



EDUCATION
PARTNERSHIP



RAISE Act Implementation Toolkit

Supporting Special Education Students

RAISE Act Implementation Toolkit



About this Toolkit

This toolkit is for district and school leaders, school board members, families, and community members to learn about the Renewing Alabama's Investment in Student Excellence (RAISE) Act Implementation. It includes information about the 2025 legislation, the district budgeting process and how to get involved, and how Alabama's districts and schools can support the student groups identified in the RAISE Act.

Here is a preview of what you will see:

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Overview of the RAISE Act

What is the RAISE Act? How does it benefit students?

For 30 years, Alabama schools were funded based on how many students attended, instead of what those students needed. The RAISE Act of 2025 updated the old formula by adding more money for students who need it most. More funds for students can be transformational, with research showing that additional dollars translate to better outcomes for students. RAISE funds are flexible, and districts can decide how to spend them in ways that best help their students. Districts can now hire aides or tutors, run summer and afterschool programs, or pursue other resources that directly support students with the RAISE Act. Districts started receiving RAISE Act funds in the 2025-2026 school year.

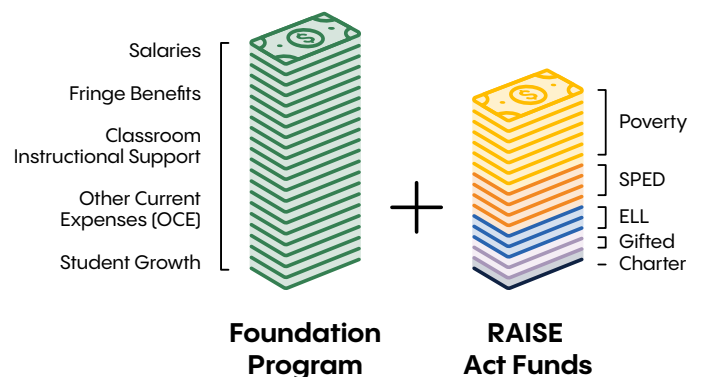
Why should I get involved?

RAISE funds must be used on student needs. The RAISE Act increased the funding available for students in poverty and English language learners, and generated funds for special education students at the state level for the first time in Alabama's history. We must make sure that districts are using this money to give students the resources they need. **To do that, districts need to hear innovative and effective ideas that have worked in Southern schools – and the voices of parents, families, students, and communities need to be heard and valued in the decision-making process.**



How much money does the RAISE Act invest in students?

The Foundation Program remains Alabama's primary school funding formula, while the RAISE Act provides additional funding for student needs. In its first year (2025-2026), \$166 million was sent to districts for five student groups: students in poverty, special education students, English learners, gifted students, and charter school students. In the second year, \$191 million was appropriated. The Alabama Legislature is committed to the RAISE Act, and these funds will keep supporting students long-term.



How is the RAISE Act funded?

The RAISE Act is funded through the annual Education Trust Fund budget and a dedicated reserve fund. The RAISE Fund was started with \$375 million in FY26 and grew to \$700 million in FY27 using money transferred from the Education Opportunities Reserve Fund. The RAISE Fund will grow over time through transfers and investments to fund future years.

How are RAISE Act funds calculated for each school district?

The RAISE Act established five student groups. Each student group has a weight, which is a percentage of the base amount that determines their additional funding. Here is the formula to determine how money flows from the state to districts for RAISE funds:

1. The state's Foundation Program per-pupil funding average from the previous year is the "base" amount. The base is defined each year in the Education Trust Fund (ETF) budget. In the 2026–2027 school year, the base was \$7,829.
2. Each student group is assigned a weight, which is a percentage of the base amount, that determines their additional funding. Weights are set in the ETF budget annually.
3. Districts receive their RAISE Funds based on the number of students they have in each group. The Alabama Department of Education releases the official totals for each district for each student group.

STUDENT GROUP	FISCAL YEAR 2025-2026			FISCAL YEAR 2026–2027		
	Weighted Allocation	Funding/ Student	Statewide Funding	Weighted Allocation	Funding/ Student	Statewide Funding
Students in Poverty	2.25%	\$170	\$68.2 million	2.75%	\$215	\$86.8 million
Special Education: Tier 1	2%	\$151	\$48.8 million	2.5%	\$196	\$54.1million
Special Education: Tier 2	10%	\$755		10%	\$783	
Special Education: Tier 3	75%	\$5,660		75%	\$5,872	
ELL Students: Districts under 9% ELL	7%	\$528	\$33.5 million	7%	\$548	\$34.4 million
ELL Students: Districts over 9% ELL	10%	\$755		10%	\$783	
Gifted Students 5% of ADM	4.50%	\$340	\$12.2 million	4.75%	\$372	\$13.6 million
Charter School	2%	\$151	\$1.1 million	2%	\$157	\$1.4 million
Base Factor	\$7,547			\$7,829		
TOTAL	\$166 million			\$191 million		

How do I find out how much money my district received?

Each year, the Alabama Department of Education will release a memo to districts outlining the RAISE funds they will receive for the upcoming school year. The memo for 2026 is accessible [here](#).

How will the state ensure that districts are investing RAISE funds well?

All RAISE Act funds must be spent on the students who generate them. Planned accountability measures include:

- Districts will annually report their yearly plan covering student achievement goals, how RAISE funds will be spent, and progress updates.
- The ALSDE will create a statewide application by fiscal year 2028 to align with state priorities and meet federal and state requirements.
- A RAISE Act Accountability and Implementation Board will be set up by July 1, 2028, to monitor districts and make sure funds are spent effectively.
- A Review Committee will track the overall progress of the RAISE Act and suggest improvements.

Who is supported by the RAISE Act?

The RAISE Act provides funds for five specific student groups: students in poverty, special education students, English language learners, gifted students, and charter school students. These groups were chosen based on Alabama's needs, and based on evidence that shows how additional funds lead to improved outcomes.

According to 2025–2026 student demographic data:

59%

of Alabama's students are living in poverty.

Students in poverty face additional challenges compared to their peers, which can lead to lower reading, math, and graduation rates.

14.4%

of Alabama's students receive special education services.

Special education students can receive a wide range of services tailored to their specific needs.

7%

of Alabama's students are English language learners.

English language learners have specific needs based on their first language and their fluency levels.

1.3%

of Alabama's students attend public charter schools.

When we look at all local, state, and federal dollars per student, charter school students experience up to a \$5,000 gap when compared to traditional public school students.

5%

of Alabama's students are considered gifted.

Prior to RAISE, Alabama's education budget supported limited grants to some schools' gifted student programs — but we know there are gifted students in all schools.

Supporting Special Education Students

In this section, we will dive into who Alabama’s special education students are, and how RAISE funds can be used to support them at the district level.

Who are Alabama’s special education students?

In Alabama, about

108,000 students (14.4%)¹

receive special education services, which is close to the national average of 15.2%.²

The RAISE Act provides extra funding for these students through three tiers:

TIER 1	TIER 2	TIER 3
Specific learning disability; speech/ language impairment; other health impairment	Autism spectrum disorder; intellectual disability; developmental disability; multiple disabilities	Emotional disturbance and/or disability; hearing impairment; orthopedic impairment; visual impairment; deaf-blindness; traumatic brain injury
Students in Tier 1 have a 2.5% weight (\$196 per student)	Students in Tier 2 have a 10% weight (\$783 per student)	Students in Tier 3 have a 75% weight (\$5,972 per student)

As of the second year of the RAISE Act (2026–2027), \$54 million went to special education students. Each tier is defined and funded by the legislature in the annual Education Trust Fund budget.

Why do special education students require additional funding?

Every student is capable of academic and long-term success. Students with disabilities often need extra support to access education, which can cost schools more than their typical per-student spending. Supports may include specialized instruction, assistive technology, behavioral support, transportation, evaluation, progress monitoring, and the coordination of services.³

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) is a federal law that requires schools to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), tailored to each student’s needs from birth to age 21. It requires services to be provided in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), and provides some federal funding to help cover costs.⁴ However, federal funds cover less than 13% of costs related to special education services.⁵ State and local funding sources provide the rest.

The special education system depends on a specialized workforce with skills and expertise that are in short supply. The workforce needs include special education teachers, Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA), speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and paraprofessionals. RAISE Funds could support building and sustaining this pipeline.



Key Terms

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):

A requirement outlined in IDEA that requires schools to provide special education and related services at no cost to families. Services must be tailored to meet each student's unique needs and help prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.⁶

Individualized Education Program (IEP):

A legal document required by IDEA that outlines a student's educational goals, services, accommodations, and how progress will be measured. IEPs are developed by a team that includes educators and parents. IDEA sets specific rules for creating and monitoring IEPs, including evaluation methods and the roles of families, students, teachers, and support staff.⁷

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA):

A federal law first passed in 1975 that provides several protections and guarantees the educational rights of students with disabilities. It has been updated four times, including in 1990 when it received its current name.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):

A requirement outlined in IDEA that requires that students with disabilities have the opportunity to learn alongside their peers without disabilities. Students should only be placed in a separate setting if they cannot succeed in a regular classroom, even with support and services.⁸

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act:

A federal law that prohibits discrimination against students with disabilities in any school that receives federal funding. Ensures equal access for students whose disabilities significantly affect major life activities, such as walking, reading, or learning.

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):

A section of federal law that prohibits discrimination in public life, including education, by requiring physical and programmatic accessibility.

Resources to Support Students

Each student's unique learning needs should be considered when schools and districts are determining which resources could be funded through the RAISE Act. The following list is not exhaustive, and all tools could be used across all tiers. Schools may be supporting IEPs with some of these resources already.

Tier 1: Specific learning disability, speech/language impairment, and other health impairments

- ✓ Extended time on assignments and tests
- ✓ Text-to-speech and speech-to-text tools
- ✓ Graphic organizers and visual supports
- ✓ Timers and visual schedules

Tier 2: Autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, developmental disability, and multiple disabilities

- ✓ Sensory accommodations (lighting, seating, noise regulation)
- ✓ Concrete, hands-on learning materials and manipulatives
- ✓ Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools for students who have difficulty communicating verbally, such as picture boards, speech-generating devices, and eye-gaze technology
- ✓ Explicit instruction in replacement behaviors

Tier 3: Emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment, visual impairment, deaf-blindness, and traumatic brain injury

- ✓ Calm-down spaces
- ✓ Flexible seating
- ✓ Assistive technology such as adaptive keyboards and screen readers
- ✓ Modified workspaces and accessible materials such as braille textbooks or audio descriptions
- ✓ Mobility services
- ✓ One-on-one aides
- ✓ Explicit instruction in executive functioning, emotional regulation, and functional communication

It is important to consider the network of professionals each school has access to for supporting their special education students:

- Classroom teachers and special education teachers who are trained to support special education students
- Paraprofessionals, instructional aides, and tutors to support instruction
- Speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, Board Certified Behavioral Analysts (BCBA), and mobility specialists
 - Districts could contract with specialists to provide trainings or iterative coaching cycles, rather than hiring specialists full time
- Music, art, and recreational therapists
- School nurses, psychologists, social workers, and counselors
- Parent liaisons and district coordinators



System-Level Best Practices

The most successful interventions for special education students are explicit, systematic, data-based, and individualized supports — not generic “extra help.” National experts in special education instruction have developed six *High-Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities*.⁹ **The following pages outline these six High-Leverage Practices (HLPs), and provide opportunities for how RAISE Funds could plug in.**

Practice 1: Professional Collaboration

Teachers and support staff must work together to best support special education students. Collaboration leads to better academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Teachers should share ideas, problem-solve, ask questions, listen actively, and use data to build and adjust instructional and behavioral plans.

RAISE funds can be used to:

- ✓ Coach special education and general education teachers on working together and aligning curriculum across classrooms.
- ✓ Hire substitutes to give teachers time to collaborate, align curriculum, and build relationships.¹⁰
- ✓ Create a mentorship program that pairs new special education teachers with experienced mentors to support teacher development and student learning.



Highlight: Auburn City Schools uses coherence mapping, bringing schools and district leaders together to map out resources and ensure that student needs are being met.¹¹

Practice 2: The Learning Environment

Consistent, organized, and responsive classrooms are best for special education students. Teachers build trust with students by structuring their classrooms with clear expectations, procedures, routines, and positive reinforcement strategies.

RAISE funds can be used to:

- ✓ Provide professional development on structuring learning environments and aligning classroom practices across all classrooms.
- ✓ Hire paraprofessionals for classroom support, or provide stipends for existing positions.
- ✓ Contract with Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA) and other specialists to train teachers.
 - BCBA's can be proactive coaches for daily routines, not just crisis responders.
- ✓ Create a sensory space that is quiet, comfortable, and secure.
 - Work with local organizations like Kulture City in Birmingham to learn about sensory inclusion.¹²
- ✓ Implement a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework.
 - Schoolwide PBIS frameworks have a positive impact on behavior, social-emotional functioning, concentration problems, and prosocial behavior.¹³



Highlight: The University of Alabama's [Office for Positive Behavior](#) partners with the Alabama State Department of Education to guide many districts on implementing PBIS systems. Districts include Autauga County, Birmingham City, Gadsden City, Hoover City, Huntsville City, Jacksonville City, Jefferson County, Mobile County, Tuscaloosa City, Selma City, St. Clair County, and Tuscaloosa City.¹⁴



Practice 3: Family Collaboration

Teachers, staff, families, and students must work as a team. Schools should partner with families on each student's goals and progress, respect each family's culture and background, and make sure families fully understand their rights in the IEP process.

RAISE funds can be used to:

- ✓ Survey and interview families and community members on their experiences.
- ✓ Train teachers to communicate effectively with families of students with disabilities.
- ✓ Create a Parent Mentor Partnership program, where parents of students with disabilities serve as mentors.
 - These programs increase parent involvement in IEP meetings and help families learn about services and the relevant curricula.
- ✓ Build family engagement programs like family nights and weekend events.
- ✓ Create resources to teach families about the IEP process and their rights.
 - Many families don't have familiarity with legal IEP documents and their rights. Information should be easily accessible, and all questions should be answered throughout the process.
 - Partner with groups like the Alabama Parent Education Center, which supports families through its [Special Families Project](#).
- ✓ Support parents with simple at-home practices and resources that support learning.



Highlight: Piedmont City Schools engages families through Coffee and Conversations with the principal, family resource nights that have sessions on special education services, and multiple Parenting Days throughout the year.



Practice 4: Using Data to Drive and Intensify Instruction

Special education teachers can use student data like test scores, observations, self-assessments, and family input to build goals, adjust instruction, and vary instructional intensity. Intensity is how much time, focus, and practice opportunities are built into a lesson to help struggling students catch up. More intensity means smaller steps, more practice, and faster feedback. Grouping students with similar needs and tracking progress regularly helps teachers match that intensity to what each student actually needs.

RAISE funds can be used to:

- ✓ Purchase data collection and analysis tools to track student learning and IEP compliance.
 - Alabama schools typically use Powerschool, Schoology, and Quanthub.
- ✓ Train teachers in data-based individualization (DBI), which uses data tools to track student progress and prioritize effective instructional methods.
 - DBI provides positive effects for students with learning disabilities, and results are better with ongoing, effective training.¹⁵
- ✓ Invest in multi-modal assessments such as speech analysis, digital portfolios, and sensor-based observations that are designed to collect, analyze, and use data to support learning.
- ✓ Purchase evidence-based intervention materials to help teachers adjust instruction based on how each student responds.



Highlight: In 2026, the Alabama State Department of Education partnered with the American Institute for Research to learn about DBI and specially-designed instruction.¹⁶



Practice 5: Explicit Instruction

Explicit, step-by-step instruction is the most effective strategy to support students with disabilities to learn new content, strategies, and skills.¹⁷ It works best when teachers model skills, give guided practice opportunities, check for understanding, offer feedback, and slowly release responsibility to students.¹⁸

RAISE funds can be used to:

- ✓ Provide professional development and coaching on explicit instruction.
 - This could focus on modeling skills, providing feedback, and gradually releasing responsibility.
 - Coaches could provide a one-time training or ongoing coaching cycles.
- ✓ Purchase classroom materials such as sample lessons with short instructional routines, guided notes and workbooks, structured lessons to support new teachers, and editable curriculum.
- ✓ Build in time and substitute coverage for teachers to focus on instructional coherence across classroom lessons and intensive support.
- ✓ Purchase data trackers so teachers can monitor student responses to explicit instruction methods over time.





The Local Budget Process

The RAISE Act sends funds to school districts called Local Education Agencies, or LEAs, for student needs. From there, money flows to schools, classrooms, and students. These funds support student needs above and beyond the Foundation Program, which is still the main vehicle Alabama uses to fund schools. RAISE funds are flexible, but must be budgeted, so understanding your local budget process is important.

Local Budgeting and Planning Requirements

- ✓ *Each year, Alabama LEAs are required to develop and adopt an annual budget (AL Code § 16-13-140).*
 - Annual LEA budgets must include RAISE Act funds. Since budgets need to reflect all available funding, this includes the additional money allocated for targeted student groups.
 - Budgets must include staffing and operating expenses by category (e.g., instructional materials, maintenance) for each school.
 - LEAs are required to hold two public information sessions before the final budget adoption on October 1.
- ✓ *All funds received from the RAISE Act Fund must be used to serve the student groups that generated them (AL Code § 16-13-362).*
 - RAISE funds are based on the number of students in each of the five targeted groups that the LEA serves.
 - LEAs may shift RAISE Act funds across student groups to meet local needs, but per state guidance, must obtain State Superintendent approval if reallocating 10% or more. Funds are not eligible for carryover.
- ✓ *Each LEA must produce an accountability plan and report by November 1 of each year, starting in 2026 (AL Code § 16-13-365).*
 - These reports must include goals and proposed expenditures for each of the five targeted student groups.
 - Starting in 2027, the reports must also include an analysis of prior-year progress for those student groups.

Budgeting and Planning Timeline

1 MARCH–JUNE: SPRING PLANNING

👉 LEA Requirements And Actions

- Begin LEA planning and gather relevant input and data on students needs, LEA priorities, and budget conditions
- Consult RAISE Act Guide, issued **June 1**, to understand allocations, allowable uses, and planning requirements

👈 How Advocates Can Engage

- Meet with district leadership to share priorities and input
- Advocate for inclusive stakeholder engagement strategies

2 JULY–AUGUST: BUDGET DEVELOPMENT

👉 LEA Requirements And Actions

- Submit budget requests to LEA finance office
- Finalize revenue projections
- Complete budget presentations using ALSDE guidance

👈 How Advocates Can Engage

- Provide input on how RAISE Act funds are allocated and prioritized
- Advocate for evidence-based strategies aligned to targeted student groups

3 SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER: PUBLIC BUDGET REVIEW AND SUBMISSION

👉 LEA Requirements And Actions

- Hold [two public hearings](#) on proposed budget
- Conduct 20-day ADM data collection (start of school year)
- [Submit budget to ALSDE](#) by **Sept. 15**
- Fiscal year begins **Oct. 1**

👈 How Advocates Can Engage

- Testify at public hearings to influence budget decisions
- Advocate for transparent use of RAISE funds aligned to student needs

4 NOVEMBER: ACCOUNTABILITY AND REPORTS

👉 LEA Requirements And Actions

- Complete RAISE Act annual accountability plan and report by **Nov. 1**, which must include goals, strategies, spending, and outcomes

👈 How Advocates Can Engage

- Advocate for clear goals, metrics, and transparency in accountability plans
- Review how impact and outcomes will be measured

ONGOING

👉 LEA Requirements And Actions

- Implement RAISE Act-funded strategies
- Monitor budget against actual expenditures
- Track program implementation and progress

👈 How Advocates Can Engage

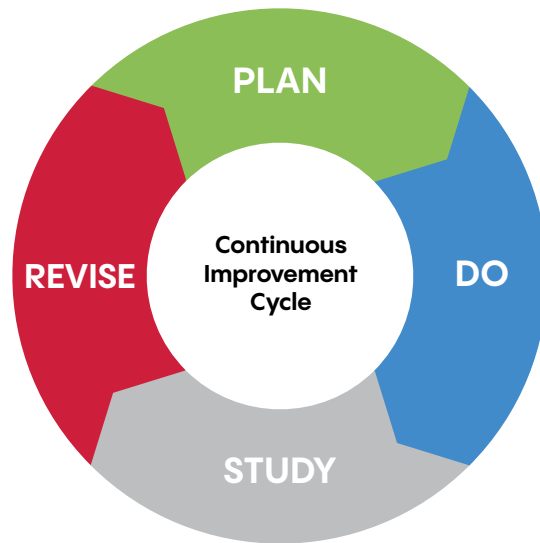
- Monitor implementation, spending, and progress toward goals
- Share feedback and recommend course corrections based on data

What's Next for District Leaders?

LEAs and district leaders have an opportunity to allocate RAISE Act funds to improve outcomes for students. Families, community members, teachers, and students should be meaningfully involved. This involvement could look like:

- Conduct surveys and interviews, hold town halls, and create other outreach opportunities.
- Publish board meeting schedules and minutes, and share the public hearing process.
- Share the budget plan and justification of program spending.
- Publish a plan for how RAISE funds will be used, and how they are intended to improve outcomes.
- Share information through newsletters, PTA meetings, school and district websites, events, and board meetings.

Continuous Improvement Cycles can help track the implementation of programs funded by the RAISE Act through a Plan-Do-Study-Revise model.



PLAN

- Identify RAISE funding levels, and which students are supported.
- Explore the needs and challenges of each student group.
- Consider schoolwide and targeted strategies.
- Choose the strategy or strategies to fund.

STUDY

- Collect academic outcome data, survey stakeholders, and observe.
- Determine how effective the strategy was for students supported by RAISE.
- Use data to identify strengths, gaps, and early signs of progress.

DO

- Fund the strategies that will support students.
- Implement the strategy by reallocating funding, staff, time, and supports so schools have what they need.
- Troubleshoot during the year if needed.

REVISE

- Expand effective strategies that show evidence of improving outcomes for students.
- Adjust, redesign, or shift away from less successful approaches, reallocating resources to support continuous improvement over time.

What's Next for Advocates?



Step 1: Get informed.

- Look at your LEA's budget from previous years to see where RAISE dollars are being spent.
- Review the LEA's RAISE Accountability Plan, which will first be submitted in the fall of 2026.
- Check out your LEA's website for information on new programs for the student groups identified through RAISE.



Step 2: Get Inspired.

- Read through the RAISE Act Implementation Toolkit to learn about best practices and possible options for spending RAISE funds.
- Each LEA receives different levels of funds, based specifically on the students they serve. Consider what your community wants and needs based on your specific district.



Step 3: Get Active.

- Respond to any surveys or public requests for comment by your district or your school.
- Call or email your local superintendent or other district administrator with your ideas on how to spend RAISE dollars.
- Speak with your principal or school leader about new programs your child could participate in.
- Review upcoming school board agendas found on each district's website, and attend when budget discussions are being prioritized.
- Participate in meetings and public hearings where the budget is discussed. These are usually part of August or early September school board meetings.

Ask questions like:

- How much RAISE Act funding does the district expect to receive for each of the five targeted student groups?
- How will the district decide which programs or schools will receive RAISE Act funds?
- How does the district plan to use RAISE Act funding for specific groups of students (e.g., additional staff, new programs, expanded services)?
- How will the district measure whether those investments improve outcomes for the students the funding is intended to support?



Share this resource with other families and district leaders.

Endnotes

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