

## 2026 Policy Agenda

VOICES for Alabama's Children's vision is that all children are safe, healthy, educated, and economically secure so that they, their families, and our state can thrive. We believe all children deserve to live in a community that affirms their inherent value as members of the human family. We will advocate for policies that promote dignity, equity and justice, resulting in opportunities that give Alabama children the best chance to succeed.

### 2026 Policy Priorities:

#### HEALTH

❖ **Protect & Secure Increased Funding for Children's Mental Health Services and Resources.**

The number of children and teens dealing with mental health issues has risen significantly in the last ten years. Even though the state has invested more in mental health recently, there still aren't enough resources for children, youth, and their families. State budgets need to prioritize funding for mental health services. This should include better early identification screenings and making mental health resources more affordable for children under 18.

❖ **Close the Healthcare Coverage Gap to Increase Insurance Affordability for All Alabamians and Protect Rural Hospitals.**

Enact policies and programs that help low-income working Alabamians afford healthcare coverage, keep rural hospitals open to provide critical mental and maternal healthcare, and support thousands of new jobs in local communities.

#### EDUCATION

❖ **Promote Healthy Digital Engagement in Early Childhood Education.**

Setting guidelines for screen time in early childhood education is essential for promoting children's healthy physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development while using technology for learning. These rules help reduce the risks of too much screen time and create a balanced learning environment. VOICES supports legislation requiring the Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE) to establish comprehensive, mandatory standards for screen time use in child care, prekindergarten, and kindergarten settings.

❖ **Secure Investment in Alabama's First Class Pre-K Program.**

Alabama's First Class Pre-K Program is recognized as one of the best programs in the country for preparing four-year-olds, particularly those from low-income families, for school. Children who complete this program are less likely to experience chronic absenteeism or require special education services throughout their education. Increased funding would enable more families to enroll their children.

❖ **Expand Access to High Quality Out-of-School Time (OST) Programs in Alabama.**

High-quality OST programs provide critical benefits to students and communities by promoting academic enrichment, life skills development, and equitable learning opportunities beyond the regular school day. These programs support working families, reduce opportunity gaps, and help students thrive both in and out of the classroom. Increasing access to high-quality OST programs is essential to improving educational outcomes, supporting youth development, and strengthening Alabama's workforce and economy.

#### SAFETY

❖ **Strengthen Alabama's Child Passenger Safety Law.**

Motor vehicle accidents are among the leading causes of preventable child deaths in Alabama. As research advances and technology evolves, it's essential to stay up to date on child passenger safety standards. To reduce the number of preventable child deaths statewide, Alabama should adopt the new Child Passenger Safety Guidelines recommended by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

❖ **Advance Community Accountability Approach to Juvenile Justice in Alabama.**

Support the continued development of a juvenile justice system that prioritizes age-appropriate, trauma-informed, and rehabilitative approaches. Promote increased investment in effective alternatives such as diversion programs, community-based services, and restorative practices.

❖ **Increase Awareness of Social Media and Screen Time Risks for Children and Youth.**

Support policies and programs that promote safe, balanced, and age-appropriate technology use. Provide families with practical tools, guidance, and resources to help children develop healthy digital habits, foster strong relationships, and safeguard their mental health and well-being.

## ECONOMIC SECURITY

### ❖ **Urge Protection of Funding and Access to Food and Food Assistance Programs.**

Support programs that provide access to healthy foods, including the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, WIC, SNAP, School Nutrition Program (or alternatives), Double-Up Food Bucks, and other similar programs designed to ensure children and families have reliable access to healthy food options.

## Ongoing Collaborative Support & Public Awareness Opportunities:

- ❖ **Raise statewide awareness about the critical need for foster parents**, highlighting the role they play in providing safe, supportive homes for vulnerable children.
- ❖ **Promote early literacy and school readiness** by supporting programs like Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library and Reach Out and Read, which provide families with young children access to engaging, age-appropriate books that build a foundation for lifelong success.
- ❖ **Advocate for improved firearm safety policies** to help reduce preventable child and youth deaths in Alabama.
- ❖ **Support evidence-based immunization policies** that increase childhood vaccination rates and remove barriers to access—protecting the health of children, families, and communities across the state.
- ❖ **Ensure sustained investment in student achievement through the RAISE Act**, and hold school districts accountable for implementing evidence-based strategies that improve student outcomes and show measurable progress over time.
- ❖ **Monitor developments in federal education block grant funding**, assessing potential impacts on state and local education priorities.
- ❖ **Monitor and raise awareness about the need for accessible, affordable broadband services** statewide to ensure all Alabamians—regardless of geography—can connect to essential services and opportunities.
- ❖ **Strengthen Alabama’s child care system** by expanding access to affordable, high-quality care. This includes protecting federal funding for key programs like child care stabilization and Head Start, while working toward long-term solutions to workforce challenges and other systemic challenges.
- ❖ **Monitor the implementation and impact of Alabama’s school cell phone ban law**, evaluating its effects on students, educators, and learning environments.
- ❖ **Monitor the impact and clarify the implications of the newly revised Age of Consent law**, passed during the 2025 legislative session, particularly regarding concerns that it may unintentionally limit youth access to necessary mental health services.