Over the next several weeks, 740,000 public school students will either be beginning or returning to school. Buses will be heading out early each morning for the vast majority of our students, and their families rely on transportation to get the students to and from school. We are here today in Montgomery County to see firsthand the preparation that is required to ready our bus fleets and to thank those individuals who are our bus drivers and mechanics as they are the first face many students see each day associated with public schools. They perform one of the many non-academic functions of public school that often go unnoticed and unappreciated!

As this new year approaches, our students will be entering public schools in Alabama where the goals of the Alabama State Board of Education’s PLAN 2020 are being realized in an accelerated manner.

Over the past three years we have redefined what it means to be a high school graduate based on input from Alabama businesses, colleges and universities, and workforce training programs.

We have adopted new academic standards that are aligned with these expectations so students leaving high school are prepared for college or careers without the need for remediation.

We have refocused the purpose of assessments (testing) to their research-based and intended purpose of improving teaching and learning rather than for simply preparing students to regurgitate answers on a test and then place schools and schools systems on arbitrary lists without context.

We have used our work in Alabama to craft our own unique waiver from the archaic NCLB where a single test score was the determinant of success and replaced it with a system of multiple measures realizing that we need ALL students to be successful with individual learning pathways based on the same rigorous outcomes.

We have worked with local communities and the agencies within those communities to create systems of Comprehensive Learning Supports knowing that all children do not show up at school ready to learn—there are basic needs that must be met.

We are currently working with our colleges of education and their teacher and leader preparation programs to redefine what it means to be a teacher or leader in our state so that the very best see teaching as a profession to aspire to, and you will see the State Board keenly focused on this area of policy development in the coming year.

We have created opportunities for schools and school systems to apply for and be granted Innovation Status, whereby they are exempted from certain state rules and regulations that stand in the way of serving children in innovative and creative ways.
AS A RESULT, the goals and objectives of PLAN 2020 are becoming a reality. As students return to public schools this fall they will enter a system with the graduation rate now at 86% four years ahead of our projection - the highest ever recorded in Alabama’s public school history - and Alabama is well on its way to the 90% goal that is foundational to PLAN 2020.

- 59% of last year’s graduates exited high school with an industry-recognized work readiness certificate.
- Alabama public school students led the nation in the percentage increase of qualifying scores on AP exams.
- Multiple school systems have sought and obtained Innovation Status and are delivering education in innovative and creative ways all based on the individual and collective needs of their students.

All of these exceptional advances are the result of great students being taught by dedicated teachers, leaders, and support staff at a time when the per-pupil state funding in Alabama has decreased by the largest percentage than any other state in the nation. What does that tell us about the dedication of our teachers and the resilience of our students!!

And no, it does not communicate we can obviously do more with less – the difference is being made up by our classroom teachers, our parents, and our local communities.

I share all this to say that the Alabama State Board of Education is committed to our plan of continual improvement, and we have been working with Governor Bentley and our legislature on a multi-year plan for adequate and equitable funding for basic educational needs. This past year we saw, for the first time in over six years, funding for classroom instructional support, and we applaud this first installment of a three-year plan but we still have needs yet to be met.

So what does this mean as we face the upcoming Special Session of the legislature? My suggestion is an approach that is strategic, that is research- and fact-based, and that is long-term and sustainable—it begins with a report commissioned by the Business Education Alliance that included the research and analysis expertise of the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama with economic modeling provided by Dr. Keivan Deravi, a respected economist and Professor of Economics at Auburn University at Montgomery.

According to the independent analysis of the collective impact of successful implementation of PLAN 2020, AUM economist Keivan Dervai projects that reaching the 90% graduation rate by the year 2020 would result in the economic output $430 million higher than it otherwise would have been, and the ETF revenues would be up by $22 million dollars. The effect would be similar to landing an industrial mega-project every year.

The report also goes on to focus on key goals and objectives within PLAN 2020 that if implemented successfully will lead to even greater impact for our state but, more importantly, greater learning outcomes for our students.
With an affirmed and widely embraced and long-term plan of transformation in full implementation, PLAN 2020, which is supported by an independent study of fidelity and impact that projects significant individual and collective economic impact on our state, I must question why there would be any consideration of looking to the Education Trust Fund other than how to use it for increased investment in public education for a long-term solution to the economic issues faced by our state. And let me be very clear and supportive of House Budget Chair Bill Poole – there is no “surplus” in the ETF when the Foundation Program remains close to 400 million dollars below the funding formulas contained within it and those differences being absorbed by our local school systems and their community members who have already committed their 10-mil equivalent of property tax just to participate in the Foundation Program. In Montgomery County alone, to operate the buses behind me the school system has to use $500,000 of local funds that could be used for innovative programs, facility upgrades, summer learning opportunities to cover the transportation costs not funded by the legislature.

What impact does this have on the General Fund? Probably very little in the immediate term, but the problems facing that fund and the agencies it supports did not become so austere overnight so there must be a long-term solution.

The research is clear – an effectively prepared college- and career-ready high school graduate:

- Is less likely to be involved in crime – direct long-term impact on prisons.
- Is more likely to become married and have an intact family – direct long-term impact on DHE.
- Is more likely to be healthy and seek and obtain regular medical care – direct long-term impact on Public Health.

The list goes on but what we are saying is that we in Public Education see our role as supportive of these functions, and our best way to do that is reach our goal of a 90% graduation with each of those graduates prepared for college, career, and adulthood.

We want to be part of the solution, and one way to do that is to be informed and embrace our civic responsibility. During the recently completed Regular Session there was much discussion about what appears to be a lack of civic and government understanding by our students and school personnel. As a result, I am designating the month of August as Civics and Government Awareness Month in public schools across Alabama. With the Special Session occurring prior to the beginning of school for most systems, this provides a unique opportunity for our teachers and leaders to travel to Montgomery as part of their professional learning days to watch government in action. We hope the majority of our 45,000 plus teachers and leaders seize this opportunity to share the remarkable transformational work that is occurring in our schools, to affirm that the investment in public education is a sound one, to demonstrate that they along with the Alabama State Board of Education and myself are committed to delivering on our commitment and their investment, and to seek legislative input on how we can become an integral part of the solution to our state’s revenue issues.