous science course of study widely praised by the science, education, and business communities. The Board stood up against the strong opposition of those who fight the teaching of the theory of evolution.

During the year-long Goals 2000 debate, A+ wrote newspaper articles, letters to the editor and other communiques to promote understanding of the facts behind the often emotional and partisan objections to this program. We worked with a coalition of organizations to first support the superintendent and next the board in their ultimate decision to accept these federal funds to purchase computers for classrooms.

A+ joined the unsuccessful efforts to enact the Children First legislation which would have provided \$60 million per year in additional funding for programs for children by increasing the tobacco excise tax by 10 cents. A+ also worked for stronger assessments and supported the Alabama Association of School Boards' efforts to limit non-education agencies from receiving funding from the Education Trust Fund.



There Is a Continuing Role for A+

In this state, we need the kind of school improvement that encourages all students to learn at higher levels. This will not be the work of a single legislative session or a single public body. It will require years of effort and the contributions of many. It will require patience, persistence, and know-how, not just for a decade, but for a generation.

Contrary to what some of our elected officials say, things in Alabama must change if we intend to prosper in the next century and beyond. While it is true that we live in a state with abundant natural resources and talented, resilient people, too often it seems that we Alabamians lack the will to make the critical decisions necessary to move the state forward.

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How will we build a mandate in Alabama for the kinds of changes that will make our schools competitive with South Carolina and Ohio—and with Germany and Japan? John Adams, chief executive officer of the Russell Corporation, believes we must paint a credible and accurate public picture of school reform’s impact on the individual child.

“Alabama citizens must be educated on the issues and taken beyond the ‘confusion stage’ to the involvement and action stage,” he says. “This obviously requires time, patience, and commitment from civic and government leaders.”

This fear of change won’t go away on its own. Educators, parents, students, and citizens must not only understand why change is needed,

but be motivated to embrace that change. Examining issues such as rewards and sanctions, charter schools, and privatization of certain school services can provide both motivation and leverage for change.

Working for this type of change also requires constant attention, political savvy, and an unflinching determination to succeed.

Who speaks day in and day out for forward-thinking Alabama businesses, community organizations and citizens about the future of the schools and the state's economy? Where do the media turn to find a counterpoint to the argument that the "good old days" are good enough today?

Where do the thousands of Alabamians who want a quality education for their families find an advocate who understands their desire to preserve the best of what has worked in our schools—discipline, effort, a good foundation in the basics—while moving forward to prepare our children for the 21st century?

If not A+, what organization has the experience, willingness and determination to stay the course and to work tirelessly for the type of public schools our state so clearly needs?

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We've learned that education cannot be separated from politics. If we are to have school improvement, Alabama needs an independent organization with the experience and stamina to challenge the political status quo. Through the struggles of the past five years, progressive Alabamians have come to rely on A+ to speak out for educational excellence—to make it clear that Alabama cannot afford to merely talk about school improvement but must raise the standard of expectations for our schools as high as possible.

It's easy to become cynical about the prospects for change. School reform is a tough row to hoe. But we are not cynical about reform. Educational excellence is a journey more than a destination. It takes time, patience, and a lot of work in the trenches.

An A+ member put it best: "We have the historical perspective. We've been there, we've made some mistakes, we've had some successes. We learned what can be done to change our schools. We can't let our children down."



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