



Our Mission
To ensure the well-being of **Alabama's children** through research, public awareness, and advocacy.

POLICY COUNTS: 2019 LEGISLATIVE REPORT



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OUR MISSION

To ensure the well-being of **Alabama's children** through research, public awareness, and advocacy.

ABOUT VOICES FOR ALABAMA'S CHILDREN

VOICES for Alabama's Children, founded in 1992, is a 501(c)(3) statewide nonpartisan organization whose mission is to ensure the well-being of Alabama's children through research, public awareness, and advocacy.

VOICES for Alabama's Children serves as the voice for children at the State Legislature each year, working on policy that benefits all children, birth to graduation. In 1994, VOICES for Alabama's Children published the state's first Alabama Kids Count Data Book, and has continued to annually publish and distribute this important information on child well-being to help shape policy and to help others identify and address issues in their communities.

The *Policy Counts: 2019 Legislative Report* can be viewed, downloaded on the internet at <http://www.alavoices.org/> or by calling 334.213.2410 or emailing vfac@alavoices.org.

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POLICY COUNTS: 2019 LEGISLATIVE REPORT



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THE 2019 LEGISLATIVE SESSION





Stephen Woerner, Executive Director
VOICES for Alabama's Children

A LETTER FROM VOICES...

Dear Advocate,

2019 has been a year of positive change and transition for VOICES for Alabama's Children. With new staff members, new campaigns, and new vision, we are going places we have never been before as an organization. I am immensely proud of our team and their work advocating for the children of Alabama. It is appropriate that the 2019 legislative session was the first of a new quadrennium with 42 new lawmakers. These new faces led to new opportunities and VOICES worked diligently to make sure children were a part of the conversation at every turn. We set bold goals for this session that led to great efforts resulting in great rewards.

One of the greatest organizational successes this year was the 2019 Child Advocacy Day which included an Advocacy Breakfast and Kids Count Rally. Seeing a room full of advocates engage with a panel of state leaders and then use their voice to meet with lawmakers was a very powerful experience. Even more impactful was watching 1000 kids on the south lawn of the Capitol participate in a chant led by Alabama Governor Kay Ivey! Child Advocacy Day defined the successes of the session and was built upon a session-long emphasis on the 2020 Census. Events like this help give children and adults the opportunity to come to Montgomery, engage in the civic process, and make their voices heard. Lawmakers know how reliable and respected VOICES data points are, but giving them the chance to interact with students, parents, teachers, pediatricians, and others who are affected by their policy decisions gave them a unique insight into the needs of those they represent.

On behalf of VOICES for Alabama's Children, I want to thank you for your continued commitment to our mission to ensure the well-being of Alabama's children through research, public awareness, and advocacy. The actions taken by you, a champion of children, such as talking to your lawmakers, engaging with your communities, and helping us advocate on behalf of our kids has had real impact on the policies that directly affect our children. Through these combined efforts, Alabama will continue to improve the quality of all of our children's lives.

Sincerely,

Stephen Woerner,
Executive Director

2019 Key & Educational Policy Priorities:

- *Census 2020*
- *Pre-K Funding*
- *Healthy Food Financing Initiative*
- *School Safety*
- *Birth to Three: Early Language Acquisition & Early Intervention*
- *Health Care Deserts*
- *Protect and Defend Funding of Medicaid and All Kids*



2019 has been a year of positive change and transition for VOICES for Alabama's Children.



LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

The 2019 Regular Legislative Session brought great progress in VOICES four focus areas of Health, Education, Safety, and Economic Security for children. Using our 2019 Policy Priorities as a guide, VOICES navigated the legislative session with the goal of making Alabama a better place for children and families. Many of our policy priorities were met, while some still have exciting opportunities for improvement and expansion. Every Friday, VOICES CAN members received an update directly from the Governmental Affairs Director on relevant legislation and progress. Our 2019 Legislative Report will detail the status of VOICES 2019 Policy Priorities, advocacy efforts, media highlights, and more.

Budgets

The General Fund budget passed with \$2.1 billion appropriated for fiscal year 2020 beginning on October 1 of 2019. This budget includes a two percent pay increase for state employees as well as increases for a number of state agencies. In addition, \$35 million of Alabama's funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) will come from the General Fund. One of the small, but impactful, items found in the 2020 General Fund is \$200,000 for the Healthy Food Financing Initiative.

The \$7.1 billion Education Trust Fund was the largest in Alabama's history and allowed for key increases for a number of programs. Among the many highlights of the Education trust fund were a \$26.8 million increase for Alabama's First Class Pre-K program and \$12.6 million for Alabama's Early Intervention program, a \$5.8 million increase from last year. Perhaps the most exciting appropriation from the Education Trust Fund was a \$1,000,000 line item to support grassroots and community based work ahead of the 2020 Census. This was a new line item in the budget to be distributed to the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs. A lot of work went into VOICES successes in the Education Trust Fund and we are delighted at the outcome.

2019 Policy Priorities

Before the legislative session began, VOICES published our 2019 Policy Priorities set in coordination with our Board of Directors. In this document we outline the top priorities on our policy agenda as we head into the legislative session. This year our policy priorities included:

- Census 2020
- Pre-K Funding
- Healthy Food Financing Initiative
- School Safety
- Birth to Three: Early Language Acquisition
"Talk to Me Baby" & Early Intervention
- Health Care Deserts
- Protect and Defend Funding of Medicaid and All Kids

We would like to commend the the Alabama Legislature, Office of the Governor, and the state agencies that helped VOICES for Alabama's Children move the needle on our top priorities for 2019. Great strides were made in many of the focus areas listed above, including:

Census 2020 – The highlight of the 2019 Legislative Session was undoubtedly the work VOICES did around the 2020 Census. VOICES emerged as a leader in advocacy and organization ahead of the 2020 Census and built a coalition of strong partnerships to support those efforts. Legislatively, the priority became to secure funding for nonprofits, complete count committees, cities, and counties doing work in communities at the grassroots level to prepare for the April 1, 2020 Census. After a successful advocacy campaign, a \$1,000,000 line item was included in the Alabama Education Trust Fund for grassroots and community based work ahead of the 2020 Census. This was VOICES' greatest win of the 2019 session and came as a result of hard work, coordinated efforts, strong partnerships, and our many meaningful relationships.



Alabama's First Class Pre-K – Alabama's First Class Pre-K program was once again ranked #1 in the nation. This news broke during the legislative session at a point where discussions of not funding the full requested increase were occurring within the Ways and Means Education Committee. Thankfully, after a successful advocacy campaign, the requested \$26.8 million increase was fully funded and included in the final version of the ETF that passed both houses.

HFFI – The Healthy Food Financing Initiative was again fully funded at \$200,000 from the General Fund. This successful program has been supported by numerous legislators, advocates and those who have benefited from these much needed dollars. The projects this program funds throughout the state are excellent examples of create solutions that make a difference at the community level.

School Safety – VOICES was proud to support bills by Representative Robertson that provided clarification and standardization on school security procedures and terminology. While State Superintendent Eric Mackey's proposal was not funded this year in the Education Trust Fund, reversion dollars were designated as an option for schools to increase security measures and infrastructure. We look forward to continued progress in the area of school safety in the coming years and hope to see the subject of mental health included in that conversation.

Early Intervention – Alabama's Early Intervention System focuses on school readiness to ensure that children who have a developmental delay or disability are supported and served. This critical program has experienced an influx of children to serve in the past few years and went into the 2019 Legislative Session with a great need for funding increases. Thankfully, the program received a \$4.57 million increase for FY2020 as well as an additional \$1.3 million in supplemental funds to support contracts for specialized services and to help with sustainment through the end of FY2019.



Stephen Woerner welcomes new lawmakers at the 2019 Advocacy Breakfast.



VOICES staff look on as Governor Kay Ivey signs a proclamation declaring April 1 as Child Advocacy Day.

REVIEW OF THE 2019 BILLBOARD HIGHLIGHTS

VOICES for Alabama’s Children routinely monitors and takes action on issues and legislation that does not appear on the organizational Policy Agenda. This is a list of important bills (but not a complete listing) the organization monitored throughout the 2019 regular session.

Health

HB41 – Representatives Stringer, Drummond (R,D-Mobile) – PASSED

Alternative nicotine product, ABC Board required to regulate retail sale like tobacco products, sales to minors prohibited, advertising near schools prohibited.

Education

HB423 – Representative Warren (D-Tuskegee) – FAILED

Public schools, require a child successfully complete kindergarten before being admitted to the first grade.

HB 388 – Representative Collins (R-Decatur)– PASSED

Education, K-3 grades, Alabama Literacy Act, established, steps to improve reading proficiency.

SB 397 – Senator Marsh (R-Anniston) – PASSED

Public K-12 Education, State Board of Education renamed the Alabama Commission on Elementary and Secondary Education, members appointed by Governor, State Superintendent of Education renamed as the Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education, secretary appointed by commission, Governor to appoint team to advise commission on functions and duties of St. Dept. of Edu., const. amend.

HB 216 - Representative Faulkner (R-Birmingham) – PASSED

Education, K-12 schools, phase in of computer science courses required, funding for teacher training and certification provided, State Administer position created within Dept. of Education, ACHE to create scholarships for preservice teachers, and Computer Science Education task force created. Passed - enacted

HB 291 – Representative Garrett (R-Trussville) – PASSED

Education, local boards of education to allow released time for religious education off campus for elective credit, Alabama Released Time Credit Act.

Safety

SB277 – Senator Smitherman (D-Birmingham) – PASSED

Criminal history background checks, required for any adult working in a child care institution, group home, maternity center, or transitional living facility.

HB 209 – Representative Pettus (R-Killen) – PASSED

Education, school resource officers, qualifications further provided for.

HB 385 - Representative Robertson (R-Mount Hope) – PASSED

Education, school safety plans, redesignate code red as school lockdown.

HB 261 – Representative Coleman (D-Birmingham) – PASSED

Junior colleges, commercial driver’s license (CDL) programs, required to provide human trafficking training.

HB79 – Representative Reynolds (R-Huntsville) – PASSED

Children, to expand and clarify requirements for membership of child advocacy centers in the Alabama Network of Children’s Advocacy Centers. .

Economic Security

HB 566 – Representative Kitchens (R-Guntersville) – PASSED

Schools, public K-12, nutrition, allowing schools to donate surplus, non-expired food to charitable organizations, purpose of redistributing food to needy students.

SB 294 – Senator Orr (R-Decatur) - FAILED

Public assistance, certain eligibility requirements for TANF and SNAP revised, fraud detection measures required.

SB 219 – Senator Whatley (R-Auburn) – FAILED

Education, National Guard, to limit amount of private tuition reimbursed to eligible guard members.

Budgets

SB90 – Senator Scofield (R-Guntersville) – PASSED

Broadband Internet service, grants to provide minimum service to rural areas, definition of unserved areas, percentage of project costs eligible for funding increased, federal and state support as percent to project increased.

HB152 – Representative Clouse (R-Ozark) – PASSED

The General Fund budget passed with \$2.1 billion appropriated for fiscal year 2020 beginning on October 1 of 2019. This budget includes a two percent pay increase for state employees as well as increases for a number of state agencies. In addition, \$35 million of Alabama’s funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) will come from the General Fund. One of the small, but impactful, items found in the 2020 General Fund is \$200,000 for the Healthy Food Financing Initiative.

SB199 – Senator Poole (R-Decatur) – PASSED

The \$7.1 billion Education Trust Fund was the largest in Alabama’s history and allowed for key increases for a number of programs. Among the many highlights of the Education trust fund were a \$26.8 million increase for Alabama’s First Class Pre-k program and \$12.6 million for Alabama’s Early Intervention program, a \$5.8 million increase from last year. Perhaps the most exciting appropriation from the Education Trust Fund was a \$1,000,000 line item to support grassroots and community based work ahead of the 2020 Census. This was a new line item in the budget to be distributed to the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs. A lot of work went into VOICES successes in the Education Trust Fund and we are delighted at the outcome.



THE VOICES 2019 KIDS COUNT RALLY

The 2019 Kids Count Rally was one of the largest events in VOICES organizational history. 1000 kids from diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and areas of the state gathered together to stand as one and advocate for all kids to be counted in the 2020 Census. Children of all ages enjoyed music from the Jefferson Davis High School band and the Park Crossing Choir, a picnic on the lawn, and a robust group of energetic speakers, including a small group of high school students from all over the state. In addition to the student speakers, kids heard from Montgomery Mayor Todd Strange, their Speaker of the House Mac McCutcheon, Senate Pro Tem Del Marsh and Governor Kay Ivey who all highlighted the importance of the census and how critical children are to the future of our state.



Our youngest advocates joined together at the Capitol to emphasize the importance of counting all children in Census 2020.



School students came together to ensure their voices were heard.

Advocates! This day would not have been possible without YOU!

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

VOICES engaged advocates in new and exciting ways before, during and after the 2019 regular legislative session. These points of contact resulted in a myriad of success for our children and families.

6th Annual Child Advocacy Day

Sponsored by: Alabama Power | **Co-sponsored by:** Alabama Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

For the 6th Annual Child Advocacy Day, VOICES set the bold goal of bringing 1000 children to Montgomery to highlight the importance of counting all kids in the 2020 Census and encourage civic engagement. From our Advocacy Breakfast to the Kids Count Rally, the day was a success and gave kids a chance to be highlighted and celebrated by state leaders and key decision-makers while providing a fun and educational atmosphere.

Advocacy Breakfast

With a new venue, VOICES brought advocates and partners to the Alabama Statehouse to enjoy a delicious breakfast and hear from a panel of state agency cabinet heads, legislative budget chairs and subject matter experts on issues facing their departments or agencies during the 2019 legislative session. During the breakfast, attendees heard from:

- **Lynn Beshear:** Commissioner, Alabama Department of Mental Health
- **Nancy Buckner:** Commissioner, Alabama Department of Human Resources
- **Kathy Hall:** Deputy Commissioner for Administration, Alabama Medicaid Agency
- **Dr. Scott Harris:** State Health Officer, Alabama Department of Public Health
- **Dr. Eric Mackey:** Superintendent, Alabama State Department of Education
- **Jeana Ross:** Secretary, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education



Attendees are greeted by VOICES staff as the day begins.



VOICES Governmental Affairs Director, Jake Jacobs, welcomes guests.



With a new venue for our breakfast, more attendees than ever were present to hear from six state agency directors or deputy directors, as well as Sen. Arthur Orr the Senate Educational Trust Fund chair.

2019 POLICY PRIORITIES FOR ALABAMA'S CHILDREN

2019 Policy Priorities

Census 2020

As Alabama prepares for the 2020 Census, VOICES is working to ensure that all children are counted. Alabama had a response rate of 72 percent in the 2010 Census. Within the birth to nineteen range are a few hard to count, and historically undercounted populations. The birth through age five range experienced a nationwide undercount of 1 million during the last census in 2010. In addition, children of color, those living in urban non-traditional households, immigrant children and homeless children are classified as hard to count. VOICES for Alabama's Children supports funding, organizations and individuals dedicated to ensuring that all of our undercounted and hard to count populations and children that do not fall into one of those categories are counted accurately and completely.

Bring Healthy Food Closer to Home

Healthy Food Financing Initiative is an effective, viable and economically sustainable policy solution to addressing food access. Such initiatives, structured as public-private partnerships, attract grocery stores, farmers' markets and other vendors of healthy, affordable foods to underserved communities. Of the 1.8 million Alabamians living in underserved communities, 500,000 are children.ⁱⁱ Over the last two years, the state has appropriated \$500K to this fund which is then handed out as grants to programs located in areas with low or no access to healthy food options. In 2015, VOICES for Alabama's Children led a bipartisan coalition of over one hundred lawmakers in a successful legislative campaign resulting in the creation of a statewide Healthy Food Financing Initiative housed at the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA). VOICES continues to support and advocate for increased funding and the efficient execution of this program.

Invest in Pre-K

Alabama's First Class Pre-K Program continues to lead the nation in four year old education and preparation. Since the program began, more than 98,000 four-year-olds have participated in this #1 quality rated program.ⁱⁱⁱ VOICES supports Governor Ivey's funding request of \$25 million. The goal of the First Class Pre-K Program is to provide pre-k to every child who is eligible and elects to attend. A fully supported program would serve 70 percent of Alabama's four year olds. A \$25 million increase in funding would bring the percent of children

covered to 40 percent. VOICES looks forward to supporting this pre-k funding and continuing to advocate for funding increases until all of Alabama's four year olds have the option to attend a First Class Pre-K.

Health Care Deserts

Nearly 97 percent of children in Alabama have some form of health coverage yet access to care and/or resources is often not available where they live.^{iv} VOICES for Alabama's Children is conducting research culminating in a white paper that addresses health care deserts in Alabama. We support legislation and initiatives that address solutions to the barriers to care identified in the white paper that provide increased access to children in underserved areas.

Protect Funding, Protect Kids

Medicaid and All Kids provide coverage and care to Alabama's most vulnerable children. 820,611 children are covered by Medicaid and All Kids. Alabama had the first SCHIP Program (All Kids), which continues to be one of the best models for offering affordable coverage for dependent children.^v VOICES will continue to monitor Medicaid funding and prioritization in order to ensure comprehensive care for mothers and infants.

Birth to Three: Early Language Acquisition & Early Intervention

85-90% of brain development occurs during the first 3 years of life. This is a critical time to introduce age appropriate early learning activities that will have a lasting impact on a child's readiness for learning. The goal is that Alabama adopts early language acquisition as a priority. Alabama's Early Intervention System (AEIS) is a program through which the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services provides services to infants and toddlers birth to age 3 with disabilities and developmental delays and their families. VOICES for Alabama's Children supports the \$4.57 million additional funds needed to fully implement and operationalize AEIS and the expansion and adoption of early language acquisition.

School Safety

Dr. Eric Mackey, Alabama State Superintendent, proposed a \$22 million funding request to support school safety and security during the preliminary legislative budget hearings on January 29, 2019.^{vi} There have previously been no line items in the Education Trust Fund to specifically fund school safety and security. The goal set by Dr. Mackey is a \$30 per student proposal to provide for School Resource Officers, Mental Health,

cameras and access point monitoring, locks and locking mechanisms and emergency response technology.vii VOICES will continue to monitor this budget item and advocate for best practices to be included in the execution of this funding request. The proposal by the Alabama Board of Education represents a progressive first step towards comprehensive school safety and a hopeful gateway to addressing mental health in Alabama's schools.

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JOIN VOICES CAN! SO YOU CAN... STAY UP TO DATE WITH US

VOICES CAN!

Our VOICES CAN! members receive periodic updates on our progress during the legislative session. We also release these reports in addition to detailing all the events over the session through our Legislative Report, so you will never miss any important information.

We thank all of our supporters and acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in the *2019 Legislative Report* are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of other foundations, organizations or individuals.

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VOICES CAN!

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www.instagram.com/voicesforalabamaschildren

Examples of Our Digital Updates



Friend --

Census Progress

VOICES continues to raise awareness for the upcoming 2020 Census and advocate for state resources to help Alabamians prepare for April 1st of next year. The robust efforts of team VOICES are progressing through discussions with the General Fund and Education Trust Fund committee chairs, the Governor's Office, ADECA and corporate and non-profit stakeholders. We believe that a one-time investment of \$5million would provide an unprecedented return on investment resulting in fair representation in Congress and the federal funds Alabama deserves. We will continue to keep our VOICES CAN members updated on this important funding request.

Health

HB41 Update: VOICES commended the passage of this bill by the House a few weeks ago. It has now been referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee where it will be discussed Wednesday, May 1 at 8:30 a.m. (room number TBD). I spoke with the House sponsors yesterday, Representatives Shane Stringer and Barbara Drummond, and they had concerns about special interest groups hindering the passage of this positive piece of legislation. I encourage VOICES CAN members to first read the legislation, and then reach out to your State Senator and voice your support for this bill. [HB41](#) seeks to decrease youth alternative nicotine product usage and restrict the ways retailers can market to kids.

Education

HB388: Sponsored by Representatives Terri Collins and Alan Baker, this bill would establish the Alabama Literacy Act which would implement steps to improve the reading proficiency of public school kindergarten to third grade students and ensure that every student completing the third grade is able to read at or above grade level.

"We support the goals of this bill to ensure all Alabama students read on grade level," said A+ Education Partnership President Mark Dixon. "We know that students who don't read on grade level by the fourth grade are much less likely to graduate from high school, and this bill will put in place the supports those students need."

I spoke with bill sponsor Representative Collins this morning and she was extremely pleased with the support received by the committee. She highlighted the success similar legislation has had in other states, including neighboring Mississippi, and the positive outcomes resulting from high quality reading standards and curriculum.

Status: Received a favorable from the House Education Policy Committee and will move to the House floor next week.

Safety

HB385: Sponsored by Representatives Robertson, Collins, Moore (P), Pettus, Oliver, Reynolds, Baker, Marques, Sorrells, Simpson, Kiel, Estes, Stadthagen, Shedd, Farley, Rowe, Treadaway and Wood (D). Under current law, each local board of education is required to adopt a comprehensive school safety plan for each school under its authority. This overarching plan must include a specific plan relating to threats to the safety of school property, students, employees, or administrators, referred to as a code red school safety plan. This bill would redesignate this comprehensive school safety plan as a school emergency operations plan, and would change terms from code red plan to school lockdown safety plan, and from code red drill to school lockdown drill, to help participants understand the reason for the plan and the drills. This bill would also require a local board of education creating or revising a school emergency operations plan to utilize the four tiers of lockdown alert level currently adopted by the State Superintendent of Education.



Friend --

Child Advocacy Day!

Wow. Child Advocacy Day was such a success for our kids, our state and for Team VOICES. Pulling this off was a group effort and I want to thank everyone who was involved in the planning and execution of the monumental event.

Most importantly, we received excellent feedback from kids, parents, teachers, principals, superintendents and state leaders on the quality and impact of both the Advocacy Breakfast and the Kids Count Rally.

Advocacy Breakfast

Advocates from a diverse set of groups and backgrounds joined Team VOICES in Room 200 at the Alabama State House for a breakfast featuring a panel discussion from state agency heads and budget updates from Senator Arthur Orr and former budget chair/current VOICES contract lobbyist Jay Love.



From Left to Right: Department of Mental Health Commissioner, Lynn Beshear; Alabama Department of Human Resources Commissioner, Nancy Buckner; Alabama Medicaid Agency Deputy Commissioner, Kathy Hall; Alabama Department of Public Health State Health Officer, Dr. Scott Harris; Alabama State Department of Education Superintendent, Dr. Eric Mackey; Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education Secretary, Jeana Ross

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