



2015 Education Progress Report

Since the launch of Plan 2020, Alabama has made significant progress toward its goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate. In 2014, the state's public schools reported an **86 percent graduation rate**, up from 72 percent in 2011.

In contrast, though, the state has a long way to go when it comes to making sure every one of those graduates is prepared for college or a career. Only **21 percent of Alabama's 2014 graduates who took the ACT tested college ready in all four subjects**. And, among those 2014 graduates who enrolled in the state's public colleges, **31 percent had to take remedial courses** in either math or English or both subjects before they could begin college-level coursework.

Alabama has made progress. The overall remedial rate is lower than it was in 2011, and Alabama students have been improving their performance on the ACT. The percentage of Alabama students testing college ready in English now exceeds the national average, and is close to the national average in reading (social sciences) and in the overall composite score. However, only 31 percent of Alabama students who took the ACT were found to be college ready in math and science. On both tests, Alabama's success rate trails the national average by a considerable margin – 12 percentage points in the case of math.

Supporters of public education never expected that Alabama would experience an overnight educational transformation. Rather, the state's strategic plan for educational improvement measures performance honestly and includes goals and strategies designed to better educate Alabama children from their earliest years to their entry to college and the workforce. Alabama's plan seeks to:

Start Early



This year, **Alabama's First Class Pre-K should reach more than 11,000 children, or 19 percent of Alabama 4-year-olds. That's up from 6 percent in 2012, with nearly triple the number of children served.** In the 2016 budget, the Legislature continued a string of steady increases for Pre-K, adding another \$10 million to the voluntary public program. Coupled with the proceeds of a federal grant, the First Class Pre-K Program plans to add more than 200 classrooms in the coming year. In 2015, Alabama was again recognized as one of only five states with a Pre-K program that met all 10 standards of quality established by the National Institute for Early Education Research. The state is in the third year of a 10-year plan to make Pre-K available to anyone who wants it.

Set High Expectations



Alabama has adopted and defended a nationally competitive set of learning standards that challenge our children to learn at the pace and depth of students in other states. In the 2016 budget, the Legislature provided **an additional \$6 million to pay for the assessments needed to track progress toward our college and career readiness goals**. All Alabama students now take the ACT College Readiness Test as juniors, and all seniors take ACT's WorkKeys, which measures skills needed for employment. Beginning in 3rd grade, the ACT Aspire charts students' grade-level proficiency on a path toward graduating college ready. The national education research organization Achieve found Alabama's Aspire tests to be among the best in the U.S for providing a truthful assessment of student proficiency.

Results from the first administration of Aspire tests in 2014 indicate a need for improvement. In both reading and math, and at almost every grade level from 3 to 8, less than half of Alabama students are on track. In reading, only 35 percent of Alabama 3rd graders scored at or above proficient. There was some progress in later grades, and by 8th grade, 48 percent were hitting the reading benchmark. In math, 52 percent of 3rd graders scored at or above proficient. But by 8th grade, the percentage of students scoring proficient had fallen to 29 percent.

Break Down Barriers to Learning



A variety of factors can interfere with a student's ability to succeed. For example, as a group, students from low-income households lag behind their more affluent peers on measures of academic achievement. To help close this achievement gap, the state provides supplemental money to school systems to help students at-risk of school failure. In the 2016 Budget, the Legislature **added \$1.9 million to support programs aimed at closing this achievement gap**. At the same time, the Legislature is requiring that these funds be awarded through a process of application and review. Applicants must propose research-based approaches to solving identified needs. They'll also be required to set goals and track results in order to prove the investments are improving student outcomes.

To make sure all students have access to a full range of advanced and elective courses, regardless of geography and the resources of local school systems, Alabama supports one of the largest distance learning programs in the U.S., ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide). During the 2014-2015 school year, for the first time, ACCESS had to limit enrollment due to budget constraints. The 2016 budget provides \$19.7 million for ACCESS, **a \$1.3 million increase for distance learning over the previous year**. With the additional funding, ACCESS should be able to handle enrollment demand while also continuing to add and improve course offerings.

During the 2014-2015 school year, 30 additional school systems formed Learning Supports teams, which bring together teaching, administrative, and support personnel in the school to identify problems that interfere with student success (attendance, discipline, transportation, health, economic distress, school atmosphere, etc.). The teams also catalog school and community resources that can help student overcome obstacles. One indicator of success: systems participating for the first time were able, collectively, to **cut the number of days**

students were absent by over 10,000 days. In 2015-2016, the SDE plans to introduce the approach to 10 to 15 additional systems.

Seek Continuous Improvement in Teaching and Leading



In the 2016 budget, the Legislature began restoring support to local systems for teacher professional development, **adding \$3 million in the Foundation Program.** The Legislature also maintained funding for the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Alabama Math Science and Technology Initiative.

The State Board of Education is expected to vote in August on new standards for educator preparation programs in Alabama's institutions of higher education. As proposed, these standards will **require higher levels of qualification and readiness for new teachers.** Entry into educator preparation programs will require a higher grade point average, and programs will be evaluated in part on the success of their graduates in the classroom.

Alabama is moving toward **an improved, data-informed teacher effectiveness evaluation system.** This school year begins a two-year process, in which local systems will develop an evaluation program based on a state model. Every local school system should be ready to implement the new evaluations by the 2017-2018 school year.

Equip Every Student with a Plan for Prosperity and a Pathway to Success



All students now take a college and career interest and planning course, usually by the end of the ninth grade year. This year, **65 percent of ninth graders completed four-year plans,** signed by a parent or guardian, that chart their route to graduation and beyond. That's up from 33 percent the previous year, and progress toward a goal of having all students complete a plan.

Enrollment in career -oriented education continues to climb. In the 2014-2015 school year, **201,700 students took a Career Tech class, an increase of 4,739, or 2 percent.**

In 2014-2015, the State Department of Education deployed 36 career coaches to help high school students connect to employers and to make informed decisions about college and careers. The FY 2016 budget provides an additional **\$700,000 to bring the number of career coaches up to 76 statewide.** The state's goal is to employ 80 career coaches, which would provide a coach one day a week at every high school in the state.

The state has increased funding for Advanced Placement courses, which can qualify students to receive college credit while in high school. In the 2016 budget, the Legislature **increased support for AP courses by another \$1 million,** bringing the annual investment to \$5.3 million. Thanks to that investment, Alabama has been a national leader in gains on increasing participation and success on AP exams, particularly among minority students. Still, Alabama's AP participation rate of 26 percent remains below the national average of 36 percent; and our success rate on AP exams, which are required to receive college credit, is only 38 percent. Only three other states – Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas – have lower rates of success.

The state also has increased funding for Dual Enrollment, which allows high school students to take college-level classes for both secondary and postsecondary credit. In the 2015 budget, the Legislature added \$5 million to provide scholarships for students pursuing career-technical

education through the community college system. It also authorized a tax credit for businesses that provided money to support the scholarships. In the 2016 budget, the Legislature added **another \$5.3 million for career-tech dual enrollment scholarships.**

To demonstrate readiness for the workplace, every Alabama High school senior now takes ACT's WorkKeys assessment. WorkKeys is a work readiness test, measuring the ability to apply mathematics, locate information, and read for information. In the 2014-2015 school year, **25,866 students, 59 percent of those tested, earned a Silver WorkKeys certificate or better.** Those who earn a Silver level certificate are considered to have the core employability skills needed for 65 percent of jobs.

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