

**Penta** Policy Insiders

# Alabama Insights Review

# Executive Summary

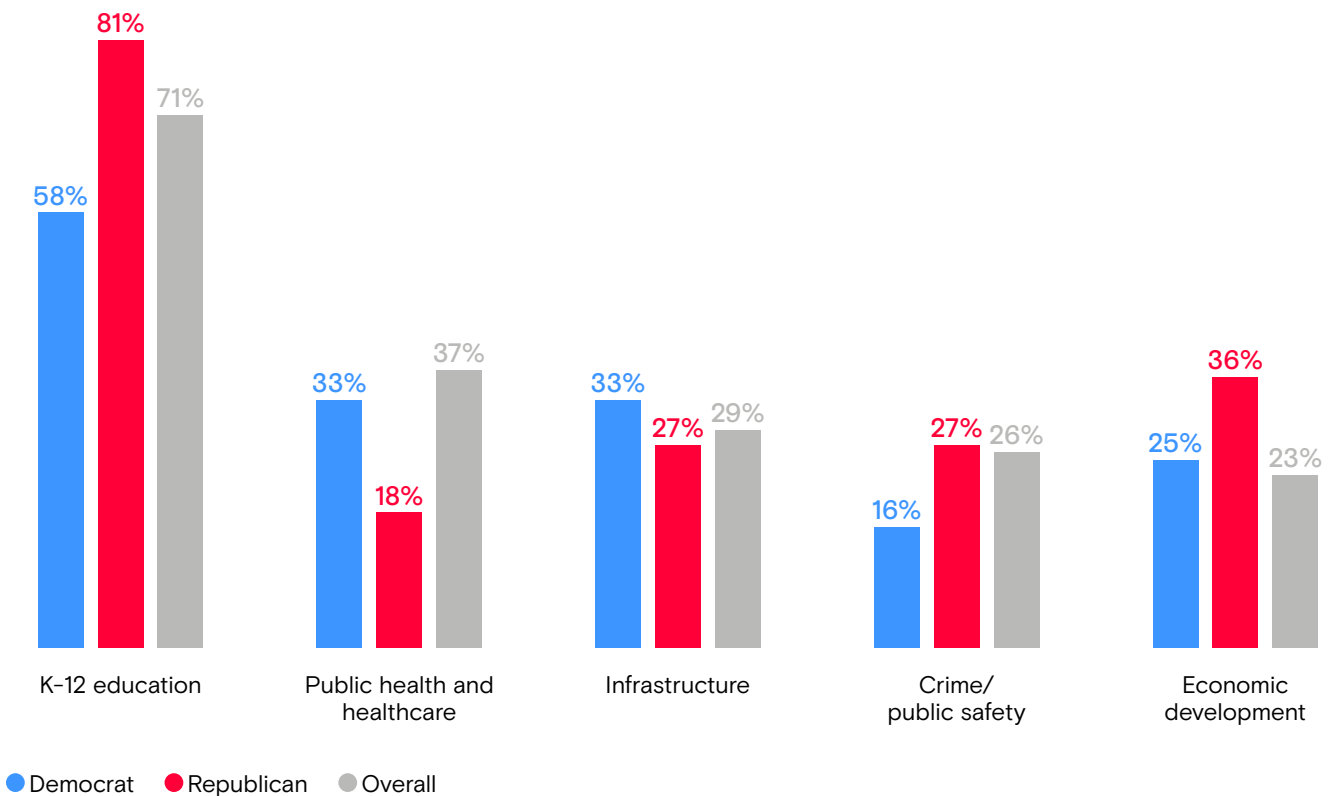
We are pleased to share our findings from this year's Alabama Insights Review. During the summer of 2022, we surveyed over 30 policymakers to understand their policy priorities and how the private and public sectors can collaborate to improve communities across the state.

Centered during a crucial election year, our research in 2022 highlights policy priorities for decision-makers in Alabama that include K-12 education, public health, infrastructure, and the economy. Policymakers place an emphasis on improving education outcomes in the state, with over 70 percent of both Democratic and Republican policy leaders stating K-12 education as their main policy objective. Healthcare ranks as the second most important policy priority, with policymakers across the aisle decision-makers placing a spotlight on improving mental health.

When it comes to the economy, Alabama policymakers agree that more needs to be done to strengthen the state's infrastructure as well as incentivize businesses and manufacturers into the state. Regardless of party affiliation, policy staff support initiatives such as workforce development in order to improve the labor force and boost the economy.

**This report examines various policy priorities in the state of Alabama, highlighting three of Alabama policymakers' top priorities - (i) K-12 education, (ii) public health and healthcare, and (iii) infrastructure.**

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



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## Alabama policy priorities

# Top issues in 2022

### K-12 Education

Improving Alabama's public education system is at the forefront policymakers' minds, with 71 percent of decision-makers saying education is a priority. Out of that 71 percent, 75 percent of Republicans and 58 percent of Democrats identify education as a primary challenge.



**Education is huge. You've got to be able to get your resources and education to a place where it's necessary, logical, reasonable, rational,** and it contributes to creating a skilled workforce.

Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, R



**Education is inequitable.** Right now I live in a county that has the largest county in the state, and it has a myriad of things like 19 different school districts within one county. And they're all funded differently.

Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, D

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### Public health and healthcare

Policymakers want to see improvements in Alabama's public health outcomes, specifically with regard to issues such as mental health and obesity.



I would love to see some more serious discussion on energy policy in Alabama **improving air quality and overall quality of life, which goes back to discussing health and healthcare and making sure that we're keeping healthy communities** and the citizens of the State healthy.

Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, D



**Our biggest priority is investing in [mental health] programs that can further reduce the recidivism right in Alabama.**

Director, Alabama Executive Branch, R



**Our most urgent healthcare policy has nothing to do with COVID. It has to do with obesity.**

Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, R

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## Infrastructure and economic development

Infrastructure and bolstering Alabama's economy is top-of-mind for policymakers in the state. Policy staff agree that initiatives to expand the state's roads and bridges, broadband, and transportation are key to bolstering economic growth.

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In Alabama, we need to have an educated workforce, and **I would love to get rid of our income tax like our surrounding states, and make it more business-friendly** for people to move to our state.

**Senator, Alabama State Senate, R**



We are growing so rapidly right now that keeping up with infrastructure and **making sure that we have the accommodations that are needed to sustain everything into the future is especially important.**

**Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, R**

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## Alabama deep dive

# K-12 Education

Policymakers point out a number of issues in the education system such as low test scores, significant achievement gaps, and underfunded programs. In fact, 71 percent of the policymakers we surveyed identified education as the most pressing policy priority. Alabama has ranked as one of the lowest performing states for K-12 education, leading policymakers to call for urgent changes that will better support students and schools in the state.<sup>1</sup>

### Low test scores

Low scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal that students are lacking proficiency in key subjects like math and literacy. In the 2019 NAEP assessment, Alabama ranked last in the United States for math, and 49th for literacy. The most recent NAEP assessment, conducted in 2022, showed that while the state did increase its rankings when compared to other states, the scores themselves stayed almost identical, indicating that significant improvements have yet to be made.<sup>2</sup> Policymakers believe that these consistently low scores exemplify the critical need to improve the education system.



Our NAEP scores are just terrible. We're 50th in the country or 51st in some things, 46th in others. **We're at the bottom, and we didn't use to be.** And I don't know what's happened, but **our kids are not successful in the classroom.**

Senator, Alabama State Senate, R

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## The impact of poverty

Policymakers are concerned that high poverty rates in Alabama contribute to the most significant challenges within the K-12 education system such as underfunded schools and teacher shortages. Political experts have gathered evidence that areas across the state with higher rates of poverty often experience poor education outcomes, aligning with the fact that the poverty rate in Alabama is currently 16.8 percent, well above the national average of 13.1 percent.<sup>3</sup>



Alabama as a state ranks very low in all the education rankings. We have school systems around the state that are in the top of the country, but **there are many, many more that are in areas of poverty, areas where we can't get certified teachers, where we just have the teacher shortage**, which is nationwide, is exacerbated in those areas.

Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, R

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## Building the future

Policymakers emphasize that strengthening the education system is vital to overall welfare in Alabama and will help children develop the necessary skills to positively contribute to society.



In those first few years, **if you can tie in those students, get them up to speed early, they're generally going to be better citizens when they're older**...education is the foundation for making sure that you've got a good tax base and a thriving state.

Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, D

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# Conclusion

Education is one of the most significant challenges in the state of Alabama, with policymakers across the aisle focused on addressing low NAEP scores and making other systemic improvements to the education system that will bolster education in underserved areas. Policymakers want to see a plan to prevent teacher shortages and ensure communities across the state have the necessary resources to strengthen their school systems.

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## Alabama deep dive

# Public health and healthcare

Alabama policymakers view public health and health care to be top priorities. In fact, 37 percent of policy leaders say public health and health care are a concern. Policy staff discuss improving overall quality of life for communities in the state and also say improving mental health outcomes is a main objective, specifically when it comes to providing mental health services in state prisons and underserved communities. Furthermore, Alabama struggles with some of the highest rates of chronic health challenges in the country, such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.<sup>4</sup> Policy staff on both sides agree that it is a priority to support health communities across the state.

Policy leaders in Alabama also want to see action in improving access to mental healthcare as a way to reduce recidivism within the state's inmate population. This focus on improving access to mental healthcare services is echoed by Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, who has made expanding mental health services for communities across the state a 2023 priority for her administration amidst growing concern over prison conditions for inmates.<sup>5,6</sup>

## Supporting a healthier Alabama

Policy leaders in Alabama also want to see action in improving access to mental healthcare as a way to reduce recidivism within the state's inmate population. This focus on improving access to mental healthcare services is echoed by Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, who has made expanding mental health services for communities across the state a 2023 priority for her administration amidst growing concern over prison conditions for inmates.<sup>2,3</sup>



I would love to see some more serious discussion on energy policy in Alabama **improving air quality and overall quality of life, which goes back to discussing health and healthcare and making sure that we're keeping healthy communities and the citizens of the State healthy.**

**Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, R**

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**Our most urgent healthcare policy has nothing to do with COVID. It has to do with obesity."**

**Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, R**

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## Improving Alabama’s mental health programs

Both Democratic and Republican policy leaders agree that there is a need in the state for more mental health programs, specifically with regard to treating inmates within the state’s prison system.

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Our biggest priority is investing in those programs that can further reduce the recidivism right in Alabama. For example, **we need meaningful drug rehabilitation, mental health programs, making it more available.** We just don’t have it available in every corner of the state and making those programs more available to everybody.”

Director, Alabama Executive Branch, R



We are working on building a new prison, which will be more of a pod-style prison, and one of those wings on the prison, we will house a mental health wing. So **those that are incarcerated can truly get the proper care that they need because about 40% of our state inmate population suffers from some form of mental health.**

Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, R

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**There’s a lack of mental health and healthcare services being provided inside the prisons.** And it’s just a constant rolling issue. I think that’ll be a big issue for Alabama.

Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, D

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## Conclusion

More than a third of Alabama policy staff agree that improving the state’s public health outcomes is a priority, especially when it comes to expanding access to mental health services for underserved communities and state prisons. Additionally, policy leaders on both sides agree that tackling chronic health conditions such as obesity are crucial to improving the state’s public health outcomes.



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## Alabama deep dive

# Infrastructure and economic development

Twenty-nine percent of Alabama policymakers view infrastructure as a priority for the state. Decision-makers detail issues such as transportation, access to broadband, utilities, and improving roads and bridges to be top-of-mind. Policymakers also want to see increased business incentives in order to bring more manufacturers into the state, which they believe will help diversify the economy.

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If you want to manufacture, you have to get your goods to the market. **Our roads are in serious need of repair.** And we've taken care of some of these issues last quadrennium.

**Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, D**

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**Alabama has done a lot to incentivize [bringing] manufacturing to our state.** I don't know if you know, but we've done well in the auto industry... we've got several plants. So I say that **overall, we're doing okay. We can always do better.**

**Senator, Alabama State Senate, D**

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**We've done a lot for [our infrastructure], but we still have a long way to go.**

**Senator, Alabama State Senate, R**

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Twenty-three percent of the policymakers we spoke to agree that economic development is a main policy objective for the state. Policy leaders note that to strengthen Alabama's economy, the state should have more work development programs so as to train a highly-skilled workforce. Additionally, policy staff say the key to attracting businesses and manufacturers to the state is through better business incentives the private sector.

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**I think companies need to be able to compete for incentives in a transparent way.** Not just where each company that comes in and wants to compete and operate in Alabama. **They need to know they're on a level playing field with everybody else.**

**Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, D**

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So as the economy is shifting to more tech-type jobs and more entrepreneurial-type things, **it's a priority to create [workforce development programs].**

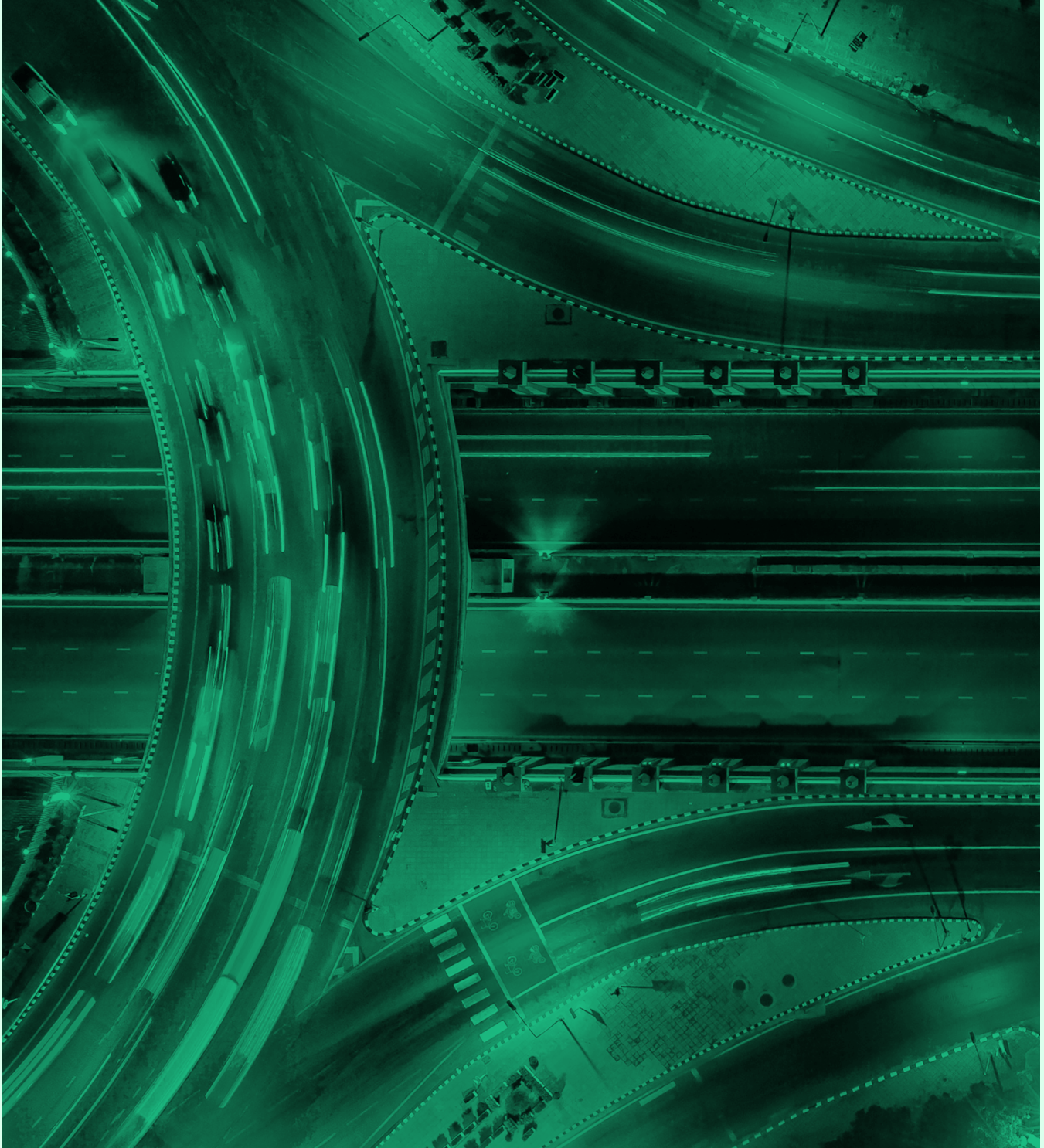
**Representative, Alabama House of Representatives, R**

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# Conclusion

Alabama policy leaders, regardless of party affiliation, agree that improving infrastructure and economic development are forefront objectives for the state. In order to aid economic growth, respondents say that better incentives for the private sector do business in Alabama are critical.



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Penta Policy Insiders provides direct feedback from policymakers to government relations professionals, improving advocates' ability to understand, validate, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their engagement.

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Qualitative n: 49 | Quantitative n: 322

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