

A+ Education Foundation's Education News in Alabama
April 30, 2008

By Sallie Owen

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1. MOBILE'S GEORGE HALL ELEMENTARY WINS NATIONAL SCHOOL CHANGE AWARD

Mobile's George Hall Elementary is one of six schools in the country selected for the 2008 National School Change Award, which recognizes schools that have gone from underperforming to exemplary.

George Hall is an urban school serving primarily black students from low-income families. On last year's state assessments, 71 percent of the school's fourth-graders scored in the top category (level IV).

To put that in perspective, that's:

- * 18 points better than the state average for all students.
- * More than double the state average for black students.
- * 7 points better than the state average for white students, who usually outperform their minority peers.
- * A few decimal points ahead of the state average for non-poverty students, who usually outperform their peers from poorer families.

The National School Change Award is sponsored by Panasonic, and honored schools will be part of a national research project on turnaround schools. Previous award winners from Alabama include West Jasper Elementary in 2005 and Anna F. Booth Elementary (another Mobile County school) in 2007.

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2. ALABAMA, RILEY LAUDED IN NEW PRE-K REPORT

Pre-K Now, a national advocacy organization, has named Gov. Bob Riley one of four Budget Heroes this year for proposing increased pre-k funding during a budget crunch.

"We can clearly see leaders' priorities when budgets are tight," said Libby Doggett, executive director of Pre-K Now. "The governors who stand out in this report are those who are consistently committed to doing what is best for young children and savvy enough to know that investment in quality pre-k is a sound economic decision for their states."

Get the report: <http://snipurl.com/prekreport> [www_preknow_org]

"State among standouts in pre-K funding," Tuscaloosa News
<http://snipurl.com/tn0423> [www_tuscaloosanews_com]

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3. PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP TO STRENGTHEN SCIENCE INSTRUCTION

The HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology in Huntsville dedicated its new facility last week, and the event brought Dr. Francis Collins – who led the team that mapped the human genome – into middle school science classrooms in Alabama.

HudsonAlpha (www.hudsonalpha.org) has a three-fold mission of genomic research, economic development, and educational outreach. The nonprofit institute is located in the nation's second-largest research park, and it is the cornerstone of the park's biotechnology campus. This cluster of biotech talent aims to turn knowledge and ideas into commercial products and services for improving human health and strengthening Alabama's progressively diverse economy

"Bioscience's 'historic day,'" The Huntsville Times
<http://snipurl.com/htimes0425> [www_al_com]

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4. STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION UPDATE:

Further discussion of proposed new graduation requirements

Board members had another opportunity April 24 to examine proposed new graduation requirements, and most of their questions focused on the First Choice Diploma.

All graduates must already pass four years of English, math, science and social studies. The First Choice Diploma would shift more students into the advanced academic diploma, which specifies that one year of math must be Algebra II with Trigonometry. It also requires two years of foreign language. All students would start in the advanced academic diploma, and they would have the opportunity to opt out with their parents' permission.

State Superintendent of Education Dr. Joe Morton told the board that there are some districts where fewer than 10 percent of students earn the advanced academic diploma. He said more students need this rigorous preparation to succeed at work, in college and in life.

"When you ask underprivileged and underserved kids to do more, they respond," Morton said.

Board members would have appointments to an implementation committee. If approved on May 8, the First Choice Diploma would affect ninth-graders in the fall of 2009.

These were among the points clarified during discussion:

* The proposal does not call for making "honors" courses for all students.

* Currently, 39 percent of Alabama's high school graduates completed the advanced academic diploma. Morton expects that number to rise gradually.

*Career Tech students would also have the option of earning the advanced academic endorsement.

"This plan is a plan that's time has come to enable Alabama to take the next step forward," Morton said.

Morton noted that the plan was endorsed by all deans of education from Alabama's colleges and universities, both public and private.

The resolution about graduation requirements would also create a Middle School Initiative to build on the gains in elementary school and better prepare students for high school.

Find documents and resources related to this proposal (including a 71-item FAQ) at http://www.alsde.edu/html/al_high_school_diploma_proposal.asp .

Graduation requirements were the dominant topic when the board met Spain Park High School in Hoover. All board members were present for the work session except Mary Jane Caylor and the governor.

In other business, the board heard an update on changes to principal certification that were recommended by the Governor's Congress on School Leadership. There was also a briefing on a survey of student drug use.

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WHAT'S UP @ A+

- CONGRATS TO GEORGE HALL ELEMENTARY: George Hall Elementary is an active member of the Alabama Best Practices Center's Powerful Conversations Network. Read more about this nationally recognized school at <http://www.abpc21.org/fieldtrips.html> .

- WELL DONE FAYETTEVILLE: Fayetteville School in Talladega County is another active member of the Alabama Best Practices Center's Powerful Conversations Network. Fayetteville was recently named a 2008 Banner School by the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools. Read more here <http://snipurl.com/fvilleclas> [www_dailyhome_com] and here <http://www.abpc21.org/digitaldivide.html>.

- MAGAZINE FEATURES ABPC: Alabama School Boards magazine recently featured the Alabama Best Practices Center in an article called "Cultivate 21st Century Citizens." (PDF, 4.4 MB) <http://snipurl.com/aasb0108> [www_alabamaschoolboards_org]

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Past editions can be found at www.aplusala.org/ednews/index.asp

Feedback is welcome. Please send messages to comments@aplusala.org.