



2020-2021

Annual Report

Celebrating 30 years



EDUCATION
PARTNERSHIP

RISING ABOVE EVERY CHALLENGE

Our Vision

Every child in Alabama has the opportunity and the support to succeed in school and to become a contributing member of society.
#GreatSchoolsForEveryChild



LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT,

Celebrating 30 years

—

A+ Family,

As you know, the past two years have been the most tumultuous in education in our history. The pandemic hit our communities hard and our schools even harder. There is work to be done as we begin our recovery from the pandemic and the subsequent year of disrupted learning for Alabama's students.

2021 is also an important year in the history of A+ Education Partnership as we celebrate our 30th anniversary serving Alabama's students. These past three decades have taught us the importance of staying the course to improve education in our state for every single child.

We thought it was fitting to select the theme of "Rising Above Every Challenge" to mark this momentous occasion, not only as an acknowledgment of the immense challenges our state has seen amid the pandemic - but also as an important part of A+'s identity as an organization.

From our founding, A+ has learned to adapt our work continuously to make important progress for Alabama's students - even when the first attempt isn't successful. As a result, our organization has become an agile, innovative, and trusted voice for education reform in our state. Each of our adaptations - whether it be the founding of our two programs A+ College Ready and the Alabama Best Practices Center or the important, evidence-based policy work we accomplish daily - has made us stronger and more committed to our number one priority: Alabama's students. These evolutions have also led to educational improvements, showing that when we work together to improve teaching and learning, we can accomplish great things for our children.

There is still much to be done. As we celebrate 30 years of A+, we celebrate and learn from our past as we recommit ourselves to the work of creating a bright future for each child in Alabama.



Mark E. Dixon, President



Who We Are

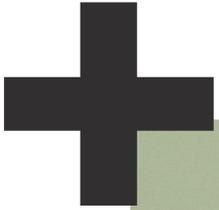
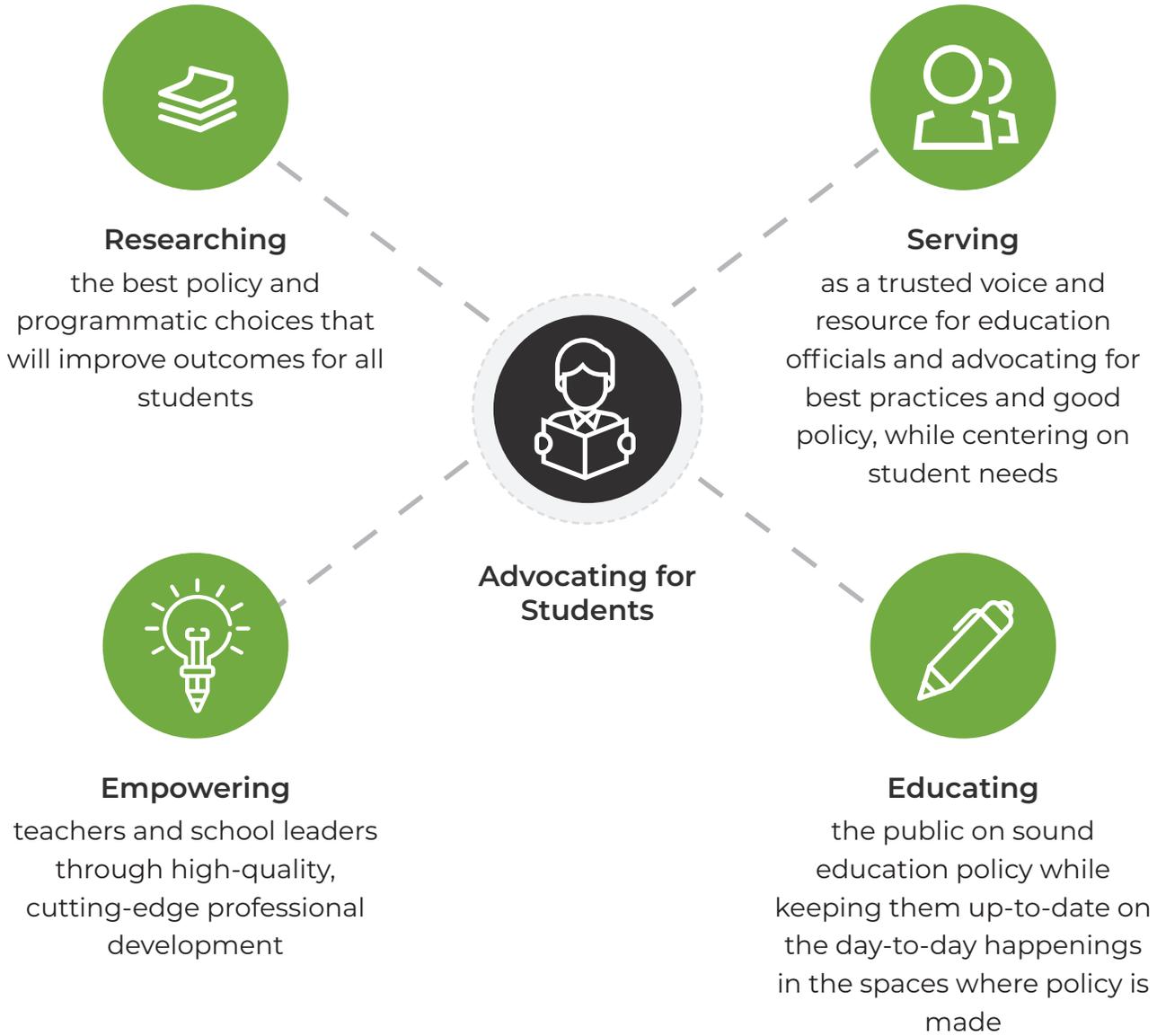
A+ Education Partnership drives improvements in public education for every Alabama student. We set and deliver high expectations by advocating for policies, practices, and investments that advance learning, and by partnering with schools to build the capacity of teachers and leaders.

As the only statewide organization focused on education reform, we believe:

- All children deserve an excellent education, regardless of where they live.
- We must make sure money is spent on what we know improves learning, and we must invest more in student-centered efforts.
- All children need support and guidance from caring adults in their families, at schools, and in their communities.
- All students should be challenged in the classroom with intellectually-stimulating curricula that teach them real-world skills.
- Every child can learn at high levels with effective teaching and support.
- Thriving communities ensure that their schools prepare all students for work, college, and citizenship.
- All families should have the opportunity to choose the right educational path that meets the needs of their children.
- Schools should meet each child where they are by continuously innovating and adopting best practices to improve student outcomes.

High-performing schools for every child are within our reach. We know what works, and when we act on what we know, both teachers and students excel. Principals, teachers, and communities **must summon the will to do what works.**

Our role in the state serves many purposes, including:



The A+ Approach: Advocacy and Practice

A+ Education Partnership is Different

With one foot in the statehouse and one foot in the schoolhouse, we advocate on behalf of all Alabama public school students.



EDUCATION
PARTNERSHIP

A+ Education Partnership works with elected and appointed officials in Montgomery and beyond to promote policies and investments that move public education in the right direction.

BUT THE WORK DOESN'T STOP THERE.

A+ also works in schools. While good policy moves education in the right direction, real change happens at the school level. So, we operate two programs that drive policy implementation and inform future policy work.

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ALABAMA
BEST PRACTICES
CENTER

The Alabama Best Practices Center supports teachers, principals, and superintendents with cutting-edge, network-based professional development.



COLLEGE
READY

A+ College Ready partners with middle and high schools to increase access to and preparation for Advanced Placement courses by training teachers to raise standards in grades 6-12.



30 Years of Education Reform

A+ was founded in 1991 by Leadership Alabama Alumni, Caroline Novak and Bill Smith, to unite business, civic, government, and education leaders around one common goal: improving student opportunity and achievement for every child, no matter where they live.

Thirty years later, the core of our work continues, serving as the only voice solely for students in the Legislature and across the state, advocating for policies and investments that advance learning for every Alabama student.

Founding members of A+ saw the biggest challenge facing our state: the lack of quality education for Alabama students. This challenge affected all areas of life for Alabamians from personal success to the economy at large.

The work began with interviews of over 50 key Alabamians with a stake in public education—from parents to CEOs—to talk about their aspirations for our public schools. Then, A+ held Town Meetings around the state. The first town meeting was in Tuscaloosa, with over 2,000 community members in attendance. As the tour continued, over 22,000 Alabamians turned out for A+-sponsored town meetings in 22 cities. This showing immediately proved one thing to A+ and our stakeholders: parents, community members, business leaders, and educators all shared a common goal - an education system that adequately and equitably serves all of Alabama's students.

After listening to a cross-section of Alabamians, and with the help of experienced experts, A+ drafted a plan to improve our public schools, called *A Blueprint for Successful Alabama Schools*, which later turned into legislation called the “Alabama First Plan.”

While the Alabama First Plan failed in the Legislature in 1994, A+ learned from this and adapted our approach to build on the momentum and support of the town hall meetings for creating great schools for every child. Since then, our work has evolved to recognize that students and their needs must be at the center of our advocacy efforts, and policy decisions should be driven by data. From defending high academic standards, to the creation and implementation of statewide early literacy programs, to promoting the right of families' choices in their children's education, A+ has tirelessly worked to give each child the support they need to succeed in college, career, and life.



This advocacy work was made even more impactful by the creation of our two direct-service programs. A+ recognized the need to support change at the school level in order to create proof points for improving outcomes for students. The Alabama Best Practices Center, established in 1999, was created to address the lack of high-quality support and professional learning for teachers and education leaders. A+ College Ready was founded through a national partnership in 2008 to address the challenge of low expectations and rigor in the classroom and lack of access to Advanced Placement coursework for students. Together, these programs help uniquely drive the advocacy work at the core of A+ by giving us firsthand experience with the day-to-day reality in Alabama's schools. In 2018, the A+ Student VOICES Team was founded to empower students to advocate for positive change in their schools and across the state at large.

This growing and evolving statehouse-schoolhouse approach makes A+ different from our peers and better equips us to rise above the challenges facing all of us as we work to create great schools for every child.

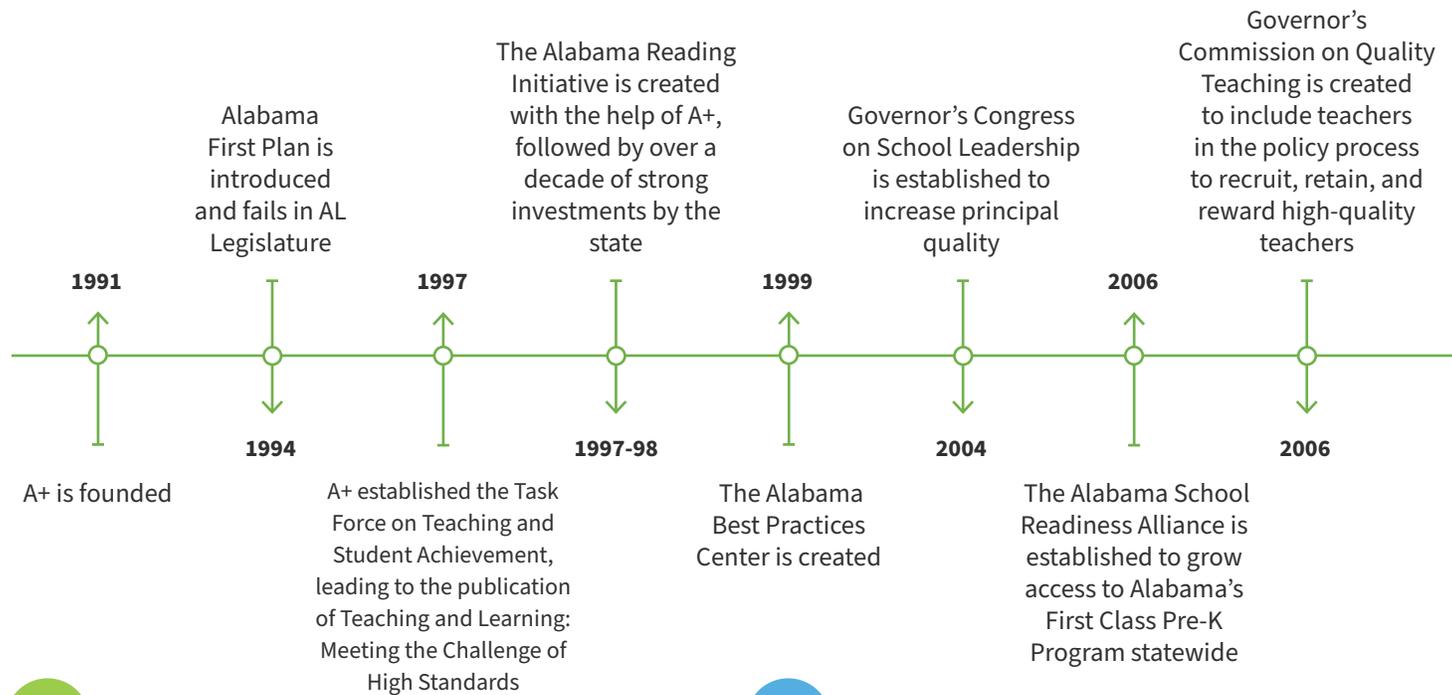
“We must recognize that our children must achieve at higher levels—that’s a given now. The real question is, how do we move forward so they don’t get discouraged? We must understand that children, regardless of their background, can achieve. We have to challenge those children and bring parents into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

- Co-Founder of A+ Education Partnership, Bill Smith - 1996

April 1993 - More than 2,000 community members attended a community meeting in Tuscaloosa, AL to discuss education reform.

Proven Record of Student-Centered Advocacy

A+ works to improve education through strategic, student-centered advocacy initiatives. Over the last 30 years, A+ has adapted our approach to meet each challenge, relentlessly working until solutions are created. We've taken a targeted approach with each of our policy goals: intentionally facilitate public-private partnerships, create replicable pilot initiatives to provide a "proof point," advocate for state funding to expand those "proof points" and ensure the policy impacts all students equitably.



1

CHALLENGE: LITERACY

One of A+'s most important advocacy efforts is ensuring every child has the fundamental literacy skills they need to succeed. In 1998, with the help of A+, the state created the Alabama Reading Initiative, which provided a trained literacy coach to every elementary school in the state. In 2002, at the urging of A+, the state committed to increased funding for the initiative, along with a statewide focus on literacy. As a result, Alabama students successfully met the national average in reading in 2011, proving that aligned leadership, strong investments, and providing resources directly to schools works. Unfortunately, the economic downturn and increased turnover in state educational leadership caused the state to lose ground in literacy, falling once again to 49th in reading in the nation in 2019. That year, A+ worked tirelessly to pass the Alabama Literacy Act, recommitting the state to literacy. With increased focus on K-3 reading, providing reading coaches to schools who need them most, interventions for struggling readers, and teacher training in the science of reading, Alabama can again gain the needed momentum to ensure every child can read.

2

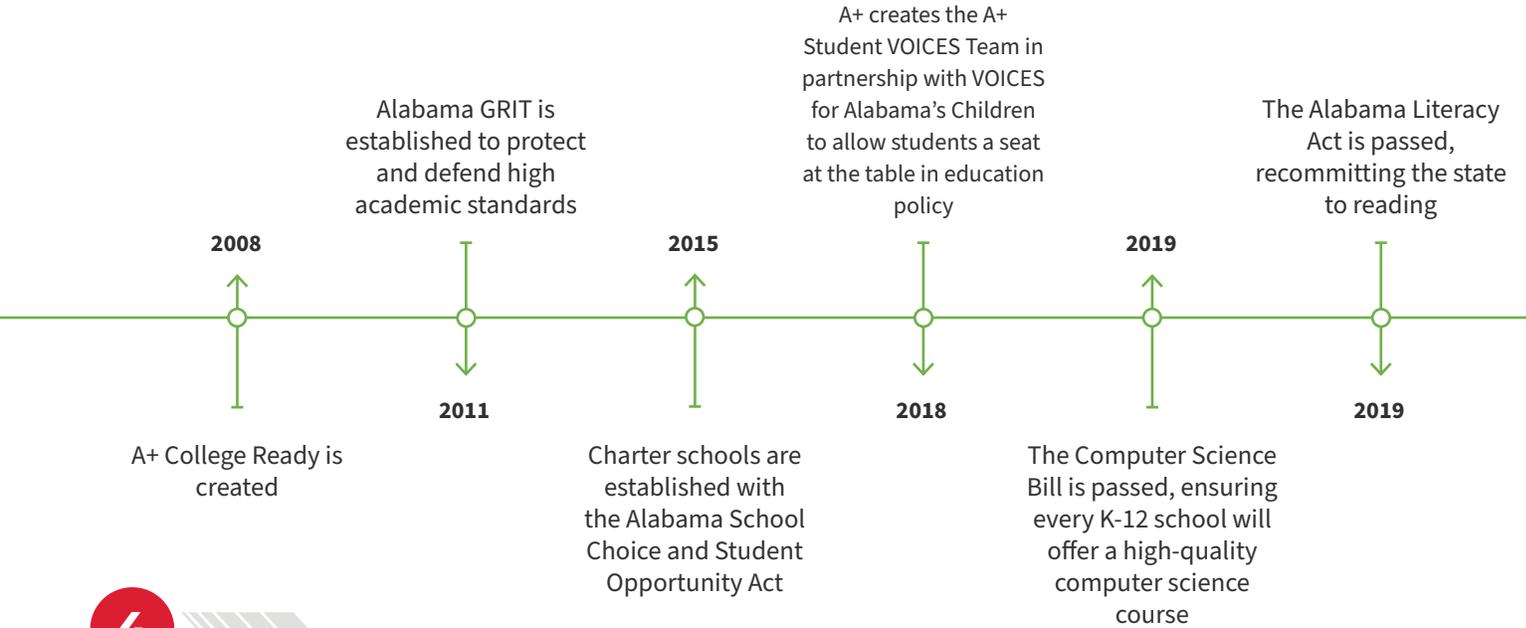
CHALLENGE: LACK OF ACCESS TO AP

Research shows that access to Advanced Placement courses increases a student's chance of attending and completing college. Prior to the creation of A+ College Ready, few students had access to these rigorous courses and college preparation - especially students of color and students in poverty. In 2008, A+ earned a \$13.2M grant to create A+ College Ready to improve the access and success of students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses in math, science, & English. This work has expanded to increase rigorous coursework in grades 6-10 to create a pipeline of students prepared for AP in high school. The Alabama Legislature and the State Department of Education fund A+ College Ready - an exemplar public/private partnership. A+ College Ready made an immediate impact. Alabama led the country for 8 years in growth for students of color enrolled in AP courses - a 336% increase. In 2020, despite the pandemic, students of color earned the highest number of qualifying scores in Alabama history. Additionally, the number of low-income students taking AP tests has increased by over 340% since 2008.

3

CHALLENGE: LACK OF ACCESS TO FIRST CLASS PRE-K

Research shows that access to high-quality Pre-K can change the trajectory of a child’s life, from being better prepared for K-12 school, to decreasing the likelihood of incarceration, to even increasing their lifetime earnings later in life. In 2006, A+ helped establish the Alabama School Readiness Alliance to increase access to the state’s nationally-recognized, high-quality First Class Pre-K program, which at the time was only available to 5% of Alabama’s 4-year-olds. This program is a unique example of public-private partnerships, because the Department of Early Childhood Education uses a “diverse delivery” model, increasing the quality of Pre-K classrooms in schools, churches, private centers, and more. In 2020, a statewide study showed that this program had lasting effects on student achievement in reading and math through at least the 8th grade. Since 2006, the state has consistently committed to increasing access to this program statewide with the goal of ensuring access to 70% of 4-year-olds by 2026. In 2022, over 40% of 4-year-olds will have access.



4

CHALLENGE: THE NEED FOR HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

One of the strongest indicators of student achievement is access to a highly-trained, supported teacher. In 1997, A+ established the Task Force on Teaching and Student Achievement to tackle low student achievement. This task force produced a report that outlined a major challenge in the state: every child needs a “well-prepared, capable and caring” teacher to help them succeed. In order to improve classroom instruction, the state needed to prioritize high-quality professional development for teachers to hone their craft and meet students where they are. From this recommendation came the creation of the Alabama Best Practices Center in 1999. The ABPC manages professional learning networks of teachers and school and district leaders to strengthen teaching and leadership practices proven to boost student learning. Participants value connecting with other educators across the state to share challenges, brainstorm strategies, and celebrate successes. In 2020, an external evaluation of the Alabama Best Practices Center showed that participating schools had higher student achievement in math and reading compared to their peers. This new data further proves that supporting educators and improving classroom instruction is critical to increasing student achievement statewide.



Direct Impact in Alabama Schools



THE ALABAMA BEST PRACTICES CENTER

In 1999, A+ launched the Alabama Best Practices Center (ABPC) to increase the capacity of teachers, instructional coaches, principals, and superintendents by connecting and equipping them with proven resources and best practices in instruction and leadership and providing an outlet to network and learn from their peers. The APBC is a dynamic program proven to improve student achievement in math and reading at participating schools, according to an external study completed in 2020.

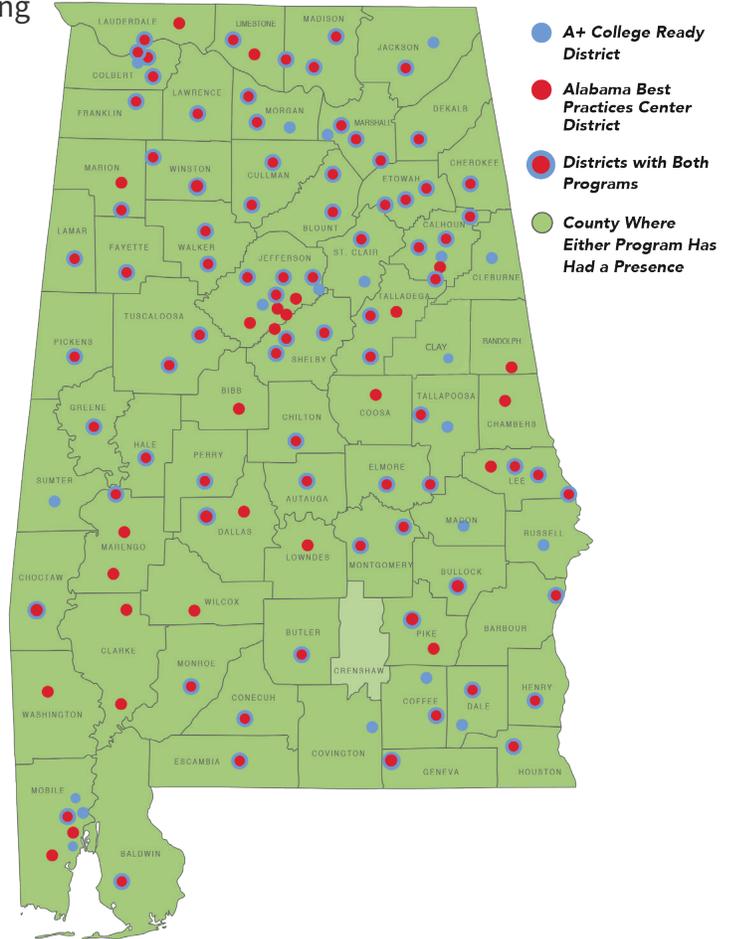
HIGHER
student achievement in reading and math for participating schools

112
school districts served since 1999

14
regional networks serving educators statewide

27,000
educators impacted in 2021

~400,000
of Alabama's 740,000 students impacted in 2021



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30 Years of Service



As A+'s very first employee, Cathy Gassenheimer has dedicated her life to bettering both the lives of children and the teaching profession. In 1999, Cathy created the Alabama Best Practices Center to increase access to high-quality professional learning for educators statewide.

"Cathy's vision and commitment to adult learning are celebrated across the state. Her personal investment in continuous improvement, infectious love of learning, and belief in the value of teachers have created optimum adult learning opportunities. As a result, students have been thriving in the classrooms of educators who are devoted to supporting their students' learning with creativity and competence."

- Caroline Novak, Founder of A+ Education Partnership



A+ COLLEGE READY

In 2007, A+ was awarded a \$13.2 million grant from Exxon, Dell, and the Gates Foundation to create A+ College Ready (A+CR) to improve the access and success of students in STEM and English Advanced Placement courses. Our A+ College Ready program continues to open the door for all middle and high school students in Alabama to reach their academic potential. A+CR provides training for 6th through 12th-grade teachers in 26 courses in math, science, English, social studies, Spanish, psychology, art,

and computer science. A+CR works to develop a diverse pipeline of students prepared for rigorous high school coursework by increasing rigor in classrooms, providing students and teachers with support, and subsidizing the cost of AP for low-income students.

200
schools served since 2009

167%
increase in students receiving qualifying scores since 2009

336%
increase in students of color receiving qualifying scores since 2009

340%
increase in students in poverty taking AP courses since 2009

\$270,417,000
in potential college tuition savings for AL students

Creating Great Schools For Every Child

As we look to the future of A+, our number one priority remains the same: Alabama's students. Since our founding, we have known that building broad coalitions of stakeholders who are united around the common goal of an equitable education system is imperative for statewide change. As such, we will continue building strong relationships with critical stakeholders. This is even more important as our state recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. There has never been a better time to reimagine our education system and enact smart policies and investments that center on the needs of our students. Our upcoming policy priorities will do just that as we expand our outreach to students, families, educators, and other important stakeholders.

POLICY PRIORITIES

1 EARLY LITERACY

A+ will continue our efforts to support and fully implement the Alabama Literacy Act, which we helped pass in 2019. A+ was asked by the state to support the Alabama Literacy Task Force to help drive implementation, and this work is ongoing. This year, A+ secured the Governor's veto on a bill that would have prematurely delayed the full implementation of the act by 2 years. We will continue to push for increased funding to support teacher training in the science of reading, new screeners and assessments, and interventions for struggling readers so that all students have the reading skills they need.

2 HIGH-QUALITY, COMMUNITY-BASED SUMMER & AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

The challenges caused by the pandemic will not be solved during the school day alone, and partnerships between schools and community organizations are critical. We are working with school districts to provide guidance and best practices on high-quality programs that can be replicated now using the current influx of federal relief dollars. We are also advocating for a state grant program to incentivize partnerships between schools and community organizations to raise quality and expand access long-term.

3 IMPROVING MATH ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL STUDENTS

Improving Alabama's last-in-the-nation math achievement is a top priority. As such, A+ will continue to advocate for full implementation of the newly-passed Math Course of Study, including high-quality teacher training, math coaches in schools, and providing extra support to students who need it most.

4 FEDERAL RELIEF DOLLARS

As \$3 billion in federal relief funds come to our schools, it is important that we work with districts to ensure that this money is spent wisely and effectively. We will be working with local districts to make the most of this one-time opportunity to reimagine an education system that works for our students.

5 EXPANDING ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY CHARTER SCHOOLS

A+ believes that Alabama families need more opportunities to choose the right education for their children. A+ will continue to advocate for equitable funding for and the expansion of effective public charter schools that have the autonomy to innovate and ensure students have the support they need.

6 EXPANDING ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY COMPUTER SCIENCE EDUCATION

Tech jobs are comprising more and more of the economy in Alabama. Our students must be able to compete on a global scale with the skills they need to be successful in an ever-evolving workforce. A+ will continue to advocate for funding for the expansion of high-quality computer science education in every K-12 school. Additionally, our A+ College Ready program will continue to provide our cutting-edge, high-quality teacher training in computer science to prepare teachers to teach these courses in their schools.



Building Coalitions



Students

In 2018, A+ created the A+ Student VOICES Team in partnership with VOICES for Alabama’s Children. This program is a statewide, student-led advocacy group for high school students that guides them to be civically engaged leaders and to be a powerful voice in public policy. Students who participate help shape the program’s components and priorities while receiving advocacy training and experience. This group is expanding membership annually and will adapt to more in-person opportunities post-pandemic. For the 2021-22 school year, students will have the opportunity to attend State Board of Education meetings, legislative advocacy days during the 2022 Legislative Session, and meet with the Alabama Delegation in Washington D.C.



Families

A+ wants to continue to grow our outreach and give families a stronger voice in the policymaking process that impacts their children’s futures. It is imperative that parents and families are both informed about and involved in education reform, because they know the specific needs of their children and the challenges that exist in their schools. As an example, A+ Education Partnership was asked by the Alabama Legislature to curate and supply parents with important at-home learning resources during the pandemic. We created our A+ Parent Portal to meet this need. As we recover from the pandemic and plan for the future, we will continue to adapt this online portal for parents and families to provide timely updates and needed information regarding their children’s education, serving as a strong foundation of public information sharing about important education policy and budget decisions. From this foundation, we plan to create big, transformational change in education working in partnership with families.



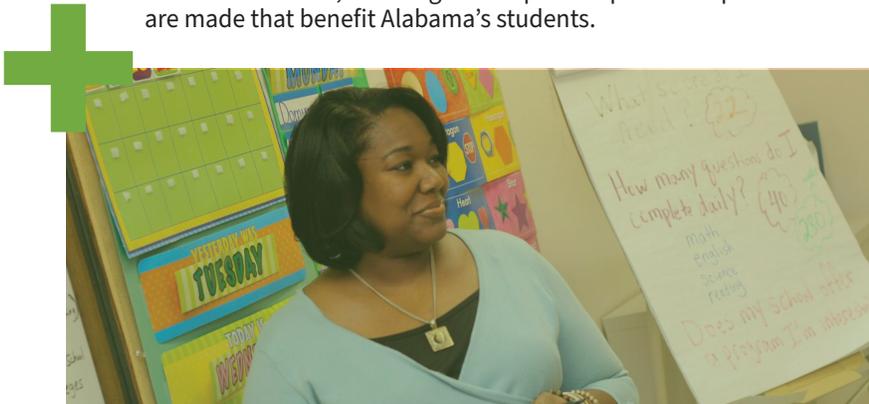
Educators

A+ has always put educators at the heart of policymaking. Historically, A+ has partnered with Governors to convene educator-led commissions that have empowered teachers to identify problems and recommend solutions. Our Alabama Best Practices Center and A+ College Ready programs continually adapt their training to meet the changing needs of teachers. Through these partnerships, teacher voices continually feed our policy recommendations to state leaders. Our weekly communication with teachers statewide also keeps them informed on policymaking and legislation and provides opportunities to advocate for policies by contacting elected officials directly.



Community Members

A+ serves as an important intermediary between the state and the public. Our innovative digital communications help break down complex education policy discussions while keeping the public up-to-date on current happenings in education policy statewide. This work is ever-expanding as our advocacy team continues to grow and add new talent. Additionally, we continue to serve as an important connector between private entities and state education leaders, ensuring that important partnerships are made that benefit Alabama’s students.



What it Takes

Our core funding comes from



FY 2020

	Corporate, Foundation, & Donor Contributions \$496,042
	Program Service Fees \$582,198
	Government Grants & Contracts \$8,737,721

A+ uses its funding efficiently, limits administrative costs, and maintains reserves to invest in continuously improving our programs.

*FY 20 Total Expenses – \$756,610 Administrative (10%)
\$ 8,197,925 Programming

\$8,954,535 Total

*Per FY 2019 audited revenues and expenses

A+ changes the way public dollars are spent on education in the state of Alabama. Through a public-private partnership with the Alabama State Department of Education, A+ manages the legislative allocation for Advanced Placement. Additionally, at the request of the state, A+ provides Computer Science teacher training, Math and English course of study training, professional development for teachers and school leaders, and rigorous curricula in middle schools. In fact, every dollar we receive from our donors generates over nineteen dollars from state grants and program fees.

\$1  \$19

Champions of Education

\$50,000+

Regions Foundation
Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation

\$25,000-\$49,999

Alabama Power Foundation
The Caring Foundation/Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama
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\$10,000-\$24,999

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RIISING ABOVE EVERY CHALLENGE

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