

Empowering Futures: Expanding Educational Opportunities in Alabama's Black Belt

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“Education is key to unlocking opportunity.”

-Senator Richard Shelby, 2023¹

INTRODUCTION

Alabama's educational landscape, particularly within the historically underserved Black Belt region, presents a complex set of challenges characterized by economic disparity, resource scarcity, and systemic obstacles. The Black Belt represents 13% of the state's population, 12% of K-12 students, and approximately 16% of students in higher education, making its educational outcomes critically important to the state's overall progress. This brief seeks to highlight critical educational challenges within the Black Belt, the impact of systemic inequities, and the necessity for comprehensive reform aimed at fostering educational equity. Through analysis of Alabama State Department of Education data on Inexperienced Teacher Rates and Economically Disadvantaged students, among other demographic indicators, this research documents the specific educational barriers facing Black Belt communities. The brief is organized into three main sections: first, an examination of the current state of K-12 education in the Black Belt region, including performance disparities and teacher experience gaps; second, an analysis of public higher education challenges, particularly focusing on community college enrollment declines and financial barriers; and finally, policy recommendations that address both immediate educational needs and long-term systemic reform to create sustainable pathways for educational and economic advancement in the region.

STATE OF K-12

The K-12 educational environment in Alabama reflects stark disparities that significantly affect student outcomes. According to the Alabama Report Card Scores, educational performance is inconsistently distributed across various counties, signaling issues in access to quality education. For example, Thomasville City recorded an overall score of 88, indicating high educational success, while Barbour County scored significantly lower at 66, revealing a wide gap in addressing educational needs.

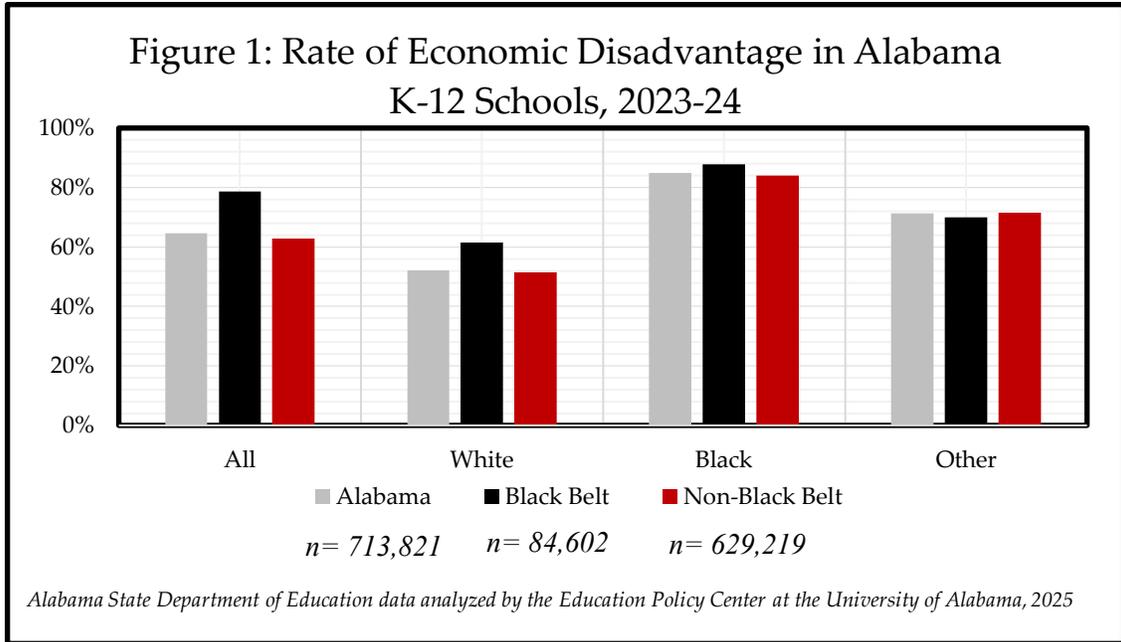
Table 1. Alabama Report Card Scores, 2024

System	Overall score	Grade	Score Chg 16-17 to 23-24	Poverty %
Barbour County	66	D	6	22
Bullock County	76	C	5	26
Butler County	72	C	0	21
Choctaw County	77	C	0	20
Clarke County	81	B	0	21
Conecuh County	79	C	0	28
Crenshaw County	82	B	-1	16
Dallas County	79	C	4	29
Escambia County	83	B	-1	21
Greene County	72	C	4	36
Hale County	84	B	4	24
Lamar County	87	B	0	15
Lowndes County	77	C	4	30
Macon County	75	C	0	22
Marengo County	87	B	1	23
Monroe County	79	C	3	23
Montgomery County	74	C	7	19
Perry County	69	D	2	31
Pickens County	82	B	7	23
Pike County	82	B	-2	23
Russell County	83	B	0	22
Sumter County	74	C	12	28
Washington County	84	B	3	18
Wilcox County	73	C	3	29
Demopolis City	88	B	3	
Eufaula City	73	C	1	
Ozark City	83	B	0	
Selma City	76	C	8	
Thomasville City	88	B	-1	
Troy City	87	B	0	
Black Belt	80	B		24
Non-Black Belt	86	B		16
Alabama	85	B		16

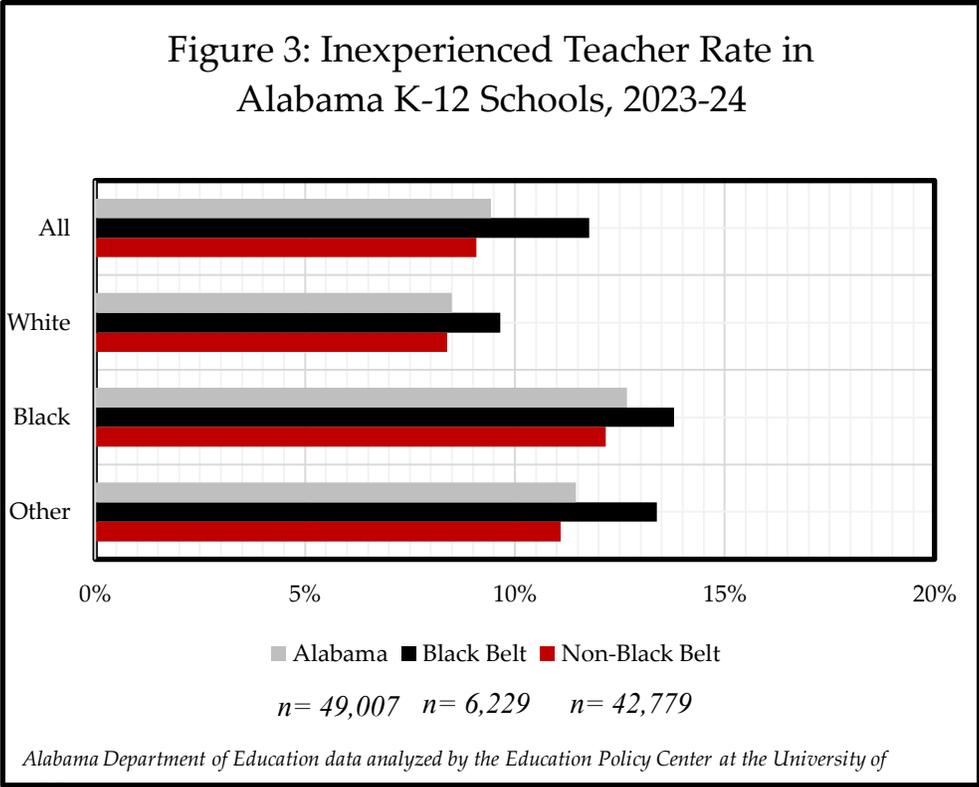
Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) data analyzed by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, 2025

Thomasville City illustrates that pockets of excellence do exist; however, they remain the exception rather than the rule. These disparities are exacerbated by the highly disproportionate rates of Economic Disadvantage among students and elevated Inexperienced Teacher Rates, undermining the ability to provide a balanced education.

One of the most revealing sources for these disparities is the Economic Disadvantage Rate. The economic disadvantage data illuminates the socioeconomic barriers confronting students, with Black Belt schools demonstrating markedly higher rates of economic challenges compared to schools in other regions. The compounding effects of economic disadvantage are important to consider. A student whose economic circumstances create persistent household stress often struggles to prioritize academics when faced with more immediate family concerns. The perception of college as a viable pathway significantly impacts academic engagement—students who view higher education as an expected part of their future commit more readily to college preparatory coursework, while those who see college as unattainable may invest less effort. For students with college-oriented family expectations, participation in advanced coursework isn't optional but assumed. This educational trajectory divide emerges because social context and academic motivation are deeply interconnected and compete for students' mental and emotional resources.² Programs that address these barriers, such as free after-school tutoring and parent-support groups, are particularly crucial for economically disadvantaged students, who as shown in Figure 1 make up ~60% of all K-12 students in Alabama. These interventions help overcome resource gaps in high-poverty districts and provide essential academic support for students whose families may lack the time, educational background, or financial means to assist with schoolwork. By targeting these evidence-based programs toward our most economically vulnerable communities, Alabama can work to increase educational equity and quality in these areas.³



The Inexperienced Teacher Rates in these areas also put students at a disadvantage. As shown in Figure 2 below, Black Belt schools show higher proportions of less experienced educators, suggesting potential limitations in attracting and retaining qualified teaching talent. This potentially creates a compounding effect, where economic disadvantage and educational staffing challenges intersect to create significant barriers to student success. Inexperienced teachers often struggle to form close relationships with their students as they will be more focused on their work as opposed to their students. In a study conducted by the National Association for Gifted Children, it was found that a majority of honors college freshmen attributed their interest and pursuit of education to a particularly intelligent and inspiring teacher who encouraged them.⁴ Since teachers in these rural areas do not have experience with the profession and will be attempting to teach the material effectively before engaging with other aspects of the job, these students are unable to form a relationship with a trusted adult who is familiar with their academic performance and can encourage them to pursue further education.



PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Within Alabama's higher education system, significant challenges persist, particularly in accessing quality education. As demonstrated in Figure 3, statewide enrollment has decreased since 2011-12, with drops felt in persistent poverty regions. This hampers the ability to reach Governor Ivey's statewide education goals and limits opportunities to develop the workforce needed to attract industry. Community colleges — often key providers of critical certifications and degrees — report alarming enrollment declines that severely restrict educational pathways for residents. These decreases disproportionately affect rural, low-income students who rely on community colleges.⁵

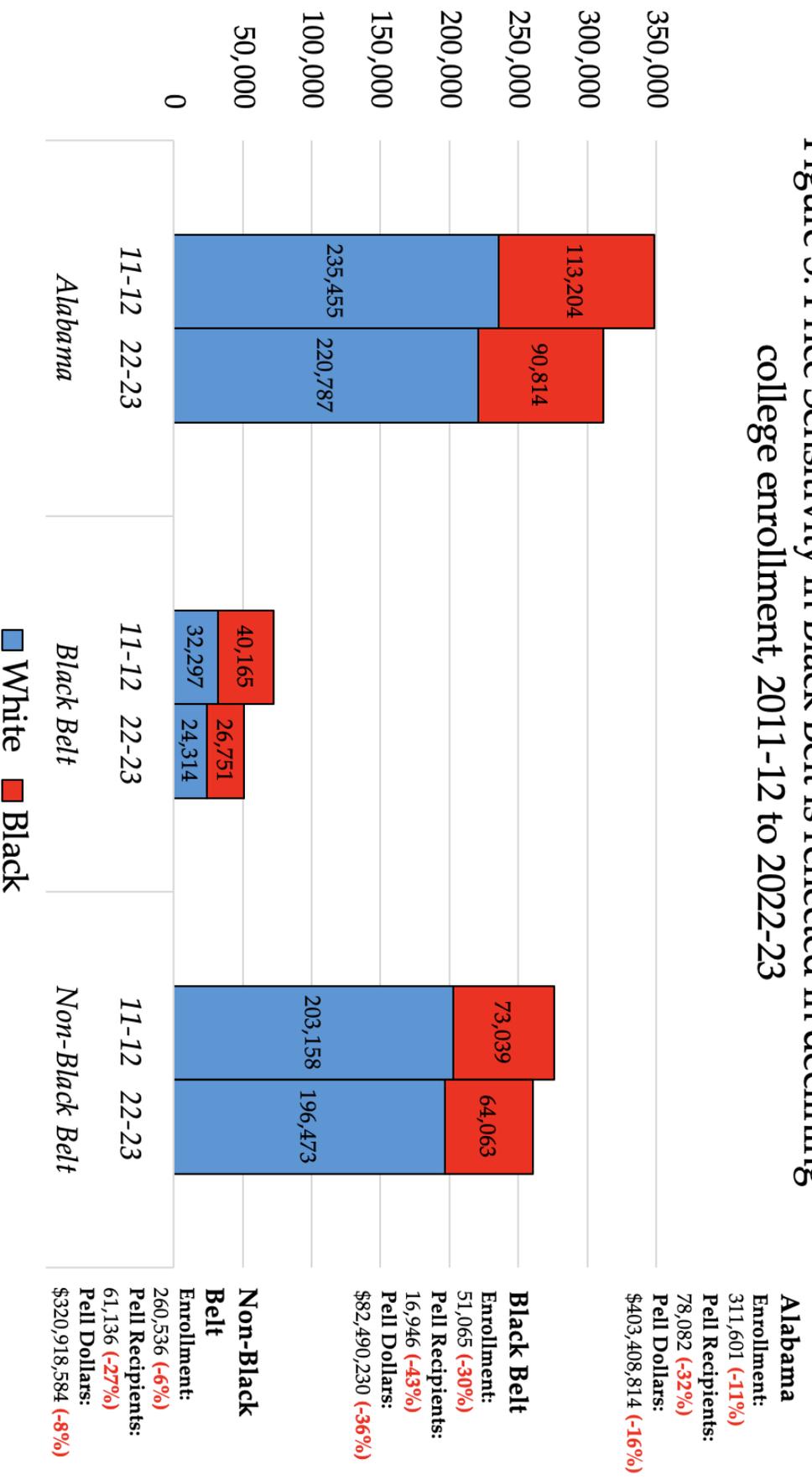
For instance, Pell Grant funding — a vital resource for low-income students — has seen substantial decreases at both federal and state levels, making post-secondary education unaffordable for many. As a result, potential students forego education due to financial constraints, widening skills gaps that affect local economies. While communities outside the Black Belt are stabilizing or increasing enrollment figures, the continuing downward trend in the region highlights the urgent need for focused educational strategies. This situation calls for targeted initiatives, including outreach, financial literacy programs, and increased financial aid opportunities for Black Belt residents.

Despite these challenges, several key institutions are working to address educational needs across the Black Belt region. The University of West Alabama in Livingston (Sumter County) serves the western Black Belt and focuses on preparing the next generation of educators for the region's public schools. Their University Charter School demonstrates what's possible, boasting a 100% graduation rate, ranking as the #1 Alabama Charter Elementary School by U.S. News and World Report, and receiving an 84 on the ASDE 2023-24 report card.⁶

In the eastern Black Belt, Troy University has evolved significantly beyond its roots as a teachers' college. The university recently established its new College of Science and Engineering, replacing the College of Arts and Sciences—a transformation described as "not only embracing the future of education, but shaping it."⁷ This development marks Troy as the emerging center for STEM education in the Black Belt.

Even institutions outside the region are extending their reach to serve Black Belt communities. The University of South Alabama, based in Mobile, serves five Black Belt counties in Southwest Alabama (Washington, Clarke, Monroe, Conecuh, and Escambia). Recognizing the reduction in rural health services across the state and nation, USA has launched Virtual Care and Rural Initiatives that deploy medical teams to existing facilities throughout the Black Belt.⁸

Figure 3. Price Sensitivity in Black Belt is reflected in declining college enrollment, 2011-12 to 2022-23



The downturn in higher education participation for residents of the Black Belt is unfortunate, but not at all surprising. In past generations, states largely drove the decision to attend college and pursue a degree through fiscal policies.⁹ State governments provided the lion's share of the cost of an advanced education. This was often done with the help of local governments for community colleges. When governments were paying much of the cost, affordability was not as great of a concern to prospective students. Now, with a substantially lower portion of an education paid for by governmental bodies and much more paid for by the student, it has necessarily become a consumer decision based on financial outcomes.¹⁰ Because Alabama ranks dead last among the 17 southeastern states in its investments in state-funded student financial aid, financing access and success is placed on the back of students and families, public community colleges and universities, HBCUs, and private non-selective colleges with historically low endowment levels.

Potential students must defer the opportunity to enter the job market to instead spend money to earn a degree, often going into debt to do so. This forced choice has its most profound influence on the poorest citizens.¹¹ In Alabama, the poorest of the poor make up a large portion of the population in the Black Belt. Available discretionary income has a powerful impact on consumer decision-making. The availability of discretionary income and the upfront cost of attending college largely influence the decision to attend. Without discretionary income to spend on education, the only option is taking on substantial debt. Low-income citizens are justifiably more averse to taking on debt than the affluent.¹² Where the most affluent are choosing between investing in more luxuries and in pursuing an advanced degree, the less affluent have to make hard decisions.¹³ In the current economic environment, the poorest are choosing between attending college and having quality food, housing, and medical care. If no discretionary income exists after paying for necessities, then necessities must be compromised on or sacrificed if there is to be any other spending.

A recent national study sheds light on the impact of discretionary income and the upfront cost of attendance on college attendance and its long-term results.¹⁴ National data was collected on the total cost of attendance for colleges and universities (TCA), the cost of rent for the poorest Americans, the average Pell Grant amount, and the percentage of the workforce employed in manufacturing. Each of these variables was hypothesized to be a proxy for a larger financial factor. TCA for the upfront cost of pursuing a degree, rent costs for discretionary spending, Pell Grant for educational voucher grants that defray educational costs, and the percentage of the workforce engaged in manufacturing for earnings opportunities that do not require a college degree. The combination of these variables in years past was compared to poverty

statistics 10 and 20 years in the future. This combination of financial factors explains over 92% of the variation in poverty rates.¹⁵ As the area with the most persistent poverty in Alabama, the Black Belt is likely being economically held back the most by these college costs and financial conditions. This burden is further compounded by wrap-around costs including transportation, deferred earnings, childcare, health care for elderly family members, cost of books and materials, and various fees—all of which diminish the ability to attend college and reduce how far Pell Grants can go to open doors, particularly when Pell has been an unpredictable and at times unreliable partner.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A key recommendation for addressing persistent poverty in Alabama's Black Belt is the expansion and continued funding of the KickStart College & Careers (KCC) program. This initiative has been vital in providing college and career readiness for Black Belt students, specifically targeting Title I schools. Since its inception in 2012, KCC has successfully served 11,000 eighth graders and demonstrated a robust potential for wider impact. From a statewide economic perspective, investing in these students' futures directly addresses Alabama's workforce development needs and economic competitiveness. Each student who transitions from potential poverty to gainful employment represents not only reduced social service costs but also increased tax revenue and economic productivity for the state. The program helps break intergenerational poverty cycles by showing students that college is a viable and desirable goal, that there is worth in pursuing higher education, and that it is an attainable objective even for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This investment in human capital yields long-term returns that benefit all of Alabama through a more skilled workforce, reduced dependency on public assistance, and increased innovation potential.

To build on its successes, we recommend a three-year investment of \$1.26 million—approximately \$420,000 annually—to significantly scale this model. By engaging all 34,500 eighth and eleventh-grade students across the 24 Black Belt counties, KCC would aim to offer invaluable opportunities that include visits to automotive manufacturers and colleges, enriching students' understanding of available career pathways. This hands-on experience is crucial in empowering young individuals to visualize their futures in high-demand sectors.

Furthermore, each student participating in KCC will receive individualized career and college exploration plans, helping align their education with the evolving requirements of 21st-century employers. This aspect of the program not only enhances student

engagement but also equips them with the necessary tools and knowledge for making informed decisions about their future. Additionally, the integration of the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship and Alabama Transfers dashboards will further facilitate these students' transitions from high school to postsecondary institutions and the workforce.

Another recommendation involves more seamlessly connecting new students and/or displaced workers with in-demand jobs, a crucial step to securing tomorrow's workforce and getting the prime-age workers off the sidelines.¹⁶ The Alabama Department of Education has taken no breaks in continuing to advance Governor Kay Ivey's workforce development goal from 2018 with their new workforce development program Be Pro Be Proud.^{17 18} Providing students the opportunity to learn about new trades and careers, Be Pro Be Proud will "meet students where they are, bridging the gap not only by connecting high school students with jobs but also by allowing younger students to explore potential career pathways" State Superintendent Eric Mackey stated in the programs announcement.¹⁹ This program recognizes the importance of getting younger students interested in these trades as well as how crucial it is to bring the opportunities to them, given the mobile capability of the program. Programs like this can be easily expanded to service the many rural and isolated high schools and community colleges of the Black Belt, inspiring new students and displaced workers.

In tandem with the expansion of KCC, it is also essential to secure funding for the Pell Grant program. The continued availability of Pell will ensure that low-income students in the Black Belt region have access to higher education and the means to pursue further academic opportunities. Fortunately, each of these financial factors can be changed by state policies. The total cost of attendance at community colleges and the average amount of Pell Grant funding have the most powerful impact on poverty within this model can be changed through increased funding. Higher community college funding can directly lead to lower TCA for these colleges, and increased federal funding can lead to higher average Pell Grant funding. Alabama can also increase available grant funding by providing additional state grant funding. Other economic policy changes can be used to increase the supply of housing and high-paying manufacturing jobs. All of these policy enhancements can likely be used to improve the poverty situation in Alabama as a whole and in the Black Belt in particular, but the most likely to produce a major improvement over the next decade would be decreases in the upfront cost of community college attendance and increases in voucher style educational grant availability.

Together, these initiatives form a comprehensive strategy designed to combat the cycle of poverty in Alabama's Black Belt by enhancing educational attainment and workforce readiness, directly addressing the systemic barriers that have historically limited access

for its residents. This dual approach to program expansion and financial support will foster a pathway to sustainable economic growth and improved living standards in the region, demonstrating a commitment to long-term change in the face of persistent poverty.

CONCLUSION

The educational inequities faced by Alabama’s Black Belt represent more than mere statistics; they signify a broader systemic failure that affects the lives and futures of countless students. As the state moves toward significant demographic and economic shifts, investing in the educational futures of Black Belt residents is imperative. Initiatives to uplift the educational experience will not only foster personal growth but also catalyze economic development, paving the way for a more prosperous and equitable Alabama. Comprehensive, targeted reforms are vital to ensure that the future workforce is prepared to meet the evolving demands of the economy; ultimately, the stakes are high for both individuals and the state as a whole.

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