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PREKINDERGARTEN: State program still tops

Posted by [Jan Hume](#) April 26, 2009 2:01 AM

Alabama has once again proved it is the best in the nation. Our state supported prekindergarten program, First Class, is of the highest quality. The program was given a perfect "10" rating from the National Institute for Early Education Research. This is not the first year. In fact, it is the third year in a row Alabama has received this rating. Only Alabama and North Carolina can claim this distinction.

First Class meets the 10 standards that research shows have the greatest impact on quality. The lead teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development. The assistant teachers are required to have the child development associate credential. Highly qualified teachers lead to high-quality programs. Small class sizes, ongoing teacher training, on-site technical assistance, research-based curriculum, as well as vision, hearing, health and dental screenings are all components of the First Class program. Each site is monitored and held accountable for meeting the standards to maintain high quality. Making sure all children start school ready to learn is what distinguishes First Class.

Potential sites apply to the state for funding and are required to meet standards to ensure they are quality programs. The approved sites are funded with a combination of state and local dollars. First Class is voluntary and is located in a variety of settings where we already send our children: public schools, private day cares, Head Start classrooms, community-based centers and churches.

Two-thirds of parents choose to send their children to preschool. We research the preschools in our area and make the choice we think is best for our children. We choose to send them to preschool for a variety of reasons: maybe it is to help our children get along with other children; maybe it is so we can work part time or full time. Sometimes, our choice is we want our child to know his letters and sounds before he starts kindergarten. Whatever the reason is for sending our children to preschool, parents are making that choice. However, in these economic times, preschool is becoming a luxury. And for many Alabamians, it has always been an unaffordable luxury.

High-quality pre-K impacts student achievement and closes achievement gaps. Research has shown children who participate in high-quality pre-K perform better in school. In fact, children who have the benefit of high-quality pre-K are less likely to drop out of high school. As we have heard, having a prepared work force is one of the biggest challenges facing Alabama. Our future work force could be in pre-K right now.

There are great people working on high-quality pre-K right now.

The Alabama School Readiness Alliance works in support of the Alabama Department of Children's Affairs Office of School Readiness and is made up of four organizations that have committed their time and resources to the effort of growing Alabama's high-quality program: A+ Education Partnership, Alabama Giving, Alabama Partnership for Children and VOICES for Alabama's Children. More than 200 individuals and organizations have also joined the alliance. In addition, the Alabama Association of School Boards and the Business Council of Alabama are growing awareness among their members, which include business leaders, school board members and other policymakers, about the benefits of pre-K. State agencies are coordinating with each other to leverage resources to ensure high-quality pre-K is available to as many of Alabama's children as possible.

Even with these partnerships, the problem is that only 6 percent of Alabama's 4-year-olds have access to this great pre-K program. The program requires state funding and local matching funds. In these tough budget times, we are hoping to protect the progress that has been made. In three years, Alabama has nearly tripled the number of children served. However, of the 38 states that provide state-funded

pre-K, Alabama ranks 36th for access.

Now let's work toward providing access for all of our children. High-quality pre-K is an investment in our children and an investment toward the economic growth of our state. We have a unique opportunity to grow this nationally recognized program into something that will give our children the chance of a better future.

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