

ALABAMA FAITH COUNCIL STATEMENT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

There are countless statistics showing that Alabama's schools inadequately prepare the state's 748,000 public school students for the future. Our students are less likely to read on grade level or graduate on time. Nationwide comparisons of student learning show that Alabama schools trail most of the country. Our schools do not effectively teach all children, leading to achievement gaps between different groups of students. And even the best performing groups of students in Alabama compare unfavorably with their peers from other states. To the further disadvantage of our neediest children, the best-prepared and most-experienced teachers are distributed unevenly throughout the state.¹ Public school advocates must accept that there are no easy solutions or quick fixes for a complex education system serving an ever-changing student population. Character development must be an essential component of our educational objectives. Money is part of a solution not a panacea. The good news is two-fold: Alabama's children are beginning to post significant learning gains,² and there are known methods to improve student learning and ultimately help every child succeed in life.³

Member Congregations:

African Methodist

*Episcopal Zion Church,
Alabama/Florida District*

*Alabama Cooperative
Baptist Fellowship*

Catholic: *Archdiocese of
Mobile; Diocese of
Birmingham*

**Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ),
Alabama & Northwest
Florida Region**

**Christian Methodist
Episcopal Church, Fifth
Episcopal District**

**Episcopal Church (USA):
Diocese of Alabama;
Diocese of Central Gulf
Coast**

**Evangelical Lutheran
Church of America,
Southeast Synod**

**Full Gospel Baptist
Fellowship of Alabama**

**Greek Orthodox: Holy
Trinity/Holy Cross
Cathedral**

**Islamic: Al-Masjidullah
Mosque, Birmingham;
Birmingham Islamic
Society; Masjid Qasim
Bilal Al-Amin,
Montgomery**

**Judaism: Conservative-
Congregation Ahavas
Chesid, Mobile; Temple
Beth-El, Birmingham;
Reform: Springhill Avenue
Temple, Mobile; Temple
Emanuel-El, Birmingham**

**Presbyterian Church
(USA): North Alabama
Presbytery; Presbytery of
Sheppards and Lapsley**

**Quakers: Birmingham
Friends Meeting**

**Unitarian Universalist
Church of Birmingham**

**United Church of Christ:
Beloved Community
Church, Birmingham**

**United Methodist Church:
Alabama/W Florida
Conference; North
Alabama Conference**

**Unity Church on the
Mountain, Huntsville**

CONSIDERING THE FACTS:

- Effective teaching is the single most important factor influencing gains in student learning. High-quality instruction can overcome obstacles to student success such as living in poverty, low educational attainment by parents, and learning English as a second language.⁴
- In 2007, Alabama's fourth-graders lead the nation in reading gains. Students also made better-than-average gains in math. This shows that Alabama's investments in the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Alabama Math, Science and Technology are paying dividends for children.⁵
- Despite these gains, 51.9 percent of Alabama's public school children qualify for federal meal subsidies, a widely used indicator of poverty.⁶
- Four of every 10 Alabama high school freshmen won't graduate on time, making this one of the worst-performing states on this measure. At the same time, drop outs have fewer and fewer options for decent paying jobs.⁷
- Alabama posts some of the largest achievement gaps in the country. By the fourth grade, students from low-income families are more than two years behind their more affluent classmates in math and reading. Similar learning gaps exist between black and white students.⁸

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OUR FAITH TRADITIONS SHARE IN COMMON:

- The Torah calls us to teach – “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it.” – Proverbs 22:6
- Jesus rebuked those who sought to hold back the children – “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” – Luke 18:16
- The Qur’an expounds the value of learning – “Allah grants wisdom to whom Allah pleases; and those to whom wisdom is granted receive indeed a benefit overflowing...” – Surah 2: 269

IN VIEW OF THESE FACTS AND PRINCIPLES, WE RESOLVE AS FOLLOWS:

- To apply the principles of our faith to this important and timely issue.
- To educate ourselves and our communities about the realities of education in Alabama.
- To speak out about our education systems that inadequately serve many of our children.
- To work within our faith communities to improve our own attitudes and actions regarding quality public education, which affects all of us.
- To help our communities to become places where all children can learn at high levels and develop self worth.

FOOTNOTES TO THE AFC STATEMENT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

- 1 "2005-2006 Alabama Board of Education Report Card: A State Summary," Alabama State Department of Education. <http://www.alsde.edu/html/reportCardDownloads.asp>.
- 2 "The Nation's Report Card Reading 2007 State Snapshot Report: Alabama, Grade 4" from the National Center for Education Statistics, http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2007/data.asp.
- 3 Kati Haycock's Testimony before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Labor, HHS and Education. <http://www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/Press+Room/Haycock+Appropriations+Testimony.htm>
- 4 "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence" by Linda Darling-Hammond, Stanford University, for the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington, 1999. <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/Abstract-TQS.html>.
- 5 Scores are from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress. <http://nationsreportcard.gov/>
- 6 "Teaching Inequality: How Poor and Minority Students are Shortchanged on Teacher Quality" by Heather G. Peske and Kati Haycock, The Education Trust, 2006, <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdoonlyres/010DBD9F-CED8-4D2B-9E0D-91B446746ED3/0/TQReportJune2006.pdf>.
"Public Policy and Teacher Labor Markets: What We Know and Why It Matters" by Susanna Loeb and Michelle Reiningger, Stanford University, for The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, 2004, <http://www.epc.msu.edu/publications/publications.htm>.
- 7 "Alabama – State Graduation Brief," Diplomas Count 2007, EPE Research Center. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2007/06/12/index.html>.
Diplomas Count 2007, EPE Research Center, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2007/06/12/index.html>.
- 8 "Education Watch 2006" from The Education Trust, <http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/summaries2006/Alabama.pdf>.
"The Nation's Report Card Mathematics 2007 State Snapshot Report: Alabama, Grade 4" from the National Center for Education Statistics, http://nationsreportcard.gov/math_2007/m0001.asp.
"The Nation's Report Card Reading 2007 State Snapshot Report: Alabama, Grade 4" from the National Center for Education Statistics, http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2007/data.asp.
"Doing What Works," guest editorial by State Superintendent of Education Dr. Joe Morton, Montgomery Advertiser, Sept. 30, 2007, <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070930/OPINION0101/709280386/1012/OPINION>.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING AND RESEARCH ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

- A+ Education Partnership** www.aplusala.org (Promotes excellence in Alabama's public schools)
- Alabama Best Practices Center** www.bestpracticescenter.org (Advances promising teaching methods through a statewide network of forward-thinking schools)
- Alabama State Department of Education** www.alsde.edu (State agency overseeing Alabama's K-12 public schools)
- Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama**
<http://parca.samford.edu/education/SystemsTestScores/Systems.html> (Education is among the issues studied by this Birmingham-based think tank)
- The Education Trust** www.edtrust.org (National advocacy organization working to close learning gaps between different groups of students.)
- Public Education Network** www.publiceducation.org (National organization that helps citizens find the best ways to improve their local public schools.)
- Give Kids Good Schools** www.givekidsgoodschools.org (Campaign to help communities achieve quality public schools for all children.)
- Partnership for 21st Century Skills** www.21stcenturyskills.org (National advocacy group of business and education leaders working to infuse 21st century skills into education)
- Education Commission of the States** www.ecs.org (Helps states develop effective policy and practice for public education.)
- Mobile Area Education Foundation** www.maef.net (Educational nonprofit organization that is independent of but works with Alabama's largest public school system, Mobile County.)

UNDERSTANDING AND ACTING TO BETTER CHILDREN'S LIVES IN ALABAMA

The way we nurture our children today has a great impact on the world tomorrow. We must work early in the lives of children to produce a foundation of character that will enhance the communities of the future. This requires us to develop an environment of quality education for raising our children with a desire for knowledge. Whether an individual congregant, a congregation, or a state-wide faith community, there are several ways to engage in the efforts to improve public education in the State of Alabama:

STUDY

- Read the Alabama Faith Council statements on Voluntary Pre-K Education and on Education. They can be found on the website: <http://www.alfaithcouncil.org>.
- Visit the websites of many organizations and agencies working on the issues of improving education in our state and country. Included in that list are the following:
 - A+ Partnership (<http://www.aplus.org>)
 - Alabama Best Practices Center (<http://www.bestpracticescenter.org>)
 - Alabama School Readiness Alliance (<http://www.alabamaschoolreadiness.org>)
 - Birmingham Education Foundation (<http://www.bhameducationfoundation.org/>)
 - The Center for Education Reform (<http://www.edreform.com>)
 - The Literacy Council (<http://www.literacy-council.org>)
 - Mobile Area Education Foundation (<http://www.maef.net>)
 - Southern Education Foundation (<http://www.sefatl.org>)
 - Teaching Tolerance (<http://www.tolerance.org>)
 - Voices for Alabama Children (<http://www.alavoices.org>).
- Study these issues with a trained facilitator in your congregation within morning, evening, or weekday classes or gatherings.
- Participate in the monthly meetings of the Children and Education Issues Workgroup. Please check the Alabama Faith Council website (<http://www.alfaithcouncil.org>) for contact information and meeting times, places, and toll-free numbers to join by telephone.

Once you have studied and reflected about these important issues, consider the following ways you can share your time trying to resolve them:

ACTION

- Find out if your congregation or faith community has passed a resolution in support of Education Reform or Pre-K Education. If not, ask your faith's leadership to reflect on this issue and to consider passing such a resolution.
- Invite a speaker from one of the many organizations and agencies working on the issue to come lead a class or speak to your congregation, study group, or community.
- Organize a letter writing campaign within your congregation to school boards, school superintendents, the State Superintendent, your legislators, and the press.

- Sign on-line petitions sponsored by other organizations and agencies calling for actions by elected officials to improve the education system.
- Arrange a meeting with your state legislators to present the Alabama Faith Council statements and discuss the issues.
- Work with other congregations and other faith communities to develop activities to raise awareness and call for action.
- Be a part of the solution by participating in after-school programs for children of working parents and/ or local literacy programs.
- If programs are lacking in your area, work with your congregation and local schools to create after-school programs and literacy initiative for children and families.
- Organize/take part in “A Day/Week of Prayer for our Public Schools.”

There are congregants in all of the Alabama Faith Council faith groups who would like to be involved in the effort to improve education in the State of Alabama. If you or anyone you know would be interested in joining others around the state, please contact Mark Berte, the Children and Education Taskforce Chair: 251-508-7801 or mberte@maef.net