

Montgomery City-County COVID Early Learning Acceleration Fund

There is no question that the lack of reliable access to early childhood education and care programs is limiting the ability of working parents to contribute fully to the area's workforce. New investments early childhood education are needed to reinforce the child care industry's weak infrastructure, allow more parents to return to work, and increase academic outcomes.

The Alabama School Readiness Alliance encourages Mayor Reed and the City Council to work with the Montgomery County Commission to utilize between \$2 - \$5 million in American Rescue Plan investments to create a City-County COVID Early Learning Acceleration fund to help with startup and local matching funding to support the expansion of Alabama First Class Pre-K classrooms. This fund could support private child care programs (many of which are women and minority owned), nonprofits and public schools with one-time grants to make facility or other improvements necessary to qualify for state First Class Pre-K grants. For example, some groups have adequate space, but must invest thousands of dollars to make building modifications in order to accommodate a First Class Pre-K classroom. The fund could also be used to fully fund new First Class Pre-K classrooms that could be sustained in the future with state First Class Pre-K grants.

It is critical that Montgomery officials work together to utilize American Rescue Plan funding to accelerate early learning. If we act now, we can help more children gain access to Alabama's nationally recognized First Class Pre-K program – which is proven to close economic and racial academic achievement gaps. First Class Pre-K is also known for its strong levels of parent and family engagement, health and mental health screenings, behavioral support, and the early identification of special needs – all of which are more pressing than ever given the global pandemic.

A Montgomery City-County COVID Early Learning Acceleration Fund is a wise, short-term use of the ARP funding that can be sustained long-term with state First Class Pre-K funding. Moreover, quality pre-k has a proven return on investment due to positive long-term academic, economic and social outcomes. The Alabama Legislature has made funding for First Class Pre-K a priority, approving increases annually over the past nine years. There is bipartisan buy-in at the state level for a [plan](#) to fully fund the program to reach an estimated 70 percent of Alabama's four-year-olds by 2025.

The Alabama School Readiness Alliance is available to help officials identify goals and develop plans for pre-k expansion. It is possible, with the assistance of this special fund, to reach 70 percent of four-year-olds in Montgomery County with the addition of 50 classrooms over the next two years.

Ninety five percent of students that participate in First Class Pre-K are “school ready” at the end of the program. A large and growing body of research promises that kindergarten-ready students will change the game for public education, economic development, crime reduction and quality of life in Montgomery. It's time for us to act on more than 40 years of research and give our students a chance to succeed. After the negative affect of COVID on families and schools, relief is in sight. The best way to increase outcomes is to start early.