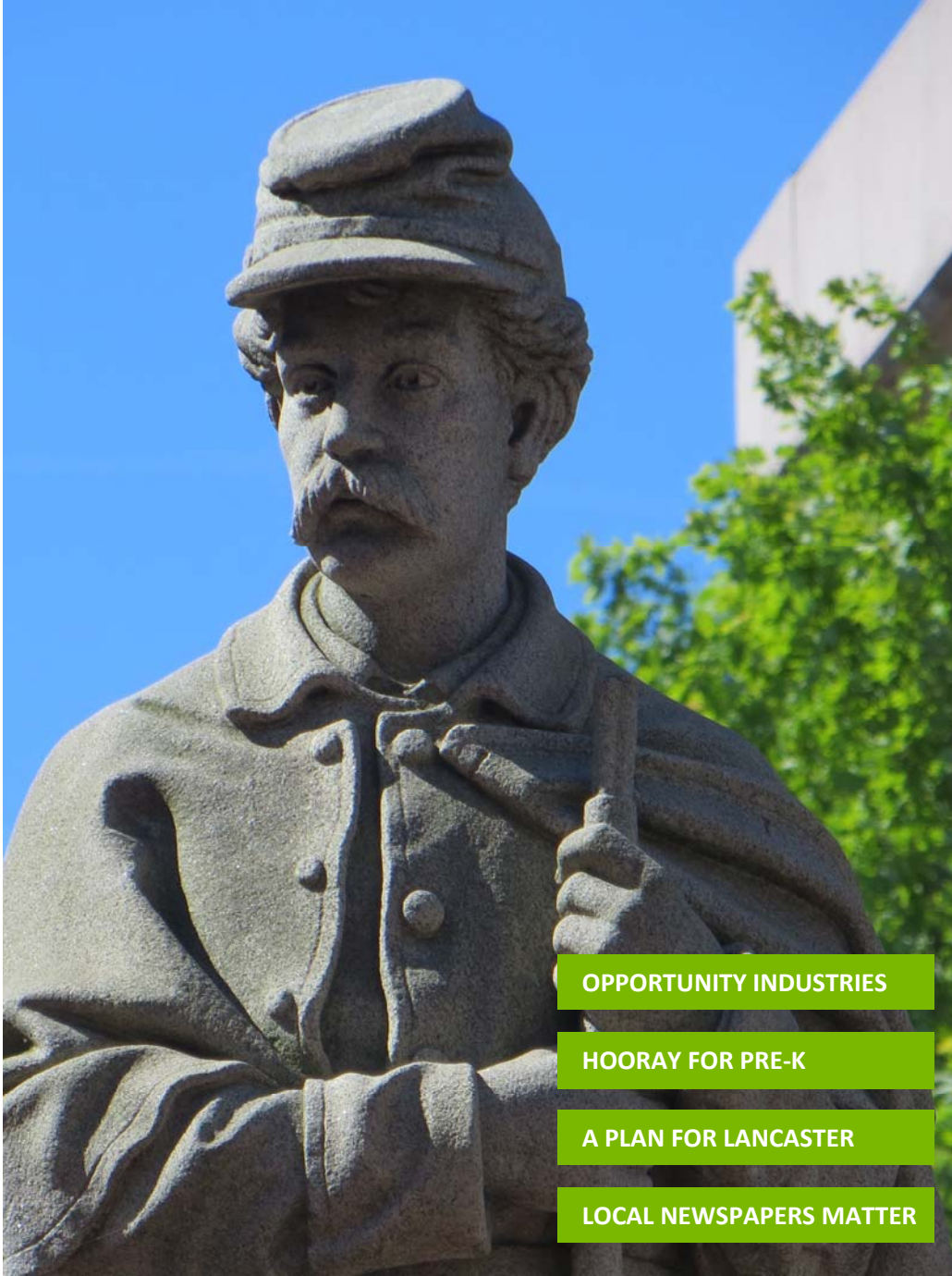


Spring 2019

Hourglass Quarterly



OPPORTUNITY INDUSTRIES

HOORAY FOR PRE-K

A PLAN FOR LANCASTER

LOCAL NEWSPAPERS MATTER

HOORAY FOR PRE-K

Alabama is showing the way

In 2017 Alabama's educational system ranked 42nd in the nation, while it was one of only three states to meet all ten of the nationally recognized benchmarks for preschools. In 2013, just seven percent of Alabama's four-year-olds participated in their preschool program. By 2017, almost one-quarter did.



In the six years that Alabama has collected data on the preschool program, its graduates have consistently outperformed other students. Clearly, investing in early education improves children's outcomes. Many argue that any preschool gains fade by the third grade -- trying to dismantle public preschool programs. Alabama's results disprove such arguments.

Abundant research shows that high-quality preschools—with small class sizes, low student-teacher ratios, robust teacher pay, training, and oversight—can have dramatic, lifelong benefits. The Perry Preschool study, which in 1962 began tracking 123 African-American three-year-olds from low-income families in Ypsilanti, Michigan, found that throughout their lives, the 58 children ran-

domly assigned to a top-notch preschool program have outperformed the kids who did not attend. At age five, more than two-thirds scored 90 or better on an IQ test, compared with 28 percent of the non-preschoolers. Three-quarters of the preschoolers graduated from high school, versus 60 percent of the others. At age 27, more than a quarter owned homes, compared with just five percent of the non-preschoolers. And by 40 nearly half of the non-preschool group had been arrested at some point for violent crimes, while less than one-third of the preschool group had.

A 2016 study tracked 1,700 children, some of whom attended Head Start in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In middle school, the attendees had higher math scores and lower truancy than other students. That year, James Heckman, a Nobel Prize recipient in economics, analyzed preschool data from North Carolina and concluded that states that invest in quality early childhood education stimulate their economies with higher-achieving workers and less money spent on remedial education, health, and criminal justice. He calculated state's annual returns at up to 13 percent.

How did Alabama end up with some of the nation's most effective preschools? Credit goes to its key architect Jeana Ross, a young teacher in a poor, rural part of the state during the 1970s who noticed that her students learned better through play and experiences than from a teacher droning on. In



the late 1990s she helped start a rural preschool, “so I looked at the kindergarten standards and asked myself, what do they need to know?” Over the next 15 years, she worked in school systems across the state, helping to spawn Alabama’s First Class Pre-K program.



Ross, now the state’s secretary of early childhood education, knew preschool was powerful. Kindergarten teachers loved it, because preschool grads arrived ready to learn. But to expand the state program, Ross and others had to convince lawmakers it made fiscal sense. They needed the help of Alabama’s powerful influencers -- its businesspeople clamoring for better workers.

With strong business support, in 2012 the Alabama Legislature boosted preschool spending by \$9 million, a 47 percent bump. During the 2016-17 school year, the state spent \$100 million on the program. And it’s paying off. By third grade, a 2016 analysis showed, preschoolers scored significantly higher than non-preschoolers on math and reading tests. Low-income kids showed double-digit improvements, and black kids saw the biggest gains: up 16 percent in

math and 20 percent in reading compared with black children who didn’t attend.

Kids initiated lessons themselves rather than passively absorbing information. A typical Alabama First Class pre-K classroom uses thoughtful displays and activities to help kids develop social skills and emotional awareness. There is a quiet corner where kids can catch a break if they feel overwhelmed or upset, heading off discipline problems. A play area uses fun activities to spark word lessons, a math corner is full of neat things to count, and free play sessions start with interactive planning.

Success requires excellent teachers, with at least one teacher for every ten kids. While many states don’t require preschool teachers to have a degree and don’t pay them as much as elementary school teachers, Alabama hires only credentialed preschool teachers and gives them elementary school salaries. Teachers reflect the ethnic diversity of their students. They meet regularly with trained coaches and spend at least 20 hours each year on professional development.

When Gov. Kay Ivey learned of the program’s recent successes, she put out a press release: “Now we must work to take the methods of instruction in Pre-K and implement them into kindergarten, first, second and third grade classrooms.” **H**

Edited from a Mother Jones Jan/Feb article by Kiera Butler