Public school district enables statewide success

Since 2017, Alabama Connections Academy (ALCA) has served K–12 students across the state to meet more children where they are with a flexible learning environment. The school has enrolled more than 2,000 students from urban, suburban, and rural communities and has already graduated their first class.

Staying relevant to today’s students and families

Dr. Tom Sisk, superintendent of Limestone County School District, authorized the statewide K–12 online public school, Alabama Connections Academy (ALCA), because he saw an opportunity to meet more students where they are instructionally with individualized learning. He realized education models needed to change to reach today’s families and that virtual learning could be the key to helping schools step into the 21st-century.

“I had been reading the research. I’m driven by the belief that education has remained stagnant and we need to look at ways to remain relevant in education. In the last 100 years, we haven’t really evolved education. We’ve changed chalkboards to whiteboards and chalk to powerpoints, but not our delivery systems and flexibility. We assemble the child much like one would build a car,” said Dr. Sisk, who emphasized that the delivery of instruction is still a centralized 20th-century industrial model.
Thinking outside the box

Approaching 35 years of service to public education, Dr. Sisk has served as a special education teacher, a varsity coach (football, wrestling, and softball), a high school administrator, and a central office administrator. In addition to his advanced degrees in education, Dr. Sisk completed the Harvard Institute for Superintendents and District Leaders and is a nationally certified school superintendent — one of fewer than 300 in the United States.

Dr. Sisk isn't afraid to get creative and try new methods when it comes to education. He authorized ALCA because he believes virtual learning is an opportunity to decentralize learning and provide students and families the flexibility they need to succeed.

“What appealed to me about virtual learning is learning on demand. [It’s] being able to take a class in your pajamas at 8 o’clock, being able to work on Saturdays, meeting the needs of kids, and creating flexibility,” said Dr. Sisk. “You’ve got to be a little progressive in your thinking. Think outside of the box and think globally.”

Reimagining education across the district and state

Including ALCA, Limestone County Schools serve approximately 8,700 students and employ around 1,100 faculty and staff. The system is composed of six grades 6–12 schools, seven grades K–5 elementary schools, one grades 3–5 elementary school, one grades K–2 primary school, the Career Technical Center, the Limestone County Alternative School, and ALCA.

Through virtual learning with ALCA, Limestone County has expanded access to quality education across the district and state and helped students find success by meeting their unique educational needs.

“We have a number of kids where this is their second chance. If their circumstances fit a traditional setting, there wouldn’t be more than 2,000 kids enrolled with us,” said Dr. Sisk. “I do believe that in time we’re going to see that virtual learning — or as I refer to it as decentralized learning — will become the norm.”

ALCA has already seen an enrollment increase of 700+ students from the 2017–2018 to 2018–2019 school year. In addition to college preparatory programs, students have access to 16 advanced placement courses and 14 honors courses. They are even able to customize their electives, within the confounds of state requirements, with courses such as Greek Mythology.
The right people and the right attitude

Dr. Sisk credits ALCA’s success to its staff and school leaders, especially Principal Jodie Dean, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who brings more than 20 years of instructional and administrative experience to the district.

“We got the right person at the helm. This would go drastically awry if you don’t have the right school leader,” said Dr. Sisk.

Principal Dean works with parents and instructors to help students achieve, and exceed their academic expectations. She and her team of 30+ staff members are dedicated to helping students succeed from day one by getting acquainted with the online learning curriculum, robust curriculum, and enrichment activities.

Despite the hurdles of starting a virtual school, with a positive attitude ALCA has been able to successfully grow.

“ALCA wasn’t a burden for the district. Our cabinet members were worried about additional work that might be shuffled onto us. That hasn’t happened. We’ve had more invigorating and challenging work that’s been enjoyable,” said Dr. Sisk.

Growing educational and economic opportunities

As an above average school district in Alabama, Limestone County is propelling its brand statewide through its partnership with the Online & Blended Learning division at Pearson.

“What better way to project Limestone County than with a partnership with a nationally recognized partner in virtual education? Having the relationship with Pearson allowed us to expand enrollment, extend our brand statewide, and create better educational opportunities for underserved populations,” Dr. Sisk said.

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The opportunities from ALCA are more than educational — they’re also economic. Limestone County is one of the fastest growing and also one of the most technologically advanced counties in Alabama. Being part of the Huntsville metropolitan area, many Limestone County residents hold jobs with the Army, defense contractors, NASA, and other businesses that are on the cutting-edge of the newest technology. Through ALCA the county has been able to recruit and support a growing workforce.

“We’re getting two automotive plants and suppliers, and expecting another 20,000 jobs in the region over the next five years. ALCA supplies a seamless conduit,” said Dr. Sisk, who emphasized that the district was being stressed to recruit labor into the region. “If I’m a welder in a plant, my children can come take classes and still be a part of the local school system. It gives us an opportunity to have statewide exposure to recruit a workforce that we wouldn’t be able to do in an existing population.”

Advice for virtual school authorizers

1. If it’s good for kids, you have to try to do it.
2. Anything worth having requires effort.
3. There are no results without relationships. ALCA staff are embedded within the organization and the school is treated the same as other schools in the district.

Dare to change.

Digital learning removes limits and gives us the freedom to provide education anytime and anywhere, empowering us to overcome our most difficult challenges.

pearson.com/why-online-learning