

LEADERSHIP MATTERS:

A BLUEPRINT FOR REINVENTING SCHOOLS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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Leadership Matters:

A Blue Print for Reinventing Schools for Student Success

August 2018

Commissioned By



*Research and reporting
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A+ 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.



About the BEA

The Business Education Alliance of Alabama was incorporated in 2013 as a 501(c)(3) Foundation. 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 January 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.

BEA Research Reports

The 2018 Report, *Leadership Matters: A Blueprint for Reinventing Schools for Student Success* is the fifth such report developed by the BEA in partnership with the Public Affairs Research Council and the A+ Foundation. *Leadership Matters* gives a clear pathway for success for all students in a variety of schools with various levels of financial support. A major key to success is found in the Leadership of the school systems and schools. All BEA reports may be found on the BEA website (beaalabama.com).

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Contents

Executive Summary	1
A Call to Action	3
In Need of Leadership	6
Direction	6
Development	6
Design	6
Data	6
Sources of Leadership in Education: Everyone Has a Role to Play	7
Teachers	7
Local School Boards and Superintendents	7
The Governor and the Legislature	8
Local Communities	9
Business	9
A State, Schools, and Communities Leading Students Toward Higher Levels of College and Career Readiness	11
Starting with a Plan, Mississippi Leads Students to Higher Achievement	11
Talladega County: Empowering Students to Lead Their Own Learning	16
Leading a Turnaround: Sheffield Resets for Higher Expectations	21
Brewton Community Leads Students to Post-High School Opportunities	25
Pike County: Leading Toward a New Way of Thinking About High School	30
Tuscaloosa: Leadership from Business and Industry	35
Conclusion	40

Executive Summary

Alabama public schools are producing more high school graduates, but more of them need to be graduating prepared for and connected to education and training beyond high school. Alabama's economy has the potential for impressive growth, but to capitalize on that potential, business and industry will need a new generation of better-educated Alabamians.

To capitalize on this moment of opportunity for students and for Alabama's economy, creative and energetic leadership is needed at the state and local levels.

...leaders have forged partnerships to accomplish their goals for better student outcomes.

With a new state superintendent of education in place and November elections set to determine leadership in the Governor's office, the State Legislature, and the State School Board, a new class of leaders will be called on to craft a plan for closing gaps in preparation and paving pathways to career opportunities.

Leaders show a passion for change.

In this report, we examine the crucial role leadership plays in shaping educational outcomes, and we showcase six examples

where leadership is making a difference and where data indicate students are achieving higher levels of success.

Change-making leaders in education are not exclusively school administrators. Leaders are also stepping forward from government, business, higher education, and from community and civic groups. In fact, in all instances showcased, successful leaders have forged partnerships to accomplish their goals for better student outcomes.

Leaders empower teachers and students to believe in themselves.



Figure 1. Munford Elementary fifth grader Annslee Shaddix

Leaders show a passion for change. Sheffield's Superintendent Keith Lankford describes having a "fire in his belly" to capitalize on his community's hunger for higher expectations for their children.

Leaders empower teachers and students to believe in themselves. As Talladega County fifth-grader Annslee Shaddix explained, she's learned talents aren't fixed; they're mastered through effort. "If you had a fixed mindset," she said, "you'd never improve."

Leaders see possibility beyond conventions. Pike County's Superintendent Mark Bazzell knew many of his high school students were capable of

college-level work. In 2018, 23 Pike County students earned not just a high school diploma, but a college associate degree at the same time.

*Leaders see possibility
beyond conventions.*

Leaders may be as ambitious as those in West Alabama, where a new, employer-driven training and recruitment system is replacing traditional educational models, matching student interests and ambitions with employer needs in partnership with area school systems

Or leaders may focus on the basics, like in Brewton, where the community pools money for scholarships, and every senior is required to devise a plan for college or financial independence after high school, referred to in Brewton's down-home vernacular as a "Get Off Your Momma's Payroll Plan." Those resources and plans are among the factors that help that community produce some of Alabama's highest college and career readiness rates.

"Finishing high school is not our goal. Our goal is getting them to the next level," explained T.R. Miller High School Assistant Principal Doug Gerety.

Leaders across Alabama would do well to embrace those higher aspirations and pursue them with the strategic thinking, dedication, and innovation shown by dynamic communities.

A Call to Action

By 2025, Alabama will need to have added 500,000 highly skilled adults to the state's workforce to fill industry's projected needs and to position the state to be competitive nationally and internationally.¹ To capitalize on its economic potential, Alabama needs all those workers to have education or advanced training beyond a high school diploma.

The state's schools have made impressive progress in raising the high school graduation rate: 89 percent of seniors graduated in 2017.

However, only 71 percent of those seniors were measured as college and career ready by the end of high school.²

At the current rate of college and career ready attainment, Alabama would fall 140,000 short of that 500,000 person goal set by Alabama's Workforce Council in its 2018 report [Preparing Alabama's Workforce for Opportunity & Growth](#). If all seniors exited high school on track for college or in a position to earn advanced certification, Alabama would be much closer to meeting this 2025 goal.

Figure 2. Workforce Needs Projected in 2018 Alabama Success Plus Report

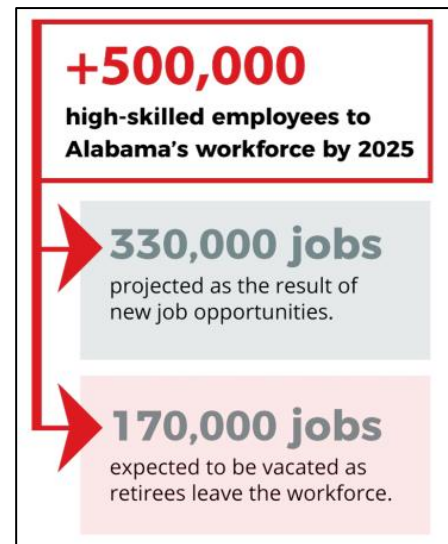
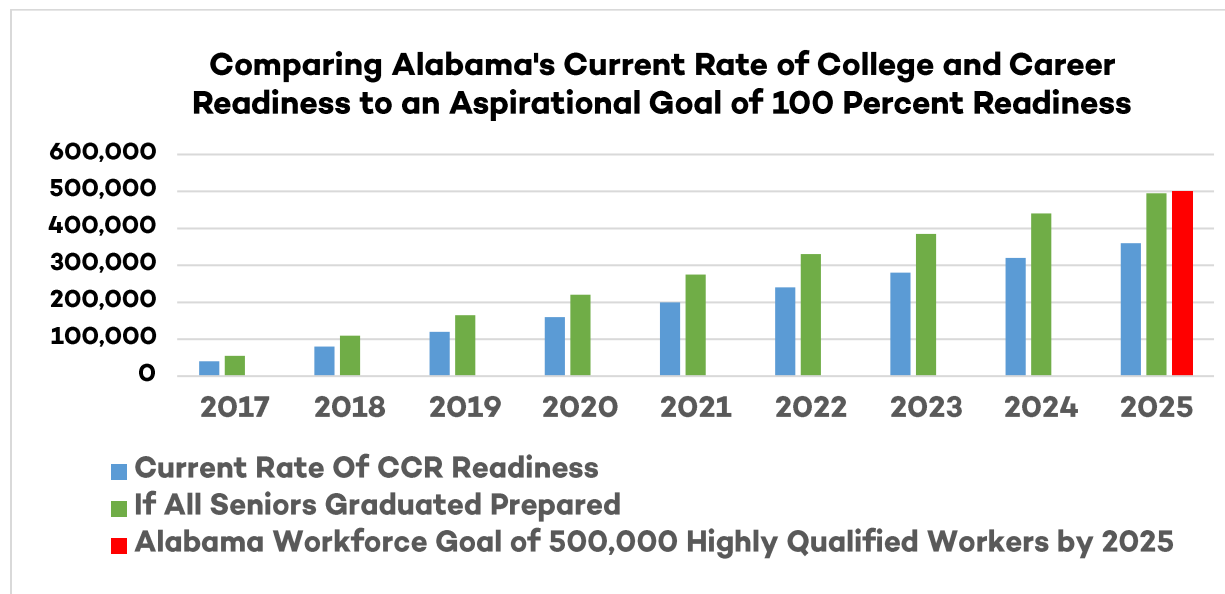


Figure 3. Number and Potential for Production of College and Career Ready High School Graduates.



¹ Alabama Workforce Council's Statewide Educational Attainment Committee. (2018). *Preparing Alabama's Workforce for Opportunity and Growth*. Retrieved from <https://alabamaworks.com/successplus/>

² [Alabama Class of 2017 High School Graduation, College and Career, ACT and WorkKeys Results.](#)

Our K-12 education system must lead in meeting the state's goal of fielding 500,000 highly skilled workers by 2025. And schools will need to lead in partnership with state and local government and higher education. They'll need the cooperation of business and community groups.

Goals are not met by happenstance.

Leadership will be required to set direction and to gather consensus around strategies. Leadership will be needed to promote the development of world-class educators. Leaders will need to redesign organizations and educational pathways to remove obstacles and efficiently and effectively move students toward higher levels of readiness. They'll need to monitor their work with data to identify successes and shortcomings.

Alabama has a new State Superintendent of Education. After elections this November, we will have clarity on who will lead from the Governor's office, the State Legislature, and the State School Board. The time is right to bring Alabama together under a new plan to improve education in Alabama, one that aligns with the needs of the state's students and the demands of the modern economy.

This report, the fifth in a series commissioned by the Business Education Alliance, examines the role leadership plays in improving educational outcomes.

According to a wide and deep base of research on education,³ three primary factors influence school performance.

First, a school's socio-economic composition can influence outcomes on measures of performance. School composition is a variable that is difficult to manipulate. Schools must work to educate the students that walk through their doors. While the challenging circumstances high poverty schools face must be appreciated, those challenges can't be an excuse for failure to position those children to succeed.

Second, the quality of teaching delivered to students has been shown to significantly affect school performance and can help overcome socio-economic challenges. Better teaching produces better results for students. As discussed in the 2015 BEA Report, *Teachers Matter*, Alabama needs to continue and accelerate efforts to support and improve instruction in Alabama classrooms. The report offered many concrete solutions. The Alabama Legislature has funded some, but more remains to be done.

But for better teaching to thrive and spread, it's necessary to have in place the third factor shown to make a difference in school performance: effective leadership.

What does effective education leadership look like? In the report that follows, we examine research on what constitutes quality educational leadership, and we present case studies of leadership producing positive change.

Examples are drawn from Alabama systems and from the sister southern state of Mississippi, where statewide leadership has produced statewide improvement on key measures.

Leadership in education isn't uniquely the role of school officials. More often than not, leadership involves the community, local business, higher education partners,

³ Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S. and Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. The Wallace Foundation.

and state leadership. Success most often occurs where leadership has created alignment with all stakeholders and clarity around vision, mission, and goals.

In March 2018, then-interim State Superintendent Ed Richardson urged schools to take immediate action to close the gap between the number of students graduating and the number of students identified as college and career ready.⁴ His call to all 137 local superintendents of education has been reinforced by the Alabama Workforce Council's report.

"This is one of the most serious issues facing our schools. Failure to address this issue immediately will only result in more high school graduates and their families being led to believe they are ready for the next step in their lives when they are not," Richardson said. Failure to address the issue, he continued, will "harm public education and depress our state's economic growth."

The challenge has been made. Who will lead?

⁴ Richardson, Ed. *Memorandum: The Graduation and College and Career Readiness Gap*. March 21, 2018. <https://www.alsde.edu/sites/memos/Memoranda/FY18-1010.pdf>

In Need of Leadership

What do we need in educational leadership?

The research on educational leadership is vast, and there are common themes as to what constitutes effective leadership in an educational setting.⁵

Leaders act in four dimensions. They set direction. They develop their personnel. They design their organizations to facilitate improvement. They use data to measure progress and identify where new approaches and investment are needed.

Direction

The first task of a leader is setting high expectations and clear direction for an organization. For direction setting to be effective, it can't be handed down unilaterally from on high. Leaders need to build consensus and mobilize resources around measurable and attainable goals. The goals should be challenging but personally compelling and achievable for the individuals tasked with pursuing them. And, most importantly, goals should be focused on student success.

Development

Goals aren't likely to be reached if teachers and staff aren't provided with the knowledge and strategies needed to achieve them. Effective schools encourage collaboration, communication, and continuous improvement among faculty members. Effective leadership opens opportunities for teachers to learn about and experience innovations in teaching both within the school and through outside networks. Leaders are themselves constantly learning, seeking out innovative approaches and sharing them.

Design

Organizations need to be deliberately designed to efficiently carry out their mission. Often, schools stick to ossified organizational structures or traditional programs out of habit or inertia. Effective leaders aren't afraid to change and innovate to remove barriers and improve function. It's often when old habits or existing silos are broken down that improvement occurs.

Data

Effective leaders prioritize data-driven decision-making and instruction. A blizzard of data exists, from student-level, formative assessments to school and system-wide summative assessments. There are attendance and disciplinary records. But those data can't just be collected; they must be understood in context and acted upon. The data should be available and clearly explained. Successes should be celebrated, and shortcomings must be addressed.

⁵ This synthesis of characteristics of effective leadership draws from two main sources—a book, *Five Critical Leadership Practices: The Secret to High Performing Schools*, by Ruth C. Ash and Pat H. Hodge and *How leadership Influences Student Learning*, a report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation. Both of these works are, in turn, drawn from a wide range of scholarly research on the subject.

Sources of Leadership in Education: Everyone Has a Role to Play

Teachers

Classroom teachers have the most direct impact on student outcomes, leading their students to mastery. Beyond their individual classrooms, teachers should also have opportunities to lead. Recent research has shown that extending the reach of excellent teachers benefits the entire teaching team.⁶ With a lead teacher providing coaching and mentoring and coordinating professional development and faculty planning sessions, individual teachers get more tailored support. The impact of the best teachers is amplified and spread, and students get improved and personalized instruction.

Principal leadership is key. Education research has demonstrated that principals have a significant impact on schoolwide improvement and successful student outcomes.⁷ Principals are expected to be more than administrators who make sure students are in their seats and that the buses run on time. Today, principals are expected to be the instructional leaders of their schools. The Wallace Foundation concludes that effective principals practice five key actions:

1. They shape a vision of academic success for all students.
2. They create a climate hospitable to education.
3. They cultivate leadership in others.
4. They improve classroom instruction.
5. They manage people, data, and processes with the goal of school improvement.

Local School Boards and Superintendents

Superintendents and local school boards work together to set high expectations and provide the resources so that all schools in the system have the opportunity to succeed. School boards set policy. Superintendents implement those policies.

In high-functioning school systems, the superintendents and school boards understand their differing but complementary roles and work cooperatively. In dysfunctional systems, the two parties feud and micromanage. In 2017, a task force created by Alabama Association of School Boards and School Superintendents of Alabama produced [an updated statement of the roles and responsibilities of school boards and superintendents](#). It is essential that local boards and superintendents understand the roles they are expected to play.

The school board hires the superintendent or works with the elected superintendent to set direction, ensures that a plan is developed to pursue system goals, and holds

⁶ Backes, Ben, and Michael Hansen. "Reaching Further and Learning More? Evaluating Public Impact's Opportunity Culture Initiative." Working Paper, CALDER American Institutes for Research, Jan. 2018, gtlcenter.org/products-resources/reaching-further-and-learning-more-evaluating-public-impact%E2%80%99s-opportunity-culture.

⁷ *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*. 2013. The Wallace Foundation. <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/The-School-Principal-as-Leader-Guiding-Schools-to-Better-Teaching-and-Learning-2nd-Ed.pdf>

the superintendent accountable for progress toward those goals. Modern school boards are expected to focus on raising student achievement and understanding how achievement is measured. They monitor results and create policies that should support the attainment of goals.

Boards allow and expect superintendents to provide educational leadership for the staff. Superintendents hold employees accountable for system performance toward the goals established in the system strategic plan. He or she advises the board on the policies and resources needed to achieve goals, creating the conditions for success.

At the state level, the State Superintendent works with the State Board of Education to set a direction and high expectations for the state. He or she designs a state department of education that supports local systems in pursuit of the state's goals and establishes a system of accountability, approved by the State Board of Education, grounded in reliable data needed to evaluate performance.

The Governor and the Legislature

The Governor of Alabama is the President of the State Board of Education. The Governor is in the unique position of helping shape state policy in K-12 education, while also having influence over K-12's connection and alignment with early childhood education and two- and four-year colleges. Additionally, the Governor's responsibilities in economic development and social welfare all intersect with the aspirations of K-12 education and the environment in which schools operate.

The Governor also works with the State Legislature to see that education is adequately funded and that those funds are effectively spent. As the State Board of Education works with the State Superintendent to set direction and establish educational policies that should improve results, the Legislature works with the Board and Superintendent to ensure they have the tools and legal authority they need to hold schools accountable for results. The Legislature is charged by the Alabama Constitution⁸ with organizing and maintaining an adequate system of K-12 public education. [The National Conference of State Legislatures](#) describes a sound state school finance system as one that:

1. Provides equity for both students and taxpayers.
2. Is efficient, making the best possible use of resources.
3. Provides adequate resources to local school districts so that they may achieve state and local educational goals and standards.
4. Incorporates fiscal accountability through generally accepted budgeting, accounting, and auditing procedures.
5. Promotes predictability and stability of education revenues and expenditures over time.
6. Supports student learning.

⁸ Ala. Const. art. XIV, § 256: "The legislature shall establish, organize, and maintain a liberal system of public schools throughout the state for the benefit of the children thereof between the ages of seven and twenty-one years."

Local Communities

While the state is charged with seeing that an equitable and adequate K-12 school system is available to students across the state, it is local communities that provide the enhanced resources and opportunities that propel the most successful systems.

At a minimum, local communities help develop, through their local boards of education, the direction and aspirations of the local system. Through public tax dollar support, local communities provide the resources school systems and students need to pursue higher levels of achievement.

In high-performing systems, communities provide volunteer support and extra financial support to help schools and systems achieve their ambitions. School foundations are a common tool for providing that extra support. Foundations can also play the role of “critical friend,” providing an outsider perspective on the successes and shortcomings of schools, directing attention and support to areas that need improvement; most often identified by leaders in the principal and teacher ranks. Additional community partners may include, but are not limited to, city and county governments, chambers of commerce, civic clubs, family resource centers, and two-year and four-year higher education institutions.

Business

It will require a wide and broad coalition of leaders to make our opportunities a reality for the rising generation.

In recent decades, business has been increasingly assertive in calling for school improvement.⁹ This movement has led to productive partnerships in many cases but has also led to some tension over proper roles and strategies.

Highly successful school systems have forged cooperative and productive ties with local businesses and have welcomed their perspectives on educational improvement.

A first step is creating new and robust communication exchanges between businesses and schools so that schools can better understand the world of work their students will eventually enter and so that business can understand the challenges schools face in leading students toward college and career readiness. That communication also needs to extend to students who need to see the connection between their academic preparation and future access to successful and sustainable careers.

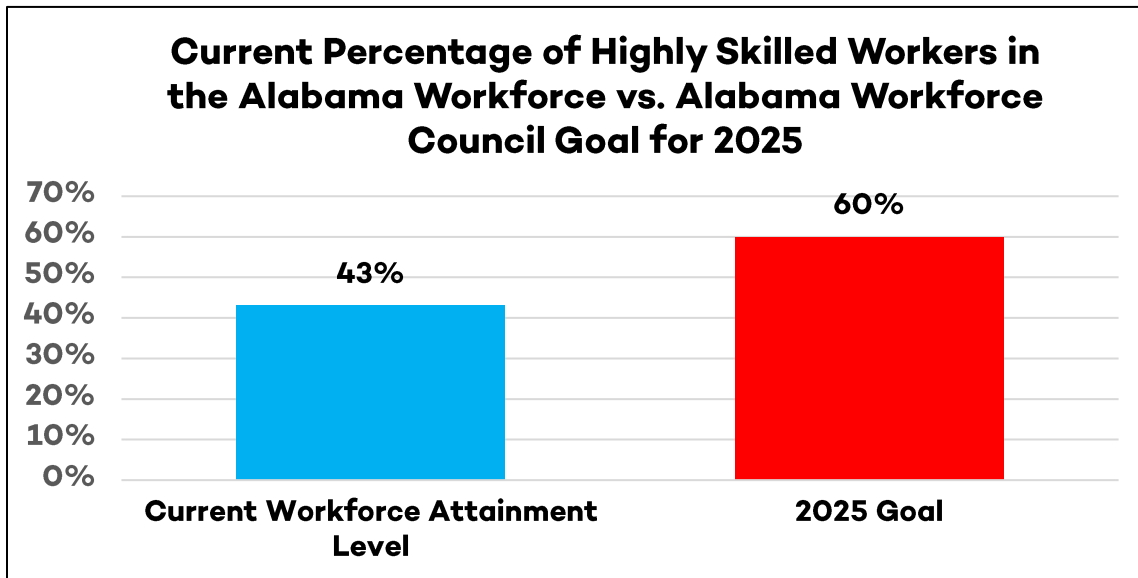
Business depends on the education system to produce the future workforce. In addition to providing necessary tax revenue, education needs local businesses to help identify pathways to credible credentials and degrees that will tell employers applicants are qualified. Even more than a diploma, those are the credentials students need to enter the workforce.

Currently, only 43 percent of Alabama’s adult workforce has degrees or certificates beyond a high school diploma. After an analysis of the current state of workforce and

⁹ Baas, Alan. [The Role of Business in Education](https://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9216/role.htm). ERIC Digest Series Number 47. 1990. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management Eugene OR. <https://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9216/role.htm>.

our needs going forward, the Alabama Workforce Council has set a goal for 2025 of having 60 percent of the workforce with a credential beyond the high school diploma. In the next seven years 170,000 Alabamians are expected to leave the

Figure 4. Gap between current percentage of highly skilled workers and 2025 goal.



workforce as they retire, according to projections. Alabama businesses and industries have the potential to create 330,000 additional jobs over the same time period. The education and training needed for the workers who will fill those jobs will increase.

To address this coming shortage, the Workforce Council has established a goal of adding 500,000 highly skilled workers to the labor force by 2025. Fortunately, school systems around Alabama are already responding to the state's need to produce better-prepared graduates. In the section that follows, we feature several examples of systems employing creative and energetic approaches to better preparing students and better connecting them with the skills they'll need to prosper in the rapidly evolving world of work.

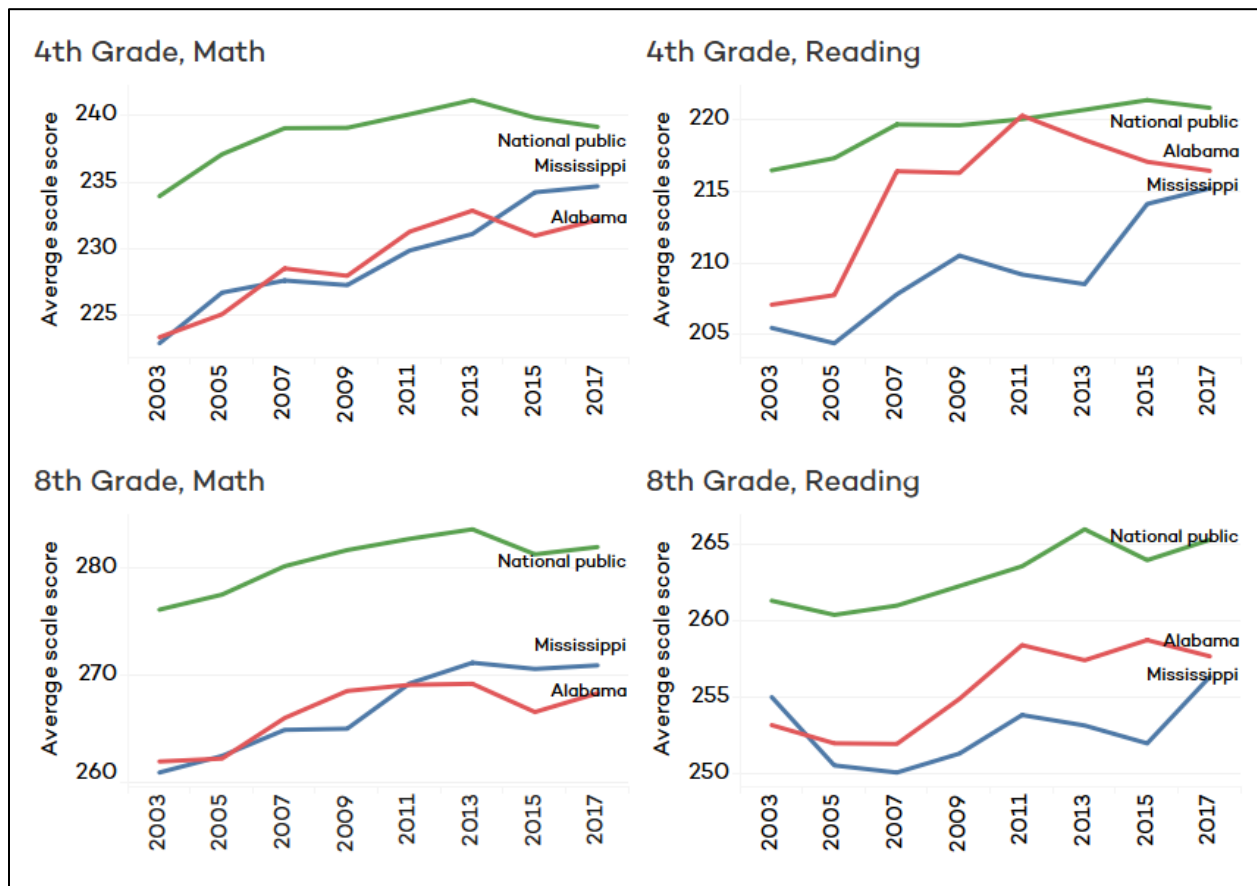
A State, Schools, and Communities Leading Students Toward Higher Levels of College and Career Readiness

Starting with a Plan, Mississippi Leads Students to Higher Achievement

On the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Mississippi continued its sustained climb up the achievement ladder. In math, Mississippi outperformed Alabama on the NAEP. In reading, though, Alabama still slightly leads among all students. However, Mississippi has a higher proportion of disadvantaged students, and when the results are broken out by economic and demographic subgroup, Mississippi students top Alabama students in every category.

School leaders there credit Mississippi's rise to high state educational standards, continuity of educational leadership, and to a well-designed state strategic plan that not only describes goals but includes detailed strategies for achieving them.

Figure 5. A time series of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, comparing Alabama, Mississippi, and the public school national average in scale scores on reading and math assessments.



Continuity of Leadership

The current State Superintendent, Carey M. Wright, took office in 2013. She was recruited from the District of Columbia, where she was Chief Academic Officer. That makes her one of the longest-serving state superintendents in the nation. In Alabama, five individuals (both permanent and interim) have occupied the post over the same period. A 2017 survey by *Education Week* found that the average tenure of state superintendents was 2.5 years.

Coupled with that, Mississippi elected an education-oriented Governor, Phil Bryant, and Lt. Governor, Tate Reeves, in 2011. Over the same period, there has also been consistent leadership in the Legislature and on the state's appointed school board. The state and educational leaders have developed a productive working relationship.

"It is very difficult to have sustainability of results without the stability of leadership," said Kim Benton, Mississippi's Chief Academic Officer.

A Plan for Progress

With Wright's arrival, Mississippi developed and implemented [a strategic plan for K-12 education](#) that has guided the reform efforts during Wright's term. The plan, adopted by the state board, includes goals and measures of success. Most importantly, it lays out strategies to be implemented by the state board and department that will lead to the achievement of the plan's goal. The plan is revisited annually. Progress on the plan's metrics is reported each year publicly by the superintendent.

Figure 6. Excerpt from Mississippi Strategic Plan

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Ensuring a bright future for every child

MISSISSIPPI BOARD OF EDUCATION
2016-2020 **Strategic Plan**

GOAL 1 All Students Are Proficient and Show Growth in All Assessed Areas

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- Increase the percentage of students proficient on 3rd grade reading assessments
- Increase the percentage of students proficient on all assessments

STRATEGIES

- Implement the required reading assessment for all elementary teachers and add to licensing for SPED and early childhood teachers
- Use the MDE Early Warning System to identify and intervene students needing assistance
- Provide professional development based on data in all content areas
- Expand content coaches in literacy and math
- Increase parental engagement through P-16 councils in lower performing schools

Under Superintendent Tommy Bice, Alabama developed a strategic plan, Plan 2020. While the plan includes general strategies for improvement, they weren't coherently and concretely connected to specific goals, and subsequent to the plan's creation, there wasn't a systematic reporting on implementation of the strategies. Since Bice

left the top school post in the spring of 2016, the plan hasn't been revisited. Bice's replacement initiated work on a new plan but resigned his post before the plan could be formalized and adopted by the Board. Alabama needs an actionable plan to meet the goal of 100 percent of graduates being college and career ready by 2025.

Chief Academic Officer Benton said Mississippi's plan is so central to their work that department officials can repeat its six goals in their sleep. Having that public blueprint for progress has helped create consensus and clarity.

"If we are all moving toward the same goal, our collective energy is going to get us there," she said.

Higher Standards and Professional Development to Support Teachers

Like Alabama, Mississippi adopted new higher academic standards and set up a system of professional development to help Mississippi teachers teach to the new standards.

"We've made instruction the focal point," Benton said. "Professional development has been critical."

Mississippi also implemented a literacy initiative similar to the Alabama Reading Initiative but targeted the initiative primarily at high-need schools.

Mississippi has only funded 80 reading coaches to support teachers in literacy instruction. That compares to Alabama's initiative that provided funding for every Alabama elementary school to hire a coach. In Mississippi, the coaches are employed by the state department and remain dedicated to literacy education, while Alabama eventually allowed school systems to broaden the responsibilities of its reading coaches. Benton said Mississippi invites evaluators such as the Florida Center for Reading Research and the American Institutes for Research to evaluate the results of its interventions. Having that external validation is important, Benton said.

An Assessment Aligned with State Standards

To test students' mastery of the new standards, Mississippi invited in national experts from the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessments (the Center for Assessment) to help develop standardized tests specific to Mississippi and aligned with state standards. That effort also depended heavily on an expert state technical advisory committee to help with the assessment's design and implementation. Alabama chose to contract with ACT for its state assessment test, the Aspire. Responding to dissatisfaction with that assessment in 2017, Alabama replaced the Aspire with another commercially available assessment system by Scantron. In 2018, Alabama contracted with the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment to complete bid specifications for Alabama's Reading and Math Assessment. In July, the State School Board hired Data Recognition Corporation to lead the development and administration of a new set of tests aligned with Alabama standards.

The assessment results serve as the primary basis for the state's educational accountability system, which, in Mississippi, is written into state law. Report card results for schools have been published annually, and the department strives to make

the data publicly accessible, which prods districts to strive for better results. “What gets measured, gets done,” Benton said.

In 2018, Alabama issued its first set of report cards to comply with a state law passed in 2012 by the Alabama Legislature. This creates a tool for improvement that Mississippi has seen as a benefit.

Results

Mississippi is posting gains in the percentage of students proficient on state assessments, and the results parallel a rise on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Mississippi has been cited by national publications and educational advocacy groups for its improvements on the NAEP in 2017. The state has seen a significant increase in eighth-grade reading where the scale score rose 4.4 points, from 252 in 2015 to 256 in 2017, the greatest improvement nationally. Mississippi posted gains in both reading and math at both fourth- and eighth-grade levels.

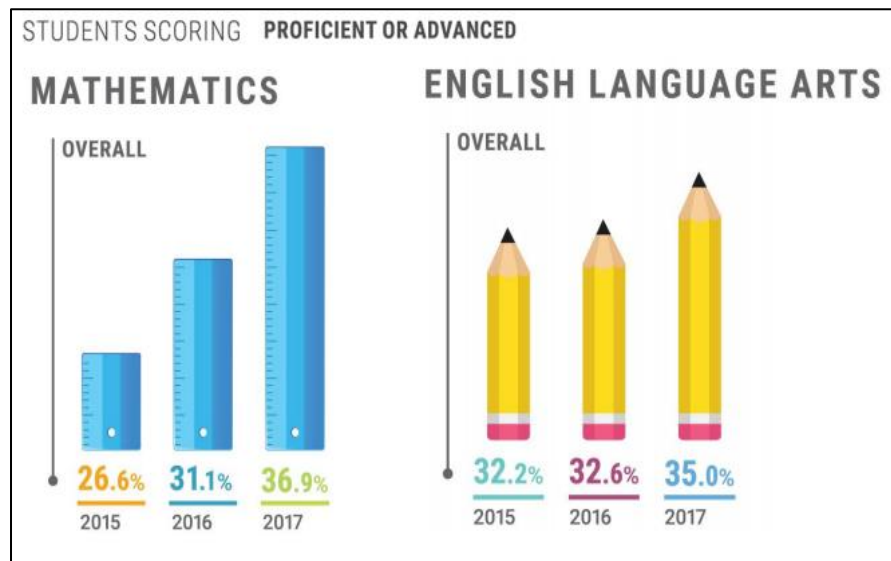


Figure 7. From annual update on progress on Mississippi State Board of Education's Strategic Plan for Education. Results for Mississippi's state developed assessment.

Mississippi Leadership Action Plan

Direction: Mississippi's educational aspirations are spelled out in a strategic plan, adopted by the State Board of Education. The State Superintendent reports to the Board and the public annually on the strategies enacted and the progress made toward goals.

Design: Mississippi designed its own state assessment based on its adopted state standards with assistance from national experts. With the assistance of organizations like the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Southern Regional Education Board, and Johns Hopkins University, the department promoted and helped local districts implement nationally proven school reform initiatives in targeted areas such as literacy, math education, early childhood education, and career readiness.

Development: Mississippi has created a “menu of options” approach to professional development, allowing districts to request the training in areas of identified need. Scarce state resources are targeted at assisting teachers in high need school districts. Literacy coaches support teachers at the most challenged schools.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

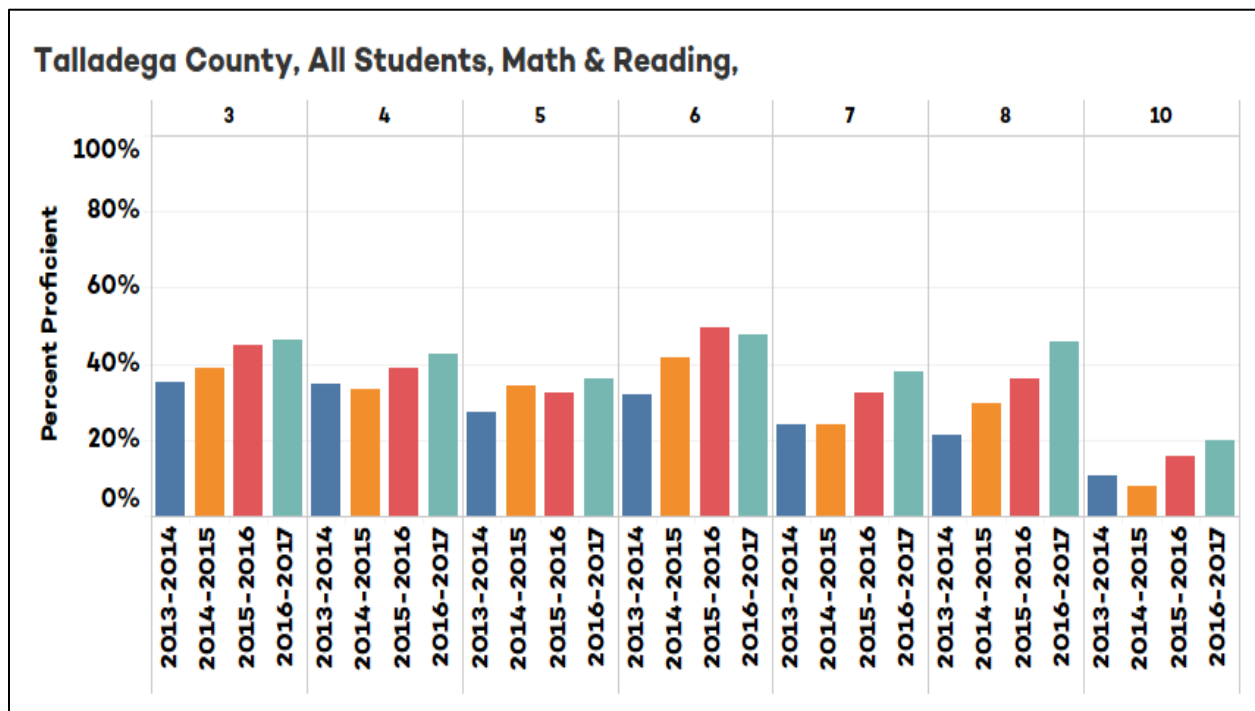
Data: Mississippi systematically tracks performance data for schools and publishes report cards for schools and districts. It also tracks statewide data and publicizes progress toward goals identified in the state's strategic plan.

Talladega County: Empowering Students to Lead Their Own Learning

Between 2014 and 2017, the Talladega County School System tied the Trussville and Winfield school systems for the highest cumulative percentage point gain in proficiency levels in reading and math on the ACT Aspire. This progress came despite the fact that 61 percent of students in the Talladega County system directly qualify for the National School Lunch program, a marker of poverty.

School officials in Talladega County attribute this progress to an unconventional leadership strategy, an approach that flips the top-down model of accountability typical in discussions of leadership. In Talladega, students are entrusted with the understanding and ownership of their own academic progress. The inverted leadership continues with teachers who are charged with presenting the results produced by their students and shaping the professional development they need to improve results. The administrative leadership (principals and the superintendent) responds to the aspirations and needs flowing up the chain from where it begins, the students.

Figure 8. Talladega County's student proficiency levels on the ACT Aspire in reading and math have risen across the board. The Talladega System is tied for No. 1 for performance improvement on the Aspire among Alabama school systems.



On a visit to Munford Elementary School, a visitor is met at the door, not by administrators and teachers, but by two fifth-grade students.

Despite their ages, Annslee Shaddix and Amberly Clark are at ease and confident guiding the visitor through the school's uniquely decorated landscape. The school's entrance is decorated to look like the mouth of a cave. The floor of the central school hallway is painted like a hiking trail that guides a visitor past walls painted with trees, creeks, and wildlife scenes meant to evoke the nearby Talladega National Forest.

Arriving at a wall of colorfully coded charts and graphs, the fifth graders explain how they track goals for attendance or for reading and math proficiency. School administrators are along on the tour, but it's the fifth-grade girls doing most of the explaining, describing the "houses" the students are divided into (as at Hogwarts Academy in the *Harry Potter* series). They explain parent-teacher conferences, in which students are expected to present their work and explain their proficiency levels, their goals, and strategies for improvement.

The approach is the product of the Talladega County Schools adoption of the "[Leader in Me](#)" program, a whole-school transformation model that empowers students with leadership and life skills. Leader in Me is based on principles and practices of personal, interpersonal, and organizational effectiveness growing out of Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Now installed in all the system's elementary schools, the Leader in Me program complements the approach the system had already been developing, an approach based on the premise that the children should lead their own educational journeys. In this model, educators don't control and direct student learning; they empower students to lead their own learning.

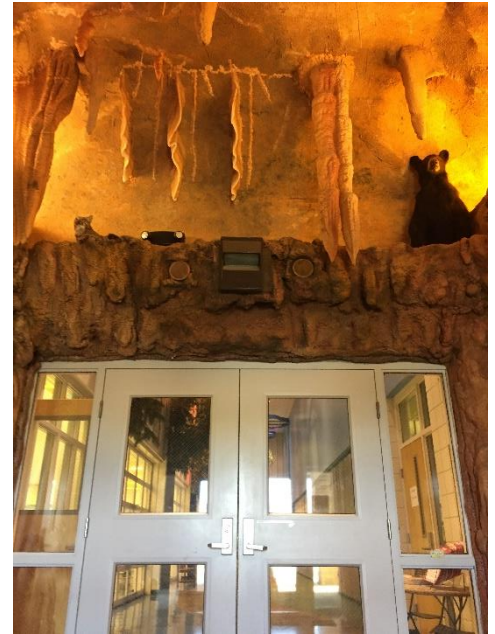


Figure 9. Munford Elementary is decorated to reflect the surrounding environment, like this simulated cave at the building's entrance.

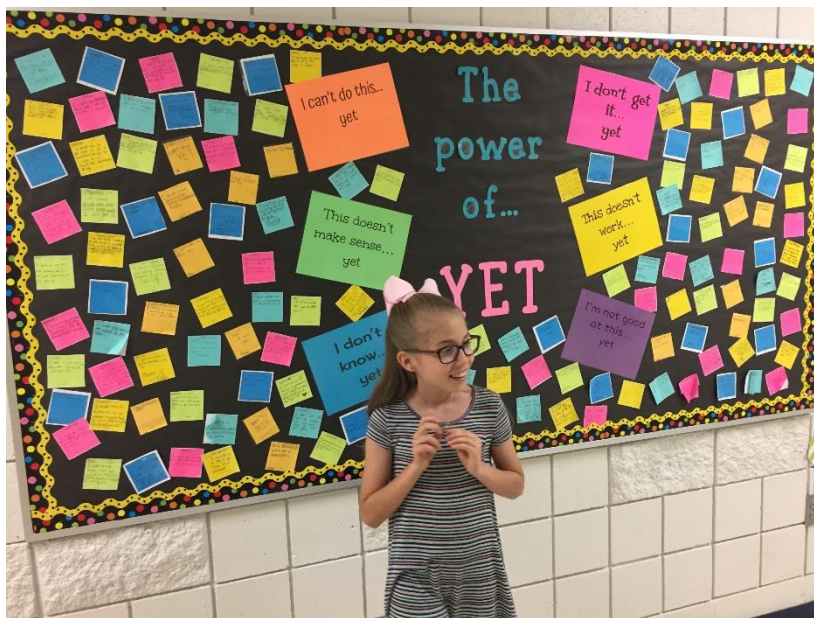


Figure 10. Annslee Shaddix explains the positive philosophy of student learning at Munford Elementary.

Annslee Shaddix explained one of the philosophical cornerstones of the school: You don't say you are bad in a subject, you just realize you haven't mastered it yet. And with work, you can.

"If you had a fixed mindset, you'd never improve," Shaddix explained.

As the tour continues, stops are made in classrooms where students' desks are grouped for teamwork. In one class, each group was building toothpick towers on a bed of Jell-O, hoping they'd remain standing when the tray of Jell-O was shaken

to simulate an earthquake. In another class, students were designing mazes with color-coded pathways that would allow miniature rolling robots, Ozobots, to navigate the maze.

It was the children, not the teachers, who explained what they were doing, how the robots worked, the difficulties they were encountering, and how to overcome them.

This integration of project-based learning and the incorporation of technology in instructional plans doesn't just happen. In addition to the regular staff of classroom teachers, each Talladega County school employs an instructional partner. Most were originally trained in the Alabama Reading Initiative to support teachers in teaching reading but have now expanded their role, through training, to provide resources and support to teachers in math and other subjects. In addition, each school employs a technology integration specialist who helps teachers integrate science, technology, and engineering into classroom instruction.

With the support provided, teachers in the Talladega System are expected to take a leadership role in guiding their own growth and development. The faculty decides on the focus of professional development. Lead teachers are primarily responsible for delivering professional development to their fellow faculty members. Munford principal Angela Robinson said that teachers are more receptive to professional development when it comes from peers rather than delivered top-down from the administration.

As is typical, teachers meet with the principal to go over the assessment data generated by their students. In Talladega, while principals are expected to monitor performance data, it's the teachers who are expected to present their data, identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and propose their own plans for how to improve results. That, Robinson said, avoids turning the meetings into adversarial, top-down reviews.

In addition to added support from within the system, Talladega County Schools are constantly connecting with community partners. Sylacauga-based SAFE (Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement) provides after-school and enrichment programs, tutoring, and family engagement programs. The U.S. Forest Service collaborated in the design and decoration of Munford Elementary, providing the rich, nature-based decorative aspects of the school. Throughout the halls are explanatory kiosks that feature information about the ecosystems in the Talladega National Forest. Munford also connects with university researchers at Auburn and Jacksonville State, allowing children to get a taste of the research that scientists are performing in the National Forest.



Figure 11. Munford Elementary's lunchroom walls are painted to reflect the landscape of the nearby Talladega National Forest.

Partnerships and new ideas are also actively researched from other systems and other states. Superintendent Suzanne Lacey is intensely interested in learning from creative and successful approaches found across the state and nation. For the past three years, the system has been part of the League of Innovative Schools, a national network of forward-thinking education leaders who work to promote the smart use of learning technologies to effect change in education through partnerships with entrepreneurs, researchers, and leading education thinkers. Through the League, teachers and administrators have been able to travel the country looking at innovation in action. During the summer of 2018, all 17 Talladega County System principals and technology integration specialists traveled to Google's main campus in California to train on integrating Google tools in schools.

"That has been a tremendous opportunity to learn from innovative schools across the nation," Superintendent Lacey said.

In addition to the free opportunities afforded to them by their membership in the League, the system pursued and won a \$300,000 grant from the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative to support the system's work in integrating science, technology, engineering, art, and math into the curriculum.

Talladega County is a sprawling county, much of its territory rural, and lacks the attractions of major metro areas. Attracting and retaining teachers is a challenge. So, the system is deliberate about cultivating the talents of the teachers and administrators it already has, allowing them opportunities for growth and advancement. Particularly important is a long-running relationship with Samford University, which allows teachers to pursue master's degrees, with classes taught in the county and tailored to the teacher and administrator's interests and the system's needs. Jacksonville State University is also a key partner for supplying student teachers, many of whom go on to teach in the Talladega system. Growth opportunities, such as moving into the instructional partner role or into administration, helps keep talent within the system.

"That builds stability and continuity in leadership," Lacey said.

Lacey is completing her tenth year as superintendent. She credits a stable and supportive school board for allowing the system to innovate and improve. Board members understand their role and support the innovations she is pursuing.

Change takes time. Talladega County's progress now outperforms the predicted level of proficiency for a school system with the level of poverty present in Talladega

County. But the system has a lot of room to grow. That is particularly true at the high school level. While the system has a high graduation rate (92 percent in 2017), the system still has challenges on the high school level metric of college and career readiness.

In response, the system is expanding its career tech offerings and has expanded Advanced Placement courses to all high schools with support from A+ College Ready. The next frontier is raising student expectations for life after graduation. Many come from households where college isn't considered a realistic ambition. With that mindset, it is hard to convince students to prepare for and put forth effort on the ACT and WorkKeys tests.

"That is difficult for kids that have no vision for college," Lacey said. "We've got to do a better job and give them a reason for taking it."

Results

Talladega is tied for No. 1 among Alabama school systems in percentage point gain on the ACT Aspire Reading and Math in all grades between 2014-2017.

Despite high poverty rates, the system has a high school graduation rate of 92 percent.

Talladega Leadership Action Plan

Direction: Give students the responsibility and opportunity to lead their own learning and teachers the responsibility to pursue their own growth and improvement, flipping the accountability model from top-down to bottom-up.

Development: Utilize teacher-driven professional development. Offer structured opportunities for teachers to earn advanced degrees through Samford University and avenues for professional advancement within the system. Provide in-school coaching personnel in reading, math, and technology integration in all schools to support teachers.

Design: All elementary schools have adopted the "Leader in Me" school transformation model, which focuses on shifting from a top-down delivery model of instruction to placing the children in the position of responsibly to pursue their own learning goals. It features a systematic initiative to integrate science, technology, engineering, art, and math throughout the curriculum.

Data: School children are challenged to understand their own assessment data and to explain it to their parents and teachers. Teachers are also expected to own, understand, and learn from their students' assessment results.

Key Partners: U.S. Forest Service, Auburn University, Jacksonville State University, Samford University, the League of Innovative Schools, the Alabama Math Science Technology Initiative, Leader in Me, and SAFE (Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement). SAFE supports our work through after-school and enrichment programs, tutoring, and family engagement programs.

Leading a Turnaround: Sheffield Resets for Higher Expectations

In 2014, Sheffield City School System had the lowest college-going rate of any system in Alabama. Since then, Sheffield has shown more improvement on that measure than any other system, with signs pointing to more progress to come. In 2017 and 2018, 100 percent of Sheffield graduates applied to at least one college. Here's how the determination of a community and a change of leadership led to improved results.

Into the 1980s, Sheffield was a thriving blue-collar town, but decades of job loss in industry had dramatically changed the economic situation of the students coming into the Sheffield schools.

Poverty rates had risen, with over half the students qualifying for free lunch under the National School Lunch Program. With the decline, there had been a gradual erosion in what was expected of the students. And the students and the community internalized those expectations.

Sheffield High School Principal Joey Burch said the teachers cared, but knowing the difficult circumstances many children faced, there was a resistance to pushing them.

"The attitude was: 'Just make life easy on them and love 'em.' " Burch said.

When it came time to talk to a college recruiter, "They were intimidated and had poor self-esteem," said Sheffield High School guidance counselor, Melissa Ryan. In 2014, Sheffield City School System had the lowest college-going rates of any system in the state, with only 36 percent of graduates going on to a two-year or four-year college.

Higher Expectations

That same year, the Sheffield community came together for a series of conversations facilitated by the David Matthews Center for Civic Life. The conversations focused on the need to reset expectations for Sheffield High School graduates, to convince students, faculty, and parents that post-secondary education and training was imperative for students entering the modern workforce.

In 2015, the school system hired a new superintendent, Keith Lankford, who came to town with, as he describes it, "a fire in my belly."

Sheffield needed a shift in mindset from "our teachers can't" and "our students can't" to a can-do attitude, Lankford said. "We want to be the lighthouse for this area."



Figure 12. Sheffield School System Superintendent Keith Lankford

A Guided Pathway to Success

Capitalizing on the appetite for raised expectations, Lankford implemented a program he called Sheffield's Guided Pathway to Success (GPS). It begins with exposing students to career options as early as elementary school, with increasing intensity of exposure in high school. Students are consistently encouraged through

shadowing opportunities, including designating a school day during which all Sheffield students spend a day in the workplace in a career field of their choosing.

Beefing Up Course Offerings

To improve student preparation for post-secondary education, Sheffield dramatically expanded access to Advanced Placement courses. Securing a state grant through the A+ College Ready program, Sheffield sponsored all high school and middle school teachers in core subjects for training to teach Pre-AP or AP classes in their field.

The high school had traditionally offered only one high school AP class: 12th-grade English. They added a second English AP class in 2015 and six more since then, while also bolstering the quality of the foundational courses in middle school and early high school that build toward those college-level classes.

Targeted Remediation

The high school hired a remediation teacher to help struggling students. Using data from frequently administered Scantron assessments, students who were falling behind were identified early and offered extra help.

Improving Connections to College

AP Participation and Success			
<u>School Year</u>	<u># of AP Courses Offered</u>	<u># Exams</u>	<u># Passing</u>
2014-2015	2	40	4
2015-2016	2	35	8
2016-2017	6	93	24
2017-2018	8	125	TBD

Figure 13. Source: Sheffield City Schools

The high school also poured renewed energy into helping students prepare for and apply to college. The school moved its college and career week, which most schools hold in November, back to August. That week the local two-year school (Northwest-Shoals Community College) and the local university (University of North Alabama) bring teams to campus to explain the options available to students. Students are coached on interview skills and the kind of questions they needed to ask of college recruiters.

The preparation, coaching, and confidence-building changed the nature of the college and career night. What had been a passive and awkward interaction between the students and college recruiters was transformed into a night for making meaningful connections, leading to active recruiting and placement. Ryan used to struggle to line up colleges to participate. Now, she worries she doesn't have enough space to accommodate the growing number of two- and four-year schools sending representatives.

With college ambitions clarified, Sheffield also increased outreach to students and parents to convince them that there were resources available to pay for college. Many families had just assumed that college wasn't a possibility and had to be

convinced financial aid was available and that the investment in post-high school education and training was a good one.

In addition to these conversations with individual students and parents, Sheffield began to track the application process for students more systematically. Working with Alabama Possible's Cash for College program, the school got real-time data on which students had started the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application, who had finished, and who hadn't. Help was offered to those who were encountering difficulties in the often complicated and unfamiliar process of applying. In addition to federal financial aid, the Shoals Scholar Dollars, a partnership with the Greater Shoals Rotary Club, UNA, and Northwest-Shoals Community College, provides scholarships to students who do not qualify for a Pell Grant or receive other scholarship opportunities.

Celebrating Success

Finally, the high school created a recognition program to call attention to academic success and college-going. Using A+ College Ready grant money, students who earned passing scores on AP tests were publicly recognized with \$100 cash prizes. Using money from a local foundation and community funds, the system also awarded \$100 prizes to students who earned benchmark scores on all four subjects of the ACT or who earned the highest level certification, platinum, on the ACT WorkKeys assessment. Students scoring 30 or above on the ACT were given T-shirts as members of the "30+ Club," and National Signing Day was expanded to recognize *all* college-bound students rather than just athletes, complete with [coverage of the event by the Florence Times Daily](#).

Results

Between 2014 and 2016, Sheffield increased its college-going rate from 36 percent to almost 60 percent, according to enrollments verified through Student Clearinghouse Data provided by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education.

While verified enrollment data isn't yet available for the class of 2017 and 2018, preliminary data indicate that the college-going rate will continue to climb. For the class of 2017, 97 percent of graduating seniors requested that transcripts be sent to colleges (36 percent to four-year institutions; 61 percent to two-year institutions). So far in 2018, 88 percent of graduates requested transcripts be sent. For both years, 100 percent of graduating seniors have completed at least one application.



Figure 14. Sheffield students who score 30 or above on the ACT are reward with admission to 30+ Club.



Figure 15. Academic scholarships are celebrated as prominently as athletic ones in Sheffield.

In 2018, 86 percent of the graduating seniors completed Free Application for Federal Student Aid, putting the Sheffield near the top in the state in FAFSA completion rates.

Eighty-four percent of 2018 graduates met at least one of the College and Career Readiness Indicators. (66 percent of graduates statewide qualified met College and Career Ready indicators.)

Forty percent of the class of 2017 graduated with a Career Tech credential. Participation in Advanced Placement courses and the number of qualifying scores earned has also increased substantially.

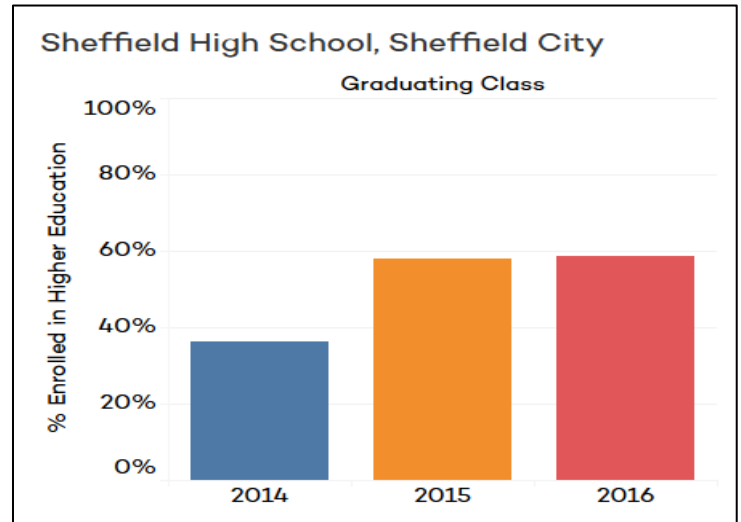


Figure 16. College-going rates for Sheffield High School.
Source: Alabama Commission on Higher Education, National Student Clearinghouse.

Sheffield Leadership Action Plan

Direction: Raise expectations and preparation for education and training after high school.

Development: Train and equip all core subject teachers to teach high-quality courses through A+ College Ready's training for Advanced Placement and Pre-AP instruction.

Design: Create exposure to careers; improve college search and financial aid support, increase recognition and reward for academic achievement and college placement. Hire remediation experts to work with struggling students.

Data: Use formative assessment data to identify students with the potential to succeed in Advanced Placement courses and also to identify early those students in need of remedial help. Employ a data system to track participation in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and make sure students complete the process.

Partners: Northwest-Shoals Community College, University of North Alabama, A+ College Ready, Alabama Possible's Cash for College program, Sheffield Education Foundation, Sheffield Kiwanis, and Greater Shoals Rotary Club.

Brewton Community Leads Students to Post-High School Opportunities

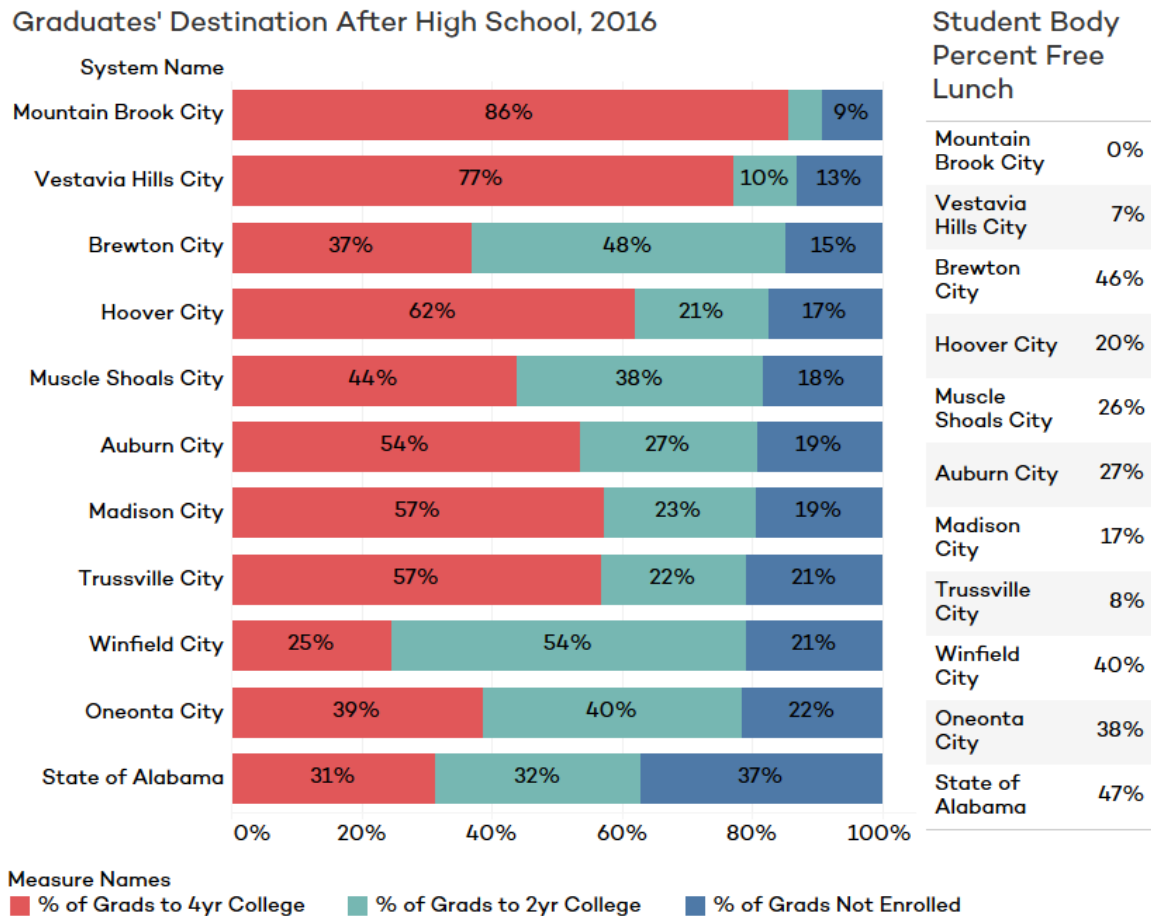
The Brewton City Schools System ranks third in the state in the percentage of its students going into post-secondary education, despite having a far higher percentage of low-income students than other systems with high college-going rates.

In 2016 (the most recent year for which comparison data is available), 85 percent of Brewton graduates entered a two-year or four-year college in the following year. That compares with a 63 percent college-going rate statewide.

In 2018, Brewton's high school, T.R. Miller, expects to have a 93 percent graduation rate, with 92 percent of graduates certified as college and career ready. In 2017, the statewide graduation rate was 89 percent with only 71 percent college and career ready.

School officials credit leadership from the Brewton community for establishing a tradition of high expectations, a tradition that is backed with investment in scholarships and a homegrown but effective solution for ensuring high school seniors graduate ready for college or work.

Figure 17. College-going rates and free lunch percentage of student body by system, 2016



Clarifying What Comes After High School

One of the first assignments for seniors at T.R. Miller High School in Brewton is to fill out English teacher Nancy Richardson's ["Get off Momma's Payroll Plan."](#)

"I want them to have a plan," Richardson says. "I tell them, 'You've got to have a job because you taxpayers pay my salary.'"

It's a simple form that starts by giving students three options for their destination after high school graduation: 1. post-secondary education, 2. the military, or 3. a full-time job.

"None of the above" is not an option.

Depending on the student's choice, they are then directed to the appropriate section of the form, which provides step-by-step concrete instructions, deadlines included, toward a post-high school destination. The students' plan, a required résumé, and a college essay go into a filing cabinet that is frequently visited in the coming months as the students apply for colleges, scholarships, and jobs.



Figure 18. Senior English teacher Nancy Richardson with a student talking about college plans. Student post-secondary plans are posted the classroom walls.

Richardson and other 12th-grade teachers are effectively extensions of the school counselor's staff, which is, in turn, an extension of the entire Brewton community's effort to propel students above and beyond high school. Senior history and government teacher Julia Clements plays a mothering role, working with school counselor Becky Edge to encourage and aid completion of college and financial aid applications. Math teacher Catherine Watson serves as the enforcer if students aren't keeping up. Beyond the school, support comes from the Brewton branch of the Coastal Alabama Community College. The financial aid office there opens its doors to all students, helping them navigate the application for federal financial aid, regardless of whether the student is applying to Coastal Alabama or elsewhere.

"Finishing high school is not our goal. Our goal is getting them to the next level," said T.R. Miller High School Assistant Principal Doug Gerety.

A Community Puts Resources on the Table

Brewton, population 5,432, was, and still is, a regional hub for the timber industry. The families that owned companies established a tradition of community investment. The children of the companies' workers receive company-sponsored scholarships for college, a practice that caught on in the community. The Greater Brewton Foundation, launched in 1994, now sponsors over \$28,000 in scholarships for college-bound kids each year. In addition, local businesses and civic clubs now sponsor scholarships. They range from common community sources, like local

chapters of the Kiwanis and Lion's Club, to unique organizations like the Sportsmen Club (African-American outdoorsmen), the Illustrious Women of Vision, and the Friendly Pals Social and Civic Club. In 2018, 27 local sources provided \$86,500 in scholarships. When combined with the national and institutional scholarships earned by T.R. Miller's 80 graduates, the Class of 2018 received almost \$3 million in scholarship offers.

This dedication to the next generation and equality of opportunity is a long-running tradition in Brewton. Stephanie Walker, President of the Greater Brewton Foundation, pointed back to the period of desegregation. In many communities, white families resisted integration and then left the public schools and formed private academies. In Brewton, the civic leadership, black and white, saw that integration was handled peacefully and that the entire community stayed invested in the public schools. Brewton also provides an unusual level of support for its local YMCA and public library, both offering high-quality, low-cost access to resources for the whole child.

Tried and True Methods for Preparation

Preparation for success after high school begins in elementary school. Brewton was one of the first schools to adopt the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) and has maintained the original program, with its focus on early grade reading. Also, Brewton was also one of the pilot systems that added and maintains an advanced extension of ARI in the middle school grades.

The system also has what it calls a "double-dose" policy. Throughout the system, if a student's grades are low in a subject, he or she is required to attend that class twice in a day until his or her grades improve. It's an approach that's helpful academically, is cost-effective, and motivates students to catch up and keep up. The support for reading and math instruction shows up in student scores on state standardized tests. On those measures of reading and math, the system scores well above the performance level predicted for a system with Brewton's demographic mix.

Attention to Individuals

Part of the secret of Miller's success is likely its size. With about 80 students per grade, no one slips through the cracks. As he is walking down the hall, T.R. Miller Principal Ron Snell greets every student by name and poses a question about something he knows is going on in the student's life. Every student's locker is decorated with symbols of the clubs and sports the student is involved in, a visual representation of Brewton's emphasis on making sure every student is engaged, whatever their interest may be.

A similar visual representation of student accomplishment is on display in Richardson's classroom. The walls are lined with pennants of schools where students are going to college. As each student is admitted, a smaller pennant with the student's name is added next to the school's pennant. By late spring each year, the walls are covered with colleges and students' names. Admission to the four- and two-year colleges, to the fire college or police academy, or the military are equally celebrated.

One college and career readiness indicator Brewton has chosen to focus on is the ACT WorkKeys certification. ACT has evaluated the skills needed in particular career fields and positions, and the test, given to seniors across the state, allows students to demonstrate mastery of math and reading, as those skills are typically applied in the workplace. The certification level a student earns on the WorkKeys test tells employers whether the applying student has demonstrated the level of skill required for the position. Brewton now prepares students to take the test, familiarizing them with the type of questions asked and refreshing them on the skills needed to perform well. In 2017, 86 percent of students scored silver or above, the state's career ready threshold. That success rate ranks fourth among the school systems in the state.

"I think when students know the *why* of a test, or the *why* of taking of an upper-level class, they are more apt to work hard at it," Edge said. "We emphasize hard work here. We always tell them we want their senior year of high school to be hard, so their freshmen year of college might be a bit easier."

"The secret of our success is easy: We are a community," Edge said. "Parents, city leaders, neighbors, students, faculty, staff, and even the elderly who graduated from (T.R.) Miller (High School) are still invested in this school. We are answerable to them. We produce great students who become great community members because we are expected to do so."

Results

In 2018, 93 percent of Brewton seniors graduated, with 92 percent of seniors qualifying as college and career ready. Brewton has effectively eliminated the gap between its graduation rate and its college and career readiness rate. Statewide, there is an 18 percentage point gap between the graduation rate and the college readiness rate.

Brewton has the third highest college-going rate among Alabama school systems in the most recently available data.



Figure 19. LaDonna Washington (left) and Doryan Woods show off their college destination: The University of West Alabama.

Brewton had the fourth highest percentage of students scoring workforce ready on ACT WorkKeys among Alabama school systems in 2017.

Community support and aggressive pursuit of national and institutional scholarships netted the 80 graduating seniors in the Class of 2018 \$2,987,758 in scholarship offers, about \$37,000 per student.

Brewton Leadership Action Plan

Direction: Align community and school system resources to ensure all students graduate with a plan for college or career and support for achieving those goals.

Design: To lay a foundation for academic success, Brewton adopted and maintains the Alabama Reading Initiative in its original form for early grades and added to that a middle school version of ARI to promote advanced literacy. Brewton also created a “double-dose” policy that requires struggling students to attend a second period of a class in which he or she is struggling. For college-going, a coordinated team of school counselors, senior teachers, and local community college ensures that students apply to college and secure the generous level of financial aid provided by community and national scholarships.

Development: Classroom teachers are supported with reading coaches in both the elementary and the middle school. Professional development for teachers is provided in-house on a quarterly basis. Brewton pursued and won a grant to provide A+ College Ready training for teachers.

Partners: The Greater Brewton Foundation and more than a dozen other scholarship funds are created by businesses, civic clubs, college alumni groups, and churches. Coastal Alabama Community College provides aid in applying for financial aid. The Brewton YMCA and Brewton Public Library provide supplementary educational and health services.

Pike County: Leading Toward a New Way of Thinking About High School

In cooperation with partners in higher education and industry, the Pike County School System is leading a movement to reinvent high school, erasing the traditional boundaries that separate high school and higher education, using dual enrollment and career tech offering to give students a head start on the next level of education.

In 2018, 20 students received a college-level associate degree along with their high school degree, with higher numbers expected in coming years as new programs mature.

In May, [a visiting delegation from the National Assessment Governing Board](#) took flight in the planes Pike County students use in training to become pilots. They watched students operate a robotic system for planting and irrigation at the county's Agriscience Technology Center and visited a full-service bank branch at Pike County High School staffed by students. And they toured Pike County's new Advanced Academics and Accelerated Learning Center, which provides robotics, science, and computer labs and classroom space for students enrolled in the system's academic academies. Students in Pike County often spend half a day taking classes on the Troy University campus or use the Advanced Learning Center's computer lab to take online courses.

The national education experts, who set policy for the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), were in awe.

"What you have done is truly breathtaking," Terry Mazany, a Governing Board member and former president and CEO of the Chicago Community Trust told the crowd of students and faculty. "You are leading the country... and your story is the future of education in our country."

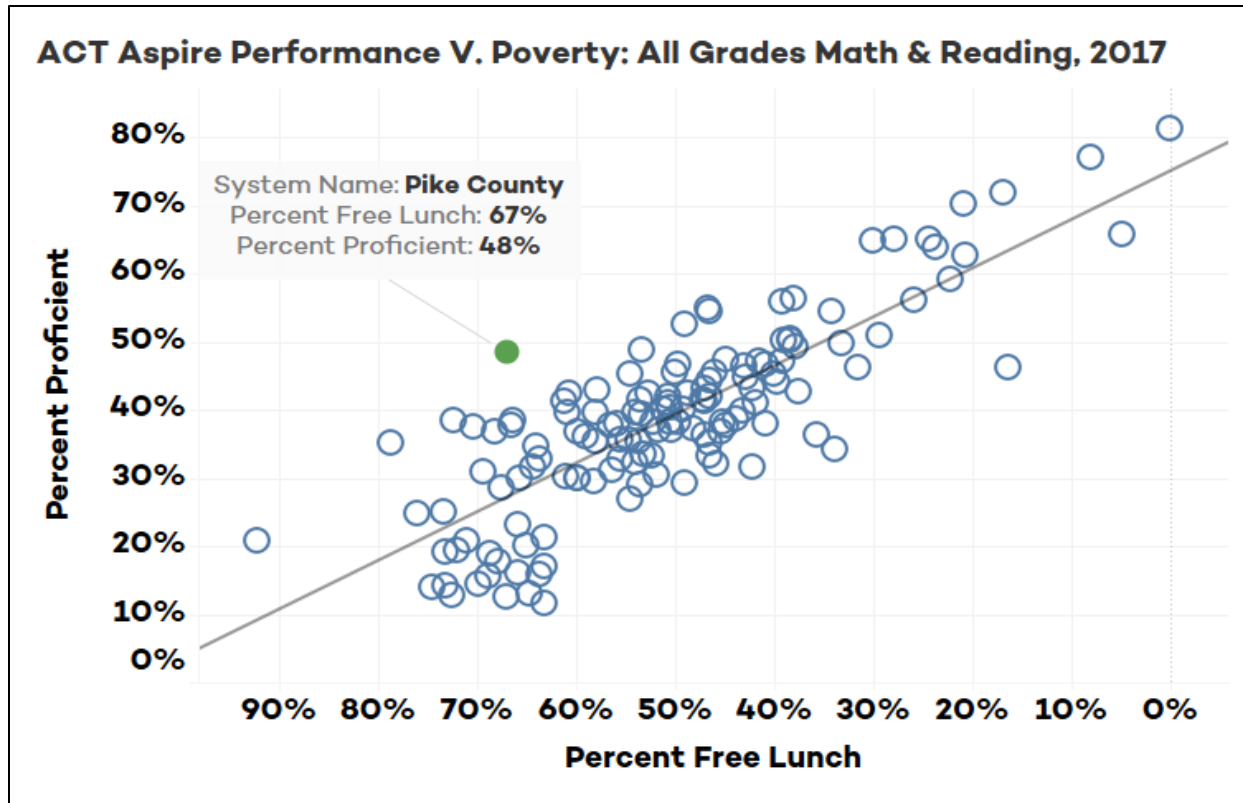
Defying Expectations

Pike County is a predominately rural system where 67 percent of children directly qualify for the National School Lunch Program, an indicator of poverty. Over the past decade, the system has been transformed into one in which its schools were regularly on the state's failing schools list into a system that is being recognized for innovation and unexpected results.

Someone forgot to tell Pike County Superintendent Mark Bazzell some accepted, but inaccurate truths, such as students from impoverished households will inevitably underperform on standardized tests or that you need a high school diploma before earning a college degree.

With concerted work and continual improvement, Pike County students generated reading and math proficiency levels on the ACT Aspire that far exceeded those of school systems with similar demographics.

Figure 20. Pike County students' proficiency rate on standardized tests far exceeds the rate generated by students from systems with similar poverty levels.



And building on raised expectations in the early grades, Pike County is now allowing students to take college classes starting in 10th grade, through partnerships with Troy University and community college partners. By high school graduation, some Pike County students are well along into their college careers.

Innovations in High School College Connections

Students in the Business Finance Academy can graduate with an associate degree in applied science from Enterprise State Community College and with work experience at the First National Bank of Brundidge in a branch inside Pike County High School. Graduates of the Agriscience Technology Academy can earn an associate degree from Wallace State Hanceville or can transfer college credit to Auburn University. Or the graduates can take those credentials straight into the workforce. Similar academies offer programs in exercise science and health information technology that lead to degrees and credentials. Pike County even offers a pathway to graduating with a high school diploma, an associate degree in leadership and an airplane pilot's license. There is no cost to the student for any of these programs; Pike County pays tuition either through dual enrollment funding available from the state or through local funds.



Figure 21. Representatives from the National Governing Board prepares to fly in planes used to train Pike County student pilots.

Culture Change

Pike County's rethinking of high school hasn't happened overnight. It is the extension of a culture change that began more than ten years ago. When Superintendent Mark Bazzell took office over a decade ago, Pike County had become accustomed to having one or more of its schools on statewide academic watch lists. Bazzell is impatient with the stubborn statistics that show poor or minority children score lower on standardized tests, and thus system like his are doomed to post poor showings on such measures.

Bazzell, who enjoyed strong support from his board of education, set about to raise expectations. He invited his teachers to read books together, such as *What Is It About Me You Can't Teach*, by Eleanor Rodriguez and *Closing the Attitude Gap*, by Baruti Kafele, which challenged conventional thinking. ([Pike County Reading list](#)). He brought authors to town. He made it clear that the faculty and staff needed to buy in to new ideas and new expectations or find another place to work.

When the state adopted new and improved standards for math and English, Pike County's faculty was convened to dive deep into the material to understand in detail what they'd be expected to teach. And he expected them to successfully lead the students toward mastery of the standards, regardless of students' backgrounds. They carefully studied assessment data, built on strengths, addressed weaknesses, and targeted interventions with struggling students. The system chose to retain Alabama Reading Initiative in its original form, preserving a reading coach to help K-3 teachers with instruction, data analysis, and intervention for early readers.

The work paid off. In both reading and math, Pike County improved each year on the ACT Aspire and now consistently outscores other systems with similar levels of poverty. That work was featured in the Business Education Alliance's 2016 report, [Exceeding Expectations](#), for its exemplary



Figure 22. Pike County STEM Academy students apply classroom learning to hands-on projects, like building and launching rockets.

performance on state assessments, despite high poverty rates in the system.

Breaking Down High School Walls

Building on that foundation, Pike County has inserted career exploration components into the curriculum starting in 6th grade. By 8th grade, students are crafting plans for navigating high school with a college or career trajectory in mind. The emphasis intensifies as students move into high school.

By the end of 9th grade, students are offered the opportunity to enhance their high school experience by taking advantage of Pike County's Virtual High School. Under the Virtual High School umbrella is Pike County's expanding list of career tech academies: health, agriculture, performing arts, business and law.

The Virtual High School also offers students, either at their home campus or in a variety of other settings, online access to both remedial and advanced coursework. Students flow between the Troy University campus and Pike County System campuses, where classes are taught either by system faculty or community college instructors, or are delivered through online learning.

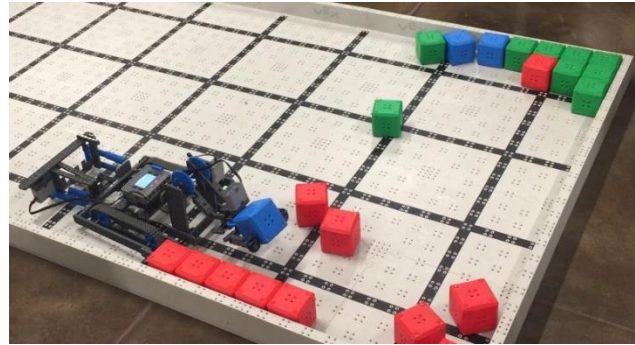


Figure 23. Students program robots to carry out tasks at Pike County's Advanced Learning Center.

Instead of confining students to the conventional track and pace of high school courses, students enrolled in the Virtual School can either receive the remediation they need to catch up in subjects where they need help, or they can accelerate learning beyond the standard offerings of their own high school. That might be in the form of online classes through the state's online course delivery system, ACCESS Virtual Learning (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide), or through one of the colleges Pike County has partnered with.

Pike County also offers a "Ready to Work" course, which follows a workplace readiness curriculum developed by the Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT) as an option for students in need of entry-level workplace skills required for employment. Successful completers earn an "Alabama Certified Worker" (ACW) Certificate and a State of Alabama "Career Readiness Credential" (CRC), which can be presented to employers to document their qualifications.

Jeff McClure, the system's Alternative Learning Director, said the system responds to regional and local workforce needs, creating programs with a wide array of partners both nearby and distant. The aim is to place students in in-demand careers with valuable credentials.

While some systems use resources to hire Advanced Placement teachers to teach college-level courses at high schools, the Pike County system saw value in paying student tuition and taking advantage of existing college courses, rather than creating those courses independently. Though it takes a substantial amount of effort to negotiate agreements and sequence the courses to see that students are offered a viable path, once the mechanism is in place, the courses and credit flow seamlessly.

As the academy system matures, Pike's goal is for 30-35 percent of each class to graduate with an associate degree and for 60 to 65 percent of students graduate with short-term, industry-recognized credential. With the achievement of those goals, Pike County would meet the need for having all its high school graduates certified college and career ready.

Results

Fifty percent of seniors in Pike County's Class of 2017 earned a career tech credential. That 2017 percentage was one of the highest percentages among Alabama school systems.

Twenty-one percent of seniors earned college credit, including 20 students who earned a college associate degree along with their high school diploma.

Pike County Leadership Action Plan

Direction: Erase artificial barriers between high school and college so that students graduate from high school with recognized credentials and, in some cases, a two-year college degree.

Development: Pike County educators participate in faculty-wide book studies and extensive professional development to support the teaching of Alabama's standards. Pike County also chose to maintain the Alabama Reading Initiative in its original form, providing a reading coach to support teachers in literacy instruction in grades K-3.

Design: Pike County's Virtual High School augments the traditional high school model, allowing students to take classes online and on campus at two-year colleges and Troy University. The system pays tuition for students and cooperatively engineers courses of study in cooperation with partners in higher education.

Data: Pike County educators are trained to pay close attention to formative and summative testing results. Faculty commits to evaluating and improving results of individual students. The Pike County System surveys employers and identifies local and regional workforce needs in order to create programs that match the needs of high school academy offerings.

Partners: Troy University, Enterprise State Community College, Wallace State Hanceville, Auburn University, National Flight Academy in Pensacola, local and regional employers.

Tuscaloosa: Leadership from Business and Industry

With leadership from Tuscaloosa-area business and industry, West Alabama is redesigning the way business and K-12 schools connect, forging a more direct pipeline between industries hungry for qualified workers with the students rising into ranks of the workforce.

Donny Jones, Chief Operating Officer for the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama and Executive Director [West Alabama Works](#), is sounding the alarm.

As a state, we celebrate when the latest industrial recruit is landed. We applaud expansions and new job announcements. But we haven't invested the same amount of attention when it comes to matching skilled workers with the positions available.

"I'm glad we have jobs to fill," Jones said. "but we've got to ramp up production of the skilled workers our new and existing industries need right now. This is urgent."

In the scramble to fill jobs in the booming Tuscaloosa-area economy, Jones has lost patience with traditional models. West Alabama Works, formed through a partnership between the West Alabama Chamber of Commerce and the Region 3 Workforce Development Council, is charged with developing the workforce the region needs. To get there, West Alabama Works is breaking down the barriers separating K-12 and business and industry. The new partnership is connecting employers, through K-12 schools, more directly to the world of work that waits beyond high school. Employers are no longer passive customers; they shape recruitment and training options offered in the schools.

Under the traditional model for recruiting future employees, employers deployed recruiters to a multitude of scattered career and job fairs, hoping to find that needle in the haystack: a student that might eventually be interested in working at that company.

West Alabama Works has replaced that needle in a haystack approach with one regional centralized and super-sized career fair extravaganza.

[Worlds of Work](#) is a two-day mega event on the campus of Shelton State Community College, complete with \$20 million-worth of equipment from cranes, helicopters, and combines to mobile surgical operating rooms and advanced manufacturing robots.

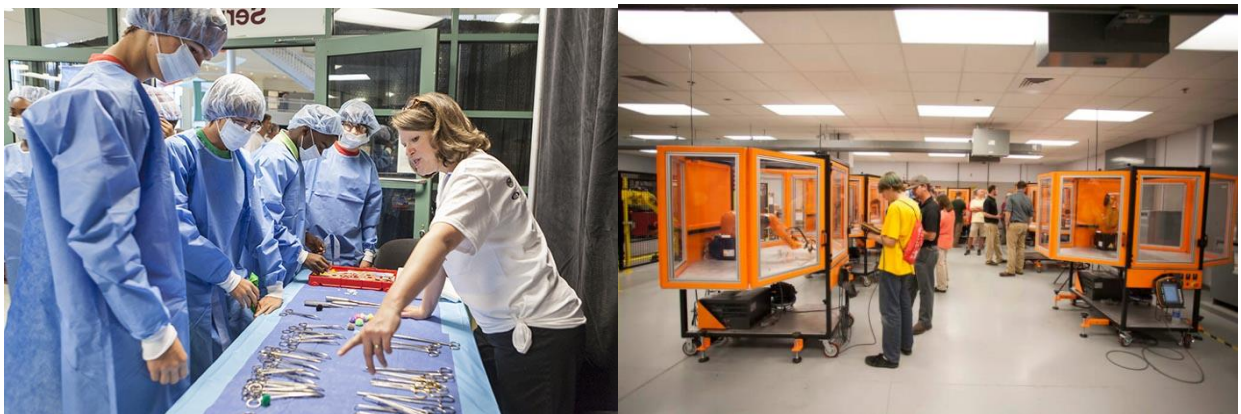


Figure 24. Worlds of Work features mobile surgical units and manufacturing robots for students to experience.

Adopting a model pioneered by the South Alabama Workforce Development Council, Worlds of Work draws nearly 5,000 middle and high school students to a single massive event where over 100 employers from throughout the region showcase their workplaces.

The one-stop fair saves time and effort for participating school systems in Bibb, Fayette, Green, Hale, Lamar, Pickens, Sumpter, Marengo, and Tuscaloosa counties and maximizes time and opportunity for employers to effectively reach students.

Building on the Worlds of Work model, West Alabama Works added [WOW 2.0](#), another two-day event, this one in the early spring and targeted at high school and post-secondary students. Where WOW is an opportunity to explore, WOW 2.0 drew 2,500 high school juniors and seniors who could directly connect for interviews with college and industry recruiters. Over 200 students participated in personal interviews with employers, with many of them leaving with job offers contingent on their completing high school and satisfying other requirements.



Figure 25. At WOW 2.0, a Shelton State Information Technology instructor explains to the students the different IT career opportunities available in West Alabama.

Under the traditional model, school systems establish training programs that may or may not correspond to workforce needs, spreading scarce resources thin and encountering problems bringing training programs at scale and tailored to industry demand.

Instead, West Alabama Works is spearheading the development of free-standing technical centers. The centers are built in partnership with school systems and industry, with industry often paying for the specific training equipment needed and working with school system officials to design the course of study the students will follow.

Two such centers are already in operation, one in Brookwood in Tuscaloosa County and another in Pickens County. A third is under construction in Northport in Tuscaloosa County. Enrollment in the programs isn't restricted to students from the sponsoring high school or system but is instead open to enrollment from students across the region.

Traditionally, school systems are self-contained academic worlds with scant interaction with the surrounding economy.

To free educators from their bubbles, West Alabama Works created an Educator Workforce Academy. The Academy brings principals, superintendents, and other school officials from across the region together to learn about local industries and the needs of employers. Each class of the academy meets four times, touring workplaces like Mercedes, Phifer Incorporated, McAbee Construction, and DCH Regional Medical System. The process allows direct conversation between educators and employers, building a better understanding of the skills and values students need to learn, the opportunities available, and the possible pathways from K-12 into the workforce.

Jones said the academy sessions are a revelation to educators, few of whom have set foot in a modern manufacturing plant and don't know of the opportunities available.

The atmosphere on interaction spawned by the work of West Alabama Works has spawned a climate of constant communication between business and education and among educators from different school systems, according to Mike Daria, Superintendent of Tuscaloosa City Schools. There is increasing collaboration and a realization on the part of educators that their students aren't well-served by simply graduating with a diploma. Students today need training in skills and values that are needed in the workplace. And they need credentials that mean something to employers.

"We want our students to have currency they take into the workforce," Daria said. "When I have folks saying: 'I can't employ your graduates,' that's a problem that we need to address."

It was out of these conversations and in partnership with West Alabama Works that Tuscaloosa Central High School piloted a high school version of the "Ready to Work" curriculum. Ready to Work was originally developed by Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT) to train adult job seekers in employability skills and to provide employers a standardized credential to certify potential employee's job readiness. Completers of the RTW program, widely offered at Alabama Community Colleges, earn an "Alabama Certified Worker" certificate.

High school students, many of whom would be going directly into the workforce, needed these same skills and certifications. Tuscaloosa City Schools, in cooperation with local employers and West Alabama Works, brought a version of Ready to Work to Central High School. The course was targeted at students who were at risk of dropping out, who if they graduated would need "currency" to find a job.

Through Ready to Work, those students received training in communication, problem-solving and teamwork, personal finance, time management, principles of manufacturing, safety, basic office technology, and job search skills, like résumé writing and interviewing.

Students received one week of instruction for each industry cluster in the region and took industry tours. Students had to clock in and out of class to enforce the necessity of punctuality. They earned CPR and OSHA certification and earned a National Career Readiness Certificate from ACT.

Of the students in the first cohort, all 28 students graduated from high school and were placed in jobs after graduation.

This year the program was expanded to high schools in Hale County as well, with 83 students successfully completing: 73 receiving job offers and 11 entering college. While those initial numbers might seem small, interest is spreading. Starting in the fall of 2018 West Alabama Works will launch Ready to Work in 12 additional high schools with projections of more than 600 students entering high wage employment through the program. Also, the State Department of Education has taken notice and is currently accepting applications for 60 participating schools to pilot the Ready to Work course.

Russell Dubose, Human Resources Director at Phifer, Inc., said his company began requiring Ready to Work training for adult employees before they could join the company. While there is an element of skills training in Ready to Work, the curriculum is primarily about workforce behavior, emphasizing the value of attendance and punctuality, the need to be drug free, the dynamics of working in teams, taking constructive criticism, and managing personal affairs. If you don't know how to behave in a workplace, you're not likely to learn them on the job. You're likely to get fired, Dubose said. Ready to Work seemed to provide the missing piece.

"Within six months, we saw a 50 percent reduction in turnover," Dubose said.

The extension of Ready to Work to high school provides that missing piece to high school students, and it directly exposes them to readily available opportunities specific to the local market. Students are exposed to jobs they wouldn't otherwise be aware of, combatting the false dichotomy in some students' mind that if you aren't headed for college, you're doomed to a low-wage, dead-end job.

"A lot of high school students think it's college or bust," Dubose said. But college is not for everyone. Landing an entry-level position at a thriving manufacturing company can be a stepping stone to more advanced training. Dubose pointed to a student who completed High School Ready to Work, graduated in 2017, took an entry-level job at Phifer, and is now training to be a loom technician—a position that will pay \$20 an hour. And that's the just the beginning of his opportunities for advancement.

"So many students have so many untapped aptitudes," Dubose said. "They just haven't been turned on to the world of work."

Results

Two workforce and training centers were established in cooperation school systems with more planned.

Established World of Work, a regional consolidated career interest fair, to begin reaching middle school children, and developed WOW 2.0, an event connecting high school students with career opportunities.

Established Educator Workforce Academy, connecting school leaders to local industry.

Established Ready to Work curriculum for high school students. All high school students who successfully completed received job offers. Now expanding to multiple schools in the region.

Tuscaloosa Leadership Action Plan

Direction: Connect students to employers and employment opportunities in order to fill the needs of business and industry.

Development: West Alabama Works' Educator Workforce Academy provides educators with workforce information and on-site visits to key local employers, fostering a greater understanding of local business and industry needs, opportunities for students, and the role K-12 educators can play in preparing students.

Design: Allow industry to drive the training content and identify the offerings that are in demand in the local economy. Replaced local high school career interest fairs with centralized Worlds of Work event. Replaced career placement event with WOW 2.0 for high school juniors and seniors. Brought a high school version of AIDT's Ready to Work training program to area high schools to provide at-risk high school students with workplace skills and credentials.

Data: Developed Career Connect data system to record all job seekers interacting with West Alabama Works' various programs. Matches applicants with potential employers looking for workers with appropriate skills. Continuous follow up through skills acquisition to job placement.

Partners: Over 200 partners in business and industry, Shelton State and Bevill State Community Colleges, K-12 school systems in Bibb, Fayette, Green, Hale, Lamar, Pickens, Sumter, Marengo and Tuscaloosa Counties, the Appalachian Regional Commission, Region 3 Workforce Council, West Alabama Chamber of Commerce, The University of Alabama, University of West Alabama, and Stillman College.

Conclusion

By 2025, Alabama needs to add 500,00 new highly skilled workers to Alabama's workforce to meet the expected demand from business and industry and to position Alabama for competitive success.

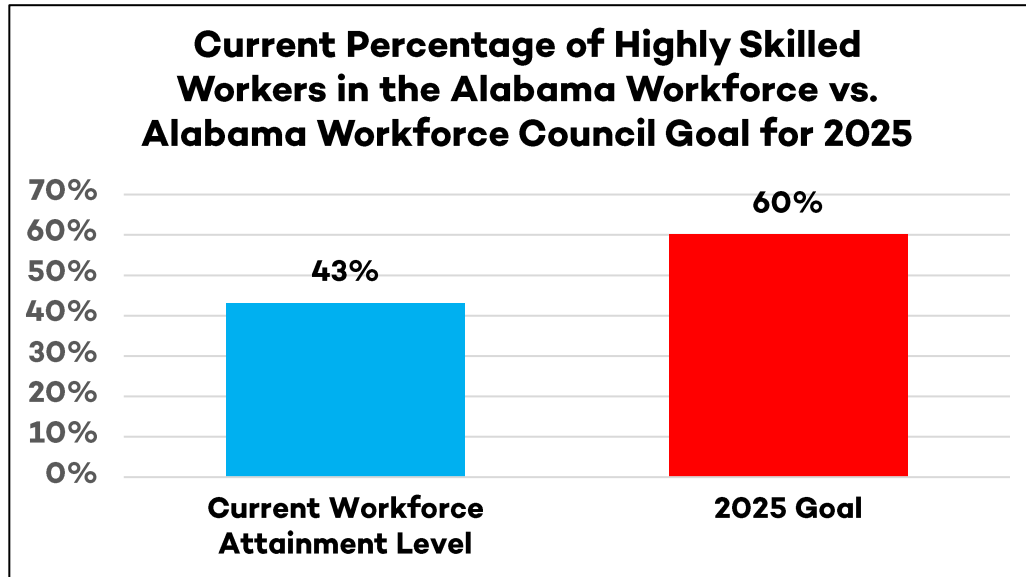


Figure 26. Source: 2018 Alabama Success Plus Report

To reach that goal, Alabama's K-12 schools need to work toward graduating every student ready for advanced training or higher education. As described in this report, ambitious schools and systems are already pursuing higher rates of attainment.

Leaders in education, business, and in local communities are setting higher expectations for students, developing their personnel to deliver improved instruction, and redesigning their organizations and educational offerings to provide more effective pathways into the jobs of the future. And they are using data to track the effectiveness of their strategic efforts.

A hallmark of the leaders and teams profiled in this report is that all of them keep abreast of state and national innovative approaches. They participate in state and national groups that share best practices. They bring ideas home to cultivate in their own local communities.

Alabama could do more to cultivate leadership in education. Several states support leadership academies that facilitate the exchange of ideas and best practices. These academies fill the need of creating better quality and greater supply in education leadership. While Alabama has a [leadership academy for superintendents](#) operated by The University of Alabama, it lacks a formal program for cultivating leadership among principals and other school leaders.

The [Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement](#) (GLISI) is a public-private venture, supported by corporations, foundations, and state grants. In 2017, GLISI reached 1,250 current or aspiring leaders providing training and on-site support for

teachers, principals, and central office leaders. GLISL creates networks of learning, aids systems in strategic planning, and offers on-the-job coaching.

The [Arkansas Leadership Academy](#), established in 1991 by the Arkansas State Legislature, provides training for principals, assistant principals, teachers, and other education leaders. Leadership academy participants are exposed to research-driven ideas for innovating and managing change in the school setting. Arkansas' academy is also supported by a public-private partnership involving the state, professional organizations, and corporate partners like Tyson Foods, Walmart Stores, and the Arkansas Chamber of Commerce.

Alabama should evaluate the various models available and build a program suited to the state's needs. In the interim, the systems profiled in this report offer a multitude of ideas for innovations that have improved results in college and career readiness and are ready to for adoption. Schools and school systems that are not satisfied with their student success results would be well-served to investigate and adopt the models for success identified in the five school systems profiled.

Those include:

Forging Partnerships: Successful schools and school systems have partners. They realize that the education of their students requires collaboration and partnerships with their school districts and sometimes outside their district boundaries. Every school system will be well served to seek partnerships with local libraries, Boy's and Girl's Clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs, family resource centers, chambers of commerce, local businesses and industries, two- and four-year colleges, churches, local school foundations, civic clubs, and more. Creating partnerships for student success is a true sign of leadership.

A+ College Ready: In partnership with the State Department of Education, A+ College Ready is a program of A+ Education Partnership that partners with middle and high schools to train and equip educators with the tools, resources, and support needed to prepare a diverse pipeline of students prepared for rigorous coursework, including Advanced Placement courses. With the aid of the program, Alabama has quadrupled the number of students participating in college-level courses while still in high school, with almost 28,000 students participating as of 2016. Beyond the spread of access, the program has helped boost the percentage of students successfully passing the end-of-course AP test. Over the past eight years, Alabama has led the nation in percentage growth of students earning qualifying AP scores in math, science, and English and third in the nation in percent growth for minority students earning qualifying scores in the same subjects.

Cash for College: In partnership with the State Department of Education, Alabama Possible's Cash for College Program offers training in how to encourage students to apply for Federal Financial Aid. Cash for College also offers schools access to data that can help schools track student progress toward completion of the applications. Successful completion of the Free Application for Free Student Aid increases the chances students will continue into higher education. With increased focus on the process, Alabama's FAFSA completion rate climbed 5 percent in 2018.

Worlds of Work and WOW 2.0: Alabama's Regional Workforce Councils are spreading efforts to connect students directly with employers in hopes of connecting business and industry with aspiring workers. Worlds of Work, a consolidated and

enhanced career interest expo, was pioneered by Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council and has since been replicated and enhanced in West Alabama. Other councils are also adopting the model in cooperation with their local school systems.

Educator's Workforce Academy: A model developed by West Alabama Works, the academy gathers principals and other principal leaders into structured conversations and a guided exploration of local business and industry.

High School Ready to Work: Originally developed to provide basic workplace skills training and credentials to adult workers, the Ready to Work curriculum is being adopted at the high school level. The program is targeted at students who intend to enter the workforce directly after high school. The Alabama Department of Education has started a pilot program to encourage the spread of the concept, [recruiting interested schools for a pilot program](#).

Faculty Book Study for Culture Change: In a quest to change faculty expectations, Pike County held faculty-wide book studies and discussions to energize new ways of thinking about educating kids, particularly those from impoverished households. [Pike County's book list](#) provides suggested readings.

Pike County's Virtual High School: While many school systems have used Advanced Placement courses to offer students college-level courses and the potential to earn college credit in high school, other schools, particularly those near community college campuses, are encouraging students to take the college-level courses on local campuses. Pike County has taken this a step further by creating ways to deliver community college and university classes to students either on the K-12 campus, at the institution, online, or a combination of these approaches.

Leader in Me: Recognizing that it is ultimately up to students to chart their courses through school and into the workforce, Talladega County brought the Leader in Me program to its elementary schools. The widely used curriculum adds leadership training and education about habits that lead to success in school and beyond.

And, finally, a home-grown solution from Brewton City Schools.

Brewton's example serves as an appropriate, if a bit comical, conclusion to this report. If Alabama is to achieve its goal of adding 500,000 skilled workers to the workforce by 2015, Alabama must equip every student with a plan for success.

And that is what Brewton strives to do. Senior English teacher Nancy Richardson's first assignment for her high school seniors is creating a ["Get Off Mamma's Payroll Plan"](#) for life after high school. The simple questionnaire and instruction list spells out the steps students need to get in college, join the military, or get a job.

The plan can work because the community of Brewton sets high expectations, provides a guided path, personal attention, and community resources to propel students to the next step.

The statistics show it works. In 2018, 93 percent of seniors graduated, and virtually all of them left certified college and career ready for the next step in their journey.

Alabama can achieve the goal of adding 500,000 new highly skilled employees to its workforce by 2025, but it will require leadership.

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