

Jay P. Greene's Blog

How to Improve Alabama's Schools

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Improving education is a combination of (1) teachers effectively conveying to students certain essential information; (2) getting a better match between schools (with different strengths and teaching talents) and students (with different capacities, needs, and interests); and (3) creating learning environments where teachers are motivated to engage the students' intellects and emotions and students are motivated to learn challenging subject-matter — and learning in a way that embeds it and puts it into practice beyond the level of learning facts that could be looked up on the web. The classroom should be a kind of theater of high-morale learning. In that shared theater of learning, the important components of civilization are passed on, teachers are role models for students, and students' character is formed.

Curriculum should promote patriotic and liberty-loving citizenship (without ruling out exposure in high school to our country's problems.) We should always remember that the family is the site and source of the most important education that a child receives. The public school system should avoid undermining the family and related social institutions like churches, charities, and voluntary associations.

There are steps that Alabama should consider to improve student performance:

Reading improvement. The Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) was a professional development program (started in 1998) with school-level reading coaches. It took a few years to plan and put into place. It was based on the scientific research literature on the teaching of reading and therefore took a phonics-first approach.

By 2007, Alabama's grade 4 reading score on **the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a nationwide examination that tests a sample of students**, had risen significantly – an eight-point jump from 2005 (almost a grade level). The grade 4 students made another four-point jump in 2011, catching up with the national average. In 2009, Alabama's grade 8 reading score on NAEP rose three points, and in 2011, it rose another three points. The grade 8 gains were slower and less sharp than the gains for grade 4 and remained five to six points below the national average. Even the less dramatic grade 8 gains did constitute considerable improvement.

The official history of the ARI says:

“From 2003 to 2011, with a state-funded reading coach in every elementary school, Alabama's 4th graders made more progress in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP) than students from any other state in the nation. Alabama met the national average in 4th grade reading for the first time, and Alabama is one of only four states in the nation (second only to Maryland) to show increases in 4th grade reading from 2009 to 2011. The number of Alabama students reading below grade level has been reduced by half.”

Since the coming of Common Core, the State Superintendent has directed the funds for the reading initiative and the STEM initiative to coaches for Common Core. Subsequently, grade 4 reading scores on NAEP in Alabama have declined eight points, to below the national average. Grade 8 reading scores remain stagnant.

I don't like to make pronouncements about policy issues without talking to a range of people and looking into the details of what changes could be made. But my working hypothesis would be that the reading initiative needs to be restored.

STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) improvement. Alabama also had a long-running math, science, and technology initiative. In contrast with the reading initiative, it seems to have produced no noticeable effects on student achievement. I think it makes sense for Alabama to look into why there has been such a sharp difference in results between the two initiatives, and make appropriate adjustments.

In both STEM and reading, the Alabama State Department of Education should consider certifying Professional Development programs that are based on science – based on empirical research with control groups and the like. A State superintendent should seek to make sure that districts know about good Professional Development and should nurture the growth of such programs.

Graduation rate and academic attainment. To boost academic attainment, Alabama should put in place a 3rd grade test (Florida currently retains students who cannot pass its 3rd grade reading test) and a 10th-grade/graduation test. Alabama discarded its High School Exit Examination(AHSGE – Alabama High School Graduation Exam) in 2013 and replaced it with ACT/CCRS (College- & Career-Ready Standards).

The 11th grade ACT cut scores in Alabama are 18 for English; 22 for math and reading; and 23 for science. The ACT scores are the standard current national “college readiness” scores. So they are, in fact, quite demanding and above the 10th grade level.

ACT is basically used in Alabama for federal reporting purposes to comply with the federal Elementary & Secondary Education Act. Graduation is currently based on area requirements and seat-time (measured in Carnegie units).

Alabama should restore its exit exam, but it should operate in a multiple second-chances way, with many opportunities to retake the tests and offering a variety of exemptions and special categories. The idea is to create a focus and a shared goal, not to deny some large number of students a diploma. Alabama should also reconsider its One Diploma policy. Since there are a wide variety of students with different capacities, interests, and needs, there should probably be a

variety of diplomas.

Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution estimates that all the prep time and all the millions spent on the Common Core national curriculum-content standards boosted achievement in the U.S. by only a tiny amount: one scale-score point. The new Every Student Succeeds Act does much to protect against future federal interference with curriculum. When it comes to testing, Alabama is not now with PARCC or SmarterBalanced, but has instead affiliated with ACT. Yet Alabama has a set of state standards largely based on Common Core. It is time, I would think, to revisit those current state standards to see what needs fixing. (I participated in California's line-by-line review of the Common Core in 2010, and I participated in creating the late-1990s California State Academic Content Standards, judged best in the nation by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the American Federation of Teachers.)

Career and technical education. Students, because they are different individuals, should have different educational pathways in high school. Blouke Carus — a leading children's magazine publisher (including Cricket, Ladybug, Cobblestone), math and reading textbook developer, and chairman emeritus of the Carus Corporation (a company producing manganese compounds) — has said: "Our schools need to offer each student a choice among six or more challenging and rigorous high school curricula, as do other, higher-performing countries."

As I and my colleagues wrote in a 2013 manifesto entitled "Closing the Door on Innovation": "There is no evidence to justify a single high school curriculum for all students. A single set of curriculum guidelines, models, or frameworks cannot be justified at the high school level, given the diversity of interests, talents, and pedagogical needs among adolescents. American schools should not be constrained in the diversity of the curricula they offer to students. Other countries offer adolescents a choice of curricula; Finland, for example, offers all students leaving grade 9 the option of attending a three-year general studies high school or a three-year vocational high school, with about 50% of each age cohort enrolling in each type of high school. We worry that the 'comprehensive' American high school may have outlived its usefulness, as a [2011] Harvard report [Pathways to Prosperity] implies."

Because vocational education has a reputation for being a dumping ground and a place where minority children were channeled because of racial bias, education policy has neglected vocational education and sometimes even eliminated it. Alabama's "Essentials/Life Skills Pathway" is a separate vocational-education pathway. For example, instead of English 9, the student would take English Essentials 9. This is intended to prep students for community college or the workforce, not for entry to 4-year colleges.

Alabama needs to avoid a situation which the only high school available for a student is a college-prep comprehensive or, alternatively, vocational-only. The state should incentivize local districts (through waivers) to create a variety of career-tech program alternatives (including a variety of mission-oriented schools), but these should include an academic component (as they do now). In general, Alabama should look carefully at Arizona where the process of school creation is highly decentralized, and the results have been fruitful.

Teacher Quality. As the 1999 manifesto “The Teachers We Need” (of which I was a co-signer) says, “the surest route to quality is to widen the entryway [and] deregulate the processes.” This would expand the pool of potential teachers. It would open the doors to highly-qualified, but non-traditional recruits who want to become teachers and thereby improve overall quality. New York State currently has a relatively open process allowing alternative certification. In Arkansas, almost half the incoming teachers come in under alternative certification.

But Alabama gets only a C- from the National Council on Teacher Quality for the extent to which the state’s teaching pool has been expanded by alternative certification and the like. Alabama should also be open to non-traditional teacher training programs like the Relay Graduation School of Education in New York City.

Michael McShane of the American Enterprise Institute has written:

“Recently, I have been influenced by the work of Northwestern University economist Kirabo Jackson, whose fascinating NBER working paper calls into serious question policy’s recent overreliance on math and reading scores as the primary measure of the ‘goodness’ of schools and teachers. As it turns out, teachers have important and measurable impacts on both the cognitive *and non-cognitive* development of students. While it’s certainly true that test scores can tell us something important about a teacher, what is troubling for the test-score types is that it looks like (1) non-cognitive scores are better predictors of later life success (completing high school, taking the SAT, and going to college) and (2) that it is not the same set of teachers that is good at raising both cognitive and non-cognitive measures.

“Such has to be the same for schools, right? If there are teachers that are increasing non-cognitive, but not cognitive skills, surely there are schools that are doing the same. As a result, trying to assess if a school is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ relies on a complex web of preferences and objective measures that, quite frankly, cannot be taken into account in a centralized accountability system. We need something more sophisticated, and something that can respect a diverse conception of what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ means.”

In citing Michael McShane and Kirabo Jackson, I am suggesting a goal for the future, while not saying that there should be no accountability. We should consider a change in providers of accountability because Alabama has a variety of school districts, localities, and other groupings. As Jason Bedrick of the Cato Institute and Andrew Smarick, chair of the Maryland State Board of Education, have separately pointed out, accountability doesn’t have to be in conformity with One Best Way. School evaluation can be pluralistic and rivalrous and doesn’t have to be solely governmental. Churches could do it, neighborhood associations could do it, chambers of commerce could do it. As Bedrick writes: “Parents can then evaluate the quality of education providers based on their own experience and the expert evaluations of appropriate external providers, and the entire system evolves as parents select the providers that best meet their children’s needs.”

Currently if a teacher is educated in Alabama teachers colleges and receives bad evaluations during the first three years, the teacher can go back to college for free. This seems like a smart program worth retaining.

Education Next magazine surveyed teachers nationwide and the teachers themselves said that about 5% of teachers deserve an “F” and 8% deserve a “D.” But we should be cautious about grandiose projects to improve teacher quality. The “highly qualified teacher” provisions of the No Child Left Behind law were never successfully put into effect. The elaborate new teacher-evaluation systems put in place (at the cost of millions) in about 20 states have reduced the percentage of teachers rated “satisfactory” from 99% to 97%.

Currently teacher-certification testing is under court supervision. Alabama has low passing scores on the PRAXIS II tests that it expects of teachers. When court supervision is over, the state could slowly raise passing scores (as Texas has). Teachers do need to know the subject-matter they are teaching. But the most important thing is to increase the inflow of good prospects into the teaching pool (from which districts and schools can select), rather than reducing the size of the pool.

Economic growth and student attainment. Both policymakers and the civically active public underestimate the economic gains from school improvement. The differences in rates of growth among states can be matched to the education of the workers in the various states. A multiplicity of causes affect economic growth, but nothing is more influential in the long run than school improvement. Although it is certainly difficult to improve schools, it is easier to improve schools than it is to change other factors that figure in increased productivity.

Equated to PISA international test results, Alabama is currently below Turkey.

Some people think that Alabama’s low results are because of demographics. But the only state whose whites do worse currently is West Virginia.

For Alabama, which is educationally at the bottom of the lowest quartile in the United States, the present value of bringing the state to the level of Kentucky – in the next quartile — would be three times Alabama’s current Gross Domestic Product (according to my Hoover Institution colleague Eric A. Hanushek). Other states at the Kentucky level are Florida, Arizona, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island. To get to the level of Kentucky would mean for Alabama over 6% annual growth in GDP and about 12% annual growth in salaries.

Conclusion: A State Superintendent should not be a Caesar, lording it over local districts and local superintendents. State superintendents should not act as if they are progressive technocrats with coercive utopian powers. It will be harmful to learning communities if state superintendents act that way. Where sensible, they should devolve much of the responsibility over academic content, teaching methods, and instructional materials to the local districts. The different districts can – and should — try different things. Parallel learning communities will sometimes arise. If districts and schools endeavor to conscientiously do their best, Alabama can climb out of the cellar and surpass states like Kentucky academically. The State of Alabama will prosper, and Alabama’s children will have more fulfilling lives.