

advocate for SCHOOLS



TO SEE A LIST OF BILLS TRACKED BY AASB
DURING THE 2020 REGULAR SESSION,
CLICK BELOW



Off the radar

Because of the limited agenda to close the session, MANY issues fell off the radar including:

- School calendar
- Tier III
- B.E.S.T.
- Open Records rewrite

It is a bittersweet ending because strong momentum for restoring education retirement benefits and to enact the Building Exceptional School Board Teams Act came to naught. The silver lining? Bills school leaders oppose also died. All bills will have to start at square one in 2021 unless included in a governor's call for a special session.

Corona Virus Updates

[AASB Resources](#)

2020 Regular Legislative Session

The Legislature will adjourn Sine Die Monday, May 18.

2020 Legislative Session is anything but "Regular"

Little did lawmakers know when they began a two-week spring break in March that the legislative session and life as we know it would be upended by the Covid-19 pandemic. Two months later, lawmakers convened for six consecutive days to address a very limited agenda of state budgets, an education bond issue and local bills. Business was conducted with strict health and safety protocols, emergency rules and a State House closed to the public. The legislature will return May 18 mainly to allow an opportunity to override any veto by Governor Ivey.

The limited agenda is complete. The unusual session included political dynamics that are still playing out. Congress sent each state governor's office funding as part of the CARES Act. The General Fund budget included language regarding executive vs legislative authority to spend \$1.8 billion in corona virus federal relief.

To clarify confusion, federal relief dollars for education are not impacted by the general fund budget language. Within CARES is a separate **Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER)**. That fund provides emergency block grants for the governor's discretion to best meet needs of students and schools in K-12 and higher education. Alabama's share is \$48.8 million.

\$7.22 Billion Education Budget

Despite the pandemic's hit to the economy, not only is the current fiscal year budget safe but the legislature appropriated a \$91 million increase making FY21 the largest education budget in Alabama history.

Strong state revenue, conservative budgeting and savings in reserves courtesy of the Rolling Reserve Act gave lawmakers confidence in moving the budget forward.

The education budget provided a strong investment in the K-12 Foundation program. Budget chairmen emphasized a substantial bump to operations and maintenance in Other Current Expense (OCE) because it would provide school boards the most flexibility to direct new dollars. The \$38.7 million increase translates into an increase from \$19,805 to \$19,908 per unit. For the most part, other items such as classroom instructional support are level funded at FY20 levels.

The [ETF budget spreadsheet](#) shows line-item appropriations and the following increases:

- English Language Learners: \$6.8 M
- School Nurses: \$1 M
- Pre-K: \$4.9 M

- AL Reading Initiative: \$26.9 M with \$18.5 M earmarked for the Alabama Literacy Act
- Computer Science: \$1.8 M
- Teacher Mentoring: \$1 M
- Gifted Students: \$75,000

New line items include:

- High needs special education grants: \$9.7 M
- School Safety Security and Climate: \$5.8 M

This [Alabama State Department of Education chart](#) shows the changes to the Foundation program. Many thanks to the legislators who supported local schools by keeping a strong investment in K-12 and addressing priorities such as mental health, early childhood literacy, math and science learning and more.

Lawmakers also approved [H.189 \(Poole\)](#) to provide the following for this fiscal year:

- Alabama Literacy Act: \$9.8 million
- Regional math coaches: \$2.7 million
- Marketing campaign for teachers: \$1 million
- Online teaching assistance grants: \$300,000

\$1.25 Billion Education Bond Issue

Long-awaited funding for K-12 capital needs will soon be available. The legislature approved [S.242 \(Orr\)](#) to provide a \$1.25 billion bond issue, including \$912 million for K-12 capital improvements. The distribution formula:

- \$400,000 to each school system;
- \$426.6 million distributed to school systems based on 2019-20 Average Daily Membership (ADM); and
- \$426.6 million distributed to school systems based on the Public School Fund allocation for the FY19.

Here is an estimate for [each school system's allocation](#) from the bond issue.

Higher education's portion is \$217.8 million and community colleges is \$120 million. The bond debt will reduce the Education Trust Fund by an estimated \$79.8 million annually over a 20-year period.

Despite the uncertain financial forecast, lawmakers decided the time was right for the first bond issue in fourteen years for several reasons. First, bond debt obligations have been paid off freeing up ETF capacity. Secondly, interest rates are incredibly low. Finally, capital expenditures could boost the state economy. Local school leaders are grateful for the much-needed infusion of dollars for capital expenditures.

Advancement & Technology Funds \$245 million supplemental FY20

The legislature approved [H.190 \(Poole\)](#) to release half of the available \$512 million from the **Advancement & Technology Fund (ATF)**. K-12 schools receive \$178.9 million in the current fiscal year. ATF funding may be used for: Repairs and maintenance; classroom instructional support; insurance for facilities; transportation; acquisition/purchase of education technology and school security.

The bill directs \$15 million off the top as first year repayment for the education bond issue. Higher education's portion from the ATF is \$66.2 million.

The funds are available as a function of the Rolling Reserve Act. The act caps each year's total education budget appropriation based on a historical average. The strategy provides a conservative budget process to prevent a shortfall of revenue in any given year. The act also works to build a savings account. State revenues collected beyond the fiscal year appropriations are first deposited in a Budget Stabilization Account based on the prior year's budget. Any additional revenue flows to the ATF and the legislature may pass a supplemental appropriation for funding to be used in the current fiscal year.

Cybersecurity Funding for Schools Working to get funds directly to you!

Alabama quickly moved to online learning when the pandemic closed schools causing remote learning, technology and cybersecurity issues to explode. Fortunately, a Cybersecurity Task Force had already been working on these issues and included school boards, superintendents, administrators, business officials, technology coordinators, Alabama Supercomputer Authority, the State Department of Education and education association leaders.

The Task Force approved best practices and funding recommendations. It became apparent that state investment in cybersecurity, technology maintenance and operations lagged far behind the critical role technology plays in running all school system operations. A best practices guide developed by the Alabama Leaders in Educational Technology (ALET) will allow systems to triage needs and take practical steps to address critical local needs. Those best practices are the basis for the Cybersecurity Task Force funding request. Just when the discussion began with the House education budget committee, the legislature went into hiatus for the pandemic.

As the education budget was quickly considered, the House Ways and Means Education committee publicly assured school leaders that help will be on the way. Committee members acknowledged the school IT employees working non-stop to provide technology support and guidance to staff, students and families. With pre-pandemic revenue growth no longer available, the committee wanted more time to build a plan for the FY21 budget. The committee will seek a supplemental appropriation in a special session, if called, specifically to address K-12 school systems cybersecurity needs.

In the meantime, an ask was made to quickly direct \$1 million to school systems to provide cybersecurity training for every school employee. Although the preference would have been for that funding to go directly to school systems, the quick request did result in \$2.5 million to address cybersecurity, with the \$1 million earmarked for training. The funding is provided in a supplemental appropriation, [H.189 \(Poole\)](#), for use in the current fiscal year through the Alabama Supercomputer Authority. The bill appropriates the monies for cybersecurity and IT support for K-12 schools in consultation with ALET and specifies \$1 million for professional development for all education employees.

Look for a concerted effort from local school leaders to incorporate a dedicated line-item in the Foundation program for cybersecurity, technology operations and maintenance. Local school leaders must make clear why keeping school technology running and protecting sensitive data requires ongoing funding, just as maintenance for school buses and school buildings.