

UAB Grand Challenge Concept Paper

Eliminating Root Causes of Academic Underachievement in the City of Birmingham & Beyond

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The great state of Alabama consistently ranks in the bottom of national rankings in overall education. Our state has a concerning number of persistently failing public schools; 75 public schools were listed as failing in Jan 2018. Statewide, 65% of third-graders in year 2016 were not reading on grade level, the majority of our children are not proficient in reading (at any grade level, at any given year) on the annual ACT Aspire testing. One cannot simply justify the failing schools by stating these families live in poverty. One needs to determine and address root causes, "people do not fail; processes do." Alabama has increased its education spending to 6.63 billion dollars this year. 96 million has been invested into our Nationally Ranked Alabama First Class Pre-K program. This is the optimal time for the UAB enterprise, as an anchor institution, to begin intervening into the root causes of academic underachievement in our state, as this has potential implications and positive influences locally as well as nation-wide. Education is one of the greatest Social Determinants of Health. Eliminating root causes of academic underachievement would improve Alabama's education national rankings and overall quality of life among its citizens; providing our children the greatest hope and opportunity for success. Our desired outcomes at the minimum include global improvement in reading proficiency, less children diagnosed with attention/focusing concerns, and great improvements in communities suffering from academic underachievement. Not optimizing education has high societal and economic cost for our state not only in poorer educational outcomes but increased chronic medical conditions with poorer health outcomes, higher infant mortality rates, loss of productivity, less state tax revenues, increased social expenditure, less safe neighborhoods, and higher societal financial burden. It has been estimated that by 2020, 62 percent of Alabama jobs will require postsecondary education.

The General Academic Pediatrics Division at UAB staffs the Women and Infant Center: Well Baby Nursery. There are thousands of families whose 1-2 day old infants are already on the trajectory to academic failure due to generational, cyclic familial situations beyond the infant's control: poverty, limited resources, limited access to a quality education, academically under stimulated homes, or maladaptive parental behaviors, etc. We see these same children at their subsequent well child visits in the Primary Care Clinic, monitoring their development and later poor academic outcomes. A concerning number of patients start off behind in their developmental milestones, never catch up, and become future parents to the next generation. To the detriment of our children, many homes are completely void of any academic ambitions. There are many root causes of academic underachievement and generational poverty that need to be explored and intervened. Out-of-school factors account for 2/3 of achievement gaps. If one

can select the positive familial characteristics of academic success (there are numerous research studies that have already identified these), replicate them in families most at risk (starting from 0-4yo), then one has a solid intervention plan to prevent academic underachievement. By the time a child enrolls in Kindergarten, their educational habits of either fondness or avoidance for books/learning have been set. A vast number of Public schools are inheriting children who are very developmentally behind prior to stepping foot inside of their classrooms. There needs to be an institutionalized, multi-layered, multigenerational, deeply rooted cultural, education family focused, statewide social marketing, mass media campaign to eliminate root causes of academic underachievement in the City of Birmingham & beyond, highlighting the importance of early childhood education and the hazards of early media exposure. The vision is to transform our communities to a culture of excellence and counter the culture of anti-intellectualism. Tying in local neighborhood leaders are demonstrated best practices. An annual UAB sponsored, “No Time 4 Screen Time” or “Books for Baby Showers” event would highlight the detriments of early childhood screen time exposure with alternative screen-free ways mothers can entertain their children.

Partnering with Birmingham Public Libraries and the Jefferson County Family Resource Center would support local children not enrolled in daycare to host “homeschooling villages” or family-centered learning communities. These children are typically under stimulated at home for the first 4-5 years of life. This homeschooling village would exposure disadvantaged children to free learning a few hours per day. The facilities could also sponsor parenting classes, support groups, family services, and education sessions with themes on preventing adverse childhood experiences.

One cultural change that has to be a priority is parental involvement. We should focus on in-person as well as video demonstrations, not lectures, using a network of coordinated, neighborhood/home based, and local community members. This provides flexibility (in location and hours offered) for stressed, low resourced families. We could create a focus group of non-working parents for ideas and solicit advice on barriers to improve parental involvement. We need to reach out to the community by conducting family seminars related to useful tips on child rearing, offered during various times of the day and week. Again, utilizing the above mentioned social marketing campaign.

Our social campaign should also include a Healthy Media Platform to address technology induced overstimulation and its role in academically under stimulating households. Our children spend the first 4-5 years of their lives (beginning as 4mo infants) in front of a screen. Thousands of hours in front of a screen has various adverse effects on a rapidly developing brain and rapidly forming synapses. There are tremendous evidence based studies linking excessive screen time to trouble sleeping, attention/focusing deficits, learning troubles, cognitive delay, aggressive behaviors, high risk behaviors, and delays in language. Addressing screen time would help eliminate root causes of academic underachievement as many parents do not consider tablets, video games, or smart phones harmful.

Lastly we would work with the city of Birmingham to eliminate the pre-k wait list by expanding the number of early childhood education centers and encouraging more applications from private subsidized daycares, home based daycares, and religious institutions.

Potential Team Members:

Alabama State Department of Education

UAB Department of Pediatrics Community Engagement

Mayor Randall Woodfin's Education and Workforce Development Taskforce

Superintendent Dr. Lisa Herring of Birmingham City School District

School Leader Jonta Morris of Birmingham's Legacy Prep Charter School

Honorable Judge Raymond Chambliss of Jefferson County Family Resource Center

Birmingham Public Library

Dr. Tajah Witherspoon of UAB Department of Education

Learning Specialist Dr. Felicia Houston of Links 2 Learning Consulting

Art Franklin of WIAT CBS News station

Executive Director Kristina Scott of Alabama Possible

Alabama Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics

Alabama Reading Initiative

Alabama School Readiness Alliance

Polly McClure of Reach Out and Read & Day One Initiative

Birmingham Pediatricians and Family Medicine Providers

Mineral District Medical Society

Jefferson County Health clinics

2-1-1 Connects Alabama: Help Me Grow

Children's Rehabilitation Service

UAB's Nurse Family Partnership

United Way: Success by 6

Childcare Resources Organization

Birmingham's Better Basics

Jefferson County Child Development Center

Jefferson County Head Start

Books A Million