

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ALABAMA



CELEBRATING ALABAMA'S PROGRESS

Certified Public Manager® Program

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The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager training program.

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Introduction

The well-being of today's children affects the future vitality of a community. Young children that participate in high-quality early childhood education have positive early learning experiences, developing skills that prepare them for kindergarten. Children who start kindergarten prepared to learn perform better throughout school and complete more years of education. A more educated workforce means higher incomes, increased public revenues, less poverty, and less crime. These are all factors that allow a community to grow and thrive. (www.urbanchildinstitute.org). Early childhood education is an agent of positive change from Pre-K to Ph. D degree. Education is the great equalizer for all (Education: The "Great Equalizer", 2021).

Alabama's First-Class Pre-K program has been a very effective approach to public early childhood education. Collaboration among several early childhood education initiatives and across political affiliations has helped maintain an unwavering focus on high-quality early childhood education. The purpose of this white paper is to research and offer recommendations for expanding the successes and best practices in early childhood education by examining outcomes from Alabama's nationally recognized First-Class Pre-K program or other early childhood education initiatives and to describe what makes the Alabama First Class Pre-K program so effective and how it can be expanded. The information was gathered through internet research and personal interviews with Allison Muhlendorf, Executive Director of Alabama School Readiness Alliance; Dr. Barbara Cooper, Secretary of Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education; and Mrs. Erin Rhea, Pre-K Teacher at J.F. Shields High School.

Highlighting Alabama's Pre-K Policies

The mission of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE) is to inspire, support, and deliver cohesive, comprehensive systems of high-quality education and care to children across the State of Alabama to thrive and learn (www.children.alabama.gov). ADECE, previously known as the Alabama Department of Children's Affairs, was established separately from the Department of Education in Alabama's state government. The State of Alabama is one of a few states to house ADECE outside of the K-12 program allowing the department to establish its own identity. Under this established department, a team of educational leaders was

motivated to develop a successful program to be the best in offering high quality education across Alabama.

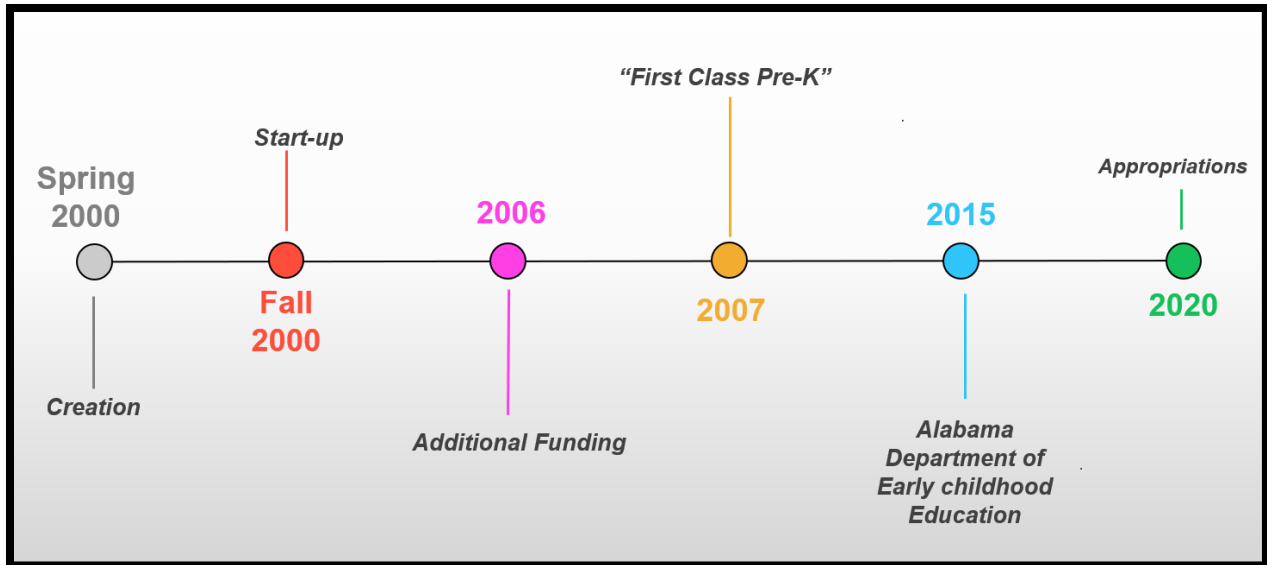
In developing Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K program from scratch education leaders learned from researching states like Georgia and North Carolina with successful Pre-K programs offering high quality education based on principles and methods. These leaders incorporated Georgia and North Carolina’s framework into a unique Pre-K program for the State of Alabama (Starting at Zero-Reimagining Education in America, 2020). It was especially important to build a strong structure to ensure Alabama children receive a high-quality education to be successful. These leaders strived to capture the essential Pre-K framework, elements, and components representing quality standards, children success and outcomes (Starting at Zero-Reimagining Education in America, 2020).

Leadership and Governor Support

Governors and community leaders are exploring how they can build an early learning system to help achieve the early childhood goal; that all children start school ready to learn (Washington: Urban Institute, 2017: “School Funding: Do Poor Kids Get Their Fair Share”).

In 2000, under the leadership of Governor Don Siegelman, the Office of School Readiness was created by the Alabama Legislature and placed in the Alabama Department of Children Affairs. The Alabama Department of Children Affairs was part of Alabama’s Executive Branch and reported directly to the Governor. Through collaborative efforts with the Department of Children Affairs and other state and county agencies, the Pre-K pilot program began in eight counties across Alabama that same year.

In 2006, the Alabama School Readiness Alliance, a nonprofit coalition, formed a joint campaign with A+ Education, Alabama Giving, Alabama’s Partnership for Children and VOICES for Alabama’s Children to lobby the legislature for additional program funding. Their efforts were successful, and Governor Bob Riley allocated additional funding for the expansion of the Pre-K program. The following year the Pre-K program formally adopted the name “First Class Pre-K program” (Alabama School Readiness Alliance, 2015).



In 2012, Governor Robert Bentley appointed Secretary Jeana Ross to administer and maintain the highest quality rating for Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K program. Governor Robert Bentley stated, “First Class Pre-K supports a solid foundation for school success and school readiness - and most importantly for our state, our families, and future success of our children – it is closing the achievement gap for our most vulnerable children” (Bentley, 2017).

On July 1, 2020, Governor Kay Ivey appointed Dr. Barbara Cooper as the Secretary of Early Childhood Education. Dr. Cooper, like her predecessor Jenna Ross, provides data and evidence on the significance of increased funding to continue expanding Alabama’s nationally recognized First-Class Pre-K Program. During the 2020-2021 school year there were 1,238 Pre-K classrooms under the leadership of Dr. Cooper. In the upcoming 2021-2022 school year, the voluntary Pre-K program will expand to 1,373 classrooms and serve 224,714 children (Dr. Barbara Cooper, Department of Early Childhood Education, 2021), enabling ADECE to move closer in reaching the 70% target goal of providing access to high quality education to all four-year old children across the state. Dr. Cooper shared her appreciation by stating, “Alabama has committed to investing in our youngest learners through the First-Class Pre-K program, and those investments continue to be recognized on the national level. This was only made possible by continuous leadership from Governor Ivey and bipartisan legislative commitment to invest in quality early childhood education” (www.children.alabama.gov). Dr. Cooper’s platform at ADECE includes investing in

early childhood education, childhood development, to raise awareness and attract more stakeholders to the program. In our interview with Dr. Cooper, she provided insight into her leadership at ADECE. Dr. Cooper is responsible for presenting an annual written report to Governor Ivey that include factors used to determine Alabama's Pre-K program investment rates versus retention, lowering dropout rates and closing education poverty gaps. Dr. Cooper also meets with stakeholders to discuss the Pre-K programs' quality, accountability and student achievements extending beyond kindergarten that includes articles of student's progress and the data of student successes based on the classroom level. Dr. Cooper celebrates three areas of successes to include continuous support of state leaders, data driven infrastructure and the Race Matters Institute that involves using the equity lens. Dr. Cooper maintains her vision on regrouping her team to focus on putting children first and how to strengthen the work already completed that includes mindful Monday team building meetings implemented during the pandemic to keep communication open among the group.

Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Budget Year	State Appropriations	Number of Classrooms	Number of Students	Number of Eligible Children	Number of Teachers Employed	Percent Access
2006-2006	\$4,326,050	57	1,026	60,002	114	1.7%
2006-2007	\$5,369,898	59	2,062	60,565	118	1.8%
2007-2008	\$10,000,000	128	2,304	62,354	256	3.7%
2008-2009	\$15,490,831	185	3,330	59,803	370	5.5%
2009-2010	\$18,376,806	215	3,870	61,093	430	6%
2010-2011	\$18,376,806	217	3,906	62,104	434	6%
2011-2012	\$19,087,050	217	3,906	62,104	434	6%
2012-2013	\$19,087,050	217	3,906	59,987	434	6.5%
2013-2014	\$28,624,146	311	5,598	60,665	622	9%
2014-2015	\$38,462,050	419	7,698	59,216	838	13%
2015-2016	\$48,462,050	652	11,736	58,740	1,304	20%
2016-2017	\$64,462,050	811	14,934	59,736	1,622	25%
2017-2018	\$77,462,050	941	15,996	57,128	1,882	28%
2018-2019	\$95,962,050	1,045	18,756	58,317	2,090	32%
2019-2020	\$122,798,645	1,209	21,762	58,520	2,418	37%

Investing in Alabama's Future

In May 2019, the Alabama Legislature approved Governor Ivey's recommended budget increase for the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, including the largest ever single-year expansion of First Class Pre-K.

Bipartisan Legislative Funding

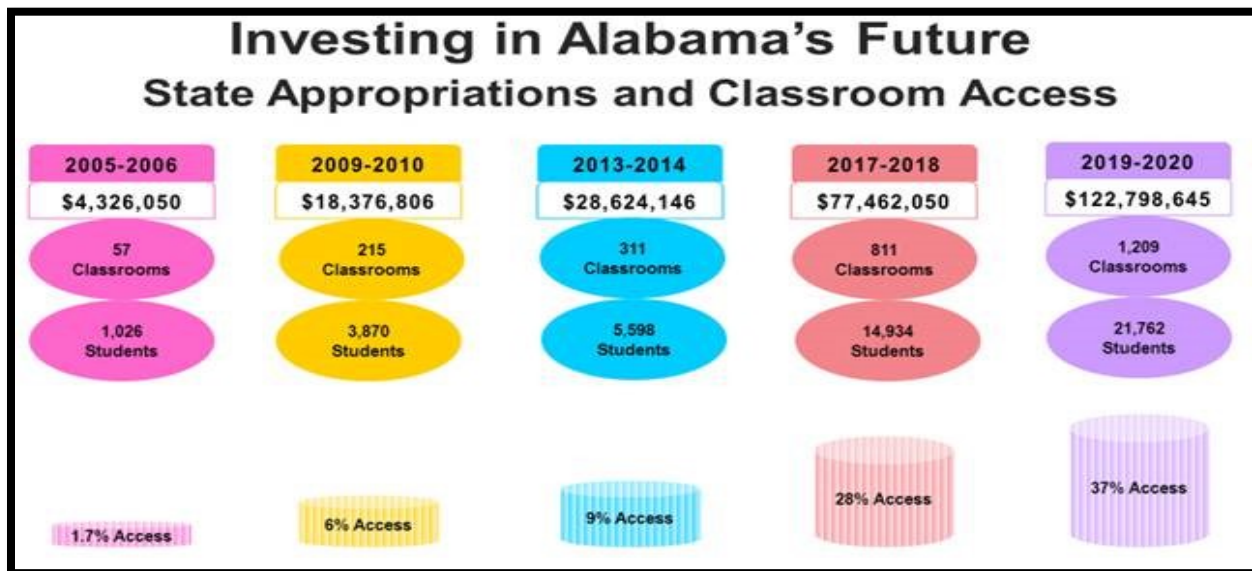
ADECE has received overwhelming support under the leadership of the last three governors, state legislators and mayors, making early childhood learning a priority in using their influence to move the program forward. Governor Ivey used her position and influence to launch the Strong Start, Strong Finish Initiative campaign to focus on early childhood education, K-12 education, and workforce development to continue the educational path of all Alabamians. The Strong Start, Strong Finish legislation received full bipartisan support during the 2019 legislative session that included a transformative education agenda unforeseen in the past 50 years.

Education is the largest budget item for each of the fifty states and commonwealth governments within the United States (<https://www.educationdata.org>). “Although education is the biggest expenditure, in most state and local governments less than a quarter of the budgets are allocated for public schools” (<https://www.ushistory.org>). Data shows that investing in education will continue to be a down payment on the future of Alabama. Preschool is critical to ensure all children in the State of Alabama start kindergarten with the skills and support that enable them to become successful.

Each year since 2017, Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K program has received increased support and allocated funding from the Education Trust Fund per the recommendations by the current Governor and approved by the current Legislatures. In May of 2019, the Alabama legislature approved Governor Ivey’s recommended budget increase for the ADECE, including the largest ever single-year expansion of Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K (<https://children.alabama.gov>).

On January 26, 2021, ADECE Secretary, Dr. Barbara Cooper presented the Alabama legislatures with a \$24.4 million dollar increase that would allow the Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K to serve a greater percentage of Alabama’s 4-year-olds, including 3,000 children on waiting lists, as well as ensure pay parity for all Alabama First-Class Pre-K teachers with the same 2% pay raise as all other K-12 public school teachers in the upcoming school year.

The legislature approved the \$24.4 million increase for this renowned program, bringing the overall budget to \$151.2 million dollars. The additional funding allowed the opening of 135 new classrooms across the state, creating space for 41% of the state’s four-year-old to enroll in Pre-K this school year 2021-2022. The additional funding designates more high-quality preschool programs, with specialized educational requirements for teachers, professional development, quality assurance monitoring, and reflective coaching for teachers based on identified needs. This leads to well-prepared teachers providing excellent preschool programs in enriching, supportive classrooms where children become confident and ready for future school success (<https://children.alabama.gov>).



Stakeholders, Partnerships and Prioritization

Each year Alabama’s legislators have recognized the importance First Class Pre-K programs have on school readiness. Additional advocacy for high-quality education includes five (5) nonprofit organizations that advocate for funding inside and outside of state government for Alabama’s early childhood education programs. The collaborative partners consist of nonprofit organizations like Alabama School Readiness Alliance (ASRA), which advocates for the extension of voluntary First-Class Pre-K. ASRA also provides effective, high quality early childhood skills which prepares children for school success and lifetime learning.

Alabama Giving, another nonprofit organization, works to expand, promote, and inspire philanthropy by encouraging members to share knowledge, collaborate and advocate to improve conditions in Alabama. The A+ Education Partnership works to close the achievement gaps by ensuring all Alabama students have the educational tools to graduate and prepare for college, career, and life. Their main goal is to improve public education for all Alabama students, create and deliver the expectations by advocating for policies, practices, and investments that advance learning, and by partnering with schools to build the capacity of teachers and leaders.

Alabama Partnership for Children (APC) works to build and maintain family structures serving children birth to age five and their families. APC understands that collaboration with and feedback from others is the most effective way to build and strengthen communities that make longstanding impact on others. And lastly, VOICES for Alabama's Children works to ensure the well-being of children through outreach, public awareness, and advocacy by partnering with community leaders to inspire lawmakers to pass legislation favorable to Alabama's children. Throughout the years these nonprofit organizations remain committed in advocating for improved public education for all Alabama students by ensuring all children receive the opportunities and support to be successful in school and life.

Our interview with Allison Muhendorf, Executive Director of Alabama School Readiness Alliance, included her professional view regarding the direction of the program with additional funding. She stated more funding will help provide full access to more four-year-old children. She also emphasized the importance of raising awareness of the Pre-K program in locating more partners and facilities to help service more children. She emphasized a conservative approach that resists lowering standards to stretch funds or quickly expand the program has been key to maintaining high quality. She also states program transparency has enabled advocates to present hard numbers to legislature when lobbying for funding.

Allison Muhendorf shared her gratitude of the recent appropriation of \$24.4 million increase to the program. She shared her appreciation towards all those who have shown support of early childhood education. "Thanks to the sustained leadership of Governor Ivey, the Alabama

Legislature, and the ADECE, our state is one step closer to providing high-quality, voluntary Pre-K to all families that want it” (Alabama School Readiness Alliance, May 18, 2021).

Throughout the State of Alabama mayors are recognizing the importance of establishing meaningful partnerships with local organizations and business communities to alleviate the financial barriers to increase student participation in Pre-K programs (“Alabama Mayors Leading for Young Children” Meeting 1, May 2021, Pg. 3). Most often local communities are required to subsidize state and federal funding that supports early childhood programs. As a group effort with the Hunt Institute, ADECE and the Alabama League of Municipalities, Alabama Mayors were invited to participate in a virtual summit addressing action needed to improve the lives of young children and families (“Alabama Mayors Leading for Young Children” Meeting 3, May 2021, Pg. 1). Montgomery Mayor Steven Reed expressed his support by stating, “This is a tremendous addition to our community. This additional funding, combined with Montgomery’s property tax increase and the influx of federal funding due to the coronavirus pandemic, puts the city in a great position to be successful in educating its children” (<https://children.alabama.gov>). Mayor Steven Reed has also partnered with Alabama School Readiness (ASRA) to advocate for expansion to increase access to the program with focus on Pre-K.

Significance of Investing in Early Childhood Education

Imagine an investment account that earned 600% interest. Every \$1 invested would turn into \$7. Would a return on your investment of this magnitude change your lifestyle or would it have a rippling effect on the rest of your family? It would probably have a positive effect on all your loved ones. “Every \$1 invested in high-quality Pre-K produces a return-on-investment (ROI) of approximately \$7. Pre-K results in savings by reducing the need for remedial and special education, welfare, and criminal justice services” (Alabama School Readiness Alliance, 2019).

A large investment on the front end of education has not been a historical model but research has shown positive impacts that high quality pre-school reaches beyond the public-school rooms. Over fifty years ago, a social experiment focused on 111 children born into low-income families in Orange County, North Carolina, known as the Abecedarian project (National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, n.d). From 1972 through 1977, participants entered the

program as infants and provided wrap-around nutrition and healthcare services within a stimulating environment until they entered kindergarten at age five. Data was gathered on participants through adolescence and once more at adulthood. Results showed that participants enjoyed better health at adulthood (García, 2016). Data from the Abecedarian preschool project administered by James J. Heckman and his team developed the Heckman Curve. The Heckman Curve “illustrates quality early childhood education yields 13% return on investment vs. just 7-10% for low-quality daycares” (Heckman, 2017).

The old maxim that an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure rings true. “Our work in Alabama is based on the perception that it is much easier and more cost-efficient to build a healthy, productive child from birth—than it is—to remediate a troubled child, recapture a troublesome youth, or rehabilitate an adult who is not contributing positively to our society or our economy” (Smart Start, Alabama Partnership for Children, 2021).

National Institute of Early Education Research

An emphasis on quality over quantity require preschool programs to agree on a set of acceptable standards and benchmarks. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), founded by Dr. W. Steven Barnett, examines the effects of public policy on children and their families in the United States. As a contributor to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study in the early 1960’s, Dr. Barnett was able to illustrate the “short-and-long term effects a high-quality preschool education program can have for young children in poverty” (Rutgers GSE, 2018). The four-decade study of “outcomes including educational attainment, employment, and involvement in delinquency and crime” was instrumental in developing the high-quality standards benchmarks used by preschool programs throughout the United States and its territories (Rutgers GSE, 2018).

Through extensive research, NIEER established ten policy benchmarks that represent the minimal standards for effective state Pre-K programs. The need to focus resources on quality Pre-K programs have grown across the country and the data collected by NIEER is often “cited by state leaders when they describe their programs” (Barnett, 2016). By partnering with state administrators, advocates, and national agencies, NIEER can assist policymakers in using their vast research to improve existing programs while pinpointing areas for growth (Alliance for Early

Access, 2021). Experts believe these policies are reshaping classroom experiences to enhance learning and the development of children. NIEER benchmarks provide a cohesive set of policies supporting meaningful and persistent returns on learning and development for later enhancement of adult life and educational achievement. The ten benchmarks include:

- Early Learning and Development
- Class Size of 20 students or Lower
- Teachers have bachelor's degree (Early Education)
- Staff-Child Ratio 1:10 or better
- Teachers Have Specialized Training in Pre-K
- Vision, Hearing, and Health Screenings and Referrable
- Assistant Teachers a Childhood Development Associate certification (CDA) or Equivalent
- Curriculum Supports
- Professional Development, Coaching for Staff
- Continuous Quality Improvement System

For two decades, NIEER has published a *State of Preschool Yearbook* that tracks state-funded preschool program funding, access, and policies. This publication's goal is to improve the public's familiarity and understanding of state efforts to expand the availability of high-quality education to preschool age children (Friedman-Kraus, Ph.D., Allison, et al., 2021). NIEER's research revealed state-funded preschool has changed significantly and quality standards for preschool has increased. However, there are still gaps and unmet needs based on participation levels due to lack of program access from state to state (Friedman-Kraus, Ph.D., Allison, et.al., 2021). The *2020 State of Preschool Yearbook* cited the six state programs meeting all ten benchmarks for quality standards were Alabama, Hawaii, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, and Rhode Island (Friedman-Kraus, Ph.D., et al., 2021). Alabama continues to rank #1 in the nation for fifteen consecutive years (<https://nieer.org/stte-preschoolyearbooks>). NEER founder and Senior Co-Director Steven Barnett, Ph. D stated "The state's strong investment in teachers and continuous improvement will produce lifetime benefits for the state's young children and its taxpayers."

COVID Obstacles

Unfortunately, normal high achieving states saw their rankings lowered due to funding and resource deficits caused by COVID. NIEER also experienced challenges this year ranking state programs due to data limitations in identifying preschool funding streams and the restrictions necessitated by COVID. Additional information added to the annual report highlights the impact the pandemic had on state funded preschool enrollment, funding, and quality standards. This information can “help policymakers plan for rebounding preschool from the negative impact of the pandemic to support both future cohorts of preschoolers and the children who missed out on preschool learning opportunities in the last year” (Friedman-Kraus, Ph.D., et., 2021). Despite the pandemic, Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K program met all ten quality standard benchmarks and according to Steven Barnett, “continues to be a leader for high-quality preschool, modeling steady increases in enrollment and funding over time while maintaining a strong commitment to preschool quality” (Friedman-Kraus, Ph.D., Allison, et., al., 2021).

The global response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) changed the daily life in diverse ways for all people. As states gradually return to a sense of normalcy, researchers are particularly concerned about the significant impacts this public health crisis has had on early childhood education programs (Silverman, 2020). As governments around the world take serious measures to slow the transmission of COVID-19, state’s early learning programs, childcare providers, educators, and families must find ways to overcome gaps and reconnect Pre-K students back into a learning routine from an interrupted year. Based on a survey, conducted by the National Institute for Early Education, research between May 22 and June 5, 2020, in English and Spanish, “most of the nation’s 3-to 5-year-olds attending preschool programs had their 2019-2020 school year cut short as stay at home orders were issued and in-person classroom attendance was shut down” (Barnett, Jung, & Nores, 2020). The NIEER study shows that “prior to the pandemic, about 60% of children ages 3 to 5, and not yet in kindergarten, attended a preschool classroom. By the end of June 2020, results show preschool participation had fallen from 61% to just 8%. This massive reduction in preschool attendance affected every subgroup of society regardless of child and family background characteristics including race/ethnicity, parental education, and income” (Barnett, Jung, & Nores, 2020). While the full consequences of the pandemic’s effects on

preschool programs is not yet fully known, studies suggest that negative long-term consequences for children are likely to be substantial.

Advantages of Participation – “Strong Start, Strong Finish Initiative”

How successful a child becomes will depend on the quality of early childhood experiences. Research shows positive impacts on student achievement in Pre-K enrollment and generational gains (<https://www.tea.texas.gov>). Children who participate in high-quality education programs show the most benefits by establishing relationships with peers and having more control over their emotions and behaviors. The students are less likely to be suspended from school, subjected to addictions, or arrested and more likely to obtain a high school diploma and have some college experience, and be gainfully employed in their adult life (NICHD, June 1999, Pg. 2 & Karoly, Lynn et al, Investing in Our Children: What we know and Don't Know about the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions. (Rand, 1998 xv).

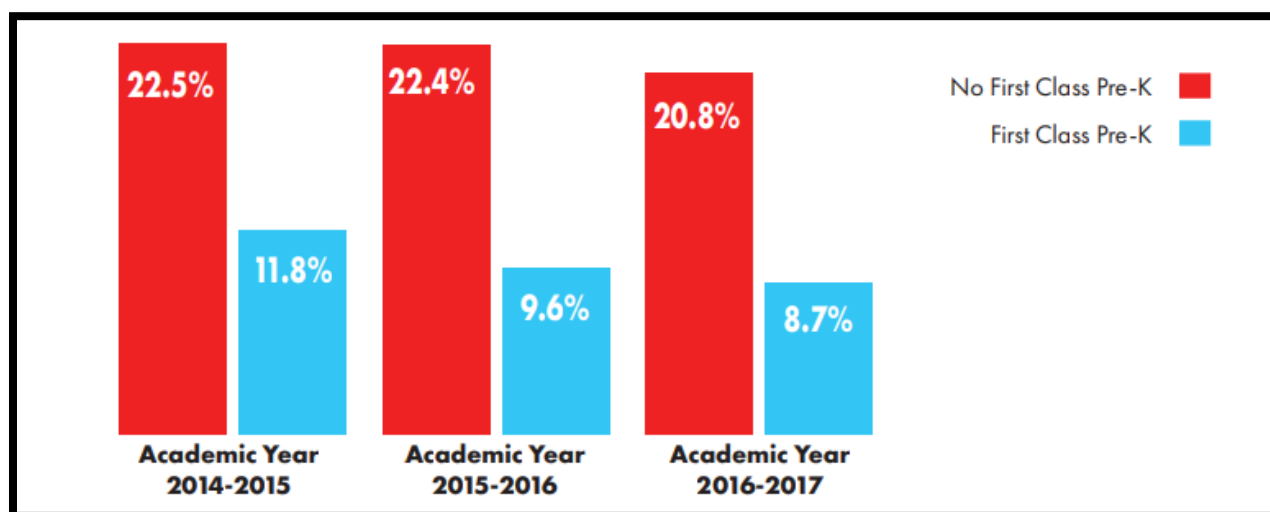
Children participating in a First-Class Pre-K program are very proficient in reading and math throughout their middle school years. These areas of proficiency are just some of the benefits identified in an ongoing study comparing the academic advantages of children that have not attended a Pre-K program and the long-term effects and outcomes that included controlling factors of poverty, ethnicity, and time (www.children.alabama.gov /[Study: Benefits for Alabama's First Class Pre-K Students Do Not “Fade out” Over Time \(December 27, 2018\) – Early Childhood Education](#)).

Demographic Characteristic	Reading proficiency (n=579,729 observations)	Math proficiency (n=579,602 observations)
	Percentage point change	Percentage point change
Received First Class Pre-K (compared to No First Class Pre-K)	+1.6*	+3.2*
Time (each subsequent year compared to first standardized test)	-2.3*	-6.9*
First Class Pre-K x Time (each subsequent school year – First Class Pre-K compared to first standardized test – First Class Pre-K)	Not statistically significant	Not statistically significant
Student in poverty	-17.0*	-17.3*
Male (compared to females)	-7.9*	-5.2*
Race/ethnicity (compared to White)		
Asian	+8.3*	+10.9*
Black	-14.2*	-14.2*
Hispanic	-12.7*	-8.2*
Other-Multiple	-2.3*	-2.3*
School – fixed effects variable (each school compared to all others)	Absorbed	

Reading and Math Proficiency (scored Level 3 or Level 4 on ACT Aspire and never retained); 3rd-7th grades; 2014- 2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017 school years

The First-Class Pre-K Research Evaluation Team, a multi-disciplinary group of researchers that included the faculty and staff from UAB School of Public Health, UAB School of Education, and the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, conducted an analysis based on Alabama students that participated in the First-Class Pre-K program. The analysis showed students in the voluntary Pre-K program were less likely to be involved in disciplinary problems throughout their school years compared to students who were not in the voluntary Pre-K program. The distinct difference in the two groups appear during the middle and high school years. Researchers also used analyzed data of disciplinary records that included 53,000 infractions over a period of three academic years (2014-2017). The percentage of First-Class Pre-K students that had discipline issues dropped over 3% in this period. By the 2016-2017 school year, only 8% of students that attended First Class Pre-K had disciplinary issues as opposed to 20% of students that did not attend. However, the percentage of discipline issues for students that did not attend First-Class Pre-K students also dropped 2% during this same period (First Class Pre-K Research Evaluation Team, 2020). In addition, the analysis also found former Pre-K students’ state records were less likely to have serious disciplinary violations (www.parcAlabama.org/news-event/all-2019/07).

Percent of Students with Infractions in Grades 1-12.



For every year that kindergarten classrooms receive more First-Class Pre-K students, discipline issues in the classroom will decline. Public K-12 teachers will be able to focus on advancing their curriculum and less time spent on reviewing basic cognitive skills and resolving behavior issues. The ripple effect on our workforce would be phenomenal.

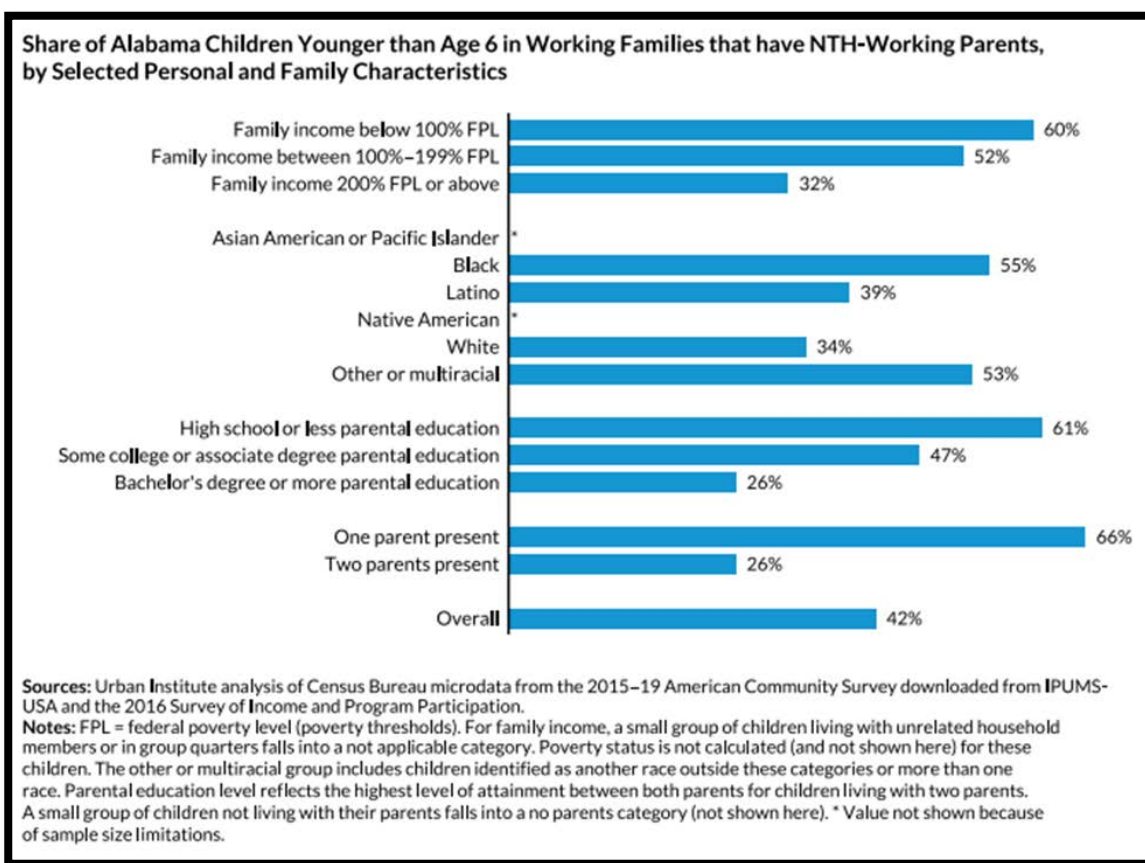
Early childhood development can prevent gaps in achievement, health, improves adult physical health and increases healthy behaviors when early health and nutrition are consolidated into early childhood development programs. Early health is critical for adult health outcomes. “High-quality, birth-to-five preschool has demonstrated positive effects on a variety of life outcomes. A new analysis of the Abecedarian preschool program, one of the oldest and most cited in the United States early childhood intervention programs showed positive effects on adult health. In 2014, researchers were surprised to discover that at age 35, participants in the treatment group enjoyed better health than the control group. The findings showed the potential of early life programs to prevent disease and promote adult health” (Campbell, 2014). Another benefit of the program was the positive impact it had on teen mothers participated in the program were less likely to have another teen pregnancy, but more likely to successfully complete their education requirements and begin a career by the time their children were 4 ½ years old (Campbell, 2014).

Recommendations

Many families face a wide range of barriers preventing enrolling their four-year-old in early care and education programs. Barriers affecting families in general are parents' lack of knowledge of early care and education in their community; the cost and affordability of the program; insufficient supply and capacity; eligibility and enrollment process which focus on adult needs; location and transportation; and daily schedules.

In our interview with Mrs. Erin Rhea, an Alabama First Class Pre-K teacher at J.F. Shields in Monroe County, several barriers affecting the expansion of the program in rural Alabama were discussed. According to Mrs. Rhea, preschoolers' attendance and enrollment into the program was based on parents work schedules and availability of public-school transportation. Many rural Alabama households are categorized as low income with most parents working nontraditional hours leaving younger children with family members while older siblings benefit from public school transportation to attend school (<https://www.urban.org>). Based on research, providing the same public-school transportation to Alabama's First-Class Pre-K participants as K-12 students could help fill Pre-K classrooms located in public schools such as J.F. Shields and other schools across the state. Mrs. Rhea credits her Pre-K classroom enrollment increase to siblings of previous students that participated in the program. The percentages of four-year-old children with access to First Class Pre-K in Monroe County is 50% with surrounding counties like Conecuh at 78% and Clarke at 40% for the 2020-2021 year. Although the Pre-K access for Monroe County stands at 50%, Mrs. Rhea's Pre-K classroom served approximately 13 students and not at the full enrollment level of 18 students for the current school year.

The Alabama’s Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) state plan, filed by the Department of Human Resources, does not have a plan to address the demand for childcare by parents that work non-traditional hours. Yet, data provided by the Urban Institute revealed that from 2015 to 2019 almost 25% of Alabama’s children under the age of 6 had parents that worked non-traditional hours (Urban Institute, 2021). Low-income households with single parents that have a high school education are more likely to work non-traditional hours. Children from these households are also more likely to benefit the most from high quality early childhood education.



The Early Childhood Education Solutions of Alabama team is offering solutions in overcoming barriers affecting families who participate in Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K program. The following recommendations and strategies could increase and expand access to Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K program and ensure all Alabama’s children are ready for school success.

- Implement an annual Pre-K campaign to remind legislators and other financial decision makers the importance of Early Childhood Education and the value Alabama’s First Class-Pre-K continues to bring to the State of Alabama.
- Allow parents to select a maximum of three locations in ranked order, regardless of their zoned area their child may attend. This expansion will increase classroom options for parents.
- Provide a standard registration period in mid-summer for fall enrollment and a second registration period in early fall to allow children on the waitlist and children turning 4-years-old after fall enrollment to have access to classrooms not at enrollment level.
- Encourage education leaders to install computerized kiosk machines with customized software in schools housing Pre-K programs for in person registration for families without internet enabled devices and to implement evening registrations leading up to the random lottery drawing.
- Permit childcare facilities with high quality education classrooms to be available during non-traditional hours as most parents need longer childcare beyond the school day and holidays.
- Provide adequate transportation or choose convenience locations for new Pre-K classrooms within low-income communities.
- Raise awareness is to enhance marketing strategies utilizing flyers, media advertisements, and informational workshops in targeted areas to include an increased social media presence for parents that lack knowledge of early care and education in their community during registration and up to the random lottery drawing.

Conclusion

Alabama’s First-Class Pre-K program has proven to be a winning investment for all citizens of this state. The State of Alabama has proven the best investment for our state is quality education for young children and their families in building a stronger economy and productive workforce.

Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE), Governor Ivey, Alabama Legislators, Alabama Mayors, local communities, and education advocates remain steadfast in raising

awareness of Alabama's First-Class Pre-K program and the importance in accomplishing ADECE's target goal in making early childhood education accessible to all children across Alabama. We applaud their unwavering focus in providing the highest-quality early childhood education in the nation. To maintain our national rank standing of providing high-quality education, there must be continuity and engagement with families. State lawmakers must remain engaged to close the funding gaps that limit access to Pre-K program classrooms. Education advocates must continue to close the gap in establishing new partnerships with our faith-based and community organizations and/or encourage these organizations to contribute in-kind match funds for newly established facilities within their community. Educators must continue to develop strategic plans to support children experiencing learning setbacks due to the COVID pandemic. These areas of enhancements will enable ADECE to provide educational equality for all children across the State of Alabama.

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