



Rep. Terri Collins  
Chairwoman of the Education Policy Committee  
11 South Union Street  
Suite 427-A  
Montgomery, AL 36130

Dear Chairwoman Collins,

In section 256 of Alabama's state constitution, it reads, "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." Meaning Alabama has a constitutional responsibility to provide an adequate and equitable education for all state residents. Though the Alabama legislature has established, organized, and maintained an education system, Alabama has not created an education system that has benefited the majority of the student population in Alabama. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) only 31% of Alabama's 4th-grade students read on grade level. Achievement results for Black students are even more abysmal. 82% of Alabama's Black 4th grade students read below grade-level state standards. Unfortunately, Academic achievement results do not get better with time. Annie E. Casey's Kids Count data shows that the average 2016 ACT composite test score was a 19, though the average ACT score for students who enroll at the University of Alabama sits at a 27, reflecting the disconnect between the state's K-12 system and the standards of the flagship university.

The education vision outlined in Alabama's Every Student Succeeds Act State Plan reads, "The first step to realizing [a state vision] is a high-performing system of public schools that challenges all children with world-class expectations for understanding English and its rich literature, mathematics, history and the requirements of a democracy, the sciences and the arts." Based on reality and the statistics of today, Alabama will not meet its vision with the status quo or minor public policy changes. As the legislature considers modifying the K-12 school funding formula, the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) urges you to consider comprehensive funding changes recommended below.

1. **Adopt the recommendations described in the Augenblick Palaich and Associates (APA) education cost study report.**

**Rationale:** Research proves that investments in public education matter, especially for students who do not receive extracurricular supports and tutoring services outside of the traditional school day. Adequate funding spent effectively leads to improved student performance and overall life outcomes.<sup>1</sup> As such, SEF supports the recommendations described in the Augenblick Palaich and Associates (APA) education cost study, which includes (1) shifting from the current funding model to a weighted student-based funding

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, B. D. (2017). How money matters for schools. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute; Jackson, K., Johnson, R., and Persico, C. The effects of school spending on educational and economic outcomes; Evidence from school finance reforms, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131 (1) (2016): 157-218.

model, (2) equalizing local tax efforts, and (3) introducing additional revenue to fund education based on the APA education cost study. These recommendations are fully described in the APA report and provide a clear pathway forward for the Alabama state legislature.

**2. Create an “opportunity weight” for students living in poverty.**

**Rationale:** Alabama students who live in poverty are more likely to face the challenges of housing instability, lack of access to high-quality out-of-school resources and toxic stress, which all impede school success. While the federal government provides some funds to meet these needs within the school, they can often force inefficiencies by their onerous regulations.

According to EdBuild, Alabama is one of 8 states that does not provide additional investments for students from low-income families or for school districts with high-concentrations of poverty. Evidence proves that there is a strong link between a student’s family income and their ability to succeed in education. If the state of Alabama commits to including an “opportunity weight” in the school funding formula for students living in poverty, student achievement and other academic metrics would rise. Schools could preemptively address the needs that students living in poverty experience. An opportunity weight would allow school leaders to move away from a deficit mindset towards one focused on academic acceleration.

**3. Eliminate school voucher programs, education savings accounts, tax-credit scholarship programs, and other efforts to fund private schools with public dollars.**

**Rationale:** Also called education savings accounts (ESAs), 529 accounts and tax credits for education expenses, vouchers allow state funding to be used for private education expenses. These policies divert money meant for public schools to tax shelters and/or unaccountable private schools. Alabama’s Accountability Act of 2013 Parent-Taxpayer Refundable Tax Credits and Education Scholarship use \$21.5 million of state taxpayers dollars each year. Evidence shows that students who take advantage of these policies nationwide are more likely to have lower test scores than if they had remained in the public school system. Vouchers are especially harmful in smaller districts where the loss of a few students would have an outsized effect on school budgets. We recommend eliminating and defunding these programs and reinvesting funding into the traditional public school system where most students are educated.

Thank you for the opportunity to weigh-in and participate in on the topic of the future of school funding in Alabama. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you one-on-one or continue group conversations. However, if you have any questions regarding the content of this letter, do not hesitate to contact me at 404-991-6777 or [fjones@southerneducation.org](mailto:fjones@southerneducation.org). You may also contact SELI Fellow and Samford student Bailey Deavers at [bdeavers@samford.edu](mailto:bdeavers@samford.edu) , who has fully endorsed the contents of this letter. We look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

Fred Jones  
Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy  
Southern Education Foundation

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