

# Stop the Slide, Start the Climb

Concepts to Enable Alabama Students  
to Achieve Their Fullest Potential

learning loss assessments  
Alabama Literacy Act  
Career Tech  
Alabama Literacy Act  
Education Trust Fund  
College and Career Ready  
COVID  
learning loss  
partners  
community  
nonprofits  
broadband  
Career Tech  
500,000 by 2025  
Cares Act  
slide  
Education Trust Fund  
workforce development  
Cares Act

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# Stop the Slide, Start the Climb

Concepts to Enable Alabama Students to Achieve Their Fullest Potential

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*Commissioned by*



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*Research and reporting  
conducted by*



PARCA works to inform and improve the decision making of state and local leaders in Alabama through objective research and analysis.



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## The BEA and Workforce Development

The Business Education Alliance of Alabama was incorporated in 2013 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The primary BEA mission is to bring business and education leaders together to discuss the challenges and opportunities that will allow Alabama to achieve its fullest potential both educationally and economically.

Each year, a BEA Advisory Council composed of business and education leaders meets to discuss the most pressing challenges at the time and then develop a theme for a research-based solution.

The 2019 report, *Education Matters*, is the first in a series of BEA reviews of Alabama's workforce development system. The report was developed by the BEA in partnership with the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama and the A+ Education Partnership.

Alabama is in the midst of an extensive redesign of workforce development. This includes a goal of producing 500,000 new highly skilled workers between 2019 and 2025.

There are multiple concurrent evaluation plans in place for Alabama's workforce system. BEA reports and evaluations are not meant to contrast, compete, or conflict with other evaluations, some of which are mandated by the federal government.

This report, and its planned successors, attempts to accomplish three goals:

1. To provide a broad overview of Alabama's workforce system for business, education, and civic leaders.
2. To provide data that measures progress of the major components of the education pipeline.
3. To provide a detailed evaluation of one component of the education-workforce development pipeline.

## **Stop the Slide, Start the Climb**

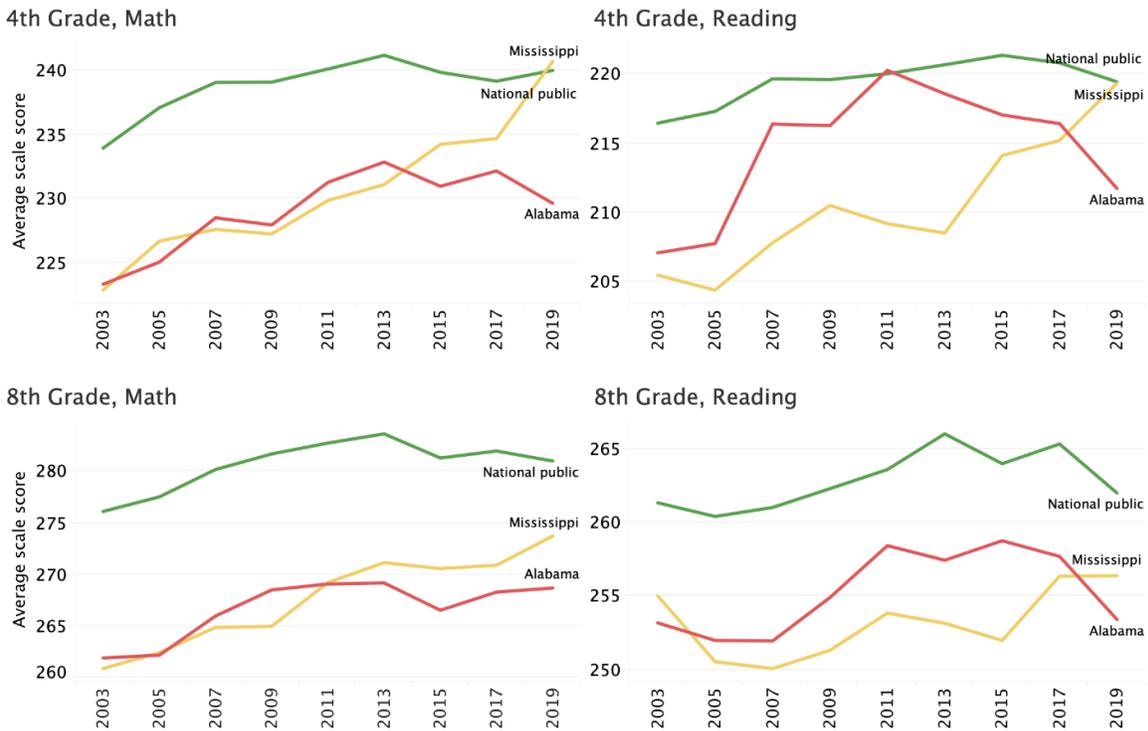
### **Concepts to Enable Alabama Students to Achieve Their Fullest Potential**

Recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, Alabama faces both a monumental educational challenge and a generational opportunity to tackle educational shortcomings that have long held us back and which threaten our future economic prosperity. Investment by the state and federal government will provide the public education system with perhaps its largest injection of discretionary money ever.

Public school systems, with assistance and oversight from the Alabama State Department of Education, must carefully plan, invest in proven approaches, and coordinate with communities, so students not only make up for learning lost in the Covid-19 crisis but go far beyond to meet the rewritten expectations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Before the pandemic, Alabama was already in a position of peril. In an economy that increasingly demands educated and technologically skilled workers, Alabama students aren't keeping up. On the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Alabama fourth graders ranked 47<sup>th</sup> in reading and 50<sup>th</sup> in Math, Alabama eighth graders ranked 48<sup>th</sup> in reading and 50<sup>th</sup> in math. Economists have predicted that Alabama will not have an adequate supply of credentialed workers to meet the state economy's potential for growth unless the public education system rapidly improves.

Figure 1. U.S., Alabama, and Mississippi NAEP Trends



Long before the pandemic struck, state leaders in education, business and government had recognized the need for catalytic change and had set ambitious goals:

1. For every third grader to be reading at grade level before moving on to the fourth grade.<sup>1</sup>
2. For every high school senior to graduate ready for college and/or career ready.<sup>2</sup>
3. To add 500,000 highly skilled workers to its workforce by 2025<sup>3</sup>

The Covid crisis introduces an additional challenge and a more urgent need to meet those goals.

<sup>1</sup> The Alabama Literacy Act of 2019

<sup>2</sup> Alabama Achieves: A Strategic Plan for a New Decade, Alabama State Department of Education

<sup>3</sup> Success Plus, Alabama Workforce Council

With the closure of schools in the face of the pandemic and the uneven mix of digital and in-person instruction delivered in the current school year, educators are reporting lower levels of academic progress.

While it is too early to gauge the full effects, data from two sets of mid-year 2020-2021 assessments administered in Alabama schools show about half of students not meeting expected benchmarks.<sup>4</sup> While some students made up some lost ground during the school year, others, including some of the most disadvantaged students, have had less time in the classroom and were more challenged in connecting remotely. That disparity has likely exacerbated existing achievement gaps. Summarizing national research, Alabama's A+ Education Partnership said, if left unaddressed, students could lose 5-9 months of learning (6-12 months for students of color) on average.<sup>5</sup>

To address what is expected to be a long term drag on educational progress, an unprecedented investment in education is being made by the state and federal governments over the next three years to remedy learning loss and to build a better educational foundation for today's students and tomorrow's workforce.

1. The two most recent federal Covid relief bills, the second [CARES Act](#) signed in December and the American Rescue Plan enacted in March, will provide well over \$2.5 billion to Alabama schools to deal with the effects of the pandemic, including to counter learning loss.
2. Gov. Kay Ivey's proposed 2022 Alabama Education Budget, currently under consideration, calls for spending \$100 million on reading instruction, which would effectively double the state's 2020 spending on early reading instruction.<sup>6</sup>
3. The second CARES Act allowed the governor to extend the \$100 million program providing broadband to low-income students. Additional

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<sup>4</sup> According to the ALSDE, 46% of early grade students were below benchmark on the Amplify formative reading assessment, and 50% of students taking formative reading assessments by Istation scored below the benchmarks. Results of additional assessments are being collected.

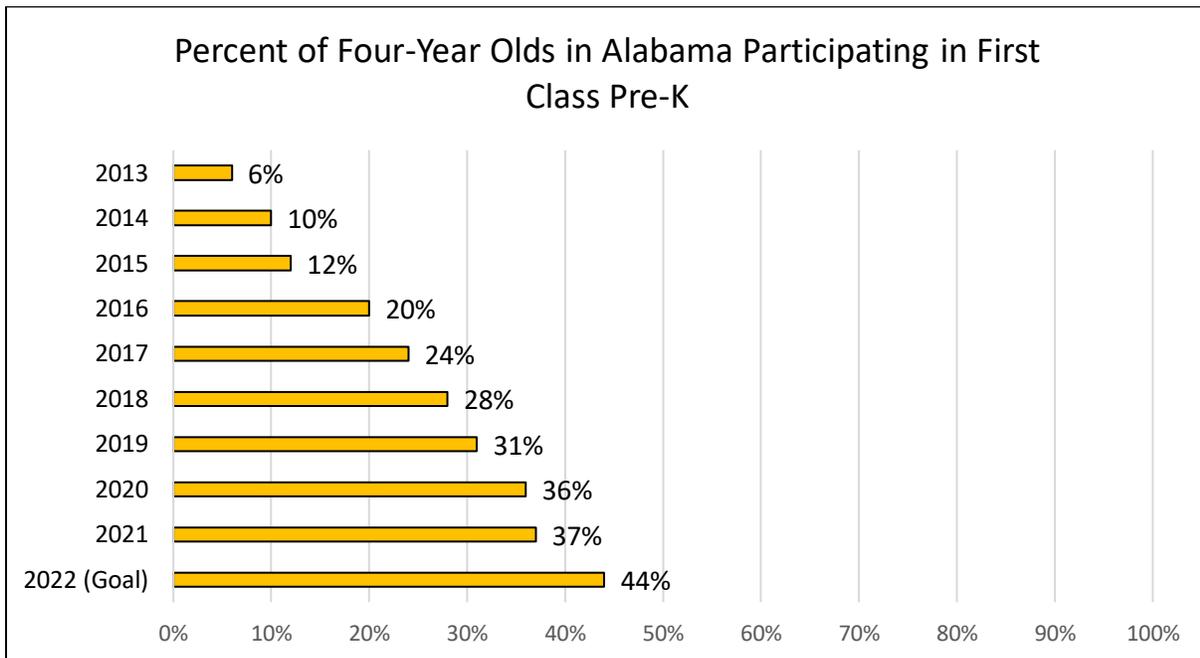
<sup>5</sup> Unpacking Learning Loss and Its Impact on Students, [https://aplusala.org/blog/2021/02/18/unpacking-learning-loss-and-its-impact-on-alabamas-students/?blm\\_aid=22202](https://aplusala.org/blog/2021/02/18/unpacking-learning-loss-and-its-impact-on-alabamas-students/?blm_aid=22202)

<sup>6</sup> <http://lsa.state.al.us/PDF/Fiscal/FY2022/ETF/ETF-FY-2022-Gov-Rec.pdf>

CARES Act funds and \$22 million from the Alabama legislature is available to expand broadband in rural areas, a need that has emerged as an educational necessity.

4. The budget also proposes a \$24 million increase to expand Pre-k from 37% to 44% of 4 year-olds; an \$11 million increase to expand middle school opportunities in Career Technical education; and a \$3 million increase for high school-college dual enrollment.

Figure 2. History of First Class Pre-K expansion



These large investments must be used strategically and systematically, according to a plan.

**Spending should be planned, coordinated, and complementary.**

The huge infusion of federal and state money will be spent more effectively if used in a coordinated, non-duplicative fashion.

The Alabama Department of Education will require school systems to apply for federal relief money. Applications should require detailed plans to

spending federal CARES money to address learning loss, including plans to coordinate those dollars with money spent to address the requirements of the Alabama Literacy Act. Money and programs which were already planned and funded through the Literacy Act can be supplemented with federal dollars used to counter deficits in math

The State Department should review the applications to ensure the plans are well-thought out and include evidence-based approaches to addressing deficits.

The federal CARES Act suggests spending on

- “High-quality assessments that are valid and reliable, to accurately assess students’ academic progress and assist educators in meeting students’ academic needs”
- “Planning and implementing activities related to summer learning and supplemental afterschool programs, including providing classroom instruction or online learning during the summer months”
- “Implementing evidence-based activities to meet the comprehensive needs of students.”

Each of the points listed has a parallel in approaches described in the Literacy Act. Federal and state dollars working in tandem can more comprehensively address the needs of students identified through Literacy Act activities. Additionally, the framework of programs set up to address reading issues can serve a broader base of students including those who would benefit from additional math instruction.

### **All Students Should be Comprehensively Assessed.**

A key component of the Literacy Act is universal use of high-quality assessment tools employed to identify reading delays. In the spring of 2020, the Alabama Department of Education approved a menu of six reading and five math assessments school systems can use to provide “real-time monitoring of

reading and math progress of students in Grades K-3 so that there is timely adjustment of instruction and intervention for all students.”<sup>7</sup>

These math and reading assessments now in place across the state should give educators tools to identify the students in need of extra help in reading and math and match that student with appropriate, evidence-based, high quality support during the summer, and during and after school in the next academic year.

**All students should be provided the instruction they need during school, after school, and over the summer, working with community partners.**

When a student is discovered to have a reading deficit, the Literacy Act requires that the deficit be investigated and addressed. Supplementary funding from the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan could support a similar approach to math instruction. With those additional funds, all students can be provided opportunities for academic acceleration.

These tutoring and enrichment opportunities can be offered in school or out of school. When providing after-school or summer programs, schools should look to existing partners in the community. Partnering with experienced, non-profit organizations to provide tutoring or enrichment programming can stretch dollars and offer children a more rounded experience. A+ Education Partnership recently published [\*Tackling Unfinished Learning and Learning Loss: Support Expanded Access to High-Quality Afterschool & Summer Programs\*](#), which outlines the need for a state grant program to grow partnerships between local school districts and community-based programs and highlights effective practices and examples that districts can replicate.

A wide range of organizations offer services to children after school or in the summer, often with an academic component. Examples include the Boys

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.alsde.edu/sites/memos/Memoranda/FY20-2050.pdf>

and Girls Clubs; Alabama Afterschool Community Network; YMCA's and YWCA's; Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers such as Alfred Saliba Center in Dothan; One Place in Tuscaloosa; SAFE in Sylacauga; Montgomery Educational Foundation's Brain Forest Program and local education foundations statewide; Summer Adventures in Learning, the Alabama Afterschool Alliance; and 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

School systems can help partners by providing school generated data from assessments for participating children and can help with the administration of pre- and post-program assessments for the participants.

The results of the pre- and post-participation data should be shared between the schools and the programs in order to serve students and continuously improve delivery. Interventions, whether delivered by schools or partners, that do not produce results should be re-evaluated and discontinued if they are not working.

**The Department should provide support, guidance, and accountability.**

While granting some flexibility, the federal government is requiring states to administer standardized tests this spring. Alabama officials had already indicated that they intended to administer its new standardized test, the Alabama Comprehensive Assessment Program (ACAP). This spring will be the first administration of the test, which was developed by Alabama educators working with a national test development organization.

This initial administration of the ACAP is particularly important because test results can be used to measure where students stand in comparison to peers across the state. It will also help the state determine any locations where students experience particularly acute learning loss. Resources and aid can be deployed accordingly. As urged by [House Joint Resolution \(HJR 72\)](#) adopted by the Alabama Legislature, the test results from this spring should not be used as an accountability measure. Instead, the results will establish a baseline a point from which school systems should be expected to build to recovery and beyond.

The results are also crucial in that they will indicate the percentage of students who will be vulnerable to potential retention under the Literacy Act when the retention provision of the Act comes in force. Results from second graders will also provide an additional method for identifying students who will need extra attention in third grade to stay on track.

While it is appropriate that the results of this year's test not be used in a formulaic accountability scheme, as recovery proceeds, ACAP will identify systems and schools that are not improving student success.

As the recovery proceeds, the state Department should inform systems and communities if the local schools are not making adequate progress in bringing all students up to grade level proficiency. That is when the state Department can use more stringent tools to assure every student has stopped the slide and started the climb.

Alabama has a most difficult challenge brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. But Alabama also has a unique and exciting opportunity to create a school-by-school, school system-by-school system plan, with accountability to achieve the three goals identified at the beginning of this report.

1. For every third grader to be reading at grade level before moving on to the fourth grade.<sup>8</sup>
2. For every high school senior to graduate ready for college and/or career ready.<sup>9</sup>
3. To add 500,000 highly skilled workers to its workforce by 2025<sup>10</sup>

Now is the time for bold, ambitious goals, for entire communities to work together with schools on well-defined plans, with accountability, so all of Alabama can reach new heights of achievement and prosperity.

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<sup>8</sup> The Alabama Literacy Act of 2019

<sup>9</sup> Alabama Achieves: A Strategic Plan for a New Decade, Alabama State Department of Education

<sup>10</sup> Success Plus, Alabama Workforce Council

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