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It’s not official, but Ivey is running for governor

We’ve wondered about Gov. Kay Ivey’s plans. Would she seek a full term of her own in 2018, or be content with cleaning up the mess left by Robert Bentley? We aren’t wondering anymore.

Nothing’s official — her spokesman will only say that she’s “seriously considering” it — and we haven’t seen any “Vote for Kay” bumper stickers or yard signs yet.

But she’s running. We’re as confident in that assessment as we were that the full sun would reappear following Monday’s eclipse.

It’s not just because paperwork was filed last week with the secretary of state’s office to reserve the name “Kay Ivey for Governor Inc.” Check out what some potential rivals are doing.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said he wouldn’t run for governor if Ivey did — and has announced that he’ll seek another term in the Legislature.

Public Service Commissioner President Twinkle Andress Cavanaugh, who had signaled her intention to create a gubernatorial campaign committee, switched gears after the Ivey news broke and instead will seek the GOP nomination for lieutenant governor.

Both are veteran politicians and understand what kind of formidable candidate Ivey will be. She’s only been in office for a few months, but that shouldn’t lessen her incumbency advantage.

As the incumbent — and a veteran of the political wars herself — Ivey also should have no problem raising sufficient campaign cash.

Don’t think we’re conceding the race to her, however. Of the declared candidates on the Republican side, Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle is a serious threat. He’s running hard and touting an impressive résumé of economic development in his city.

State Auditor Jim Zeigler also is exploring a gubernatorial run. He’s somewhat of a gadfly and perpetually “on a mission,” but he also has a populist appeal to voters.

There are two potentially strong Democratic contenders, Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox (who’s considering the race) and former Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb (who’s already in). But it will take a significant political shift for that party to be competitive in a statewide race, even with a worthy standard bearer.

Ivey also has two vulnerabilities — her age (she’ll be 73 in October) and her link to the PACT college tuition program debacle. (The latter happened on her watch as state treasurer, although in fairness she had little control over the markets where the program’s money was invested, or colleges’ apparently endless tuition increases.)

Ivey has stressed “steadying Alabama’s ship of state,” something that was needed given the circumstances of her taking office. However, by the start of next year’s legislative session, we believe Alabamians will be looking for more than stability and someone with a broom and a dustpan. They’ll be expecting her to offer a serious, constructive agenda that meets the state’s needs, and guide it through the Legislature.

That’s a different kind of audition than she experienced this year. The voters will determine whether she passes it.

A version of this editorial first appeared in The Gadsden Times.
Sentance’s future on the line

Board member says vote on state superintendent coming Sept. 14; Ivey undecided

Trisha Powell Crain tcrain@al.com

Alabama State Board of Education mem­ber Jeff Newman, R-Millport, said he antici­pates board members will bring state superintendent Michael Sentance’s con­tract up for a vote at the next board meet­ing, scheduled for Sept. 14.

Newman said board members aren’t happy with Sentance and it’s time for it to come to a vote.

Though speculation has swirled about Sentance’s job security for months, Newman is the first board member to admit publicly the board plans to vote on his con­tract.

SEE SENTANCE, A7
Newman said he told board vice president Stephanie Bell, R-Montgomery, last week the item labeled "Personnel" on the original special-called agenda for the now-canceled meeting wasn't specific enough.

Newman said board members intended to bring up Sentance's contract for a vote, and he recommended to Bell that the board state that clearly on the agenda.

"All board members had to know what we're voting on," Newman said.

"There's a number of (board members) that wanted it, Stephanie (Bell) included," Newman said. "It wasn't just Jeff."

The meeting scheduled for Wednesday morning was canceled late Tuesday afternoon after a challenge from Gov. Kay Ivey's office about the legality of the way the meeting was called.

Newman said he didn't want to do anything illegal, so he was fine with canceling the meeting for Wednesday.

Newman did not attend Wednesday's special-called work session due to a medical procedure, he said.

Ivey said Thursday she has not decided how she will vote on Sentance's fate. Ivey is president of the board but has not regularly attended meetings.

Last month, most board members gave Sentance low evaluation scores. Ivey did not submit an evaluation but said she thought Sentance needed more time to implement reforms. He was hired in August 2016 and began work the following month.

Ivey was asked if it would be premature for the board to fire Sentance.

"Those issues are being considered by the state board and I will consider them as well and we'll deliberate on that and make the decision a bit later," Ivey said. As for whether Sentance still needs more time, Ivey said: "I'll take all that into consideration as I consider how I will vote."
BIRMINGHAM

Hudson saluted for lifetime of innovation

Jim Hudson, co-founder of the HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology, was named EDPA's inaugural Lifetime Achievement in Innovation winner.

HudsonAlpha founder nets first ‘imerge’ award

William Thornton wthornton@al.com

A visibly moved Jim Hudson needed a few minutes to recount his story, moments after winning the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama’s first “imerge” Lifetime Achievement in Innovation Award.

“It’s truly humbling,” said Hudson, the co-founder of the HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology in Huntsville, his voice breaking.

In a short talk, Hudson recognized many people from his life and career. There was the uncle who gave him a chemistry set, setting him out to become “the mad scientist I always wanted to be.” His parents and their values, his professors, a 90-year-old librarian who told him stories on his first job and the more than 200 artists of the Lowe Mill Arts & Entertainment center. And his wife Lynn, “the person who owns my heart.”

SEE HUDSON, A7
He also lauded the state of Alabama for its support of HudsonAlpha, and Huntsville, for the "can do" spirit he grew up in.

The awards were given during the EDPA "immerge" event Thursday at the Alabama Theatre.

The ceremony had an Academy Awards feel, with a runway and band playing during the speeches. Birmingham's Elise Mayfield of MasterChef sang "The Show Must Go On," and Alabama Commerce Secretary Greg Canfield lauded the state's companies — and the night's winners — for finding new ways of doing business.

"Each of you has created an opportunity," he said. "You've offered a view of Alabama that is truly transformational."

Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman spoke before the awards ceremony. What's going to matter more than ever in the future is the motivation to participate in society, the initiative to keep learning and the moral compass to care about others, Friedman said.

"We are entering a world where one person can kill all of us," he told a crowd at the Alabama Theatre. "We collectively have the ability to educate, cure and house probably every person on the planet. We have never been here before. We have probably never been more godlike as a species than we are right now."

Friedman rattled off several stories and theories from his latest book, "Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Acceleration."

Friedman compared the EDPA to "something nature does well" — "a complex, adaptive organism" — meeting at the nexus of the public and private to facilitate innovation.

"What's propelling the country today is healthy communities — like this, like Huntsville — that are creating, not waiting for D.C."

Much of Friedman's hour-long talk dealt with how technology and societal factors are accelerating, as illustrated by the exponential power of computers and connectivity. He compared the year 2007 to the advent of the printing press, with the simultaneous development and introductions of the iPhone, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other advances which put more computer and communicative power into the hands of the individual.

The best metaphor isn't a cloud of information, but a supernova of bursting possibility, he said.

"We're talking about a release of energy into the hands of men, women and machines that have changed the power of one," he said. "The president can tweet directly to a half-billion people around the planet without an editor, without a filter. And the scary thing is that the head of ISIS can do the exact same thing."

Other honorees were:
- Quality Filters of Robertsdale, for Outstanding Achievement in Innovative Manufacturing, CEO George Spottswood. In accepting the award, said Innovation is the key to its business.
- "We have to continue to reinvent ourselves every day, every week, every year," he said. He also thanked the Alabama Technology Network.
- ZeropFM of Cullman, named Corporate Innovator of the Year among small companies with up to 50 employees. CEO Lance Self said the company began five years ago in the Wallace State Community College business incubator. "We are proud to be made in Alabama," he said.
- Diatherix of Huntsville, honored as Corporate Innovator of the Year among large companies with more than 50 employees. The company's pathogen detection technology enables healthcare providers to identify an infection's cause and determine multiple infection sources. CEO Dennis Giraud thanked HudsonAlpha for its support, and said the work it and other companies have done has meant more companies and innovators are coming to Huntsville and Alabama. "It's the quality of life, it's the innovation," he said. "There's excitement not with what we've done, but what we're going to do."

"What's propelling the country today is healthy communities — like this, like Huntsville — that are creating, not waiting for D.C."

Jim Hudson
Suspensions feed achievement gap in state’s schools

Editor’s note: AL.com is digging into the persistent achievement gap between black and white students in Alabama schools. To tackle that issue, education reporter Trisha Powell Crain put out a call for teachers willing to dive deep in frank conversation, and more than 200 educators responded. This is one of several stories that resulted.

Trisha Powell Crain tcrain@al.com

Though out-of-school suspension rates continue to creep downward, students in Alabama continue to be suspended at higher rates than the national average, according to federal data. And black students in Alabama are increasingly more likely to be suspended than their white classmates.

In Alabama, nearly 62,000 students were suspended from school one or more times during the 2013-2014 school year, according to the most recent federal data available. More than 26,000 of those students were suspended from school more than once during that school year.

For black students in Alabama, as in other states, rates of out-of-school suspension are much higher than seen among their peers. While black students make up only 33 percent of enrollment statewide, they accounted for 62 percent of suspensions from school in Alabama.

Black students in Alabama are nearly five times as likely to be suspended multiple times than white students. And that disparity has grown larger over the past few years.

During the 2009-2010 school year, black students were just under four times as likely as white students to be suspended from school multiple times. During the 2011-2012 school year, that likelihood was 4.7, and for 2013-2014 school year, it was 4.8.

Researchers only recently are beginning to explain the impact those disparities have on achievement, but one thing for sure is that students who aren’t at school can’t learn what’s being taught.

“It affects achievement right off the bat. When a student misses instruction, achievement will suffer,” said Greg DeJarnett at the Alabama Department of Education. DeJarnett, a former principal, is an Alabama DOE specialist who works with school districts to implement initiatives aimed at reducing suspensions and expulsions.

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SCHOOLS
FROM AI

MISSING OUT

Black students already are less likely to have access to pre-kindergarten and more likely to live in poverty, both barriers to success in school. In Alabama, they’re more likely to attend school districts that spend less money per pupil, meaning less access to resources that improve educational opportunities.

They’re also more likely to be taught by white teachers who research has shown tend to have lower academic expectations for students of color.

Add to that the likelihood they’ll face harsher discipline than their white peers, and you’ll begin to see the challenges faced by the nearly quarter of a million black students attending Alabama’s public schools.

Kicking kids out of class for bad behavior, referred to as exclusionary discipline, does nothing to improve the behavior, research shows, nor does it make schools safer.

“There is no evidence that frequent reliance on removing misbehaving students improves school safety or student behavior,” researchers Daniel Losen and Russell Skiba found. Losen and Skiba are two of the leading researchers in this area and continue to explore the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline.

Repeatedly removing students from the classroom does have an impact on achievement, Losen said.

Comparing repeated suspensions to chronic absence, Losen said most educators understand that “kids who are chronically absent for any reason are going to have lower achievement. There is well-established research to support that connection.”

Additionally, black students are more likely than their white classmates to be suspended from school for minor offenses, Losen said.

RELYING ON PUNISHMENT

While Alabama’s overall out-of-school suspension rates at 8.4 percent are higher than the national figure of 6 percent, racial disparities in discipline aren’t just an Alabama problem. This is a national problem, said DeJarnett, and one that directly impacts the school-to-prison pipeline.

He cited the American Bar Association report from a task force convened in 2016 to reverse the pipeline. “Of course, the (child’s) inappropriate behavior is a result of whatever is going on beneath the surface,” DeJarnett said.

Pay attention to what is going on beneath the behavior, and if teachers do that, he said, “then suspensions naturally come down.”

“People are over-relying on suspension as the problem solver to inappropriate behavior,” said DeJarnett. “But the problem is, once they are suspended, they come back to school with the same issues they had to begin with.”

Although intuitively it makes sense, researchers Edward Morris at the University of Kentucky and Brea Perry at Indiana University Bloomington recently made the connection, finding that “school suspensions account for approximately one-fifth of black-white differences in school performance. The findings suggest that exclusionary school punishment hinders academic growth and contributes to racial disparities in achievement.”

Additionally, Morris and Perry noted, “We find that the effects of suspension are long lasting, setting into motion a trajectory of poor performance that continues in subsequent years, even if a student is not suspended again.”

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PARENTING AND BEHAVIOR

While it's easy to point fingers at students who misbehave and say their parents should teach them how to behave, DeJarnett said it isn't that simple.

Teachers have a responsibility to teach students not only content, but also what their behavioral expectations are, he said. Assuming that students already know what is expected of them behaviorally isn't good practice, he said.

Losen agrees that schools have a responsibility to teach appropriate behavior and pointed out that some parents do struggle to teach good behaviors, particularly when a student has a behavioral issue or disability.

"There's nothing wrong with saying we need more parent education," Losen said. "Just like there are some kids whose parents who are illiterate, there are some kids who come from homes where parents don't really know how to improve behavior."

Additionally, if a student has a disability impacting behavior, Losen said, federal education law requires schools to find ways to address the behavior without kicking students out.

Setting behavioral expectations at school helps all students, DeJarnett said. "Research is clear that when a child misbehaves in the classroom, it can decrease the entire classroom's achievement level," DeJarnett said. "And then when you have a small group of students within a school that consistently disrupt, they can bring the achievement level down for the whole school."

But too many discipline referrals can also lead to other missed educational opportunities. Students who have too many discipline referrals sometimes aren't given opportunities for enrichment classes, field trips, and other academic pursuits.

For example, most all of Alabama's magnet schools, originally designed to attract white and black students to attend schools together in the 1970s, require students to have a fairly clean disciplinary record before being accepted.

LONG-TERM COSTS

There is a cost to kicking students out of class, and researchers have recently put a dollar figure on it.

Suspensions not only cost instructional time, but can lead students down a path toward dropping out of high school, costing even more down the road.

Researchers at UCLA's Civil Rights Project estimated that suspending students in high school cost California, with an 18 percent suspension rate for 10th-graders, $1.9 billion in associated fiscal (taxpayer revenues and government costs) impacts with a social (the cost to the larger society) impact of $6.2 billion.

Florida, with a suspension rate of 27 percent for ninth-graders, suffered a fiscal impact of $518 million and a social impact of $1.6 billion, estimates showed.

Those economic impacts can be localized, Losen said, simply by looking at the costs to communities when students drop out of high school. "You're actually taking a bad economic situation and making it worse," he said, "when you're kicking kids out right and left for minor offenses."

Wealthy school districts know this, Losen said.

"You don't see white wealthy districts hiring principals who say 'We have to kick out the bad kids so the good kids can learn,'" he said. "In wealthier communities, all children have value, even the ones that are not well-behaved. And the idea that there are no badly behaving wealthy children—most people will admit that's probably not true."
ALABAMA’S PLAN
DeJarnett said the Alabama DOE is putting a lot of time and energy into spreading the word about an approach, called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, or PBIS.

PBIS is designed to help teachers interact with students and get to the root cause of unwanted behaviors. “PBIS is a way of thinking,” he said, and therefore requires training along with feedback on implementation to ensure it is being implemented to fidelity.

He is clearly a fan of PBIS and is currently charged with training school personnel across the state. Many districts had some exposure to PBIS during an initial push, back in the early 2000s, but are not necessarily implementing it appropriately, DeJarnett said.

“The misunderstanding that went forward about PBIS was that PBIS was more about reward and praise, OK?” he said. Rewards are only one part of PBIS, though. “The real work of PBIS is being proactive, teaching expected outcomes for behavior, being consistent, and being positive.

“When a child exhibits inappropriate behavior, yes, we are to address that behavior. Do it firmly but fairly,” and then, he said, “do the work to find out what’s going on.”

Teachers have gotten used to regularly reviewing achievement data, but few tell him they regularly review discipline data, he said. “If you’re not reviewing your discipline data as faithfully as you are your academic data, the two are correlated” and you’re missing part of the picture, he said.

Dr. Sara McDaniel heads the University of Alabama’s PBIS technical assistance center, and works in partnership with the state department and also with multiple school districts across Alabama, helping schools implement PBIS.

She agrees with DeJarnett that the full benefit of PBIS implementation takes time, up to three to five years to see schoolwide effects, but believes it’s worth it. “Because it works,” she said.

PBIS is a research-based practice, backed up by 17 years of evidence, showing success in student outcomes, McDaniel said.

The framework of PBIS can be difficult for teachers to understand, McDaniel said, because they are used to being given a program with a box of information and then implementing what the instructions tell them to do.

PBIS can’t be done like that, she said. “Every school is different, the climates are different, the student needs are different, the resources are different. And behavior just doesn’t work that way.”

McDaniel has been working with Huntsville City schools in recent years to implement PBIS In its schools, she said. Huntsville is operating under a decades-old federal desegregation order, and is actively seeking to get out from under that order.

In an effort to address the U.S. Department of Justice’s concerns about student discipline, Huntsville City Schools changed its code of conduct, now called Behavioral Learning Guides, Superintendent Dr. Matt Akin wrote in an email to AL.com.

Teachers and principals are also learning new behavior practices like PBIS and restorative practices. Akin wrote, “The goals are simple: focus on teaching students expected behaviors, positively reinforce them when they perform those behaviors, and limit exclusionary discipline (like out of school suspension and expulsion) to the most severe misbehavior.”

Akin said it is a work in progress, and “hopefully, student behavior will continuously improve with the District’s new supports.”

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REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE

Good data is tough to find in Alabama. AL.com is in ongoing discussions with the state department of education to gain access to better information about the reasons for suspensions.

Without that state-level data, AL.com reviewed district-level Student Incident Reports, called SIR reports, found on a few school districts' websites. None of the state discipline data is broken down by race.

The only way to see racial breakdowns is to either view the federal Office for Civil Rights data, the latest of which is from the 2013-2014 school year, or to find it in those few school districts which are required to file reports with the federal court due to obligations under decades-old desegregation orders.

Huntsville is one of those districts.

Two years of reports, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, show suspension rates are changing in Huntsville’s schools. The overall rate of out-of-school suspension is down from 13.3 percent to 10.9 percent for black students, and from 2.4 percent to 1.7 percent for white students.

Some schools, like Lee High in north Huntsville, lowered suspension rates from 20.8 percent to 13 percent for black students and 9.8 percent to 5.3 percent for white students, while rates rose in other schools. Mostly white Grissom High School in south Huntsville saw suspension rates increase for black students, from 13.4 percent to 17.8 percent, but stay the same for white students, at 2 percent.

Akin cautioned it’s hard to see the impact of changes beginning to be made using only two years of data.

The federal data is the most complete data set, so that’s what AL.com used to calculate the rates and data for the entire state. School district officials report this data directly to the federal government.

FEDERAL GOALS

Meanwhile, federal law is also aimed at reducing out-of-school suspensions. The federal law governing education, called the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires states to spell out their plans for reducing the number of times students are punished by being yanked from the classroom.

Alabama’s draft ESSA plan, currently posted for public comment, is short on details, but does say state officials plan to “design and implement alternatives to in-school and out-of-school suspensions” by creating restorative justice practices and training school districts on how to use PBS.

PBS was a part of Alabama’s soon-to-be-replaced Plan 2020, a strategic plan created under former Alabama Superintendent Tommy Bice, but it’s unclear how many school districts attempted to implement it.

This fall, the state department of education will convene a statewide advisory committee to address reducing suspensions and expulsions within the state, DeJarnett said.

That statewide committee will include education organizations like the Alabama Education Association and the Alabama Association of School Boards, state agencies including the Departments of Public Health and Mental Health, along with the Alabama PTA, the Alabama High School Athletic Association, the Alabama School Nurses Association, the Alabama family court division, the juvenile probation office, law enforcement, and others. The committee will put together a comprehensive plan developing a model code of conduct from a proactive, rather than punitive standpoint, he said.

“When we’re talking about reducing school suspensions, everybody has to be on deck because everybody touches the child,” Regional trainings covering the state, DeJarnett said, will begin in October.

“If we want to see academic achievement improve,” he said, “then we have to address those social emotional issues that children are faced with and the high rates of suspensions and expulsions.”

Losen agrees.

“Oftentimes it is about the teachers needing to change and leaders needing to change their whole attitude about what the role of the school is. These are not private schools. We all benefit when the public schools take all kids in, all kids have to be there, and we improve every aspect of what’s going on with those students that they can be successful in our communities,” said Losen. “It makes for much safer communities, and it’s also more efficient.

“We’re paying public dollars for kids to be in school, those schools shouldn’t be kicking kids out in the community right and left.”

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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Classroom teachers have a front-row seat in the efforts to educate Alabama’s children, so AL.com decided to ask them what the state could do to close the achievement gap. According to data studied by AL.com, the percentage of black students reaching proficiency on standardized tests in public schools is between 20 and 30 percentage points below the levels of white students. Even in schools where poverty presents challenges for all students, white students generally outscore their black peers by 15 percentage points or more.

Central to this project is a private Facebook group where more than 60 teachers have engaged in conversations. Spaceship Media, a California-based nonprofit that uses journalism to bring people together, helped convene the group.

Teachers discussed everything from institutional racism to teacher bias and talked of challenges including cultural barriers, trust issues and the lack of African-American teachers.

Spaceship’s Jeremy Hay noted the diversity of the teachers in conversation, in both philosophy and instructional strategies and practices. “They aren’t a cookie cutter bunch,” he said.

“Our initially being guarded, teachers spoke openly and honestly about not knowing all of the answers,” said AL.com’s Shauna Stuart, who worked with the group.

Huntsville City Schools Superintendent candidate Matthew Akin meets with a group of leaders from the community, parent volunteers, education nonprofits and Board of Education members at the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce on Monday.

Greg DeJarnett, Alabama Department of Education: “People are over-relying on suspension as the problem solver to inappropriate behavior. But the problem is, once they are suspended, they come back to school with the same issues they had to begin with.”

Daniel Losen, Center for Civil Rights Remedies: “You don’t see white wealthy districts hiring principals who say, ‘We have to kick out the bad kids so the good kids can learn. In wealthier communities, all children have value … And the idea that there are no badly behaving wealthy children — most people will admit that’s probably not true.”
SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS IN ALABAMA

Here's a closer look at school suspensions:

- Three school districts suspended nearly one in three black students: Bibb County (31.7 percent), Lowndes County (31.3 percent) and Pike County (30.6 percent). Another 21 districts suspended between 20 and 30 percent of all black students. Fifty-four school districts suspended between 10 and 20 percent of their black students.*

- The largest disparity for black students was in Homewood City schools, where black students accounted for 24 percent of the student population, but 78 percent of the out-of-school suspensions, a difference of 54 percentage points. Eight more districts had differences between 30 and 45 percentage points.

- The largest disparity between the proportion of white students being suspended and white students in the population was in Hale County, where white students comprise 87 percent of the population, but 100 percent of suspensions were given to white students.

- 61,076 students statewide suspended from school one or more times

- 26,226 students statewide suspended more than once from school

- 18,488 black students suspended from school one or more times

- 6,587 white students suspended from school one or more times

- Black students accounted for 33% of enrollment, but 62% of out-of-school suspensions

- White students accounted for 57% of enrollment, but 32% of out-of-school suspensions

- Statewide out-of-school suspension rates are 15.7 percent for black students, 4.7 percent for white students, 8.4 percent for students of two or more races, and 3.8 percent for Hispanic students.

- At the district level, suspension rates for black students ranged from 75 percent in Chickasaw City schools to 0.4 percent in Decatur City.

Source: All data is from the 2013–2014 school year, U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data. Data is self-reported by local school districts directly to feds.

“People are over-relying on suspension as the problem-solver to inappropriate behavior, but the problem is, once they are suspended, they come back to school with the same issues they had to begin with.”

Greg DeJarnett, Alabama Department of Education. DeJarnett, a former principal, is an Alabama DOE specialist who works with school districts to implement initiatives aimed at reducing suspensions and expulsions.
MONTGOMERY

Judge erases increases to state education employees’ health insurance

Rules board met illegally, orders refunds to educators; PEEHIP vows to appeal

Mike Cason  mcason@ad.com

A Montgomery County judge has ruled the health insurance board for Alabama education employees violated the open meetings act when it raised premiums last year.

Circuit Judge Johnny Hardwick invalidated the increases approved by the board of the Public Education Employees’ Health Insurance Plan, which took effect Oct. 1. Hardwick ordered the money from the increases refunded to PEEHIP members. It had been held in an escrow account. Hardwick issued his ruling Sunday.

Former AEA President Sheila Hocutt Remington had filed a lawsuit challenging the premium increases last year.

Premiums rose $80 a month for employees whose plans covered their spouses and dependents, the lawsuit says. "This is a great day for AEA and for all public education employees," AEA President Sherry Tucker said. "I'd like to thank the AEA Legal Department and our entire team for their hard work and for this well-deserved victory."

PEEHIP will appeal, the agency said in a statement. "PEEHIP respectfully disagrees with the judge's decision in this case. PEEHIP will appeal the decision to the Alabama Supreme Court and move to stay the court's order."

The PEEHIP board approved the premium increases at a meeting April 27, 2016. Hardwick found the PEEHIP board had given public notice of a 1 p.m. meeting that day. But he found the board met illegally at 9:30 a.m. the same day, without public notice, to hear a presentation from PEEHIP staff about the need for the increases.

"We are thankful that Judge Hardwick saw this situation for what it was — a violation of the Open Meetings Act to ram through a premium increase without public discussion or debate," Remington said.
Insights into Litigation

Interview: Jay Ezelle

Jay Ezelle | Partner, Starnes Davis Florie

Jay represents companies, professionals, and universities in high profile matters, including commercial disputes, intellectual property infringement, NCAA compliance investigations, and other complex litigation. His experience ranges from the massive securities litigation in HealthSouth, Just for Feet, Enron, and Worldcom to representing The University of Alabama and its President in litigation stemming from the termination of former head football coach Mike Price. Jay received B.S. in Biochemistry from Rhodes College and his law degree from The University of Alabama School of Law, where he graduated summa cum laude.

Q: What are some best practices for companies when it comes to avoiding litigation?

Jay Ezelle (Partner, Starnes Davis Florie): That is a great question. Unfortunately, there is not a single set of best practices that will apply to every situation as it will depend on the nature of the business, the company’s risk tolerance, and the impact of that particular practice on the bottom line. One practice that many companies fail to use is to seek the input of a litigator before a dispute arises. Far too often, companies do not think to bring in a lawyer experienced in the courtroom until an issue hits a boiling point and, by that time, it is much more difficult to avoid a lawsuit. As trial lawyers, we view the world through the lens of how a judge or jury will react to a particular action, and readily factor in the likelihood of a claim, the value range of the claim, and the cost to defend against the claim. Most normal people – by that I mean non-lawyers and lawyers who practice outside of the courtroom – don’t go through life thinking about how each and every action will be perceived in a trial. Thus, a quick consult with a litigator may cause a company to rethink a certain course of action or tweak how they approach an issue to reduce the risk of litigation. In fact, many of our clients rely on us just as much for advice on litigation avoidance as they do to represent them in a lawsuit.

Q: How would you characterize the civil litigation climate in Alabama in 2017?

Ezelle: Alabama judges and juries do their absolute best to be fair. They typically resolve cases based on who they believe is telling the truth. As evidence of this, jury verdicts in civil cases have hovered around a 50-50 split between plaintiffs and defendants over the last decade. In the last year, the percentages increased slightly in favor of plaintiffs, but not by a statistically significant amount. That being said, we have seen a substantial uptick in bet-the-company type claims and seven-figure verdicts. That has resulted in a 2.5 percent increase in the chance of a million dollar verdict. Historically, 5.5 percent of verdicts exceeded a million dollars, but 8 percent of the verdicts last year exceeded that amount. Moreover, several recent verdicts have been extremely large – such as a $20 million verdict in a medical malpractice case, a $16.8 million verdict in a trucking case, and a $16 million verdict in a medical malpractice case – and have caused a substantial increase in the average verdict amounts in the last year.

Q: What are some questions businesses should ask when choosing a litigation firm?

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Ezelle: First, I would ask who will be working on my case. Lawyers are not fungible and the results in a case can vary greatly based on how the lawyer handles the case. Just because a firm has a great reputation does not mean that every lawyer in that firm is the best choice to handle a particular case. Thus, a client needs to know at the outset who will actually be doing the work. Second, I would want to know what experience the proposed team has before this particular judge. Trial lawyers act much like tour guides in a foreign and dangerous country. If the lawyers do not personally know the judge, their clerks and assistants – as well as the practices and expectations in that particular courtroom – then it is like being in a foreign country with a guide who does not have a roadmap and does not speak the local language.

Q: Are there any particular hot areas for litigation that businesses should be aware of and prepare for?

Ezelle: Beyond the typical employment and personal injury claims, we have seen an increase in cyber-security, white-collar criminal, and commercial litigation cases. The cyber-security claims are merely a byproduct of the escalating frequency and scale of cyber-attacks. As for white-collar cases, the most complex regulatory thicket in history combined with government investigators making enforcement a priority have created an extremely dangerous environment for any company in a regulated field. We have also seen a rise in commercial litigation between businesses, including breach of contracts, failure to honor non-compete agreements, and misrepresentation of financial information.

Q: What are some questions businesses should be regularly asking their attorneys to avoid litigation?

Ezelle: A company should consult with a litigator periodically to develop its own best practices and policies that are tailored to its specific needs and environment. The lawyer should be asked whether the company policies governing employment issues, workplace behavior, accounting, document retention, the use of technology and equipment, agreements with third parties, and myriad other day-to-day operations are consistent with the best practices to avoid litigation. Another important tool for avoiding litigation is an after-action review of any claim. This process allows a client to determine the specific causes of the claim, and provides evidenced-based solutions for avoiding being in that situation again.

Q: How has technology changed the practice of litigation?

Ezelle: First, the speed of litigation has increased dramatically. When I started practicing, the usual course was for one side in the litigation to send a letter about an issue. The other side would then schedule a meeting with their client, discuss the response, and then draft a responsive letter. Typically, a meeting of the lawyers would follow and, if the issue could not be resolved, a motion would be filed with the court. That process took weeks. Now, all of that back and forth can be handled by e-mail, whether people are in the office or not. What used to take weeks can now be handled remotely via smart phones and the entire process may take just hours. Second, the amount of information at issue in litigation has increased exponentially. In the old days, a client would simply pull their file and give it to their lawyer. Now, cases must be litigated using the mountains of electronic evidence we all generate every day. But, I would caution that although the speed of litigation and the amount of information has increased dramatically because of technology, there is no app for sound legal advice.

Q: What are some high-risk areas for litigation that companies often don’t consider?
Ezelle: We continue to see a large number of trade secret claims that were not anticipated by the targets because they do not see their companies as intellectual property-based. Yet, companies across all sectors may have trade secrets such as customer lists. The trade secret cases not only emanate from the traditional corporate espionage framework, but now arise more frequently from lateral hires who, before leaving their previous employer, are thought to have downloaded company files. Many companies do not have policies and procedures governing employee access to trade secrets or due diligence measures to avoid trade secret transfers from new employees.

Q: How does experience in litigation translate to helping your client outside the courtroom?

Ezelle: It can help in two ways: First, as we discussed earlier, I think consulting a litigator about litigation avoidance at the beginning of the process is the most effective and least expensive way to reduce the impact of litigation. Second, I think trial experience is one of the single biggest factors in helping clients achieve a settlement at a reasonable value. This is somewhat counter-intuitive as many companies think they do not need real trial lawyers to handle a claim when they have no intention of allowing the dispute to ever make it to a jury. Yet, this typically results in a vastly elevated settlement value as the lawyers on the other side have the advantage of knowing their adversary is not willing to try the case. If you are playing poker, you would never tell the table that you always fold. If the other side thinks that a litigant is willing to actually try the case because they have hired real trial lawyers, then they must calculate the risk of trial into their valuation of the claim, which results in a much lower settlement value.

Q: If my company expects it will soon be the subject of litigation, what are the immediate steps it should take?

Ezelle: First, stop talking about the claim internally and retain a lawyer. Far too often, actions taken after a company becomes aware of a claim, but before it retains a lawyer, can become the focus of the case and make the potential exposure much worse. Internal communications about the potential claim outside the presence of a lawyer are not privileged and can be the subject of discovery in the lawsuit. Second, take steps to preserve the relevant evidence, including electronically stored information. If a company does not take the necessary steps to preserve the evidence once it becomes aware of a potential claim, then it could lose favorable evidence or face potential sanctions for destroying evidence, even if done innocently. Finally, in cases of substantial exposure, I think the company should have the lawyer conduct an early case assessment, which consists of interviewing the key witnesses, reviewing the key documents, and providing a written analysis of the potential exposure and particular areas of concern. Although it requires a greater up-front expenditure, this process almost always reduces the total litigation expenses, as it allows the client to evaluate the risk fully at the outset of the case, rather than being surprised by a development later in the case. The clarity provided by an early case assessment also enables the company to have a strategic advantage in the litigation by having a comprehensive understanding of the issues from the outset of the case.

Q: How can employers craft policies that help reduce the likelihood of litigation stemming from the actions of employees?

Ezelle: When implementing policies governing employees, it is critical that those policies be tailored to that specific company. The policies should incorporate the best practices for that particular industry and the environment in which the company operates. Implementation of
cookie-cutter policies can create confusion for the employees and ultimately cause more harm than good. Likewise, the policies should be readily attainable, not aspirational. That is, they should address litigation risks through standards that can be easily communicated to and implemented by the employees. This should typically be done through employee training, rather than just crafting policies and putting them on a shelf. In many cases, it can be far worse for a company to adopt a policy if it will just be ignored by its employees. We have been involved in a number of cases where companies have self-inflicted exposure by adopting policies that did not make sense for their distinct operation and were ignored by their employees. Yet, by adopting those policies, the companies set the legal standards by which they were ultimately judged.

**Q: What does today's litigator need to know that the previous generation did not?**

**Ezelle:** The profession has not changed. Our job is still to advocate zealously our client’s interests. To do that, we must have a thorough understanding of the facts and implement the best strategy for explaining those facts in the most persuasive way allowed within the confines of the law. What has changed is the medium through which we communicate. This requires a lifelong commitment to learning, as businesses continue to become more complicated, and a willingness to evolve with the technology, as it continues to change the way we communicate with each other. It also requires a greater level of responsiveness than past generations, as the modern economy is no longer centered on a 9-to-5 workday and clients expect and deserve access to their lawyers whenever an issue arises.
News seeks Rondini records

Attorney hired to obtain Sheriff’s Office files

By Stephanie Taylor
Staff Writer

After an open records request was denied by the Tuscaloosa Sheriff’s Office, The Tuscaloosa News has hired an attorney in an effort to obtain records related to the Megan Rondini case.

Dennis Bailey, attorney for the Alabama Press Association, will file motions to intervene in the ongoing court case and request investigative records, including recorded interviews and other evidence.

Rondini, a former University of Alabama student, hanged herself in February 2016, almost eight months after she alleged to police that T.J. Bunn Jr. raped her at his home in Cottondale. Investigators and prosecutors ultimately decided they didn’t have enough evidence to charge Bunn.

Bunn, then 34, has denied the rape allegation through his attorney and has told investigators that he and Rondini, who was 20, had consensual sex.

Rondini’s family believes

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the Bunn family’s connections to the University of Alabama and Tuscaloosa community influenced the decision not to prosecute as well as the minimal support they say she was offered, leading to her suicide. Rondini had left Alabama and enrolled at Southern Methodist University in her home state of Texas. Her parents have filed a wrongful death lawsuit in federal court against Bunn, the Tuscaloosa County sheriff, two investigators, the University of Alabama and UA President Stuart Bell.

The Tuscaloosa News requested documents and other investigative materials related to the case in a records request to Sheriff Ron Abernathy dated June 26. Abernathy sent a letter on Aug. 10 denying the release of those records.

"I have remained officially silent regarding your above-captioned public records request until now for two reasons," Abernathy wrote. "Most importantly, I am committed to encouraging all victims of sexual assaults, when they occur, to come forward to law enforcement with evidence received in confidence and so held, pursuant to the Alabama Grand Jury Secrecy act, until such time as formal charges are made public."

Abernathy also said that out of “respect for a grieving family” he has refrained from releasing “sensitive evidence” in the case.

Specifically, The News sought information collected as part of the “rape kit,” all photos taken as part of the investigation, audio and video recordings, written or recorded statements and communications taken from mobile phones.

The Tuscaloosa News has obtained and reviewed portions of the investigative file, including text messages and videos, but it is seeking the records directly from the court to ensure they are presented in their entirety, with no omissions or alterations.

"Although we have seen some of the records, obtaining them through a court order puts the onus on the custodians of the records to provide a complete accounting," Tuscaloosa News Executive Editor Michael James said.

Tuscaloosa County Circuit Court Judge Brad Almond already has allowed the records to be released -- to the Rondini family on April 5 and to the Bunn family in July. Selected portions of the records have since been published on the internet.

"A lot of information about this matter has appeared online and on social media, much of it unsubstantiated and unsourced," James said. "We believe that's irresponsible. Considering the gravity of the accusations and insinuations that have arisen with regard to institutions the public should have faith and confidence in, we believe it would be in the public interest for the court to order the release of the records."

The records request by The News referenced a BuzzFeed News article published online on June 22 that brought attention to the case and raised questions about whether law enforcement, the court system, medical professionals and university staff mishandled it.

"If this investigation was handled improperly, as the (BuzzFeed) report suggests, it is in the public interest to closely scrutinize the practices and policies of these institutions that provide important and essential services here. If the investigation was indeed handled properly, those same institutions have the right to an unblemished reputation," a reporter for The Tuscaloosa News wrote in the request to Abernathy.
UA begins fall semester Wednesday

By Ken Roberts
City Editor

Wednesday marks the beginning of fall semester at the University of Alabama. Here’s a quick quiz, with answers, as students head back to class:

• How many students are enrolled? UA won’t have a precise number until later in the semester, but last year’s enrollment was 37,665 undergraduate, professional, and graduate students. Odds are that this year’s number will exceed the 2016 number.

• Where are they from? Last year, 43 percent of UA students came from Alabama, 53 percent came from elsewhere in the United States and 4 percent were international students representing 77 countries. The gender breakdown was 56 percent women and 44 percent men.

• When is homecoming? The annual homecoming game is set for Oct. 14 against Arkansas at Bryant-Denny Stadium. Kickoff time will be announced later, along with details about the homecoming parade and bonfire on the Quad.

• When are holidays and breaks scheduled? UA will be closed Sept. 4 for Labor Day; Oct. 26–27 will be the mid-semester study break; Nov. 22 begins Thanksgiving holiday.

• When are final exams? Dec. 11–15.

• When is winter commencement? Dec. 16 at Coleman Coliseum.
Heavy hitters launch new plan to transform Birmingham's economy

By: Ty West

*Birmingham's heavy hitters in the innovation world team on a new venture*

It didn’t take a visit from one of the world’s foremost experts on metropolitan economies to recognize Birmingham was home to a combination of unique innovation assets.

But what the 2015 visit from the Brookings Institution’s Bruce Katz did accomplish was to convince some of the most influential executives in Birmingham that the Magic City had a once-in-a-lifetime confluence of factors that could transform its economy.

It just had to seize the opportunity.

Over the last two years, some of the heaviest hitters in Birmingham’s innovation and business worlds have been working behind the scenes to develop a comprehensive initiative to capitalize on the metro area’s innovation assets in a long-term bid to boost job creation, transform the local economy and broaden access to economic prosperity.

The result is Innovate Birmingham – a sweeping new initiative that many believe represents the best chance yet for securing Birmingham’s long-term economic fortunes and reversing its longtime trend of modest job growth.

Many are already familiar with the Innovate Birmingham name from a new workforce program that is training 925 local individuals for high-demand jobs. But that program, which is a transformational initiative in its own right, is actually just the tip of the iceberg for Innovate Birmingham.

If the organizers have their way, it’s an initiative that will touch nearly every facet of Birmingham’s business community – helping the region address longtime challenges like education, workforce development and poverty in the inner city.

With the annual Innovation Week Birmingham kicking off Aug. 18, the Birmingham Business Journal is taking a deep dive into the new organization and what the launch of Innovate Birmingham could mean for the economy, the community and your business.

*How the plan came together*

Conversations and collaboration among key players in Birmingham’s innovation economy have been occurring for years.

But those conversations crystallized into a formal effort starting in October 2015, when Katz visited Birmingham.

Katz, author of “The Metropolitan Revolution,” is a preeminent expert on metro area economies and has consulted with top metros around the globe. Even with his vast experience with some of the largest and most successful metro areas in the world, Katz was blown away by the
concentration of innovation-related assets in the Magic City – from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and Southern Research to Innovation Depot.

Devon Laney, CEO of Innovation Depot, said Katz made it clear that, while many communities have one of those assets, few – if any – have all of them in such a close proximity. In Katz’s mind, that fact, coupled with the revitalization of Birmingham’s urban core, created a unique and time-sensitive opportunity.

For a variety of reasons, Laney and others say the timing of Katz’s visit was fortuitous.

A number of factors – from downtown’s revitalization and a burgeoning technology scene to an increased emphasis on innovation in life sciences and other fields – had merged to create the right environment for a new transformative plan.

“We’ve really been building toward this for the last several years,” Laney said. “There’s just so much activity, we needed someone or some initiative like Innovate Birmingham to make sure we’re all working in alignment together toward a shared strategic vision. That’s why the timing is right.”

What Katz’s visit and subsequent discussions among high-level leaders helped cement was the idea that what Birmingham really needed was more alignment between its various innovation resources.

“Bruce Katz’s visit was a catalytic event,” Southern Research CEO Art Tipton said. “He crystallized the thinking and probably gave everyone the input that people were thinking correctly and moving in the right direction.”

With key leaders calling the idea a generational opportunity for Birmingham, a number of influential players in Birmingham’s business world joined forces to make it a reality.

Original funding partners for the project included the Birmingham Business Alliance, the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, UAB, Regions Bank, Alabama Power Co. and BBVA Compass. Numerous other entities, from REV Birmingham to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, also have been involved.

Laney said the alignment he has experienced with the Innovate Birmingham initiative is unlike anything he has seen in his time in Birmingham.

“For the first time in my time here, I really feel like there is alignment throughout the community, really around true technology-based economic development, with UAB, BBA, Innovation Depot, Southern Research,” Laney said. “All of these organizations are focused on, ‘What do we need to do intentionally, proactively and strategically to make sure we are maximizing the potential we have in this area and pushing ourselves to become a hub in the Southeast for technology-based economic development?’”

UAB President Ray Watts, who stayed on for a second year as chairman of the Birmingham Business Alliance in large part to spearhead the launch of Innovate Birmingham, said the initiative marks a logical next step for Birmingham and its economy.
“Everybody understands the importance of innovation to our economic future,” Watts said. “It’s about creating opportunity for our young people and about creating a new economy in Birmingham that is 21st century based.”

And UAB has played a critical role in several aspects of the young initiative.

In addition to devoting significant resources and time to the launch of Innovate Birmingham, UAB spearheaded efforts to land a key $6 million workforce grant, which represented an early win for the initiative.

The school is also investing in physical resources, such as connecting its 100-gigabit internet connection to Innovation Depot, to boost Birmingham’s bid to attract and retain technology companies.

UAB is also launching a commercialization accelerator that will pave the way for more job-creating ventures that will emanate from research happening at the university.

“It became clear with so much innovation going on at UAB, plus the infrastructure we have around the knowledge-based economy and technology, it put us in the position that we felt like if this is going to happen, UAB is going to have to be a part of it,” Watts said.

Laney said the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham put up funding that allowed the metro area to tap into the expertise of Perkins + Will, a Chicago-based firm with expertise in strategic planning, innovation and long-term community endeavors.

After a series of working groups focusing on everything from access to capital and community engagement to workforce development and entrepreneurship, a concrete picture of what eventually became Innovate Birmingham took shape.

As those discussions took shape, there was a recognition that volunteer leadership, which has been a key component of some previous strategic plans, wasn’t the best option.

“We needed someone who wakes up everyday and thinks about the big picture and how all of the components align,” Laney said.

The initiative needed a full-time leader.

They found one in Bob Crutchfield, who spent the last nine years at Harbert Management Corp. In addition to deep connections and experience in the venture capital world, he has significant senior executive experience, particularly with health care and life sciences companies.

Crutchfield officially joined Innovate Birmingham on May 1 and began building out a team that now includes Lakey Boyd, Kellie Clark and Yuval Vossey. Josh Carpenter, who officially works for UAB, is also among those playing a key role in the effort, particularly when it comes to workforce development.

That team isn’t likely to significantly expand, and that stems from the mindset Crutchfield is using to approach the initiative.
A venture capital approach

As a venture capitalist at Harbert, Crutchfield has been actively involved in a number of successful companies, including Shipt – a fast-growing Birmingham grocery delivery firm that recently raised $40 million.

And that background will influence his role at Innovate Birmingham.

“I want to take a venture capitalist strategy to what we do,” Crutchfield said.

Crutchfield said one of the key goals is to create new processes and programs that can be duplicated and scaled to help organically grow local companies and connect them with revenue and capital opportunities.

“Anything that is predictable and repeatable is generally sustainable, and you can scale those things,” he said. “(We’re using) a thoughtful process where we are trying to build an operating strategy, not just a project roadmap, but a real operating strategy.”

For those reasons, Crutchfield doesn’t envision Innovate Birmingham becoming a large organization in terms of headcount. He said the plan is to have a lean, agile team that complements and leverages existing resources in the metro area. He said the goal also isn’t to replace or duplicate existing assets in the area.

“We view ourselves as being enablers of the existing resources in the community around economic development. We’re going to carve out the ones that are specifically additive to technology and innovation,” Crutchfield said.

Birmingham leaders say Crutchfield, who had participated in steering committees as the plan took shape, was a logical choice to lead the organization.

“He’s been successful in (multiple) different types of careers,” Tipton said.

While many in Birmingham know Crutchfield from his work at Harbert, Tipton said several aspects of his background make him an ideal fit for the role.

“Bob is an operational guy. His background is filled with successes in running large organizations. He will bring that level of diligence to this process.”

In terms of goals, Crutchfield said the biggest measures of success will be how well Innovate Birmingham can increase economic prosperity and create a pathway of success for disadvantaged communities.

So how will that happen?

One of the key goals of the plan is increasing the number of innovation-based businesses in the metro area by creating an environment where they can thrive.

One example is a data project Innovate Birmingham is working on with Alabama Power, the BBA and UAB to help catalog large companies in the state, help understand where those
companies have gaps in existing products and services that could be solved with innovation and then develop a need assessment.

From there, a database would be created of all of the high-tech and innovation-focused firms in the metro area, which could help match Birmingham technology with potential revenue opportunities.

Other components include both connecting high-growth businesses with existing incentives and potentially working with government leaders to repackage incentives in a way that could better serve high-growth and innovation firms.

“We’re trying to help understand how to translate what’s available today into usable resources for companies like Shipt, Hospicelink and Fleetio,” Crutchfield said.

Another goal is ensuring access to capital for startups and emerging companies. One of the key ingredients in that push is marketing Birmingham’s innovation scene and getting more outside venture capitalists into the Magic City.

That’s an area where the region has made strides in recent years, as evidenced by the growing number of funding deals — such as the $40 million recently raised by Shipt and other recent funding rounds by Prepaid Technologies, TicketBiscuit, Planet Fundraiser, StrategyWise and numerous others.

In addition to creating an environment for organically grown companies, Crutchfield said another key component of the initiative is recruiting high-growth outside companies that are ready to scale to the metro area.

Given the existing assets in Birmingham, its relatively affordable cost of living compared to other innovation havens and upgrades like the 100-gigabit fiber connection that UAB is bringing to Innovation Depot, Crutchfield and others say the stars are aligning to make the Magic City a top choice for growing companies.

Watts said programs like Innovation Depot’s new Velocity Accelerator are doing just that. The program, which recently completed its first year, attracted candidate companies from around the world. And outside companies that came to Birmingham for the program, such as LikelyAI from Slovakia, are opting to stay in Birmingham after completion.

The same is true for many fellows in the Venture for America program, which brings aspiring entrepreneurs from across the nation to Birmingham for two-year fellowships. The program is entering its third year, and Birmingham will host 18 fellows — a significant increase over its previous class and the largest in the nation.

While there is clear evidence to show Birmingham is an attractive location for innovation companies and individuals, there is one critical ingredient that must be addressed: the workforce.

A jobs gap for technology and STEM jobs is a challenge facing a number of metros around the nation. And it’s one area where Innovate Birmingham has already experienced early success.
An early win

Late last year, officials with UAB discovered a grant opportunity through the Department of Labor.

The timeline was short, but UAB pooled together resources and submitted a grant application in an effort led by Carpenter, a Rhodes Scholar and UAB alumnus who returned to UAB as director of external affairs in the UAB president’s office.

Birmingham was one of 23 communities that received a grant, with the Magic City receiving a $6 million grant that will allow what is now known as the Innovate Birmingham Regional Workforce Partnership to train 925 students over the next four years.

It’s not the only workforce initiative that Innovate Birmingham plans to embark on, but it’s one that illustrates a key component of the initiative: the idea of inclusion.

When Katz visited Birmingham, one of the big takeaways for many leaders in the city was the idea that an innovation-based initiative was one that, while largely based in the city center, should reach deep into Birmingham’s neighborhoods.

So far, the Innovate Birmingham workforce partnership has proven to be doing just that. The first cohort of 18 students graduated in May, with the bulk of those students having a job in hand. Of all of the communities that received grants, Watts said Birmingham was the first one to land a participant a job.

“The whole idea is to take young people who might not have enough good opportunities and give them opportunities through this workforce development program to be entry-level IT professionals and go to work for the best companies in our area,” Watts said.

In the coming months and years, the number of students in the program will continue to accelerate and two- and four-year colleges and universities will join the mix.

Carpenter said one of the key components of the workforce initiative is working with employers in the area to understand their exact workforce needs in a more real-time and actionable manner than what has been done in the past.

“We want to reduce that lag time. If we know cybersecurity jobs are on the rise, it makes no sense for us to wait and develop a curriculum and deploy it three years later,” he said. “We should be working hand in hand with employers right now. And they need to be able to trust us and find us as a reliable source of talent, because their needs are going to occur far more quickly than three years from now.”

To accomplish that goal, Birmingham is working with Burning Glass Technologies, a labor market analytics firm, and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, to create a report to lay the foundation for demand-driven workforce efforts.

The end goal is a framework where employers are regularly communicating their needs and Innovate Birmingham and education partners are consistently and quickly adapting their programs to fill them.
"The goal is to build a model that is the envy of every other city that is trying to build a workforce of the 21st century," Carpenter said.

The Innovate Birmingham Regional Workforce Partnership will include bootcamps and two-year and four-year colleges. He said that gives the program an opportunity to be nimble and responsive.

"If we can develop a model for that growth and opportunity, I think we have a real chance to distinguish ourselves among other Southern areas who are trying to build similar systems," he said.

Ultimately, Innovate Birmingham leaders say the plan for the workforce initiative is to spark generational change, particularly in Birmingham's neighborhoods.

Today, participants in the program are picking up skills that will open up doors to new careers. Eventually, Carpenter said the hope is that some of those individuals will eventually go on to start their own companies.

He said the whole concept is built on the idea that talent is distributed equally in the community, but opportunity is not.

"If we scaffold and create opportunities for people who are in distressed neighborhoods but have a lot of talent, we can actually in real time respond to the changing needs of our employees," he said. "We want Innovate Birmingham to be the workforce vehicle who can move and change and adapt."

In addition to the workforce development aspect, Crutchfield said Innovate Birmingham is also exploring ways to boost talent recruitment from other metro areas to the city.

"Talent is a big part of the hurdle for high-growth companies," Crutchfield said.

He said Innovate Birmingham would like to drill into data to determine some unique incentives that could aid those efforts, such as student loan forgiveness or relocation expense underwriting.

"What I'd like to see is us finding alternative incentives so that workforce advancement and recruitment is done through things like maybe loan forgiveness – paying back students loans," Crutchfield said. "We want to be provokers of thought."

Ultimately, Crutchfield said the workforce component is critical because creating an environment where innovation-based startups can thrive requires a pipeline of talent. It also requires the right infrastructure.

**The real estate side**

When Katz came to Birmingham, one of his suggestions was the idea that Birmingham should create an actual innovation district to capitalize on its assets and the city’s existing stock of historic buildings.
Initial conversations that focused on a specific innovation district evolved into a realization that there are opportunities to create several pockets of innovation across the city, rather than just targeting a few specific blocks.

“What we’ve come to realize is innovation is really industry agnostic,” Laney said. “What we said is the Innovation District should really encompass all of the urban core.”

Laney said he envisions pockets of innovation-based development, such as a technology district around Innovation Depot, life sciences operations springing up around health care and research assets and other industry-focused clusters.

“Place is a natural component of building a technology and innovation ecosystem. You’ve got to have real estate and a place for companies to land,” Crutchfield said. “My view is if we do our job well at Innovate Birmingham, real estate will become a byproduct of that.”

That would be welcome news for Birmingham’s commercial real estate brokers, which have regularly harped on the need for more white-collar jobs in the city center.

Recent leases and transactions by former Innovation Depot companies suggest entrepreneurial ventures can indeed be a critical source of those deals. Companies like Fleetio, Platypi, Atlas RFID and others have each chosen downtown locations for their new offices after leaving Innovation Depot. Other innovation-based startups are scooping up properties in places like Avondale.

There are a couple specific areas that appear poised to benefit from growth in the number of innovation companies.

One of those areas is the land around Innovation Depot, which has a number of vacant or underdeveloped properties that could be attractive because of the size and types of buildings available, as well as the proximity to the incubator.

Laney said it’s possible that the 100-gigabit fiber connection that is coming to Innovation Depot could eventually be made available to surrounding properties.

That would prove to be a huge selling point when recruiting technology companies to the area or for convincing home-grown startups to remain in town.

Another area that could benefit is the property in the Southside near Southern Research, where developers have recently been scooping up sites in expectation of a redevelopment of the Southtown public housing complex.

Between its proximity to Southern Research, UAB and St. Vincent’s, the Southside could be a logical home for life sciences firms emanating from commercialized research at UAB.

The Southtown redevelopment project, if it proceeds, also could create more opportunities for workforce training initiatives with current or future Southtown residents.
Laney noted that one particularly interesting area is the Civil Rights District, which largely overlaps with the technology district. He said that overlap, as well as Innovate Birmingham’s focus on expanding economic possibilities for inner city residents, presents a unique opportunity.

“We have this incredible unique opportunity to be the leader in inclusive innovation,” Laney said. “We have an opportunity to set the standard.”

Where things go from here

Just like a startup CEO would report to his venture capitalist investors, Crutchfield said accountability and a focus on results will be a key component of Innovate Birmingham.

The initiative plans to deliver quarterly updates to the board and publish a public, quarterly newsletter. The initiative’s website, innovatebham.com, recently had a soft launch and will be built out with more resources in the months to come.

In the organization’s first 60 days, Crutchfield said Innovate Birmingham had more than 130 meetings, connected with nearly 40 investors and sat down with more than 20 entrepreneurs.

He said Innovate Birmingham also started benchmarking investments to track through PitchBook. Between the second quarter 2016 and the second quarter 2017, Birmingham companies raised more than $83 million.

Five years from now, Crutchfield wants to see those numbers even higher.

He wants to see higher volumes of startup activity and greater access to capital.

And he wants Birmingham to become widely known as a place that invests in its entrepreneurs and innovators and vice versa.

“If we can become known as a region entrepreneurs invest in and want to live in, then we’re going to be able to do great things for this city,” Crutchfield said.

When Katz visited Birmingham again in late 2016, he noted that even if the Magic City did nothing, it would still have some success because of its assets and broader economic trends. Leaders didn’t want to take that risk.

At this point, the goal for Crutchfield and others is to capture as much success as possible. From his standpoint, Crutchfield said the ultimate measure of success will be economic prosperity.

“The biggest measure for me will be, ‘How well have we done at truly delivering on our goal and objective of creating a pathway to access for disinvested communities and populations so they are represented in our economic prosperity pool?’” Crutchfield said.

Birmingham won’t be without competition. Many Southeastern metros, including Nashville, Atlanta, Raleigh-Durham, Chattanooga and others, are also making strong plays in the innovation economy.
But the backers of Innovate Birmingham are optimistic the Magic City has a unique combination of assets, necessary resources and, perhaps most importantly, the alignment, to differentiate itself.

"We're building an innovation ecosystem, and we want to continue building that and transform the future of the city," Watts said.

MEET THE BOARD

A look at the board of directors for Innovate Birmingham:

Mayor William Bell,
City of Birmingham

Jimmie Stephens,
Jefferson County Commission president

Dr. Ray Watts,
UAB president

Brian Hilson,
Birmingham Business Alliance CEO

Chris Nanni,
Community Foundation of Greater
Birmingham CEO

Andrea Taylor,
Birmingham Civil Rights Institute CEO

Mark Crosswhite,
Alabama Power Co. CEO

Grayson Hall,
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Mayer Electric CEO

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Protective Life executive chairman

INNOVATION ASSETS

Experts say Birmingham has a rare combination of innovation assets in close proximity. Here's a look at three key resources in the urban core:

INNOVATION DEPOT
The incubator is home to about 100 high-growth companies and a number of key initiatives. Many believe a tech district will sprout up around the incubator in the years to come.

SOUTHERN RESEARCH
The nonprofit conducts research in life sciences and a variety of other fields, and the area surrounding its campus is already a hotbed of activity.

UAB
Birmingham's economic engine has played a critical role in the formation of Innovate Birmingham by investing money and resources into innovation-based economic development endeavors. The research emanating from UAB -- particularly in life sciences -- is expected to be a major catalyst for job growth.
UAH atmospheric researchers studying birds, bugs during total eclipse

By: Christina Edwards

Three hours northwest of Huntsville, Alabama, the town of Hopkinsville, Kentucky became “Eclipseville USA.”

And while atmospheric researchers from the University of Alabama in Huntsville traveled to the path of totality, their scientific journey involves much more than just the moon and the sun.

"We are actually scanning birds, bugs, dust, other things in the atmosphere trying to get velocities, trying to see how the air movements change during an eclipse," explained Dustin Conrad, a graduate research assistant at UAH.

"For the radar we have here, basically we send out a signal and it has to hit something in order for it to come back. Normally, it is rain, snow, hail, other things like that. But in this case, we are using birds and bugs — it’s something to reflect that signal back towards us."

"We are basically just observing things, reflecting our signal back. We want to see how the air movements change during the eclipse," Conrad concluded.

In addition to watching the birds and the bugs, observing the atmosphere throughout the eclipse may provide some clues for night time storm development.

"In the evening, when you start to shut off part of the sun, most of the time you think a lot of the clouds dissipate," explained Ryan Wade, a lecturer and academic advisor at UAH.

"But sometimes, that cooling actually produces a little bit of low-level convergence, and that low level convergence forces upward motion. And so, we’re hoping to see something like that in really fast time during the eclipse. And that’s what we can kind of see, maybe occurring off in the distance up towards Hopkinsville and towards the Land Between the Lakes.

"And you can see the cumulus that are growing. The more robust ones are actually growing now, during the eclipse and immediately following it. Hopefully we have got some good data to show something."
Watching the sky: Researchers observe the clouds, as well as the eclipse

By: Christina Edwards

And they’re off!

Rising higher into the Kentucky sky, researchers from UAH released weather balloons Monday in order to study the atmosphere before — during — and after the eclipse.

"Today we’re releasing weather balloons at set increments in accordance to the solar eclipse that occurred," UAH graduate research assistant Alex Staarmann said.

"Basically [we want] to capture the lowest one mile of the atmosphere and how it responds and how it changes and varies according to the decrease and then the subsequent increase as a result of the total solar eclipse."

"We are studying what happens during false night in the boundary layer, "UAH undergraduate research student Joy Marich explained.

"False night is pretty much when totality of the sun happens, so cut off of solar radiation. And sometimes that can affect the weather."

By observing an “accelerated sunset” in the middle of the afternoon, the unique data can be used for modeling cumulus cloud growth and other micro-climate weather phenomenon.

The UAH researchers are taking this potentially once in a lifetime opportunity to observe how the diminished sunlight affects the weather within the first mile above the ground.
Solar eclipse 2017: How much did the temperature change during the eclipse?

By: Leada Gore

If you thought it suddenly got cooler during yesterday's total solar eclipse, you're not wrong. Data obtained during the eclipse showed temperatures dropped - in some place by as much as 11 degrees - during the period when the moon blocked out the sun.

The National Weather Service Center in Huntsville reported a 10 degree temperature drop during the peak of the eclipse in North Alabama. NWS equipment at the University of Alabama in Huntsville also picked up a drop - and sudden rebound - in both dewpoints and solar radiation during the eclipse.

North Alabama wasn't the only spot to see a significant temperature change as the eclipse made its way from Oregon in the west to South Carolina in the east, cutting a 70-mile wide path of totality across 14 states.
Temperatures in Douglas, Wyoming dropped by 11 degrees, from a pre-eclipse high of 78 degrees to a totality drop of 66 degrees.

Blacksburg, Virginia saw a 6 degree temperature decrease; temperatures in San Diego and Kansas City dropped by about 4 degrees.

Boulder, Colorado also experienced a sudden cool-down.

Tweet from @NWSBoulder: Temperatures at DIA dropped from 85° to 77° during #Eclipse2017 #cowx

What caused the change? It's pretty simple, according to NASA.

"When sunlight fades at twilight, we always notice how things start to cool down. The same is true for the temporary dimming during a total solar eclipse," officials with the U.S. space agency said.
Because totality only occurs for a few minutes, the environment does not have much time to respond to the sudden lack of sunlight, though the change can be sudden and quite obvious.

"Because the patch of the shadow travels faster than the speed of sound, weather systems will only be affected very locally directly under the instantaneous footprint of the eclipse. The main effect is in the "radiant heating" component which goes away suddenly at the moment of eclipse and produces a very fast temperature decrease," NASA said.

Cloud cover and humidity also impact the temperature change. If there are substantial clouds, you will see less of a drop in temperature because the clouds will help hold the heat near the Earth's surface. Humid air will also help hold the heat, meaning it will stay warmer in those areas than in places where the air is dry.
Total Solar Eclipse Left Many Captivated, Emotional In Hopkinsville

By: Matthew Torres

The total solar eclipse was best described as a breathtaking event tens of thousands of people who witnessed at its max totality will never forget.

In Christian County, Kentucky, hundreds from across the world traveled to Orchardale Farm in Cerulean since it has been dubbed the point of greatest eclipse.

Totality lasted for 2 minutes and 41 seconds, and mesmerized large crowds along the way.

"It felt a little eerie, kind of calm and just a neat experience," Doug Wilcox, a Hopkinsville resident, said.

It also proved to be emotional for visitors like Ginny Simmons who drove 10 hours from Texas.

"It is so hard to describe. It makes you realize how we are so tiny on this Earth. It was so amazing, just beautiful," Simmons told NewsChannel 5.

Simmons and her husband are two of the more than 100,000 visitors expected in the county for the once in a lifetime event.

Hopkinsville Mayor Carter Hendricks said visitors traveled from 46 different states and 20 countries.

"Is this what it was like when people were first pulling up to Woodstock?" Clay Barclays, a Cincinnati visitor, questioned. "All these people are here from all over the place. Different countries and different towns and cities for one purpose, I think I get it."

Officials anticipated an economic impact of $30 million but the mayor and governor stressed that it was more than just about the money.

"Our primary concern is that we were prepared for the influx of visitors and that they had that type of experience that made them proud to be a part of it. I hope they walk away with sincere appreciation that this community rolled out the red carpet to help them enjoy," Hendricks said in a press conference.

Scientists from several universities, NASA and the Vatican were also on the farm.

For instance, Professor Kevin Knupp of the University of Alabama in Huntsville released a weather balloon to research the impact of the eclipse on the lower part of the atmosphere.

State, local and federal officials prepared for the event for more than a year.
NASA sets up camp at APSU farm to study eclipse

By: Harvae Herod

The APSU Farm is buzzing with energy today in anticipation of the total solar eclipse. There are several different experiments going on to study the behavior of our physical surroundings and the wildlife around us.

NASA has set up filtered telescopes to allow visitors a chance to look at the sun in all its beauty. They have also set up a live feed that will stream the eclipse to different parts of the country, including New York’s Times Square. Students from the University of Alabama in Huntsville will be launching balloons to track the shadow of the eclipse in real time. One of their packages being launched includes hops from a local brewery that will be used to create a commemorative eclipse brew.

Beekeeper and APSU sophomore student Emily Randleman will be studying the beehives on site and how their behavior changes as the sun and the moon align. Female cows on site will be monitored in 30 minute intervals to see if any of their behaviors change as well.
Alabama Readying for Solar Eclipse

By: Staff

Alabamians from the Tennessee Valley to the coast are getting ready to view the solar eclipse on Monday.

The area of totality is north and east of Alabama along a line extending from Nashville, Tennessee to Columbia, South Carolina. But midday skies will still darken across much of the state.

Stores in northern Alabama are selling thousands of protective glasses to view the sun, and the University of Alabama in Huntsville has an eclipse-watching party. The McWane Science Center in Birmingham is having a viewing party atop its parking deck.

Near Mobile, about 900 students at Saraland Elementary School will watch the eclipse on television after officials canceled plans to let them watch outdoors. At least two state school systems are dismissing early since they couldn't provide glasses to students.

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Huntsville takes next step in landing Dream Chaser

By: Staff

A high-tech spacecraft could soon be using a Huntsville runway for commercial shipments to space.

The Huntsville International Airport is in the process of applying for a license through the Federal Aviation Administration to land Sierra Nevada Corporation’s Dream Chaser spacecraft.

This Phase II contract follows a Phase I contract completed in 2015 that examined the compatibility of SNC’s Dream Chaser with the existing runway and taxiway environments at the airport.

“The preliminary study proved the feasibility of landing so now we are pleased to announce that we have initiated the permitting process with the FAA,” said Rick Tucker, Huntsville International Airport Executive Director.

"This represents a shared vision of Huntsville as a leader in the commercial space economy as the first community to make a commitment to this vehicle and its role in space commerce,” said Tucker.

Teledyne Brown Engineering serves as the primary contractor. Partnerships with the airport include the City of Huntsville, Madison County, the City of Madison, the State of Alabama, UAH and the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber.

“We’re excited to continue our progress in this community-wide effort to land the Dream Chaser in Huntsville. This initiative fits well with our expertise and portfolio as a hub for the fast growing commercial space industry,” said Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle.

“Madison County is excited to move to the next step in bringing Sierra Nevada’s Dream Chaser to the Huntsville International Airport,” said Madison County Commission Chairman Dale W. Strong.

Phase II is expected to take at least 24 months, as the permits are being sought, the partners will be working to share the capabilities of the Dream Chaser with potential users while marketing the workforce and expertise of the Huntsville region to support payload design, development, integration, operations and processing.

"We are very excited to be working with Huntsville as the first commercial airport that will apply for a FAA permit to land Dream Chaser after an orbital mission. This will put us in the forefront of commercial space activities and it is no surprise that ‘Rocket City’ is the first to join us on that journey,” said John Roth, vice president of business development for SNC’s Space Systems business area.

"Working to secure this permit through the FAA will allow this spacecraft to return to Earth’s orbit and land at Huntsville International Airport in Madison County, Alabama, home to

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Marshall Space Flight Center, The University of Alabama Huntsville, and HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology," said Strong.

One marketing effort underway is the Huntsville Chamber's sponsorship of a contest with the European Space Agency (ESA). With Scottish aerospace company Astrosat, the Chamber is seeking ideas for utilizing the Dream Chaser beyond cargo transport. Entries are being accepted until September 8 at Space Exploration Masters. The prize includes business development support from Astrosat, a visit to Huntsville/Madison County, and a year's worth of business incubation at BizTech. The winner will be announced in October during the Space Tech Expo in Bremen, Germany, at the Huntsville/Madison County booth.

"The ESA competition has given us an international platform for sharing the space-related capabilities of Huntsville/Madison County," said Lucia Cape, senior vice president of economic development for the Chamber. "We look forward to seeing what entrepreneurs from around the world would do with a Dream Chaser spacecraft, and we want to let them know that they can land it here."

Sierra Nevada Corporation was awarded a cargo resupply contract with NASA in 2016. Earlier this year, SNC announced that its first two missions would be launched on the United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket, made in Decatur, Alabama.
Huntsville takes next step to landing spaceship at airport

By: Lee Roop

The Huntsville International Airport has taken the next step toward landing Sierra Nevada's Dream Chaser spacecraft on one of its runways.

The airport has signed a contract to apply for a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) license to land the small, shuttle-shaped ship in Huntsville. The licensing process will take two years.

Local leaders see the license to land Dream Chaser as a step toward making the city a hub for the growing commercial space industry. Science payloads on the International Space Station are managed now by the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, and officials believe they can leverage that relationship to build a new space business in the "Rocket City."

As part of that push, the city will be "working to share the capabilities of the Dream Chaser with potential users while marketing the workforce and expertise of the Huntsville region," the airport said in a statement.

Sierra Nevada Corp. is supporting the licensing effort. NASA has added the company as an official station supplier with a contracted minimum of six cargo delivery flights. Its first two flights will be atop a United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket made in Decatur.

"We are very excited to be working with Huntsville as the first commercial airport that will apply for an FAA permit to land Dream Chaser after an orbital mission," Sierra Nevada Vice President John Roth said this week. "We feel that the ability to land a space mission on a commercial runway anywhere in the world is a big advantage of our vehicle and will bring space up close and personal to thousands of people who can come out and see the landings. This will put us in the forefront of commercial space activities and it is no surprise that 'Rocket City' is the first to join us on that journey."

Partners with the airport in the licensing and marketing effort include Huntsville, Madison, the State of Alabama, the University of Alabama in Huntsville and the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce.
Senior logisticians take advanced course at UAH

By: Susie Averitt

Professional Development Solutions in the College of Professional and Continuing Studies at the University of Alabama in Huntsville has conducted the first Army Senior Logistics program for GS 13-15 civilians from various commands.

It provided attendees with guest speakers, facilitators, panel discussions and teambuilding exercises. The participants’ collaborative efforts identifying strategic challenges in a capstone exercise culminated in an outbrief to John Hall, deputy to the commanding general at Combined Armed Support Command, completing the two-week learning experience.

The purpose of the Army Senior Logistician Advanced Course was to close competency gaps and provide education and networking opportunities to senior leaders seeking strategic professional development growth. Program Director Lane Fabbey worked with the UAH College of Business and selected Advisory Board members to design the curriculum around the 12 Integrated Product Support competencies including additional sessions on topics such as Managing in an ERP Centric Environment, Leading at an Executive Level, and Innovation with Managing End-to-End Supply Chains.

Professional Development Solutions at UAH will conduct the next Army Senior Logistician Advanced Course in September. For more information about Professional Development Solutions, visit PCS.uah.edu/PDSolutions or contact the Professional Development Solutions team at PDSolutions@uah.edu.
Phil Williams Announces Candidacy for State Senate

By: Daniel Bruce

Local businessman and entrepreneur, Phil Williams, has announced that he is running for Alabama State Senate District 2. The district encompasses much of the Huntsville Metro Area, including Redstone Arsenal. Bill Holtzclaw, the district’s current senator, will not seek reelection. Williams, a Republican, currently represents District 6 in the Alabama Legislature. Williams was raised on a small farm in rural Alabama and graduated from the University of Alabama at Huntsville with a degree in international business. Throughout his career, he has been involved with the development of several small businesses, specifically with technology start-up companies. Williams co-founded 3D Research Corporation in 2002 with his wife Lisa, and the two quickly built it into one of the fastest growing companies in both 2004 and 2005.

Williams began his political career in 2009, when he entered the special election for the Alabama Legislature and won a highly competitive election. According to a news release from his campaign, Williams has had quite a track record in Montgomery. He has opposed efforts to raise taxes on small businesses, fought to increase funding for education, and worked to pass the Alabama Ahead Act. He was reelected in 2010 and 2014 with no opposition from either political party.

“In the State Senate I will continue to fight against the business as usual mentality that typically results in higher taxes for us. Alabama deserves leaders that work to solve the problems facing our families and our state – not those that go to Montgomery to play political games. If we are going to move forward we must have fundamental change in how we approach education, funding for roads and reforming our government”

Williams’s platform focuses on the three E’s that he believes should be at the forefront of any Alabama political discussion: Education, Economy, and Ethics. Williams promises to fight to keep the schools in North Alabama the best in the state. “The education of our children must be our main objective if we are going to prepare our students for the jobs of the future.” He also pledges to fight to keep North Alabama growing economically. “I will continually look for ways to support our local business community that drives our economy.” Finally, Williams hopes to rid Montgomery of the stigma that has surrounded state politicians over the past few years. “Everybody knows how ugly Montgomery can be and I will continue to be very outspoken in challenging elected officials to maintain the highest ethical conduct.”

Williams and his wife Lisa have been married for 21 years and have one son. He likes to spend his time mentoring small businesses in the Huntsville area. The Republican primary will be held June 5, 2018.
Gov. Kay Ivey gives space center $10M for cyber camp, new building

By: Lee Roop

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey gave the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville a $10 million economic development grant today to fund a new U.S. Cyber Camp and help construct a new building to house it and link the rocket center’s two existing exhibit halls.

"Expanding cyber camp in Alabama's No. 1 tourist attraction was a logical investment for the state...," the governor said. "In order to have a workforce that is prepared for the 21st century and can fill jobs in the 21st century, we must train our students and young people in technology, and the efforts of the U.S. Cyber Camp do just that." Ivey said the Army, FBI, Department of Homeland Security, NASA and National Security Agency "are all interested in participating in programs right here. The need to expand the U.S. Cyber Camp is real, and it is important."

The space center, home of Space Camp, Space Academy and Aviation Challenge, held its first cyber camp this summer with 32 students from across Alabama chosen by their teachers. The center's partners in the camp are Cyber Huntsville, an initiative of Mayor Tommy Battle, and the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

'Reocket center must grow'

Space center CEO Dr. Deborah Barnhart said more than 50,000 people are now coming to the center's camps and programs each year. "To meet the growing demand and expand the outreach of our mission to inspire the next generation of explorers and leaders, the rocket center must grow," she said. "We need more classrooms, more simulation space...."

The new building will also provide additional space for the center and museum. It will link the original center building constructed in 1970 and the Davidson Center for Space Exploration where the Saturn V rocket is displayed.

Speakers in the Saturn V Hall and on video endorsed the new camp, including Air Force Gen. John Hyten, commander of the U.S. Strategic Command.

"We have all of the nuclear capabilities, global strike capabilities, space, cyber space, missile defense capabilities," Hyten said of the command in video remarks. "Imbedded in all of that is cyber space. Cyber space is the glue that holds all things together, so I'm pretty excited that there's going to be a cyber camp here at the Space & Rocket Center in the not-too distant future."

Investment in state, country

Alabama House Speaker Mac McCutcheon of Madison County thanked Ivey for investing "in our area, but more than that, investing in our state and the future of our country as a whole.

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The check will be an investment and we will ... take it as far as we need to go to make that successful."

Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle started Huntsville's cyber initiative nine years ago. "When we started, the cyber industry was just a fledgling industry...," Battle said. "We are developing an industry that now has become a multibillion-dollar industry."

Huntsville school students start learning computer coding in the second grade, Battle said, and they are programming in middle school.

"Because of the ever increasing and evolving cyber threats coupled with the need for more cyber professionals, Gov. Ivey and the state of Alabama's support for the U.S. Space & Rocket Center's U.S. Cyber Camp comes at a critical time," Carey Miller, managing director of Deloitte & Touche, said in a statement. "As a supporter of the camp's first session this summer, we saw firsthand the value and impact of this camp and applaud the state's investment in the future of its workforce and cybersecurity. We look forward to supporting the camp's growth and development."

Also present to meet Ivey was Annalee Bottoms, a high school sophomore from Tharp Town, Ala., in Franklin County. She attended the first Cyber Camp and talked about her excitement for the new field. "I want to do this," Bottoms said.

Ivey said the funds for the grant came from Alabama's 666 Fund. It was established by voters in 2000 to invest some of the royalties paid by natural gas and oil companies active off Alabama's gulf coast. A nine-person board headed by Ivey makes the investment decisions.
Gore documentary called ‘bad science’ as sales plummet

By: Valerie Richardson

Climatologist Roy Spencer publishes rebuttal to ‘Inconvenient Sequel’ as weekend box office drops by 59%

It was a tough weekend for Al Gore. Not only did “An Inconvenient Sequel” continue its nosedive at the box office, but the climate change documentary also drew a scathing rebuttal from a leading climate scientist.

Climatologist Roy W. Spencer, principal research scientist at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, released Saturday an 81-page e-book on Amazon titled “An Inconvenient Deception: How Al Gore Distorts Climate Science and Energy Policy.”

“After viewing Gore’s most recent movie, ‘An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power,’ and after reading the book version of the movie, I was more than a little astounded,” Mr. Spencer said on his blog, Global Warming. “The new movie and book are chock-full of bad science, bad policy, and factual errors.”

Mr. Spencer said the sequel, like its 2006 predecessor “An Inconvenient Truth,” implies repeatedly that naturally occurring weather episodes are the result of human-caused global warming — for example, a shot in which the former vice president stands ankle-deep in a flooded Miami street.

“That flooding is mostly a combination of (1) natural sea level rise (I show there has been no acceleration of sea level rise beyond what was already happening since the 1800s), and (2) satellite-measured sinking of the reclaimed swamps that have been built upon for over 100 years in Miami Beach,” said Mr. Spencer.

Mr. Spencer isn’t new to the warming debate — he’s a well-known climate skeptic — but there’s no disputing his credentials: He’s an award-winning former NASA senior scientist for climate studies who continues to work with NASA on the U.S. Science Team.

The author of three previously published books on climate change, Mr. Spencer said he wrote the point-by-point rebuttal in two weeks after the Aug. 4 wide release of “An Inconvenient Sequel,” which took another plunge last weekend at the box office.

The movie earned $331,007, a 59 percent drop from the previous weekend’s gross of $816,150, for a total to date of $3 million. Meanwhile, the per-screen gross plummeted from $1,468 to $644, according to Box Office Mojo.

The former vice president has not commented publicly on Mr. Spencer’s rebuttal, but another prominent scientist, climate “consensus” leader Michael E. Mann, praised the film in a July 26 review for Nature.

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“Nobody (and given my experiences with climate deniers, I speak with some authority here) has been more vilified for their efforts to communicate the climate threat than Al Gore,” said Mr. Mann, distinguished professor of atmospheric science at Penn State.

Mr. Mann, co-author of the “hockey stick” theory of global temperatures, said the Tennessee Democrat “has a genius for joining the dots in the global mapping of climate impacts.”

“It is astonishing that we’re still mired in a political debate about whether climate change even exists when, with each passing year of insufficient action, the challenge of averting a catastrophe becomes ever greater,” he said. “Knowing that Al Gore is still optimistic is a shot in the arm at a time of uncertainty.”

What’s not in dispute is that “An Inconvenient Sequel” so far has failed to replicate the success of the original, which earned $24 million at the box office and won the 2006 Academy Award for best documentary feature.

While Mr. Gore has tirelessly promoted the film, and critics on Rotten Tomatoes gave the sequel a positive 77 percent approval rating, only 48 percent of audiences say they liked it.

“Would I still recommend ‘An Inconvenient Sequel’? Sure, although I doubt there is much one could glean from this movie that couldn’t be obtained by rewatching ‘An Inconvenient Truth,’” Salon critic Matt Rozsa said in an Aug. 15 review.
Tide basketball SEC schedule released

By Cecil Hurt
Sports Editor

The University of Alabama men's basketball team will open its 2017-18 Southeastern Conference home schedule at Coleman Coliseum on Dec. 30 against Texas A&M.

The game is part of an 18-game conference slate announced by the SEC office on Thursday.

Tip times along with TV selections will be released at a later date.

The Crimson Tide has 18 games on its league slate in addition to its 13-game non-conference schedule, which was announced in mid-July.

Alabama's conference schedule will have three of its first and last five games on the road.

However, Alabama will have a stretch in the middle of league play where it will play five home games in a seven-game stretch.

The Tide's home-and-home opponents for the upcoming season include Texas A&M (Dec. 30 in Tuscaloosa and March 3 in College Station, Texas), LSU (Jan. 13 in Baton Rouge, La., and Feb. 13 in Tuscaloosa), Auburn (Jan. 17 in Tuscaloosa and Feb. 21 in Auburn), Mississippi State (Jan. 20 in Tuscaloosa and Feb. 6 in Starkville, Miss.) and Florida (Feb. 3 in Gainesville, Fla., and Feb. 27 in Tuscaloosa).

Along with its home-and-home contests, the Tide will have a home schedule which includes South Carolina (Jan. 9), Missouri (Jan. 31), Tennessee (Feb. 10) and Arkansas (Feb. 24).

Additional road games will consist of Vanderbilt (Jan. 2), Georgia (Jan. 6), Ole Miss (Jan. 23) and Kentucky (Feb. 17).

The SEC Tournament will be played west of the Mississippi River for the first time when the Scottrade Center in St. Louis, Mo., hosts the event from March 7-11, 2018.
For Tide, preseason is over

No. 1 Alabama turns its attention to preparations for No. 3 Seminoles

By Aaron Suttles
Sports Writer

Nick Saban didn't want his team to peak too soon, so up until now Alabama's fall camp has consisted of no Florida State preparation.

At least that's what Saban said. Certainly there was some scouting going on behind the scenes for the coaching staff and the analysts, but, as it pertains to the players on the practice field, fall camp has been about fundamentals and the installation of the offense and defense.

That may have changed with Thursday's practice. Following Saturday's scrimmage, Saban said the team would make "an assessment" about whether to begin the season-opener preparation or continue to practice as usual.

"We kind of have a plan about when we start working on against Florida State," Saban said.

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FOOTBALL

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Saban said. “Philosophically, you know I’ve always been one that thinks you can practice too hard and everybody gets stale by the time you play the game.

“I think we have work to do on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, we’ll sort of make an assessment on where we are, and then decide where we go from there, if we’re ready to start preparation for the game and have a couple extra practices for it, or exactly when we’ll do that.”

At this point nearly everyone is ready to turn their attention to something other than practice. Storylines from fall practice have been exhausted. There’s not much more left to do than play the game, a game that’s been highly anticipated since day one of the offseason.

Left guard Ross Pierschbacher said when he studies the Seminoles, he sees a lot of Alabama.

“Big, strong, fast defense. Very athletic. Going to be tough challenge for us up front,” he said. “I would say yeah (they look like us). The size, speed, explosiveness and just how they play. I think their (defensive line) is a little more up field than ours is. They try to penetrate. So it’s a big challenge. We’ve been working hard this camp to try to match up with them.”

Middle linebacker Rashaan Evans sees a great challenge from Florida State.

“They are a versatile team,” Evans said. “They got athletes all across the board. I’ve been hearing a lot of things about them trying to be a dominate team by competing against people like us, the SEC.

I’ve seen the offense more often, since we are preparing to facing them in two weeks, but they have great wide receivers and great running backs.

“The quarterback (Deondre Francois), I mean he has a year under his belt, so he’s got a little experience. Just with that I feel like we are going to have a great battle coming up.”

Reach Aaron Suttles at aaron@tidesports.com or at 205-722-0229.
Sweet Home Alabama

Former Crimson Tide players Allen, Anderson quick learners with Redskins

The Associated Press

ASHBURN, Va. — When Jay Gruden watches college football, it's no surprise the program that has won four of the past eight national titles sticks out.

"You watch other defenses, no disrespect, and then you flip on an Alabama game, it's different," Gruden said.

That helps to explain why a school-record 10 Alabama players were selected in the 2017 NFL draft. Gruden's Washington Redskins took two of them — defensive lineman Jonathan Allen in the first round and linebacker Ryan Anderson in the second — and believe playing at Alabama allows them to quickly transition roll into the professional game.

"They played in a lot of huge games," Gruden said. "The SEC, you can argue all you want, is the best conference in football and they played great competition week in and week out. Every game was a huge game for them, not to mention their record was what it was."

A high-level of game competition and pro-style practices have Allen and Anderson ready to contribute right away to a defense that ranked 28th in the league the past two seasons. Allen should be part of a heavy rotation on the defensive line and Anderson will likely get time early on, especially in pass-rushing situations.

"Playing at Alabama has made things a lot easier for me," Allen said.

Anderson said practices at Alabama were "rougher" than in the NFL and hopes that makes a difference.

"We do a lot of banging around there," Anderson said, "so it definitely prepared me physically and mentally for this grind I'm doing now."

It's only the start of the grind for seven Alabama defenders drafted this year.

Allen was second behind cornerback Marlon Humphrey, and there are high expectations on the Northern Virginia native who only fell to Washington with the 17th pick because of concerns about shoulder injuries.

Allen said Nick Saban and the rest of the Crimson Tide coaching staff helped him and other teammates learn how to practice. The evidence has shown on the field with the Redskins as Allen hasn't looked like a rookie.

"He learns quick," left tackle Trent Williams said. "A couple moves that I would do and it would take a few times to catch on, with him it only works once and you've got to switch it up. ... He's making good strides."

Williams thinks opposing linemen will figure out what Southeastern Conference counterparts learned after Allen led Alabama with 10.5 sacks last season and 12 during the 2015 national championship season. Anderson was third on the team in sacks those two years, and he and Allen each scored a touchdown last season when Alabama's defense had seven.

"They just had that mentality of running to the ball," Gruden said. "They had other players on their defense that were very good also, but Jonathan was consistent in the middle. His junior year, he was a great pass rusher. He transformed his game to become a better run player. And then Ryan was just all around the football all the time."

With former general manager Scot McCloughan saying on Twitter the Redskins followed his draft board for all but one pick, toughness and physicality were understandably a priority. Already senior director of player personnel Doug Williams, effectively McCloughan's successor, said, "Jonathan Allen is the guy that he was hyped up to be."

Allen is the quiet type, even around teammates, so he's not adding to the hype.

Defensive line coach Jim Tomsula recognizes that, saying Allen is a "humble" person who was raised right.

Gruden credits the time they spent in Tuscaloosa to help shape Allen's and Anderson's mature personalities.

"I don't think they have any choice but to be mature coming from Alabama," Gruden said. "Both are very mature beyond their years, have great work ethic and are good football players."

NOTES: Gruden said Anderson is close to being full strength after getting a stinger in the first preseason game. ... LB Junior Galette (hamstring) is expected to be a game-time decision against Cincinnati on Sunday. Galette is a former Stillman University player.
Hurts, Alabama players top Coaches All-SEC team

The Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM — Alabama placed a league-high 15 players on the coaches preseason All-Southeastern Conference teams, including quarterback Jalen Hurts.

The SEC released the teams on Wednesday with all 14 members represented.

Alabama had four players on the first-team offense and four on the first-team defense, plus punter JK Scott.

Reigning SEC offensive player of the year Hurts was joined by offensive linemen Jonah Williams and Ross Pierschbacher, along with wide receiver Calvin Ridley.

Defensive linemen Da’Ron Payne and Da’Shawn Hand and safeties Minkah Fitzpatrick and Ronnie Harrison are also first-teamers for the Tide.

Alabama enters the season ranked No. 1.

Texas A&M’s Christian Kirk is a preseason first-teamer as both a receiver and a return man. LSU’s Derrius Guice and Georgia’s Nick Chubb are the first-team tailbacks.
ESPN should remember to respect audience

With season openers less than two weeks away at most college football programs, there are some teams that still need practice.

Also, some networks.

ESPN has fumbled twice this week, both connected with college football. If they've had blunders in other areas, I probably missed them because it is August and — well, college football.

This isn't going to be some fire-and-brimstone excoriation of ESPN, although you can readily find that elsewhere if you want it. In both instances — when reporter Mike West went on Twitter and posted “quotes” from Nick Saban that weren't Saban quotes at all, and again when they shuffled announcer Robert Lee off an assignment in Charlottesville, Va., because his name is the same as a Confederate general who died more than 125 years ago — I don't know that some nefarious agenda was at work. I do know the execution was sloppy, and that was compounded in both cases by the actions being utterly unnecessary.

ESPN has taken tremendous criticism for what conservatives, in particular, seem to be “bias” toward a liberal agenda. Whether it is Caitlyn Jenner or Colin Kaepernick, Michael Sam or Serena Williams, the emphasis of the network's coverage has been questioned. Without delving into extremely complicated social issues here, I will say that ESPN — like any vast media company — has many employees, representing many viewpoints. Also, many of the people who watch ESPN do so for one reason: live sports.

In this area, that's live college football above all other fare, not that there aren't fans of the NBA, the NFL and many other sports. Regardless, there are a great many viewers — or, in the case of their website and social media presence, a great many readers that like to take their sports straight, without politics (or fashion or pop culture.). Can I fairly condemn anyone else for straying from a “stick to sports” approach? No. I'm a wanderer myself, as anyone with Twitter knows. Your employment doesn't take away your citizenship, or your interests.

But the two incidents this week went beyond that. They weren't opinions. In the first case, the Saban tweets attributing quotes about race relations to Saban when he never said the words,

See HURT, C5
was an attempt at satire by the reporter, Mike Wise. The quotes were easily misconstrued and not just by sensitive Alabama fans or "dumb" readers. Several of Wise’s ESPN colleagues passed them along, often with scathing takes of their own.

Wise has apologized and was "disciplined" and, again, it's not like I've never made an ill-considered Tweet (although I've never gone the "false quote" route, and wouldn't.). Here is the problem. You can throw a rock in the water, then change your mind and dive in after the rock. But you can’t fix all the ripples.

The Robert Lee move, on the other hand, was — according to ESPN executives — designed to stop "jokes" (of the "ha ha, General Lee" variety) about the harmless coincidence before they happened.

But by sending Lee to another site, ESPN generated far more attention (and a thousand more jokes) than it would have by leaving well enough alone. No sane person would have been offended by Lee calling the game.

Now, people are offended — because ESPN assumed that they would be offended. These are sensitive times in America but one way to defuse the worst outcomes is to assume that a person can disagree with you and still have some intelligence.

That’s called “respect.” And respect for your audience matters. The media — from all sides of the spectrum, and starting right here with me personally — should always keep that in mind.

Reach Cecil Hurt at cecil@tidesports.com or 205-722-0225.
A RETURN TO FORM

Now healthy, Turner making plays on outside

Drew Champlin  dchamplin@al.com

Time away from the gridiron helped many UAB players recover from injuries without burning eligibility. Wide receiver Ronnie Turner Jr. is one of them.

The 6-foot-4 Turner came to UAB last fall after setting records at Hartnell College in California. In 15 games, Turner caught 93 balls for 1,674 yards and 22 touchdowns. His junior college career was cut short when he landed on his left shoulder wrong and dislocated it from the shoulder capsule.

Turner, a junior, had it surgically repaired last fall and now is fully healthy and challenging for a starting spot as an outside receiver.

Head coach Bill Clark said Turner’s body is now in better shape and he’s set up for success.

“It took until the end of spring to be what we wanted him to be,” Clark said. “He stayed in May, worked hard and kept his weight on. Now, this looks like the guy we recruited.”

Turner came to UAB six months after his brother Michael, a quarterback. Michael is 16 months older than Ronnie.

“I didn’t want him coming out here by himself so far without any family,” Ronnie Turner said. “He’s the oldest, so he’s going to lead me in the right way. He had to be the leader and quarterbacks lead. I think the quarterback position was the right fit for him because he was always leading.”

Turner was a running back, but grew too tall for that position and blossomed into a big-time receiver.

“He’s a big-bodied guy,” UAB offensive coordinator Les Koenning said. “He runs smooth routes and he’s a big body. Corners are really fast, so if you can’t outrun them, you have to outsize them.”

Quarterback A.J. Erdely described Turner as a “real playmaker.”

Turner is also more confident now, knowing he can take a hit to the shoulder or fall down after contact and bounce right back up.

The outside receiver position should be one of strength this fall for the Blazers, who open the season on Sept. 2 at 2:30 p.m., against Alabama A&M at Legion Field.

“I feel like I bring the high ball threat and deep ball threat,” Turner said. “If we’re in the red zone and I have a jump ball opportunity, I’ll come down with it.”
Not shocked by Thomas’ big win

Former high school teammates knew success would come to Justin Thomas, who won the PGA Championship last week

By Drew Hill
Special to The Tuscaloosa News

When Mike Thomas walked into the Blackstone Grille restaurant in Prospect, Ky., for the first time since his son Justin’s major championship victory, he was greeted with applause.

The community had been waiting for that moment, and the buzz has hardly quieted. The same could be said for Tuscaloosa.

Thomas, a former University of Alabama golfer, won the the PGA Championship on Aug. 13 at Quail Hollow Club in Charlotte, N.C.

“We always knew that it was going to happen,” Thomas’ former high school teammate, Jack Clare, said to their coach, Dan Utley, after the victory. “It was only a matter of time.”

Clare took the words right out of Utley’s mouth.

Thomas played at St. Xavier High School in Louisville, of which Prospect is a suburb, before playing at Alabama. The St. Xavier coach had never seen such a young player dream any bigger. Thomas’ blend of focus and humility was everything he could want from a high school golfer.

“He backed his dreams up with hard work,” Utley said. “If there’s such thing as talent in this game, he has always had it. You never take anything for granted in this game, but Justin’s game was built to win major championships.”

In his high school years, Thomas flew across the country to play in national tournaments and returned to play for St. Xavier the next day. He never lost sight of the importance of being a good teammate, and that didn’t

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THOMAS

Continued from C1

...go unappreciated by his peers.

"We still joke and say that the game owes him success," said Brendan Doyle, a former high school teammate of Thomas' and a senior golfer at Indiana. "He's such a good guy that it makes it really easy to be happy for him."

Lucas Jones, another member of the 2011 St. Xavier golf team, used the PGA Championship to reminisce on the time he asked Thomas to play a round a golf with middle schooler Patrick McSweeney. Jones had been introduced to McSweeney after he was told he was battling cancer, something he also fought as a child.

"He immediately said, 'Absolutely, of course,'" said Jones, now a senior golfer at Bellarmine University. "That was when Justin was just beginning to come up at the peak of the college level. He got Patrick's number and they still text occasionally."

McSweeney relapsed right before the 2014 PGA Championship at Valhalla golf course in Kentucky, and Thomas met Jones once again in a grocery store parking lot so that he could sign a hat and a flag to give to McSweeney in the hospital. The cancer survivor attended St. Xavier, like Thomas.

"He's always been that way," said Cooper Musselman, another of Thomas' high school teammates. "He's like top 10 in the world right now and still to this day he never hesitates on sending me a text back.

He's a genuinely nice guy that isn't hard for anyone to get along with."

So, when Thomas cleaned up with a final-round 68 to take home the Wanamaker Trophy, there was plenty of excitement from his old team, but no shock. Instead, Musselman described it as a feeling of relief. It was something their old teammate had deserved since his early years in golf.

"He always does the little things," Jones said. "He has never stepped outside of the big picture, and that made the PGA Championship really nice to see."

Although they weren't around to celebrate together, Thomas' old St. Xavier teammates reminisced about their high school years over the phone.

"There was one shot he hit in a practice round that we still talk about," Doyle said. "It was like a 320-yard hole, and we all pulled out driver to see if we could reach the green. After nobody did, he pulled out a 3-wood and drove it within 5 feet. The next day he went on to break the course record. That's when we said, 'Wow, this guy's going to be special.' We were right about that."
The more you stare at it, the more impressive Alabama’s No. 1 streak looks

Kevin Scarbinsky

Oh, sure, the sun disappeared for a brief interlude in the middle of it, but there was a sense of normalcy to Eclipse Day 2017. The star at the center of our solar system rose in the East and set in the West per usual Monday.

Also, Alabama was a runaway choice as the No. 1 team in the Associated Press preseason poll.

Unless you’re as oblivious to college football as Will Muschamp was to the eclipse, you know by now the AP joined the Coaches Poll in starting the Crimson Tide at No. 1. You also know Alabama has extended its unprecedented streak of consecutive seasons with at least one No. 1 ranking to 10.

Miami’s amazing run of seven straight years atop the poll at some point every season from 1986-92 has been, it has to be said, totally eclipsed.

Go deeper inside the numbers, and you gain an even greater appreciation for Alabama’s consistency in performance during the last decade. Here are some fun facts:

Alabama ascended to No. 1 for the first time under Nick Saban on Nov. 2, 2008. Starting with that week and including this preseason ranking, the AP has released 138 polls. Alabama has been No. 1 in 59 of those polls.

Put another way, Alabama has been No. 1 in 43 percent of the AP polls from November, 2008 through August, 2017. That’s a first-ballot Hall of Fame batting average.

Twelve schools have reached No. 1 in the AP poll at least once since Alabama first did it under Saban, which highlights the exclusive nature of the national championship chase. Here’s the breakdown of how many times each of those 12 schools has been ranked No. 1 in that time, with national titles since 2008 in parenthesis:

- Alabama — 59 (4)
- Florida — 15 (1)
- Florida State — 12 (1)
- Ohio State — 12 (1)
- LSU — 11 (0)
- Oregon — 8 (0)
- Clemson — 6 (1)
- Mississippi State — 5 (0)
- Oklahoma — 4 (0)
- Notre Dame — 3 (0)
- Auburn — 2 (1)
- USC — 1 (0)

That 2012 preseason poll was Lane Kiffin’s one shining moment as the USC head coach.

SEE SCARBINSKY, B3
Depending on the calendar, there have been either 16 or 17 polls per season during the Saban era in Tuscaloosa. Here are the number of polls per season in which Alabama has been ranked No. 1 during this streak:

- 2016 — 15
- 2013 — 14
- 2012 — 11
- 2010 — 6
- 2008 — 5
- 2009 — 3
- 2014 — 2
- 2011 — 1
- 2015 — 1
- 2017 — 1 and counting

Interesting, isn't it? Alabama's longest in-season run as No. 1 in 2016 and 2013 didn't end with national championships, which verifies the wisdom that it's harder to stay on top than to get there. On the flip side, the Crimson Tide didn't reach No. 1 during its championship seasons of 2011 and 2015 until the only poll that matters — the last one.

About the only first left for Saban's Alabama program to accomplish in terms of poll mountain is starting and finishing on top. The Crimson Tide couldn't do it in 2010, 2013 or 2016, although it came agonizingly close last season.

One more chance starts Sept. 2.
Big SEC games at home for UA women this season

Staff report

The University of Alabama will host Missouri, LSU, Texas A&M, Vanderbilt, Arkansas, South Carolina, Auburn and Georgia in SEC women's basketball play in the 2017-18 season, the league announced Tuesday.

The home dates are set for Dec. 31 (Missouri), Jan. 11 (LSU), Jan. 18 (Texas A&M), Jan. 21 (Vanderbilt), Feb. 4 (Arkansas), Feb. 8 (South Carolina), Feb. 18 (Auburn) and Feb. 22 (Georgia).

The Crimson Tide will have road games at Florida (Jan. 4), Arkansas (Jan. 7), Mississippi State (Jan. 14), Kentucky (Jan. 25), Auburn (Jan. 28), Ole Miss (Feb. 11), Tennessee (Feb. 15) and LSU (Feb. 25).

Alabama doesn't play more than two consecutive road games at any point, nor does it have more than two home games in a row during the league season.

The SEC Tournament is scheduled for Feb. 28 - March 4 in Nashville.

Season tickets are currently on sale for $45 for public reserved general admission. Faculty/staff and senior citizen season tickets are available for $25, and groups of four or more public reserved general admission are reduced to $35.

UA also offers donation season tickets at a discounted rate of $35, with tickets distributed to local charities and nonprofit organizations or military personnel.

See SEC, C7
Eclipse over, Bama reign continues

The sun will rise in the east again this morning, despite its brief Monday hiatus. Alabama is No. 1 in the Associated Press college football poll once again. So is all right with the world?

The preseason ranking matters from a perception standpoint, if only because it indicates just how entrenched Alabama is in the collective consciousness of college football. The Crimson Tide is perceived as so powerful that it is the default choice as No. 1. The logic, if you can accuse college football reporters of being logical, is that any other team that wants to be No. 1 is going to have to go through Alabama at some point.

Florida State, which starts out at No. 3, gets its chance a week from Saturday. Others will get the opportunity later, although the Crimson Tide's SEC schedule contains only three ranked teams: No. 12 Auburn, No. 13 LSU and No. 23 Tennessee.

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HURT
Continued from C1

That's less daunting than the league schedule usually is, but it could always turn tougher. If Auburn beats Clemson, it probably becomes a Top 3 team in the ensuing poll. Plus, the post-season — Alabama's annual goal — would include, if all goes as UA hopes, three more ranked teams.

The most impressive outcome of Alabama being ranked at the top of the no-one-has-played-yet poll is that it extends the Nick Saban streak of being ranked No. 1 at some point to an entire decade. The achievement is staggering. No other dynasty in college football history since 1930 (the start of "modern" polling) comes close. The great Miami Hurricane run of the late '80s-early '90s — you remember, the run that Alabama ended in New Orleans — had seven such seasons, and won the title four times. Alabama has four titles in its nine-year run and is looking for a fifth. The AP poll is only one data point among many. But expect this statistic to be cited in all future "greatest coach of all time" debates.

There were a few other interesting aspects in the first poll. Alabama was the only SEC team in the Top 10. The Big Ten, despite its dismal post-season performance in 2016, had three (Ohio State, Penn State and Wisconsin, plus Michigan at No. 11), an indication of just how the winds of perception have changed in two years. It's also why, aside from Alabama-Michigan game may be the most intriguing matchup of the first weekend.

Oregon didn't make the preseason poll for the first time in a decade, indicating just how far the Ducks have fallen from a national title appearance just three seasons ago. This year, they aren't even considered in the Top Three in their own division, so Willie Taggart has a lot of work to do. On the other hand, South Florida — Taggart's previous job — is the only Group of Five team in the poll and has a chance to go undefeated. So there is hope in Dixie, or Tennessee Volunteers made the poll, even if almost everyone — including a segment of their own fan base — doesn't expect that will last. If it doesn't, will Butch Jones last? Nick Saban, meanwhile, is far from such questions, and is annoyed by the ranking. No topic has pushed his angry button like "expectations" in recent weeks. So he now has a full tank of jet fuel with which to ignite.

Reach Cecil Hurt at cecil@tidesports.com or 205-722-0225.
University removes damaged Robert E. Lee statue

By: Associate Press

Duke University removed a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee early Saturday after it was vandalized amid a national debate about monuments to the Confederacy.

The university said it removed the carved limestone likeness before dawn from the entryway to Duke Chapel, where it stood among 10 historical figures. Officials discovered early Thursday that the statue's face had been gouged and scarred and that part of the nose is missing.

Another statue of Lee, the top Confederate general during the Civil War, was the focus of the violent protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, that turned deadly a week ago.

Duke University president Vincent Price said in a letter to the campus community that he consulted with faculty, staff, students and alumni before deciding to remove the statue.

"I took this course of action to protect Duke Chapel, to ensure the vital safety of students and community members who worship there, and above all to express the deep and abiding values of our university," Price said in the letter.

Durham has been a focal point in the debate over Confederate statues after protesters tore down a bronze Confederate soldier in front of a government building downtown on Monday. Eight people face charges including rioting and damaging property. Days later, hundreds marched through Durham in a largely peaceful demonstration against racism before an impromptu rally at the stone pedestal where the statue stood.

Other monuments around North Carolina also have been vandalized since the Charlottesville protest, and calls are growing to take down a Confederate soldier statue from the campus of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Gov. Roy Cooper has urged the removal of Confederate monuments from public property around the state, though his goal would be difficult to achieve because of a 2015 state law prohibiting their removal. Duke is a private university and outside the scope of that law.

The Lee statue had stood for about 85 years between two other historical figures of the American South, Thomas Jefferson and poet Sidney Lanier, along the main entryway to the neo-Gothic church at the center of Duke's campus. It was moved into storage at 3 a.m. Saturday and its future is undetermined, university spokesman Michael Schoenfeld told the Herald-Sun of Durham.

"We want people to learn from it and study it and the ideas it represents. What happens to it and where it will be is a question for further deliberation," Schoenfeld said. The decision was supported by the university's trustees, Schoenfeld said.

See next page
Duke has been affiliated since its founding with the United Methodist Church. Luke Powery, dean of Duke Chapel, said Saturday he sees the empty space formerly occupied by the Lee statue as creating a new opportunity to heal the ongoing racism problems confronting the country.