



# Alabama Insights Review

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# Executive Summary

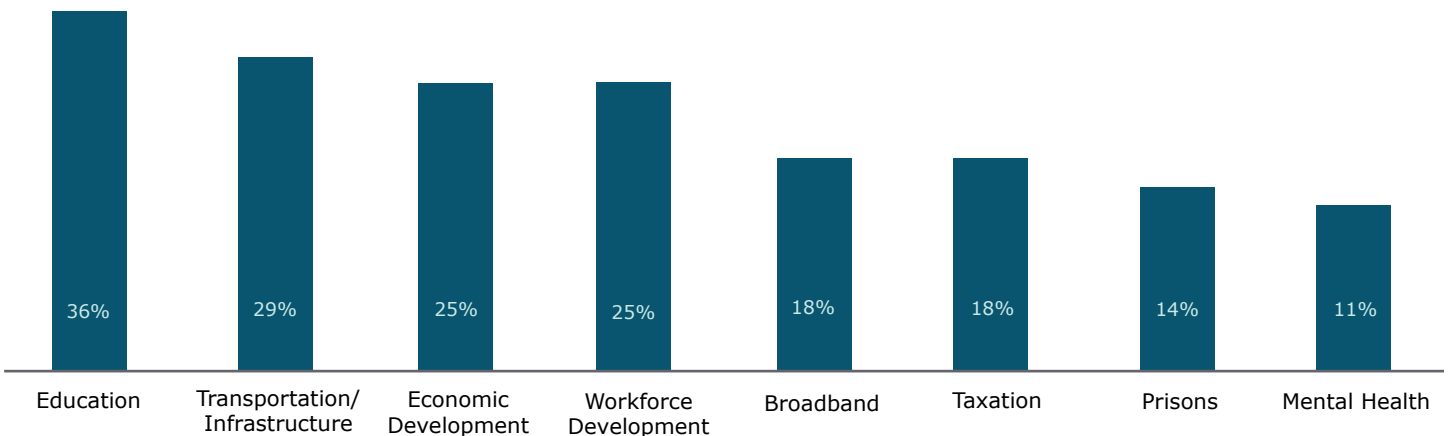
From October to December 2021, we surveyed and spoke with 30 state and local policymakers in Alabama to understand policy priorities throughout the state and how the private and public sector are working on those issues.

In our analysis, policymakers highlighted education, workforce and economic development, and infrastructure as key issue areas for Alabama. Policymakers also discussed how they would like to see the private sector engaging on these issues, in order to benefit both local communities and the state as a whole.



This review examines three of Alabama policymakers' top policy priorities of **Education, Workforce & Economic Development**, and **Infrastructure & Broadband**.

## Top Pressing Issues in the State



n = 30

Which of the following do you view as the most pressing issues facing the state?

### Education and Workforce Development

*"I think the priority from an economic standpoint is keeping the people working... And **making sure that we continue to improve the education of our workforce development...** I think that's definitely two priorities, keeping people working and adding to our workforce."*

Representative, R

### Infrastructure and Broadband

*"Well, we have a number of infrastructure needs, **probably the top of those is rural broadband.** It doesn't matter which portion of the state you're talking about."*

Representative, R

# Improving Alabama's Education System

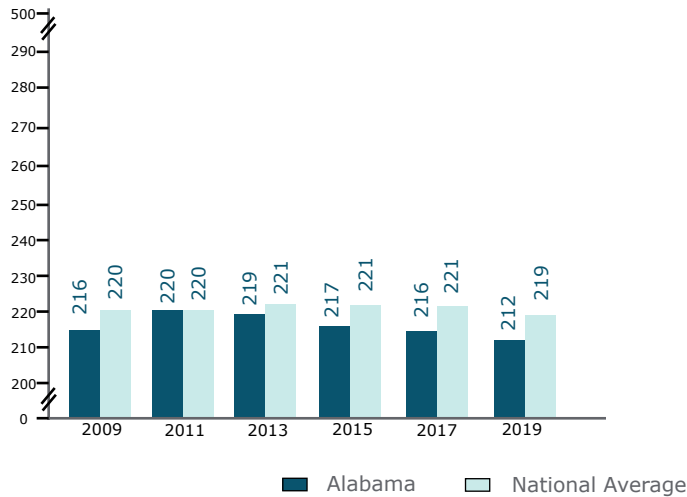
Education was raised as a top priority for policymakers on both sides of the aisle. Academic underachievement is a challenge in Alabama, despite healthy education spending **within the state's budget**. Policymakers see a need for creative solutions to address the problem moving forward.

*"[Education is] the biggest thing we do as a state. We spend more money on education than anything else we do. The feds don't control education. We do. So we need to do better. I want to see us improve. And that's always a priority of mine."*

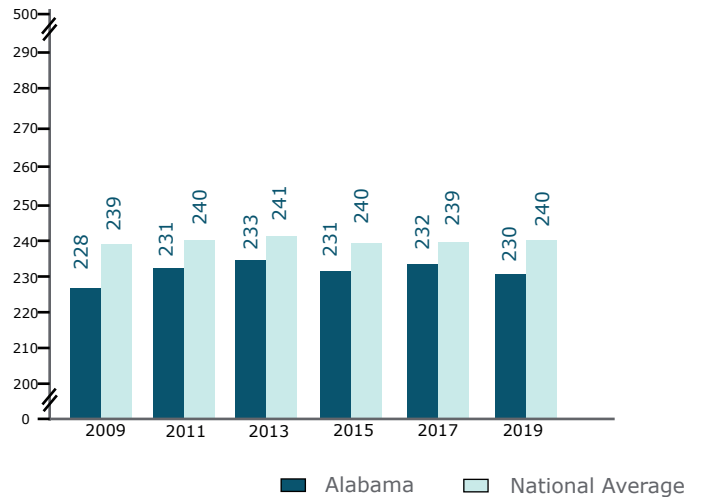
Representative, R

## Academic Underachievement in Alabama's Education System

Legislators are concerned about underachievement in schools across the state, as students are performing below grade level in every subject. This is an ongoing issue that has only been worsened by the pandemic.



Average scale scores for **grade 4 reading**, by All students and jurisdiction: 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019<sup>1</sup>



Average scale scores for **grade 4 mathematics**, by All students and jurisdiction: 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019<sup>1</sup>

*"Right now our students are below grade level across the board in every subject and every grade in every city, county, and the whole state. And so what we need to be doing is focusing on how we move them past below-grade level to grade level. And our state priorities don't seem to reflect that."*

Representative, R

*"There's already been some talk out of Montgomery about trying to improve our last-in-the-nation math scores with some innovative solutions. And I think really anything in that area in education is some of the most important priorities for, especially state-level leaders."*

External Relations Officer, R

<sup>1</sup><https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/xplore/NDE>

# Improving Alabama's Education System

## Policymakers Don't Believe Money Alone will Solve the Problem

More than 20% of Alabama's total state expenditure goes towards elementary and secondary education, and the Education Trust Fund is the largest operating fund of the state.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Alabama is ranked at 38th place for per-pupil spending (\$9,696 per pupil)<sup>2</sup>. Policymakers believe that money alone is an insufficient solution to the state's education problems.



*"If you looked at Alabama's numbers, we're not where we need to be, and we're trying to get better in education. I think in terms of money, we are spending a good amount of resources, but it's beyond money."*

Representative, R



*"If you compare the two budgets, the education trust fund and the general fund, about 78, 79 cents of every dollar in this state goes to education. But what we've got to make sure that we're getting a good return for investment on the educational dollar spent. We all know that just throwing money at a problem does not always fix it."*

Representative, R

## The Literacy Act - First Step to Address Academic Underperformance

The Literacy Act (HB388) is one of the major steps that the Alabama state legislature has taken towards addressing the state's academic underperformance. It is part of a larger mission in Alabama to improve public education across all subjects.

### The Alabama Literacy Act

The Alabama Literacy Act (HB388) was passed in 2019 and is scheduled to be enacted in the 2023-2024 school year, with the goal of improving reading proficiency in students between kindergarten and 3rd grade.<sup>3</sup> If students aren't performing at grade level by the end of 3rd grade, they are provided with a 'reading intervention' with the possibility of repeating the grade. The Act also revised education funding to focus on schools with the greatest needs. It is meant to address academic underperformance and literacy levels of Alabama's elementary school students.

*"We passed the Literacy Act. We passed other accountability measures in education. We have to raise the bar on education... So it's initiatives towards education, and it's a lot more than just the money that we have to do in education."*

Representative, R

*"We do have the Literacy Act that's providing training for teachers. But it's specific to kindergarten through 3rd-grade teachers. Unfortunately, 4th through 12th graders also can't read at grade level... I think it's incumbent upon the adults in the room to make sure that the students have what's necessary for them to learn."*

Representative, R

<sup>1</sup>"Alabama's Budget Basics," The Urban InSTITUTE, June 2022, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/projects/state-fiscal-briefs/alabama#:~:text=Alabama%27s%20budget%20basics,%2C%20bonds%2C%20and%20federal%20funds.>

<sup>2</sup>"Per Pupil Spending by State 2022," World Population Review, 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/per-pupil-spending-by-state.>

<sup>3</sup>Alabama State Legislature, House, Education, K-3 grades, Alabama Literacy Act, established, steps to improve reading proficiency, HB 388, 2019 legislative session, introduced in House April 9, 2019, <https://legiscan.com/AL/text/HB388/id/2049964/Alabama-2019-HB388-Enrolled.pdf>

# Encourging Workforce and Economic Development

A strong workforce is necessary in order to attract corporations to Alabama and help to fuel the state's economic development. Policymakers emphasized the connection between education and workforce, and how that link could open up opportunities for public-private collaboration.

## Education and Workforce are Linked

A higher quality education endows students with the necessary skills to enter the workforce and attracts corporations to the state. Therefore, improving Alabama's education is key to encouraging economic development.

*"If business thrives, education's going to receive more revenue. If education thrives, they're producing a higher quality worker which benefits business. They're interdependent, one upon the other."*

Representative, R

*"We have a variety of jobs and industries coming in, and we want to improve [education] to make sure our students can go directly to our workforce, whether that's to continue their education or for some type of certificate or trade."*

Representative, R

*"We drawing a lot of new industry into Alabama. But we have to keep the pace to have local folks prepared to take those jobs. We're working heavily with our community colleges to try to speed up the process as much as possible."*

Representative, R

## Public-Private Partnerships and the School-Work Pipeline

The school-work pipeline has produced opportunities for public-private partnerships within the state, as private companies collaborate with schools to offer training and employment opportunities.



*"NASA wanted to work with some locals like a minority school to help workforce development. Well NASA's trying to do a 3D program. And it's actually a 3D printer that will actually print houses... It's a pretty neat concept. So NASA was linked up with Drake State and in Tuscaloosa a company who has the 3D printer."*

Representative, R



*"Homebuilders have designed a program that if you're over 18 and you sign up to go to school, they will teach you how to do electrical, how to do plumbing and HVAC and all those trades, and once you're in school a certain amount of time, they have companies come in and actually interview you and actually hire you on the spot."*

Representative, R



*"The private sector is investing a lot of money in making sure that the current employees are able to keep up with the changing methods in construction... all this is important to all these private sectors when they open these sectors and challenge these young people who have a day job."*

Senator, R

# Encourging Workforce and Economic Development

## Looking Ahead on Workforce Development

Innovative workforce development is essential for promoting a business-friendly environment in Alabama and growing the economy. Attracting more businesses to the state will benefit both consumers and employees.

*“Workforce development has been a priority of ours for the last two to three years, for sure. We’ve got to be a little bit more creative and see how we can encourage our young people, young adults, and even older adults to be reclaimed, retooled, and be able to go into the marketplace in a different vocation. To help people go into a better position, a better-quality job, high-paying job.”*

Senator, R



*“We want Alabama to be business-friendly, open for business. I think we’re headed in the right direction as we’re really becoming an automotive state manufacturer, as mentioned in some of the recent announcements and over the last two or three years. We need to try to do things that we can to see what we might do to help the consumer. Obviously, bringing businesses in the community.”*

Representative, R

*“Workforce development encompasses many things—bringing the businesses or keeping the existing businesses here and training our workforce to fit the needs of those particular industries or businesses that need employees... Workforce development is a key component in our balance, our policymaking, and our future.”*

Executive Director, D



# Upgrading Infrastructure and Broadband

With increased funding from the Build Back Better fund, infrastructure is a top priority for Alabama and a key opportunity to improve the state's interconnectedness and economic environment.

*"There was just a massive infrastructure bill that was passed by Congress and signed by President Biden. There's an unprecedented level of money flowing to infrastructure projects all across the country, but especially in our state right now. And so the ability for our local governments to take advantage of these unprecedented resources is really important to make sure we put them to use on behalf of the people."*

External Relations Officer, R

*"I think [a priority is] moving ahead with our infrastructure enhancements. We've got a lot of structurally deficient infrastructure in Alabama. We're driving across bridges and stuff that are dated... It's very dangerous. So, one, functionality needs to be improved on our infrastructure, and then two, capacity."*

District Administrator, D

*"There are a number of road and bridge infrastructure priorities that we really need to look into. The main reason for that is not just the age of them, but the continuing growth that we have from an economic standpoint. For those to continue to grow, we've got to ensure that we have the proper infrastructure to handle that growth."*

Representative, R



## Broadband Improvements are Needed Across the State

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted major gaps in Alabama's broadband infrastructure. Now, strengthening broadband accessibility for all regions is a key step for recovery.

*"That's the biggest concern of the people, the broadband...it was an issue before, but now with so many students we have in our rural areas that are doing school from home and then people doing work from home, they're having to do some major work on computers."*

Municipal Commissioner, D

*"We started the Alabama Digital Expansion Authority commission. It lays the foundation by drawing maps where we have fiber internet. Their job is to try to connect the entire Alabama through the internet with fiber. But we have to actually focus on the unserved areas in the rural part, and then work our way in for the underserved."*

Representative, R

*"Hopefully, with the \$65 billion that was granted towards broadband and internet, Alabama can really utilize it in a way where we could really break the internet into all communities of Alabama. "*

Representative, R



# Upgrading Infrastructure and Broadband

## What Policymakers Want to See from the Private Sector on Infrastructure

When it comes to infrastructure projects, **open communication** and **proactive engagement** between the private sector and the public sector is essential. This has become especially important as private organizations in Alabama support local communities in the wake of natural disasters.

*"[I'd like to see private industry] engaging about how proposed infrastructure improvements or additions would impact their business, **proactively engaging their local governments would be something good to see.** You don't want to find out once you're deep into a new project that all of a sudden a company feels like this is going to harm them."*

Municipal Member, R

*"We just went through a pretty severe flood, and we had flooding that washed out roads everywhere...But our industries all stepped up...And to see the community response, some of the industries that opened up to even just simply allow people to go get a shower. **It definitely builds that community trust and then that community partnership.**"*

Representative, R

*"So when that [hurricane] took place in my district, people really helped-- citizens, corporations, the private sector. The hospital was one of the major contributors as far as starting a foundation, and **I had so many corporations reach out to me as a lawmaker to figure out how they could help.** And we've essentially been able to really rebuild the area. It's a community."*

Representative, R

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## Looking Forward in Alabama

As Alabama moves forward from the Covid-19 pandemic, policymakers are focused on recovering and improving the state and its services to be better than ever before. By raising academic performance in public schools, Alabama can strengthen its future workforce and attract corporations and new growth to the state. An updated and efficient infrastructure is necessary to support this growth and keep the state connected. Throughout it all, policymakers see ample opportunity for the private sector to engage on public issues and contribute to the well-being of the state as a whole.



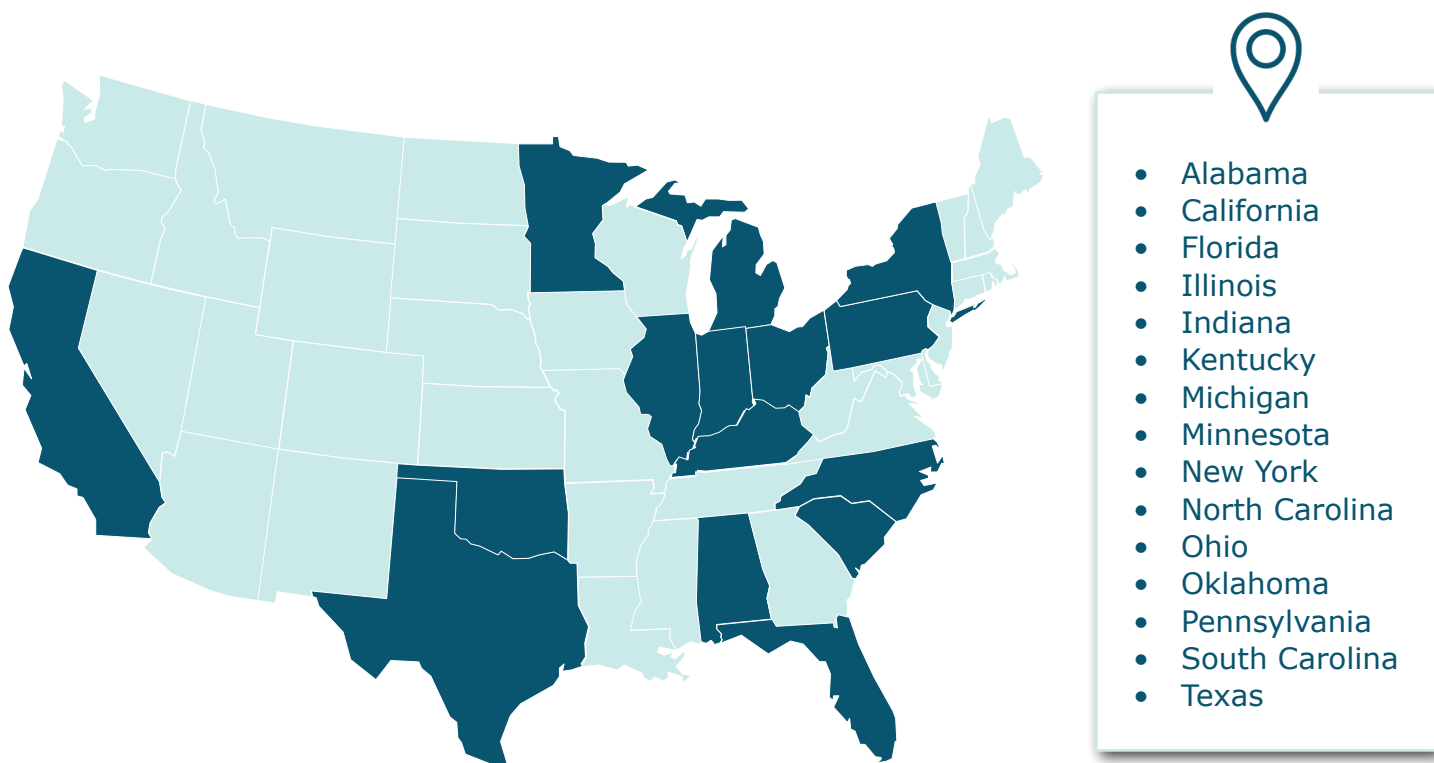
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# States Insights Review

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