

Press Release

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Collaborative Economic Development Initiative Unites Northeast Alabama Programs to Transform Regional Workforce and Educational Opportunities

July 22, 2025 - ONE East Alabama, a newly formed regional economic development organization representing nine counties across Northeast Alabama, has announced a landmark partnership with three leading educational and workforce innovation programs—CREATE, EARTH, and Challenger Learning Center of Northeast Alabama—to drive economic prosperity and workforce transformation across the region.

ONE East Alabama was established to position Calhoun, Clay, Cleburne, Coosa, Etowah, Randolph, St. Clair, Tallapoosa, and Talladega counties as a premier business destination through a strategic focus on economic development, education, workforce readiness, and tourism. Executive Director Kelley Pearce emphasized the importance of uniting these efforts to ensure that economic opportunity is equitable and far-reaching—especially in smaller towns that have historically lacked access to robust resources.

“This collaboration is not just about building a workforce—it’s about building a future,” said Pearce. “By leveraging the innovative work of CREATE, EARTH, and the Challenger Learning Center, we are establishing a comprehensive economic ecosystem that prepares our students for high-paying careers, supports our local industries, and attracts investment into our communities.”

Create: Preparing the Next Generation of Skilled Workers

CREATE is located in Oxford, Alabama (Choccolocco Research, Education, and Technical Experience), directed by Lorie Denton, is already reshaping career pathways for secondary students and adults across the region. Initially serving Oxford High School, the program expands availability to 16 additional high schools across the region beginning this August. By offering hands-on training and industry credentials in high-demand fields—such as aviation, cybersecurity, robotics, and criminal justice—CREATE is equipping students to either enter the workforce directly or pursue higher education with confidence.



Kelley Pearce, Executive Director of ONE East





Lori Denton, Director of Create Technology & Innovation Center

As part of the regional strategy, the scalable model offered at CREATE supports the vision of ONE East Alabama by aligning workforce skills with regional industry needs—bridging the gap between education and economic opportunity.



EARTH: Innovation for Rural and Regional Resilience



Margaret Morton, Director of EARTH

The East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub (EARTH) located in Sylacauga, Alabama, under the leadership of Margaret Morton, will anchor rural economic development by transforming the former Avondale Mills complex into a dynamic campus for workforce training, innovation, and entrepreneurship. EARTH will serve as a launchpad for emerging ideas in agriculture, healthcare, IT, manufacturing, and more—while offering a lifeline of support services in transportation, early care, and job placement for adult learners.

With strategic partnerships in place—from Innovate Alabama to Shipshape AgWorks—EARTH is designed to incubate innovation and connect rural talent with the tools to succeed. This initiative aligns seamlessly with ONE East Alabama’s mission to foster economic growth by leveraging the region’s unique assets and driving community-based solutions.



Challenger Learning Center: Inspiring STEM Pathways and Lifelong Learning



Dr. Farrah Hayes, Executive Director of Challenger Learning Center of Northeast Alabama

Located in Rainbow City, Challenger Learning Center of Northeast Alabama will bring NASA-vetted, immersive STEM experiences to more than 40,000 students across 12 counties. With a focus on middle school programming and plans to expand into other grades, Executive Director Dr. Farrah Hayes envisions the Center as a cornerstone for STEM learning, career exposure, and credentialing.

Through space-themed missions, STEM junior microcredentialing, and partnerships with higher education institutions, Challenger Center will complement traditional education and prepare students for the high-tech jobs of the future. This educational innovation supports ONE East Alabama’s goal of creating a workforce pipeline that remains rooted in the region while capable of competing globally.



A United Vision for Regional Prosperity

Together, ONE East Alabama, CREATE, EARTH, and Challenger Learning Center are building a regional framework where education, workforce development, and economic growth go hand-in-hand. This collaborative strategy ensures that students can discover meaningful career paths, businesses can find skilled workers, and communities can thrive without the need to relocate talent or opportunity elsewhere.

“Our unified mission is to remove barriers and create a system where every student and adult in Northeast Alabama has access to training, education, and the tools to succeed,” said Pearce. “This is about preparing our people for the jobs of today and tomorrow—right here at home.”

Additional Information

ONE East Alabama

ONE East Alabama is a regional 501(c)(6) economic development organization representing nine counties in East Alabama. Its mission is to attract investment, foster job creation, and enhance quality of life through coordinated economic development, education, workforce, and tourism initiatives.

CREATE

CREATE provides high school students and adults access to technical education and career training across a wide array of high-demand industries. The program promotes workforce readiness and higher education access throughout East Alabama.

EARTH

The East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub (EARTH) is a regional center for workforce training, entrepreneurship, and innovation located in the historic Avondale Mills complex. EARTH supports economic development through knowledge-based training and strategic partnerships.

Challenger Learning Center of Northeast Alabama

Challenger Learning Center of Northeast Alabama delivers STEM-based educational space missions and classroom programming to students annually across 12 counties. The center fosters curiosity, critical thinking, and career exploration through immersive learning experiences.