

First Class Pre-K: Preparing Alabama's Children for School Success and Lifelong Learning

For 12 consecutive years, Alabama's voluntary First Class Pre-K program has been recognized for providing the highest quality state-funded pre-kindergarten program in America. In its 2017 State of Preschool Yearbook—an annual report on the quality of state-funded early childhood education programs across the country—the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) released those findings.

The program, overseen by the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, currently serves nearly 17,000 students, or 29 percent of all eligible four-year-olds, in 941 classrooms.

Alabama is one of only three states to meet or exceed all ten program review benchmarks, which include items such as class size, teacher training, and student-to-teacher ratio. Alabama was also recognized in the report as having the capacity to maintain quality while expanding.

The support of policymakers has been instrumental in the program's success. In 2005, the program began with \$4.3 million in funding and has tripled the percentage of eligible four-year-olds served since that time.

In addition to NIEER's findings, a recent study of Alabama third graders found that students who participated in the state's First Class Pre-K program are more likely to be proficient in reading and math than their peers. The study was conducted by a team of researchers from the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama in conjunction with the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Researchers found that First Class Pre-K:

- Narrowed the gap in reading proficiency by 28 percent for all children in poverty; 32 percent for white children in poverty; 31 percent for Hispanic children in poverty; and, 26 percent for black children in poverty.
- Narrowed the gap in math proficiency by 57 percent for all children in poverty; 71 percent for Hispanic children in poverty; and, 37 percent for black children in poverty.
- Increased reading proficiency for children in poverty by 12 percent overall; 25 percent for Hispanic children in poverty; 23 percent for black children in poverty; and, 3 percent for white children in poverty.
- Increased math proficiency for children in poverty by 13 percent overall; 17 percent for Hispanic children in poverty; 16 percent for black children in poverty; and, 10 percent for white children in poverty.

A panel of educators and policymakers will Alabama's pre-K efforts in-depth. Biographies for panelists are below.

Panelists:



Jeana Ross is Alabama Secretary of Early Childhood Education. Appointed in 2012, Ross oversees initiatives such as the Children's Policy Councils and Head Start Collaboration Office. Ross began her career in education as a school teacher, later working in several local school systems as a Title 1 specialist, grant writer, and federal programs coordinator. For three decades, Ross has worked to develop, organize, facilitate, and evaluate programs and initiatives that ensure quality educational services for children and support at-risk students and families.



Del Marsh is President Pro Tempore of the Alabama State Senate. Now in his fifth term, Marsh has served as a state senator since 1998. Marsh serves on the Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry; County and Municipal Government; and Education and Youth Affairs committees, among others. Marsh is also the owner of Aerospace Coatings International since 1991 and is the director of Southern States Bank.



Tracye Strichik is Director of School Readiness in the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. She took over that post just over a year ago. Prior to that, she spent nearly seven years as the director of the Office of Early Learning and Family Support. Strichik also served as the director of the Early Childhood Center at Auburn University. She began her career as a kindergarten teacher in Prattville, Alabama.