Alabama Leads the Nation in Gains Made in 4th Grade Reading

WE’RE #1! That’s what dozens of signs read in the hands of Alabama Department of Education employees during a news conference to announce the results of the nation’s report card. The 2007 data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows a historic gain of eight points in fourth grade Reading for Alabama public school students — the largest gain in the nation, and an indication that Alabama is closing the achievement gap. Alabama is only four scale score points from the national average (220) in fourth grade Reading.

"Of all the things I have done since I’ve been Governor, whether it is economic development or anything else, there has never been a press conference I have been more excited about,” said Governor Bob Riley as he began the news conference. “Alabama is poised to lead the nation in so many things, but the one that is most important is that we lead in education.”

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In 2005, the scale score for fourth grade Reading was 208 and in 2007 the gain increased significantly to 216 – resulting in a net gain of eight points. That’s almost triple the national average in gains.

“This is a marathon, not a sprint,” observed STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION JOE MORTON. “When we started the Alabama Reading Initiative nearly a decade ago, we knew it would take time to get full funding and implement it statewide. We had to prove ourselves and we are doing so. The same is true for the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative (AMSTI). In grades and schools where we have these state initiatives, we have seen improvement. Now we must continue to work to expand both programs to higher grades and all schools.”

MARK SCHNEIDER, Commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics said Alabama’s gain in fourth grade Reading scores is higher than any other state between 2005 and 2007. “This gain stands out for this year’s assessment, and in the history of NAEP’s state-level Reading assessment,” Schneider said.

For the first time in Alabama history, Alabama public school students in grades K-3 had completed the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) training before the 2007 NAEP assessment was administered to fourth graders. And the dramatic increase in NAEP reading results points out the need for ARI training in the middle grades. The ARI will expand to Grades 4 through 8 by 2009.

“We’re number one and Alabama will never be the same!” exclaimed ASSISTANT STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION KATHERINE MITCHELL.

Alabama also made significant gains in the Advanced category in fourth grade Reading. In 2005, 4 percent of Alabama students scored at the Advanced level. In 2007, that percent nearly doubled to 7 percent of the students scoring at the Advanced level. That percentage equals the national average of students scoring at the Advanced level.

“The impact ARI has had on our school has been unbelievable,” said MS. SHERRY CALVERT, Principal of FE Burleson Elementary in Hartselle. “When I asked my faculty what they attribute our positive change in performance, the answer was, ‘The training ARI provides in reading comprehension.’”

The good news continues from NAEP with data that shows Alabama posted significant gains in fourth grade Mathematics, and gains in eighth grade Mathematics. In 2005, fourth-graders in Alabama scored 225 points and in 2007 the score rose to 229. The national average improved by two points while Alabama’s score showed a four point gain. The percentage of students who performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level was 26 percent in 2007, up from 21 percent in 2005. Alabama’s eight-graders improved NAEP Mathematics score from 262 in 2005 to 266 in 2007 while the nation only rose by two points over 2005 scores.

“The people we owe all of our appreciation to are the teachers of Alabama who have done a fantastic job,” said Gov. Riley.

“We are now beginning to see the results of our efforts,” said DAVID BYERS, vice president of the state Board of Education and District 6 representative. “Investments in our Alabama Reading Initiative and Math, Science, and Technology Initiative demonstrate increases in teaching and learning.”

In addition, the 2007 scores reflect the first time that the NAEP test was administered to students enrolled in schools that participated in AMSTI. Those schools that have implemented AMSTI continually see increased test scores on all levels. Currently, only 25% percent of Alabama’s schools have implemented AMSTI; however, that number could grow to more than 40 percent if additional funding is approved in FY 2009.

“AMSTI training requires students to think, question, and find answers they are able to support and defend,” said MRS. CAROL BROUGHTON, Principal Fairhope Intermediate School in Baldwin County. “Such critical thinking skills are beneficial for learning and testing.”

Approximately 12,000 students from approximately 230 schools in Alabama participated in the NAEP Reading and Mathematics assessments in January – March 2007. Nationwide 338,100 students took the NAEP Reading test and 337,100 students participated in the Mathematics Assessment. These assessments are required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Reading and Mathematics results are reported by average scale scores (on a 0-500 scale), and by achievement levels (Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced). NAEP assesses a representative sample of students in Grades 4 and 8 from each state in Reading and Mathematics every two years.

2007 NAEP Reading and Mathematics results can be viewed at http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard.
October is Parental Involvement Month across Alabama, but what exactly is parental involvement? Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, parental involvement is defined as the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities. This includes ensuring that parents play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning; that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s education at school; that parents are full partners, and are included in their child’s education in decision making; and that parents are included on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child.

Usually it is not lack of interest that keeps parents from becoming involved in their children’s education. Often there are barriers in the way.

For parents to become involved, schools must develop and maintain a commitment to a parent involvement program. Listed are several ideas suggested by the Alabama PTA on what schools, teachers, and principals can do to get parents to play an active role in their child’s education and school.

**SUGGESTED PARENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES FOR SCHOOLS:**

- Welcome parents in a positive and friendly manner. Send a welcoming letter to parents at the beginning of the year to establish rapport and start the year on a positive note.
- Schedule parent-teacher conferences at times convenient to working and non-working parents; e.g., early morning; before, during and after lunch; late afternoon; and nights.
- Survey parents for their opinions about school services, programs, and specific needs.
- Publish a school newsletter in which parent, student, and staff contributions to the school are regularly recognized.
- Offer parenting classes, workshops, and support groups at flexible times and provide child care.
- Create a parent resource room for activities, meetings, get-togethers, and materials to assist them in helping their children.
- Equip staff with developmental training that will assist them in knowing how to best work and communicate with parents.
- Develop a plan for regular teacher-to-parent communication.
- Encourage parents to communicate with their child’s teacher on a regular basis.
- Maintain a forum for parents to share their ideas and/or concerns in a non-threatening atmosphere.

**Tips to Help Your Child Succeed**

As a parent, you are the most important influence in your child's success. Below are 10 ways you can help your child succeed in school and life.

1. **Let's talk** – Talk with your child
2. **Reach for the sky** – Set high but realistic expectations
3. **I'm OK, you're OK** – Build your child’s self-esteem and confidence
4. **An apple a day** – Keep your child healthy
5. **Parents, the first teachers** – Support learning at home
6. **Getting connected!** – Communicate with your child’s school
7. **Oh, the places we'll go!** – Encourage exploration and discovery
8. **Circle of friends** – Help your child develop good relationships
9. **Stayin' alive** – Keep your child safe
10. **Can I help?** – Participate in community service

*(source: Alabama PTA)*
ROUGHLY half the people who hear the noise of door number two coming to a close at Holman prison will never hear that sound again for as long as they live. It’s a sound that countless numbers of prisoners have heard over the years and the sound that most would like to hear at least one more time – as they regain their freedom. However, on this day the sound is heard not by a prisoner, but by a man on a mission to reduce the high school dropout rate and promote literacy in Alabama. And he wants those who have made the wrong choices in their lives to help him reach the thousands of young people at risk.

DR. SHELLEY STEWART, CEO of the Birmingham-based marketing firm O2 Ideas, is also the Founder and Board President of The Mattie C. Stewart Foundation, a non-profit organization named after his mother whom he witnessed being killed by his own father at the age of five in 1939 in Rosedale, Alabama. The purpose of the foundation is to provide the tools and resources needed to help educators, community leaders, and other interested parties to motivate young people to stay in school while promoting the importance of getting a good education. The documentary, along with a shorter classroom version and a supporting teachers guide, is being made available to all principals and counselors in Alabama as part of “Dropout Awareness Day” September 21, 2007.

“The teaching message in InsideOut is clear: A life lost to prison is a life lost to a family, to relatives, to friends...to all of Alabama. We must do all we can to stop the loss of these lives. This documentary has application for everyone who sees it, regardless of age or social position.”

As part of an early preview tour in May, InsideOut made its debut to educators and community leaders in Huntsville, Mobile, Birmingham and Montgomery to overwhelmingly positive reviews. Based on the success of those previews, the statewide distribution and classroom showing of InsideOut on September 21st was put into motion. The success of this initiative will then be used to launch a national campaign through The Mattie C. Stewart Foundation with the goal of reaching educators, students and community leaders in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Mississippi before the end of the year.

To learn more about The Mattie C. Stewart Foundation and InsideOut, visit www.mattiecstewart.org.
These are the 3 Rs being taught at 298 schools including 29 systems across Alabama as part of the Positive Behavior Supports program (PBS). The program takes a proactive instead of a reactive approach to discipline in schools systemwide, and equips schools with the ability to:

- Reduce office discipline referrals
- Reduce suspensions/expulsions
- Reduce the number of students referred to the Building-based Student Support Team.
- Reduce the number of students referred for special education testing
- Increase consistency/morale among staff

Teachers, administrators, parents, and other school personnel are trained in effective strategies to improve student behavior and discipline. They in turn implement this strategy across the board to increase consistency among staff when invoking discipline. The schools also reinforce positive behavior with rewards and recognition programs.

“The key is having a proactive plan in place for what you are going to do when a certain behavior occurs and then knowing how to follow through with the discipline,” said DONNA KIRKENDOLL, PBS Training Program Coordinator.

Office referrals at Elberta Elementary (K-3) in Baldwin County declined from 652 to 47 since implementation in 2001. “Our major office referrals come from kindergarten. By the time the children are in the 2nd grade they already know the expectations for behavior,” said Principal Hope Zeahan.

The number of office referrals in Childersburg Middle School declined from 1,971 in the 2002-03 school year to 1,109 for the 2005-06 school year.

Principal Deron Cameron said, “Our faculty has immersed themselves in the program as we consistently recognize students who follow our rules and procedures after having been taught appropriate behaviors.” Cameron added that students are able to recite the 3 Rs and they know what each one entails.

Van Nelson, principal at Marion County High School, said PBS keeps teachers, staff, and students on the same page regarding negative and positive behaviors. “The climate of the school is different. It’s making people look at people differently and encourages them to do the things you want them to do in a positive manner,” said Nelson. “Teachers have a better rapport with students.”

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Another factor of the PBS program is the increase in time dedicated to teaching. Taking a proactive instead of reactive approach alleviates taking time away from classroom instruction.

“One of the most powerful things we teach our teachers is to use a problem-solving model – system data and practices. We teach them to use the data to make decisions on what type of intervention they need schoolwide,” said Kirkendoll.

The PBS training program is administered by the Alabama Department of Education. It was first implemented in 2001 in select schools and began systemwide in 2002.

If you are interested in developing a Positive Behavior Systems program in your school system, call Donna Kirkendoll at the Alabama Department of Education at 334-242-8114.
CONGRESSMAN ROBERT ADERHOLT (R-Haleyville) recently announced that the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) recently awarded a $200,000 grant to Cullman City Schools. The money will be used to aid in the acquisition of laptop computers and Smart Boards for the schools’ Get SMART program. The grant will underwrite the acquisition of 500 laptop computers and 25 Smart Boards for classrooms that will directly benefit ninth and tenth grade students and approximately 50 teachers. The computers will permit the schools to offer enhanced online educational programming to students and continuing educational opportunities to the teachers and parents of the students. It is estimated that 300 students in the community will also benefit from computer literacy training programs that will be offered by the schools.

CULLMAN CITY SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT DR. JAN HARRIS said, “The Cullman City School System is thrilled to receive a $200,000 ARC grant for Smart Technology. Our students will be the beneficiaries of this innovative grant that will provide 21st Century technology for their use. Appreciation is extended to Congressman Aderholt, Governor Riley, and the ARC for approving this Smart Technology grant. We are grateful for the enriched opportunities this funding will provide for our students.”

$200,000 Grant Announced for Cullman City Schools
Alabama’s 2006 Teacher of the Year Ready to Run in NYC Marathon

CAMERON MCKINLEY prepares to “tie one on” for kids’ fitness. The former Teacher of the Year is passionate about the health and fitness of Alabama’s kids, and she will tie up her orange shoelaces to run 26.2 miles in the New York City Marathon on November 4th in support of her passion. “I am running this to promote kids’ fitness. Alabama is 4th in the nation in child obesity so I wanted to do something to help people be aware that we need to get our children interested in running or some other form of fitness,” said McKinley.

McKinley is running as part of the Run for Something Better Campaign sponsored by ING. “Anyone can donate ten dollars and receive a pair of orange shoelaces as part of ING’s ‘Run for Something Better’ campaign, said company spokesperson Joseph Loparco. “The orange shoelaces show you’re tied to running and kids’ fitness,” added Loparco. ING sponsors the National Teacher of the Year and the NYC Marathon. Kids participating in ING’s Run for Something Better program have run enough miles to reach the moon (approximately 238,000 miles)! Wow, that gives new meaning to the phrase “…to the moon!”

McKinley says she ran marathons years ago to raise money for leukemia and was asked at a Teacher of the Year conference last year by ING to run in this year’s NYC Marathon. “It doesn’t matter how busy you are or how long it’s been, you can always pick yourself up and do it again,” said McKinley. “I wanted to get back into getting involved in being an example of fitting in while performing fitness activities using spreadsheets. The results and the PSAs will be posted on a newly created website http://camruns.wikispaces.com. McKinley hopes this Web site will help spread the message across Alabama about the importance of kids’ fitness.

“We want to get kids to have good habits now. Whether it be running or gardening or soccer, we need to make fitness a priority,” said McKinley.

Awards, Opportunities, and Professional Development

The 2007-2008 Alfa Teacher of the Month Program honors outstanding K-12 public and private school teachers and principals with $1,000 cash awards (not grant awards) and $1,000 to their schools. For more information, contact Ann Starks at 334-242-9702 or astarks@alsde.edu. DEADLINE: Oct. 19 (for teachers in State Board of Education Districts 6, 7, and 8)

Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education Network and National School Boards Association Award recognizes a local school board for outstanding support of the arts in education. Award includes a cash prize of $10,000 to use for arts education programs. Contact Susan Butler at sbutler@nsba.org or 703-838-6711 or Adriana Cutler at acutler@kennedy-center.org. DEADLINE: Dec. 3

The seventh annual To Kill a Mockingbird Essay Contest is open to Alabama students in Grades 9-12. The essay’s theme should reflect the writer's perception of how life has changed in the South from the time period depicted in the novel. The statewide student winner and the student’s school each receive $500. Contact Dr. Lesa Shaul, The Honors College, The University of Alabama, at 205-348-5557 or lshaull@bama.ua.edu. DEADLINE: Dec. 14

High School Teachers – Express Yourselves! The University of Alabama’s Honors College wants your take on reading and/or teaching Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. The Honors College invites Alabama high school teachers to share a singular experience or memory of reading and/or teaching Lee’s novel. Prose or poetry submissions will be accepted. The Honors College expects to include selected essays in a published volume. Contact Dr. Lesa Shaul, The Honors College, The University of Alabama, at 205-348-5557 or lshaull@bama.ua.edu. DEADLINE: Dec. 14

2008-2009 Alabama Teacher of the Year application is online. For more information, contact Ann Starks at 334-242-9702 or astarks@alsde.edu. DEADLINE: Jan. 28, 2008
OCTOBER

Statewide Parent Involvement Month · School Bus Safety Month
Child Mental Health Month · Computer Learning Month

October 7-12 – National Fire Prevention Week
October 8 – Columbus Day
October 11 – State Board Meeting
October 15-19 – National School Lunch Week
October 22-26 – Red Ribbon Week, Safe Schools Week
October 25 – State Board Work Session
October 28 – Statue of Liberty Birthday

NOVEMBER

Child Safety and Protection Month
Adoption Awareness Month

November 3 – State Board Meeting and Work Session
November 11-17 – American Education Week (NEA)
November 12 – Veterans Day Observed
November 20 – Universal Children’s Day
November 22 – Thanksgiving Day

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BOARD BRIEFS

OCTOBER

- Resolution Proclaiming October as Statewide Parent Visitation Month in Alabama
- Resolution Recognizing the Family of Teron Dukes, Cleburne County Schools, as the Statewide Winning Family in the 2007 Poster Contest on Parental Involvement
- Receive Recommendations of the State Textbook Committee for Adoption of Textbooks for Reading/Literature and Driver and Traffic Safety Education

For a complete list of agenda items, visit the Alabama Department of Education’s Web site www.alsde.edu under Board of Education.

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