



Nearly all of the digital learning activity in Alabama is through the state virtual school, ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide) Distance Learning, though several district programs have been piloted in recent years, including the state's first fully online options. Alabama does not have a charter school law, though schools authorized under the 2013 Alabama Accountability Act (HB84)¹⁰⁷ may waive certain Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) rules, policies, and procedures. In 2008, Alabama became the second state to establish an online learning requirement.

ACCESS is a supplemental program that started in fall 2005; it served 51,809 course enrollments in SY 2013–14, roughly the same number as in SY 2012–13; it is one of the largest state virtual schools in the country. ACCESS offered 20 credit recovery courses in SY 2013–14, and as of SY 2014–15, it also offers 15 credit advancement courses to students who “exhibit proficiency beyond the level required” (as approved by the State Board of Education (SBE) as part of the 2008 First Choice initiative¹⁰⁸). In SY 2013–14, 27,712 students in 132 school districts (out of 136 total) took ACCESS courses either from delivery school sites during set time periods, or off-site;¹⁰⁹ 4% of courses are offered by interactive video conferencing. As of SY 2013–14, private school students were permitted to take ACCESS courses on a fee basis. The ACCESS state appropriation for SY 2014–15 is \$18.5 million, the same as for SY 2013–14; funds for hiring, teacher training, and course development are distributed directly to three support centers, which then receive an additional \$250 per course enrollment.

¹⁰⁷ HB84 (Alabama Accountability Act, 2013); retrieved June 26, 2014; <http://alisondb.legislature.state.al.us/acas/searchableinstruments/2013rs/bills/hb84.htm>

¹⁰⁸ Personal communication with ACCESS Program Administrator, June 20, 2014; and Resolution To Adopt Alabama First Choice Implementation Guide; retrieved June 20, 2014; http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/_bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE%20-%20Resolutions_4.aspx?ID=1476

¹⁰⁹ Alabama State Code, 290-3-1-.02(12); retrieved June 20, 2014; <http://www.alabamaadministrativecode.state.al.us/docs/ed/290-3-1.pdf>

All students in Alabama must complete “one on-line / technology-enhanced course or experience prior to graduation;” this could include an online course or a blended “online experience incorporated into courses used to fulfill requirements for graduation.”¹¹⁰ Exceptions through individualized education plans are allowed.¹¹¹ ALSDE has published guidelines on the essential characteristics of a quality online learning experience, specific course standards to meet the graduation requirement, and guidelines for online teachers.

State policies

The Alabama Accountability Act (2013)—formerly the School Flexibility Bill—permitted parents of students in designated “failing” public schools to receive an income tax credit toward the costs of transferring to a private or higher-performing public school. The act’s Innovation Zone / Flexibility Initiative permits applications from schools seeking to waive ALSDE policies and procedures, enabling formation of assorted nontraditional schools (including virtual ones).¹¹² The act was found unconstitutional in May 2014 by a county circuit judge, who issued an injunction blocking implementation of the law. A stay has been granted on the injunction, permitting the act to operate during the appeal process.

HB165 (2012),¹¹³ the Alabama Ahead Act, encouraged the use of digital textbooks and tablet or mobile computing devices for public 9th grade students and teachers. Beginning with SY 2012–13 in districts that chose to participate, “students in grades 9–12 shall be provided in electronic format ... to the extent practicable and obtainable from the publisher, textbooks ... and other instructional materials.” It also stated “Where feasible, each [year] public 9th grade students and teachers will be provided in lieu of or in addition to hardbound textbooks and other instructional materials ... a pen-enabled: tablet, mobile computer, or other similar wireless electronic device for storing, reading, accessing, exploring, and interacting with digital textbooks.” The legislation allowed issuance of up to \$100 million in bonds to pay for the program,¹¹⁴ and tasked the ALSDE with developing an implementation plan and providing oversight. Additional legislation proposed in both 2013 and 2014 regarding funding and other changes to the initial law did not pass, and as of July 2014 no implementation plan was in place.

Digital programs

Enabled by the Alabama Accountability Act (2013), Alabama’s first virtual high school programs, the Baldwin County Digital Renaissance High School and the Florence City Virtual School, opened as pilots in SY 2013–14. Both schools had caps on student participation, at 30 and 100 respectively. The Digital Renaissance Virtual School received permission to operate as a full-time stand-alone high school in SY 2014–15 with no enrollment cap. Students must appear in person for orientation, proctored examinations, state-mandated assessments, and physical education, and are expected to report to the learning center several times a week. Pike County Virtual High School and Mobile County Public School System Envision Virtual School were approved to open in SY 2014–15; respective enrollment caps are set at 100 and 250 students. Schools may use, but are not limited to, ACCESS course materials.

A separate blended ACCESS franchise model allows teachers in approved traditional high schools to use ACCESS content in their courses; the SDE provides training. Five districts used the ACCESS franchise model in SY 2013–14, and it is an option for all Alabama districts upon request. The model was piloted in summer 2011 by two teachers in the Spain Park and Hoover High Schools (Hoover District), and uptake in districts has been steady, including Dotham, Blunt, Huntsville, Montgomery, and Lauderdale.

¹¹⁰ High School Distance Learning: Online/Technology Enhanced Course or Experience Guidance; retrieved June 20, 2014; <https://docs.alsde.edu/documents/61/OnlineGuidance.pdf>

¹¹¹ Alabama State Code, 290-3-1-.02-(8)(d)4; retrieved June 20, 2014; <http://www.alabamaadministrativecode.state.al.us/docs/ed/290-3-1.pdf>

¹¹² Approved Innovation/ Flexibility Plans; retrieved June 27, 2014; <https://www.alsde.edu/Pages/Innovation-ApprovedPlans.aspx>

¹¹³ HB165 (2012); retrieved June 20, 2014; <http://alisondb.legislature.state.al.us/acas/SearchableInstruments/2012RS/PrintFiles/HB165-enr.pdf>

¹¹⁴ Processes and procedures for the Alabama Public School and College Authority’s issuing and sale of bonds, payments to suppliers, and its interaction with the State Department of Finance and the State Treasurer’s Office are detailed in HB165.