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STATE OF ALABAMA

2023 STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS

Lieutenant Governor Ainsworth, Pro Tem Reed, Speaker Ledbetter, Speaker Pro Tem Pringle, members of the Alabama Legislature, justices of the Alabama Supreme Court, distinguished guests and my fellow Alabamians!

As we begin the first legislative session of this new four-year term, I am especially proud to be joined by so many students from around our state, including Livingston's University Charter School and the Northeast Alabama Community College.

Folks, our students...our young people are why our work today matters and why we must get it right. Everything we do today is for a better tomorrow for these children and all the families who call Alabama home.

We have an opportunity during this Legislative Session to continue making progress for Alabama families.

We must be prudent and wise with our folks' hard-earned dollars.

We must support a strong economy in Alabama so mom and dad can provide for themselves and their children.

We must support these hardworking parents.

We must ensure our children have the opportunity to receive a quality education no matter where they live.

And we must prioritize the safety of our children and our communities.

I believe Alabama can accomplish these goals and more because we believe in the power of strong families.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a lot of work still ahead, but as I have said before: I am confident Alabama's best days are still in front of us.

As Pro Tem Greg Reed takes on his first full term in the Senate, and as the House has its new leader in Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter, I predict we will have a busy and productive session, and I certainly thank you both for your good service.

I know at the end of this Session, we will have made great strides for the five million Alabamians who call Alabama their sweet home.

This evening, I am proud to offer a report on the state of our state. Folks, Alabama is thriving. It is filled with immense opportunity and endless possibilities.

Alabama's budgets are strong. Folks, that is not by chance. That is because, together, we have taken a fiscally conservative approach to budgeting. We've fully funded our rainy-day accounts, paid down our debts and made robust investments that are paying long-term dividends for our people.

We can be very proud of the fact that during my time as governor, we have not once used the word "proration," nor have we spent beyond our means. And that's not going to change moving forward. Members...I urge you to completely pay off the Alabama Trust Fund this year. That was the promise made to the people of Alabama, and we should make it a priority. Unlike D.C., we pay our debts!

Alabama's financial footing compared to other states across the country is solid, and on top of that, Alabama has one of the lowest overall tax burdens in the nation and one of best business climates.

I urge each of you – especially our new members – to continue being wise and responsible with our people's hard-earned money.

We are, once again, tasked with allocating our taxpayers' dollars that are part of the second round of the American Rescue Plan Act from Congress.

And I'll say again: This is not "free money," and we must invest these one-time funds wisely. Last year, thanks to you, members of the Alabama Legislature, we put these dollars to work, meeting some of Alabama's biggest challenges. I commit to the people of Alabama we will once again take a smart approach and put it towards major and needed endeavors like expanding broadband access, improving our water and sewer infrastructure and investing in our health care – including telemedicine.

This evening, I am calling a Special Session of the Alabama Legislature to begin tomorrow so that we can urgently address these endeavors. Let's wisely invest these federal monies to overcome some of our biggest challenges, while also paying off our debts.

If you turn on the news or even just make a run to the store, we know that times are tough right now.

A paycheck does not go as far as it did two years ago.

That is why I am calling on you to put nearly a billion dollars back into the hands of hardworking, taxpaying Alabamians through one-time rebates of \$400. That means \$800 for our working families, and it couldn't come at a better time!

Folks, this is the people's money, and it's only right, while still acknowledging we are recording revenues far exceeding normal and sustainable levels, we give a fair share of this money directly back to the people of Alabama.

While there is still uncertainty in our national economic climate, we must create stability here at home.

Our stability begins and ends with our small businesses – the backbone of our state's economy. We will reduce the financial load shouldered by our small businesses by lowering their monthly prepaid sales tax burden. This will positively impact thousands of small businesses across the state.

During my inaugural address, I promised we would reduce burdens holding back our businesses with the goal of cutting regulations by 25 percent over the next two years. I am proud to share with you all that tomorrow, I will sign an executive order to cut red tape so that our businesses are not held back, but can thrive. As I like to say, sometimes the best thing government can do is just get out of the way!

I am also proposing we invest even more into our locally owned businesses – the ones engrained into the DNA of our communities – through a \$200 million grant program known as our Main Street Program.

These competitive grants will help revitalize our small cities and towns. When folks think of main streets, they should think of Rural Alabama!

I am proud of the successful track record we have had in recruiting business and industry to both the rural parts of Alabama and the larger cities.

Since I've been governor more than \$42 billion have been invested in our state, which has created some 78,000 new jobs.

For most of those, we can thank the Alabama Jobs Act. And any good coach knows when you have a play that's working, the team needs to keep running it.

Today, we have to look ahead and create an economic development strategy for the 2030s.

I assured you we would have a winning game plan here at home, and tonight, I am calling on you to get behind our playbook for economic success, what I am calling The Game Plan.

We will ensure stability and growth by renewing and improving the Alabama Jobs Act and the Growing Alabama Act.

We will create a promising future by investing in large, shovel-ready sites and take steps to accelerate their development.

We will spur innovation by stimulating the creation of high-tech jobs, sparking growth in rural areas and supporting entrepreneurs and small businesses.

And lastly, we will build confidence by increasing transparency in our incentives program.

Y'all, Alabama is working. Let's keep it that way! I call on you to join me in ensuring that we keep winning by implementing The Game Plan through its passage in the Legislature, and I urge you to make this an early priority!

It is also important we be a state that supports our working moms and dads.

In a post-Roe world, I am proud Alabama has one of the strongest pro-life laws in America to protect our unborn babies. However, our work is not done. We must also support parents, whether they are looking to adopt or need childcare so they can put in a hard day's work to provide for themselves and their children.

We must ensure our children have the opportunity to receive a quality education. Improving our children's educational outcomes is my top priority and will continue to be over the next four years.

The first policy initiative of my first term was what I call Strong Start, Strong Finish. Our groundwork positioned our youngest learners to receive a sturdy foundation, ensuring their strong finish when they entered the workforce.

I am confident in the direction we are taking to improve our children's education. We have aligned our standards and assessments. We have seen stability in leadership. And we are experiencing a hunger from all areas of our state to produce better results for our students. That's why I believe we will make tremendous improvements in the area of education so Alabama ranks among the top thirty states in reading and math by the end of my term as governor.

We have seen tangible results in the students who have received instruction in our First Class Pre-K program. That is why I have instructed the Department of Early Childhood Education to prioritize funding classrooms in the most challenged areas of our state. No matter the zip code, a child should be able to get a strong start in their educational journey.

It's also past time we require our students to complete kindergarten. I call on you to adopt legislation to ensure our students are ready for the first grade. Our first grade teachers should be preparing those students for the second grade, not simply catching them up to be on a first-grade level.

Last year, I presented a challenge to our schools, communities, citizens and leaders to band together to pledge we will no longer accept the existence of failing elementary schools in our state.

No longer are we letting family income or any other barriers define a child's ability to obtain the quality education they so deserve. Instead, we are tackling these critical issues head-on by taking an individualized approach, examining and acknowledging the specific needs of each school and providing crucial resources to our disadvantaged school systems. I am proposing we continue funding this strategic vision to find new, personalized ways to solve old problems, ensuring every Alabama school is a successful one.

Through the Numeracy and Alabama Literacy Acts, we are putting a renewed emphasis on the fundamentals of education: Reading and math. The full implementation of these will be key to our students' success.

In my budget proposal, I am including increased funding for more reading and math coaches so we can ensure every child in every school has the ability to be proficient in these two essential areas.

We are also continuing and strategically funding after school programs.

We are doubling our funding for computer science education in Alabama.

We are working to increase our labor force participation rate by eliminating any and all barriers to enter the workforce. Today, there are needs in industries across the board, one of those being teachers.

My goal is to have the starting salary for all Alabama teachers to be the highest in the Southeast by the end of my term.

To that end, I am proud to announce tonight that I am proposing a two percent pay raise for our teachers.

I want Alabama to be aggressively working to recruit, retain and prepare the teacher of tomorrow.

As I laid out my vision for these next four years during my inaugural address, I chose to speak on the need to improve school choice in Alabama. In fact, I was probably the only Alabama governor to ever do so in an inaugural address.

It's important we continue to have meaningful discussions on school choice. That must begin with improving the school choice we already have: Our charter school options and the Alabama Accountability Act.

I am proposing we provide startup funds for Charter Schools and make needed reforms to the governance of the Charter School Commission in order to create better accountability.

These actions will allow more charter schools to form and to ensure high quality education and ultimately...create more choices for parents!

Alabama also continues to support destination magnet schools including the Alabama School of Cyber Technology and Engineering, the Alabama School of Fine Arts and the Alabama School of Math and Science. All are excellent options, and they are most certainly a part of what school choice means in Alabama.

In order for Alabama to be innovative tomorrow, we must be innovative in how we teach our students to learn today. It's schools like these that immerse them into subject areas like computer science or writing or even ballet.

I announced the creation of the Alabama School of Cyber Technology and Engineering during my first state of the state address in 2018.

Now, tonight, I am proposing we establish the Alabama School of Healthcare Sciences to address the growing healthcare worker shortage we are predicted to experience in the coming years.

This new healthcare high school, to be located in Demopolis, will offer an innovative curriculum for 9th through 12th graders, exposing them to a diversity of STEM and healthcare opportunities, as well as hands-on clinical training experiences.

Y'all, when these students receive their diplomas, they will be ready to fill a broad spectrum of healthcare jobs or pursue a higher education.

I am a firm believer in getting our students in real life experiences. In this modern economy, I also highly value STEM education. And learning must not stop at the classroom door.

Coach Saban has said before that while there are many trophies and championships in the game of football, the most life-changing achievement is getting an education. I could not agree more, Coach.

The Saban Center – a partnership between the Saban family and the city of Tuscaloosa – will be an interactive and immersive STEM experience for young people from all over Alabama.

And it won't just be limited to STEM, it will help students become even more well-rounded, exposing them to the arts and very appropriately – sports sciences.

This evening, I am very proud to add the state to the team of partners making the Saban Center a reality. I believe this will be a learning center for many Alabamians for generations to come – and to that I'll say...Roll Tide!

This evening, I am thrilled to be joined by Terry Saban. Terry and Coach Saban are incredible partners to our state, and I am very proud to join you on this venture.

Miss Terry, we're all honored to have you here. Would you please stand and be recognized?

And while education is number one, nothing is more important than the safety of our children.

Since 2018, we have invested over \$126 million in school safety and security. We must continue to do that in this Legislative Session.

Ensuring safety in our schools also means caring for the mental health of our young people. We are making tremendous strides to put a focus on mental health care in Alabama through our investments and our actions.

Unfortunately, we have to worry about the safety of our children in so many more ways today, including by dangerous and lethal drugs like Fentanyl.

That is why I am instructing ALEA to make combatting this drug the top priority of our Alabama Drug Task Force. Tonight, I am also urging you, our legislators, to pass House Bill One so I can sign it into law as soon as possible. By doing this, we will put any traffickers of this deadly drug behind bars – and keep them there.

While I cannot control what steps are being taken – or maybe better said...not being taken – at our Southern Border, I can do everything in my power to stop this drug from being a killer in Alabama.

Here in our state, we have and we will always back the blue, and that means standing behind the men and women who serve Alabama as Corrections officers. That is a tough – and too often thankless calling, not just a job, and we must continue to make increasing their salaries and benefits a priority.

Here in Alabama, we also proudly support the men and women who serve in our nation's military. Let's, all of us in this room, continue working to make Alabama the most military friendly state in the nation and find ways to support our service men and women deployed abroad or here at home.

Alabama is blessed with an abundance of outdoor recreation opportunities...from our scenic mountains and lakes, to our lowland forests teeming with wildlife, to our sandy beaches and Gulf seafood.

Each year, thousands of tourists travel long distances to share in our quality of life.

But that's not all. Alabama's beauty and opportunity are a natural advantage in recruiting and retaining new generations of highly skilled workers seeking the best balance of life for their families.

They are discovering there is no place like Sweet Home Alabama!

There is great possibility in the future of our state.

As we look ahead to a future filled with rich opportunity and great possibility, I pledge that we will build on our roots by focusing on getting the hard work done today, while never forgetting that our work now matters most to our future generations.

Since inauguration, we've hit the ground running. We are working hard to improve life for our Alabama families.

I'll say it again: We will have a busy, productive and full four years in front of us. Let's work together, and let's go to work!

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.

May God continue to bless each of you and the great state of Alabama.