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## STATE OF ALABAMA

### 2025 STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS

#### **EMBARGOED UNTIL THE GOVERNOR'S DELIVERY**

Lieutenant Governor Ainsworth, President Pro Tem Gudger, Speaker Ledbetter, Speaker Pro Tem Pringle, members of the Alabama Legislature, Chief Justice Stewart, justices of the Alabama Supreme Court, distinguished guests – and my fellow Alabamians!

It is an honor to join you all this evening as we begin another productive legislative session.

From Rainsville to Cullman...Huntsville to Birmingham...Tuscaloosa to the Loveliest Village on the Plains...from the Black Belt to the Wiregrass...from our Capital City to Mobile...

...and yes...all the way to the Gulf of America...we live in the greatest state in the greatest nation on Earth.

All of our work must continue to focus on making sure Alabama remains the best state in which to live, work and raise a family.

Y'all, if there is one thing to know about us Alabamians, it is to never count us out.

You call us a football state, and we might just become a basketball state.

You say we are not innovative, and we will rightfully earn Space Command Headquarters.

You say we are stuck at the bottom in education, and our students will show you the highest gains in the country.

There is nothing...I mean nothing...an Alabamian cannot achieve, and it remains the highest honor of my life to serve our people as governor these next two years. Ladies and gentlemen, the state of our state is strong, and opportunity abounds for all of Alabama.

There's more work ahead, but like I said: Don't ever count us out.

You certainly can't count out Abbie Stockard. Growing up, Abbie probably did not imagine she would one day represent Alabama on the Miss America stage. And she didn't just represent us...she won it!

A product of the Vestavia Hills public schools, Abbie is currently pursuing her nursing degree from Auburn University. Competing in the Miss America program earned Abbie tens of thousands in scholarship money – about which I am sure mom and dad are glad – and it has allowed her to champion Cystic Fibrosis awareness. Abbie will now take her message across the country, and she is already representing Alabama – and America – well.

And while you will always be Miss Alabama to us, we are so thrilled to welcome our own Miss America, Abbie Stockard, to the Alabama State Capitol this evening! Abbie, please stand and let us recognize you.

I am also grateful to the McGill-Toolen Catholic High School Choir for traveling from Mobile to be here with us. Thank you for sharing your God-given musical talents this evening.

This past fall as we kicked off another academic year, I, again, had the opportunity to visit several schools around our state, including St. Mary's, right down the road from McGill-Toolen. We were proud to celebrate the passage of the CHOOSE Act – Alabama's education savings account program.

Beginning next school year, these ESAs will give more Alabama families greater flexibility in choosing an education that suits their child's individual needs. Importantly, we are funding students, not systems.

Already in the first month of the application period, we have an outstanding 18,000 student applicants, and we have received them from every single county.

The number of applications will only grow in the next two years as program eligibility becomes fully universal.

Clearly, taxpaying Alabama families want school choice! And thanks to your work, they are getting just that.

We are most successful when we engage parents in our students' educational journeys. After all, our parents are our first teachers.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is helping us put books directly in the hands of Alabama families each month. Since we officially launched the program in our state, one million books have been sent to the mailboxes of enrolled families, and I am excited to report that we now offer this program in all 67 counties.

Our friend Dolly is not just working nine to five for Alabama, she is opening the world of reading to so many families across our state. Thank you, Dolly!

As governor, I have had the chance to meet thousands of our students, and I always remind, especially our elementary students, the importance of reading well. First, you learn to read, and then you ultimately read to learn.

After its first year of full implementation, the Alabama Literacy Act is proving it is working. The nation's report card showed our 4<sup>th</sup> graders, once again, have increased their reading scores – and it's happening across all proficiency levels and demographics.

On this occasion last year, it was a special privilege to host ABC Elementary School from my home county of Wilcox who made tremendous reading gains. Having a quality education is going to be their ticket to a successful life.

In Alabama, that is our primary goal – ensuring every child in every zip code can receive a strong education.

Thanks to both the Literacy and Numeracy Acts, our educators are unlocking students' potential to reach their dreams.

As we place hundreds of math coaches in schools and work our way towards full implementation of the Numeracy Act, we are already seeing the results.

Now, unfortunately, not all of us are blessed with an engineering brain like our friend Senator Chambliss, and we remember how difficult and frustrating math class could be.

This evening, I am excited to have with us some students who have math figured out...and they are 4<sup>th</sup> graders from Danville-Neel Elementary School in Morgan County.

Y'all, these students made the highest math gains in the state last year jumping up a whopping.....35 percentage points.

Boys and girls, congratulations on this achievement. Please stand and let us recognize you.

It is because of the great work of teachers and communities, like Danville-Neel, across this state that Alabama saw the largest jump in math scores in the country last year.

Our Turnaround Schools initiative is also delivering real results. Schools that were once among our lowest performing are now outpacing the average growth rate at other schools. Thanks to this initiative, we will no longer have failing elementary schools in Alabama.

We begin this legislative session with great momentum following last week's announcement on our historic reading and math gains.

When I took office, Alabama ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in reading. Today, we are 34<sup>th</sup>.

And in math, Alabama ranked 52<sup>nd</sup>. Today...we are 32<sup>nd</sup>.

Ladies and gentlemen, our students, teachers and families are changing the narrative when it comes to education in Alabama. We are, in fact, not just a football state...Alabama is an education state.

It is vital we continue investing wisely in programs that deliver results: Programs like the CHOOSE Act, the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, the Literacy and Numeracy Acts, as well as our Turnaround Schools Initiative.

We will continue allowing these successful education reform policies to take shape while taking an active approach to do everything we can to support our students, teachers and families.

According to a recent survey, 72 percent of high school teachers in the country reported that cell phones are distracting students.

We have also learned from parents that teens are spending an average of almost five hours every day on social media, and it is having a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Don't get me wrong: Our phones and social media are fantastic tools, but we have to know the time, the place and how to use them. Schools in our state are already taking action, and we want to support that statewide.

Senator Donnie Chesteen and Representative Leigh Hulseby will carry a bill to put a ban on cell phones in schools. The legislation will also require local boards to adopt Internet safety policies and provide students social media training.

Let's create the best learning environment for our students and get this bill to my desk so I can sign it into law.

In Alabama politics, we don't exactly follow the rule of never asking a lady her age...and that's ok. So, while we are on my age, I will share one of its many benefits: MeeMaw will tell you exactly like it is!

First, if a teacher wants to start a family, she should have the proper maternity leave. That is why I am proud to have Senator Vivian Figures and Representative Ginny Shaver joining forces this year to pass a good, responsible parental leave bill to support both our state workers and teachers.

Next, there are only two genders: Male and female. I look forward to finally putting my signature on the What is a Woman bill by Representative Susan Dubose.

And last, there is a place for the Ten Commandments and other key historical documents in our classrooms.

We will always be a state that supports our strong Alabama values.

Part of what makes Alabama the best state in which to live, work and raise a family is that we have opportunities for our men and women to earn a solid wage and provide for their families.

This evening, I am proud to report that since I have been governor, over \$55 billion dollars have been invested in our state, creating some 93,000 jobs and counting.

In Alabama, we understand how to make a successful business climate. Our new Senate Pro Tem Gudger is a small business owner himself, and I have been proud to partner with him, and all of you, to help build on our economic momentum.

Part of building a strong economy is having strong infrastructure. Transportation infrastructure, digital infrastructure and water and sewer infrastructure. We are tackling it all.

I am proud to report that thanks to Rebuild Alabama alone, we have embarked on nearly 500 road and bridge projects across every single county in the state.

Alabama is also being recognized as a national model for broadband deployment. Since taking office, we have supported over 200 expansion projects, which will allow more than 142,000 more addresses to be connected to high-speed internet.

For the first time, the state has directed funding towards 495 water and sewer infrastructure projects statewide, and that is largely thanks to the work of ADEM Director Lance LeFleur. And after 15 years of serving our state in this capacity, Lance will retire in May. Lance, we commend you and wish you well.

The Alabama momentum is real. And while we are creating a record number of jobs and maintaining low levels of unemployment, we still have a lot of work to increase our labor force participation rate.

Through our passage of the Working for Alabama legislation last year, we are establishing the new Alabama Department of Workforce to replace the Department of Labor. I am excited to have Secretary Greg Reed leading these efforts.

We must ensure a path for everyone who wants a job to get one, especially our veterans.

To our Alabama veterans: You have our utmost respect and admiration. You have taken care of us, and so now, we must take care of you.

We will work to make sure you have all the resources readily available.

I am proud to support legislation from Senator Andrew Jones and Representative Ed Oliver to make the Department of Veterans Affairs part of the Governor's Cabinet.

We will also restructure our Board so that our veterans – of all eras across every military branch – are best represented. The goal is to have a Board that is a team player within the executive branch and can fiercely and effectively advocate for the unique needs of veterans of every generation – and their families.

Our veterans are not only part of the fabric of our great nation. They are our fellow Alabamians.

They are our neighbors, our colleagues, family and friends. Here with us from Huntsville this evening is an Army veteran, Jae Barclay, along with his beautiful family.

Jae was serving in Afghanistan when a land mine exploded and engulfed his body in flames. That same day was his and his wife, Sierra's, first wedding anniversary. And just seven days later, they welcomed their first daughter, Addison.

In natural fighter fashion – in Alabamian fashion – he not only survived, he came home and overcame unimaginable obstacles and lives an outstanding life. He has a great job and a loving family. He is living the American Dream, and it is because of brave veterans like Jae that we can all live the American Dream.

Jae, what an honor it is to have you here with us. Please stand and let us thank you for your outstanding service to our nation.

The safety and security of our people is paramount.

A top security concern of every American is protecting our borders.

Securing the Southern Border is securing Alabama's border. And today is a new day in America with President Trump at the helm. He has wasted no time in leading on this very important issue.

Our own U.S. Senator Katie Britt is also an important champion of securing our borders. She is showing Washington, D.C. that Alabama means business. The Laken Riley Act is now law with President Trump's signature, and I am urging Congress to pass Senator Britt's Wall Act that will help finish building the wall and eliminate federal benefits for illegals. It's time to restore common sense.

Here in Alabama, we are supporting President Trump in his mission. I have directed my cabinet agencies – including the Alabama National Guard and ALEA – to continue standing ready to lend assistance where needed.

At the same time, we know every state in the nation is grappling with increasing public safety challenges, but I believe Alabama can lead on tackling this problem.

Bolstering public safety is my number one priority this session, and I am proud to partner with Speaker Ledbetter and a bipartisan group of legislators in putting forward a package of bills that will back the blue and combat inner city gun violence.

To back the blue, we will provide law enforcement with enhanced legal protections that allow them to carry out their duties courageously and effectively – without fear of Monday morning quarterbacking in the courts.

We will support long-serving law enforcement families through dependent scholarships. Y'all, our men and women in blue put everything on the line. They need to know: Alabama has their backs.

We will crack down on inner city violence by enhancing penalties for dangerous felons with guns. We will expand Aniah's law, boost our successful Metro Area Crime Suppression Unit, ban Glock switches, and we will enhance supervision of high-risk juveniles. Working together, we will create a safer Alabama.

Finally, we must not just be strong on crime – but also smart on crime.

While we are moving forward in building two new men's prisons and graduating a record number of corrections officers, we must also see that DOC resources are reserved for the worst of the worst offenders. That is why I am supporting the Second Chance Act. This commonsense reform will help us focus our taxpayer dollars on the most pressing public safety needs.

A safe Alabama is a secure future for Alabama, and a secured future is our goal. So, now, let's look ahead and keep making great strides for the people who call Alabama home.

Let's pass responsible budgets that do not grow government.

Let's support our students, teachers and families.

Let's support our economy and high-wage jobs.

Let's ensure more money stays in our taxpayers' pockets.

Let's support our veterans. And let's foster safe communities.

Y'all, I am proud of Alabama. I am proud of our citizens. I am proud to continue leading our state forward. And I am humbled to be a governor of all the people.

The people of Alabama deserve our very best. Future generations of Alabamians deserve our hardest work today.

This is our opportunity. So, let's not waste a moment.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless each of you and the great state of Alabama!