



## The Birmingham News

### Champs, sort of

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The honorees were deserving, the cause just.

Wednesday, Gov. Bob Riley presented the Pre-K Now Champion Award to the Alabama Office of School Readiness and a "who's who" of children's advocacy groups: VOICES for Alabama's Children, the Alabama Partnership for Children, A-Plus Education Foundation, Alabama Giving and the Alabama School Readiness Alliance.

The award from Pre-K Now, a national group that supports high-quality, voluntary pre-K, came for the Alabama coalition's successful efforts to expand pre-K in Alabama. This year, the Legislature almost doubled the funding for pre-K programs to \$20 million.

Here's the thing, though. And it should infuriate and frustrate.

Alabama has offered voluntary pre-K since 2000, but piddlin' funding has never allowed more than a tiny percentage of eligible children to attend. This year, fewer than 2,400 of the state's 60,000 4-year-olds - about 4 percent - were able to attend. With 1,800 more 4-year-olds in the program in the coming year, according to Riley, that's still less than 7 percent of those eligible.

Here's what makes it worse, though. Alabama tops the list of states in quality standards. Alabama and North Carolina are the only states to meet all 10 quality benchmarks of the National Institute for Early Education Research.

We have the nation's best pre-K, but offer it to just a sliver of eligible children. That has to change, and more quickly than we've seen.

Riley, who has become a strong supporter of pre-K in his second term, had proposed spending \$30 million in the 2009 fiscal year, part of an ambitious, three-year plan to grow pre-K. By the third year of Riley's program, the state would be spending more than \$80 million on pre-K for nearly 21,000 children.

Obviously, that growth plan is off track. It is true the 2009 education budget is a disaster, slashing almost \$370 million from this year's spending because of an economy in the doldrums. But that doesn't give cover to a Legislature that virtually ignored pre-K funding during recent years of double-digit growth in tax collections.

Alabama should have been growing its pre-K program every year since it began. Pre-K is that important.

Studies have shown that children who take part in pre-K are more likely to graduate high school and go to college, and less likely to commit crimes or become teenage parents. They are more likely to get better jobs with higher salaries, and less likely to be on welfare.

For every dollar Alabama invests in pre-K, the potential savings down the road could be enormous. If Alabama would put its money where it's quality is, what a great state this could be.