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News

# Yes, there are high-poverty public schools that operate at a high level in Alabama. Here's how high flyers succeed.

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"Alabama's high flying schools"



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Principal Becky Williams describes the “Sweet Water Way” at the rural K-12 school in Marengo County – a high-performing, high-poverty school – as simple: “An effective teacher, bell to bell.”

But that’s easier said than done. For decades, educators, researchers and policymakers have struggled to quantify what exactly makes schools like Sweet Water -- with more than 60% of 580 students eligible for free or reduced-price meals -- successful, in the face of a local lack of student resources and school funding. On statewide testing last spring, 60% of Sweet Water’s students were proficient in English Language Arts and 33% were proficient in math.

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But while Sweet Water stands apart from other high-poverty schools, it doesn't stand alone: Some Alabama schools -- with lots of poor kids and not a lot of local tax support -- are beating the odds.

These high-flying schools defy expectations, with students who score better than their peers and many of their wealthier counterparts.



Students and staff walk through the hallway at Sweet Water High School, a K-12 school in Marengo County, Alabama, which was identified as a high flying school in a recent Alabama Education Lab analysis. Trisha Powell Crain/AL.com.

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In an Alabama Education Lab analysis, we used measures of poverty, achievement, and local tax support to find 43 schools we call “high flyers.”

We considered geographic location, student population, along with known facts about the schools. With concerns about learning loss and unfinished learning due to school interruptions during the pandemic, a closer look at how Alabama’s high flyers are getting it done might reveal lessons from which other schools can learn.

Hundreds of miles and dozens of hours of visits to five high flyers later, we compiled what we found in high-flying schools, which were spread across the state:

- Teachers have high expectations for students and are invested in their students' academic success.
- Teachers take control of the things they can control.
- Plentiful support to help teachers get better at both what they know and how to teach it.
- Constant assessment of where students stand and what they need help with.
- Leverage of strong community support.

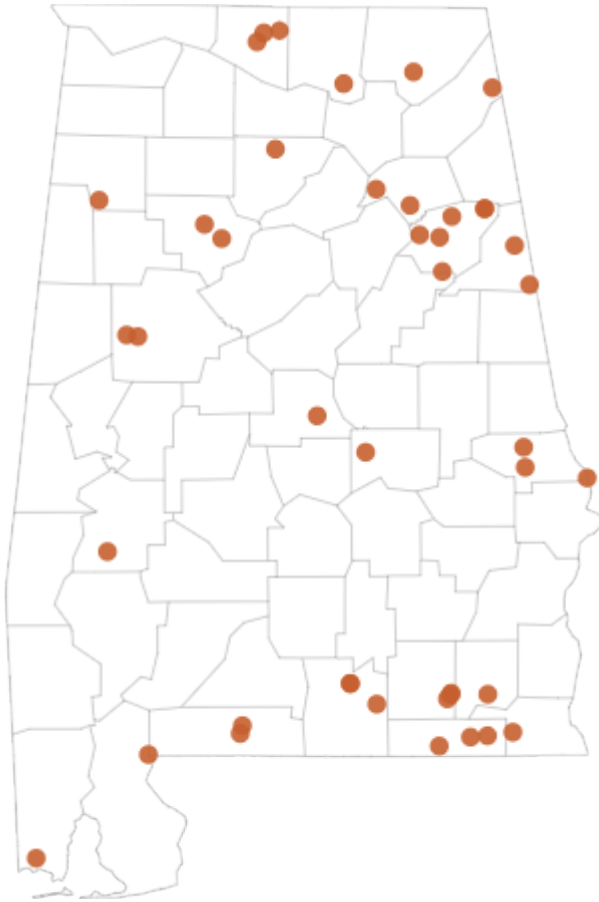
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*Can't see the map? See it online [here](#):*

## Alabama's high flying schools



These schools outperform their peers, despite having high rates of student poverty and low levels of local funding, according to an Ed Lab analysis of 2021 test data.



Source: ALSDE

 A Flourish map

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These may seem like obvious things for high-quality schools to do, but researchers have debated their importance -- and how to implement them -- for decades. And every school needs something slightly different.

“I wish I could say ‘you do this’ and it’s all better,” said Melissa Shields, who oversees school improvement at Alabama’s state department of education. “But you [have to] start with that mindset, that belief that ‘I could be a gamechanger at this school. I believe that kid can learn, and I believe all of us can.’”

That doesn’t mean that every high-achieving school is perfect -- or that there aren’t reasons to ask why some schools seem to do better than others. Out of the 2021 high flyers in the Ed Lab analysis, all but one of the high flyers had a majority white population, and no school with more than 75% of students in poverty made the list.

Research has shown that when schools have an extreme level of student poverty, described as 75% or more, overall achievement is lower than in schools with lower levels of schoolwide poverty.

Experts debate why. A [2006 study of the impact of concentrated student poverty](#) in schools nationwide found high-poverty schools – which the author defined as schools having more than half of students in poverty – are 22 times less likely to be high-performing.

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In Alabama, the vast majority -- 80% -- of schools with an extreme level of poverty are majority-Black.

Penn State professor Erica Frankenberg studies the impact of segregation on student achievement and schools. Schools where the vast majority of students are in poverty, she said, face challenges beyond academics.

“You’re starting to get a pretty substantial number [of students] who may not have adequate nutrition or stable homes,” she said. “They may be transient, moving around. They may not have space and help to do homework. So all of these different ways in

which they may not be getting the same support the middle class or more affluent kids would have.”

Those types of challenges help explain why many schools with extreme poverty didn’t make this list -- and demonstrates the level of statewide and community changes that may be needed, beyond school supports, to help more students succeed.

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### **The research and reality**

For decades, researchers have tried to distill a magic recipe of why some schools succeed more than others.

High flyers are often really good at rolling out strategic initiatives and programs and evaluating them along the way, said Shields, at the state department.

“They roll them out, they know who’s responsible, they have a timeline.”

But experts and researchers also talked about types of intangibles that are harder to measure and track: Beliefs that all children can learn, even children facing the big challenges poverty brings, and that teachers can make a big difference in children’s lives.

They generally reach the same conclusions about what works well in high-performing, high-poverty schools: high expectations for students and teachers, working systems of support for everyone in the school and strong accountability measures.

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Karin Chenoweth has studied high-performing, high-poverty schools across the country since the early 2000s.

“It’s very simple in some ways,” Chenoweth said. “They teach the kids. That’s what they do. It’s not hard. But the details are actually very complex.”

And it’s the details that make success difficult to replicate, she said. High flying schools don’t do everything right, and some things they do won’t work in other schools. “The point is, there’s expertise within these schools that can be lifted up and learned from, not replicated,” Chenoweth said.

“So the work is really hard,” she said. “It requires a deep belief in kids that has been undermined for 60 years not only by racism and classism, but then you had the Coleman report which said well, game over.”

The Coleman Report, published in 1966, said schools must consider a child’s family background when assessing achievement gaps, and that race and income explained most of the differences in achievement between Black students and white students.

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Correlations between family income and test scores still exist today, but subsequent research has shown that schools can have a positive impact on student outcomes -- and that some schools seem to have a bigger impact than others.

Alabama has documented similar initiatives in successful schools before. In 2004, the state department of education conducted a study of high-poverty schools with high levels of math and reading proficiency, what they called "Torchbearer Schools."

After the study was published, Alabama began annually recognizing Torchbearers.

Tony Thacker led the program for many years before retiring in early 2020. Thacker said the bar set by Torchbearers inspired others to reach for new heights, and he regularly received calls from principals and superintendents asking how to become a Torchbearer.

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As accountability measures changed, along with the state's standardized test, the Torchbearer recognition was abandoned. A new state recognition program took its place. The Legislative School Performance Program rewards improvement – without consideration of the percentage of students in poverty – on the state's A through F report card.

Efforts to assess high flying schools, nationally and at the state level, aren't without their critics. But research programs, like Chenoweth's EdTrust, say there is value in trying to measure success, not just failure, at struggling schools.

Like previous Torchbearers, many of the high flyer five schools we visited had experienced a light-bulb moment, where they decided to try new things and provide the support teachers and students needed to grow and learn. For most, that turning point came a decade or more ago.

They all described hard work and long hours, the pushback they sometimes received from teachers and parents and the need to be flexible and evaluate to see if what they were doing was moving the needle for students.

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What was evident in all schools was that student success was paramount and poverty was not allowed to get in the way of that success. We found the same elements Thacker found nearly 20 years ago.

In 2004, Thacker summed it up this way: “True Torchbearer schools showed consistency of effort and purity of purpose.”

“And the needs of the students always outweighed the needs of the adults.”

### **How we found the high flyers**

We looked for schools that met these parameters:

- School wide student poverty level of 48% or higher (756 schools), and
- Spending less than \$2,000 per student in local tax money during the 2018-19 school year (589 schools), and
- Proficiency on spring 2021 math and English language arts tests at 120% of the statewide proficiency level for all grade levels tested in the school and all students:
  - 120% of statewide math proficiency: 26.4%
  - 120% of statewide ELA proficiency: 54.5%

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Here's the full list of high flyers. See the table online [here](#). Analysis by Trisha Powell Crain:

### Alabama's High Flyers 2021

District	School	Student poverty level	ELA proficiency	Math proficiency	2018-19 local per student expenditure
Athens City	Athens Elementary School	69.3%	54.8%	54.8%	\$1,251
Baldwin County	Perdido Elementary School	56.1%	60.4%	30.4%	\$1,983
Brewton City	Brewton Middle School	49.0%	54.6%	32.1%	\$1,534
Brewton City	Brewton Elementary School	52.8%	66.5%	41.1%	\$1,408
Calhoun County	Alexandria Elementary School	55.3%	61.5%	33.5%	\$704
Calhoun County	Ohatchee Elementary School	62.8%	59.1%	29.5%	\$701
Calhoun County	Pleasant Valley Elementary School	52.5%	62.1%	38.6%	\$729
Chilton County	Clanton Elementary School	61.4%	55.1%	36.6%	\$617
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Source: Alabama State Department of Education

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