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STATE OF ALABAMA

2024 STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS

Lieutenant Governor Ainsworth, President 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!

It is an honor to address you all as we begin what will be a consequential legislative session.

In just one month on March 5, we will also head to the polls to vote in Alabama's Primary Election, which is significant this year as we are now one of the earliest states in the nation and included among those on Super Tuesday. All the more reason to get out and proudly cast your vote!

Any chance I get, I remind young people that voting is the single-most important civic duty we have. From delivering this message to Girls Staters each year to speaking with our 4th graders learning about their Alabama history – I am always proud to share with our students that having the right to vote should never be taken for granted.

When talking to a group of Carbon Hill 7th graders preparing for their school elections, I told them: If you don't vote, you can't gripe. The same is true for us adults.

As an Alabamian, something I am most proud of, though, is that after the polls close, no matter who we voted for, we all still treat each other with respect, whether selecting a Class President or President of the United States.

Even while we may vote differently, we all agree in protecting the integrity of our elections in Alabama.

That is why I am proud to support legislation that prohibits ballot harvesting in our state. We would put a stop to any manipulation of our elections by closing loopholes that allow unaccountable, paid political operatives to pressure folks through the absentee voting process.

This year, we have a new bill to outlaw ballot harvesting that also protects folks who truly need assistance in having their voices be heard.

While other secretaries of states are worried about picking their favorite candidates for the ballots, I am grateful Secretary Wes Allen is focused on making sure Alabama's elections will always be free and fair.

This year when Alabamians make their way to the ballot box, I hope they will be voting on another issue: Gaming. I believe the current proposal being contemplated by the Legislature is good for Alabama, and I will be carefully watching it move through the process. It will crack down on illegal gambling, and it will responsibly regulate limited forms of legal gaming, including a statewide lottery. Thank you to Speaker Ledbetter and his leadership team for their hard work on this.

Now is the time for Alabama voters to have another say on this issue.

In more ways than one, we can contrast what we are doing here in Alabama with that of Washington, D.C., or even other states. I am confident that because of our work together – Republicans and Democrats alike – Alabama can be the model for the nation.

We all recognize the responsibility and role of state government. That means standing up for our Alabama values, while focusing on areas like education, economic development, workforce, infrastructure and public safety. And we will always, always make sure our government is working for our fellow Alabamians.

I believe because of these efforts, and because we are on solid financial footing, Alabama is in the most competitive position we have ever been in our state's history.

Ladies and gentlemen, the state of our state is strong, and together, we are prepared for the Alabama of tomorrow.

Fostering safe communities is a paramount responsibility of government on any level, and it begins with protecting the future of our state – our children.

That is why I am calling on the Legislature to, once again, invest in school safety through a \$100 million grant program.

We must also continue investing in critical mental health care for our students.

Unfortunately, children across our country, including right here in Alabama, have been victims of human trafficking. We must continue educating the public on this very real evil, and we must take action against it where we can. For many, the movie, Sound of Freedom, was a wake-up call. The proposed Sound of Freedom Act will mandate life in prison for those who traffic minors, and I am proud to put my support behind this important legislation.

In this ever-evolving world, ensuring new technologies are both safe and effective is an important public safety measure. Today, that new technology is Artificial Intelligence, maybe better known as AI.

And look y'all, I am not going to stand here and preach like I know a lick about AI. However, I do know that new technologies can have benefits, but if not used responsibly, they can be dangerous. We are going to ensure that AI is used properly.

This week, I will sign an executive order to establish a task force to better understand Artificial Intelligence and to prepare the state to safely and effectively use this emerging technology going forward.

The Alabama Department of Corrections certainly remains a key focus of our state's public safety efforts. I will be frank: Running a corrections system is a hard job, and I know everyone has an opinion on how they can do it better. There is no one more capable to lead that effort here in Alabama than Commissioner John Hamm.

Prisons around the country and on every level – federal, state and local – are experiencing challenges. But we remain committed to doing everything in our power to make improvements where we can in our state system.

We are moving forward in our mission to build two new facilities. At the same time, we are working to stop contraband coming into our existing facilities, and we are doubling down on our staff recruitment efforts and seeing record graduating classes of officers because of it.

Alabama proudly backs the blue, including our corrections officers, and we steadfastly support our military.

I am thrilled to have recently tapped General David Pritchett to serve as the new adjutant general for the Alabama National Guard.

Already in his short time on the job, the Alabama National Guard has stepped up in times of need. From carrying the torch on important missions like the F-35 project to aiding portions of the state impacted by stinging winter weather.

He also continues to support the hundreds of Alabama soldiers deployed at the Southern Border to protect our country against illegal immigration – we are proud of these men and women and thank them for their service.

In addition to supporting our active military men and women, we also care deeply for our veterans who have served.

Last November, I had the opportunity to visit Dovetail Landing in Lincoln.

Their vision is to create a place to support veterans, especially those struggling with the challenging transition back to civilian life. It could be through emotional support or by helping these folks develop a new skillset to enter the workforce.

I was impressed and moved. This evening, I am calling on you to invest in the construction of this new endeavor. Our veterans carried us, and now it is time we help carry them.

Alabama is a pro-life state. I am more committed than ever to protect the sanctity of life, and as I said on this occasion last year, our work is not done.

This evening, I am proud to declare Alabama will foster a culture of life. We must re-focus our efforts to do more to support life after birth.

Last year, Commissioner Nancy Buckner and the Alabama Department of Human Resources had great success in foster care adoptions, accompanied by a relentless focus on enhancing childcare quality. I am proud to double-down on these efforts.

To foster a better culture of life, we must also do more to support Alabama families, and early onset medical care is necessary for both mothers and children. While we are making significant strides, we still face challenges, especially in Rural Alabama.

That is why I am proud to support a pilot program that will start hosting checkups for pregnant women at nine county health departments in areas of need.

Folks, there is nothing more important than our Alabama families, and we must come together to find common ground on meaningful ways to support them.

The success of any state hinges in large measure upon the ease and speed of the transportation of commerce. Alabama's roads, bridges and ports have always played a major role in driving our growing economy.

Just as our roads and bridges are critical to our success, our digital highways – or broadband connectivity – are equally vital.

Ensuring our entire state has the ability to connect to high-speed internet is the most significant thing we can do to support a modern economy. Just yesterday, I was in Wilcox County to announce 21 grants across the state totaling \$188 million. We're talking 46-hundred miles of fiber infrastructure. In total, Alabama's investment in broadband expansion will be a whopping \$2 billion. Y'all, I am really excited about this, and there's even more to come!

I believe we have the best broadband deployment map in the country. And over the next three years, every Alabamian will see the difference, and we will be more competitive for it as we work to connect Alabama.

Our state has experienced tremendous success in economic development, and I am confident we will be able to build on those efforts with our new Commerce Secretary Ellen McNair.

Tonight, I am proud to report to you all that during my tenure as governor, Alabama has seen investments totaling \$48 billion, which has created 86,000 new jobs. As I like to say: We're just getting started!

Secretary McNair and her team are developing a brand-new strategic plan, one that will meet our goal of having an economic development strategy for the 2030s today!

To help Alabamians and Alabama businesses achieve success, though, we must make sure our efforts in workforce development match what we are doing to recruit and retain business and industry.

Last July, I wrote an OpEd saying to eliminate ‘Help Wanted’ signs, we must shift our focus to labor force participation. The Ivey Administration remains committed to doing that.

In 2015, major reforms were made within the state’s workforce development sector. I am committed to taking those reforms a step further so we can remain laser-focused on ensuring government always works better for Alabamians. When it comes to workforce development, there are two customers – jobseekers and employers.

While our unemployment rate remains historically low, our labor force participation rate stands only at 57.2 percent, one of the lowest in the nation.

Our state will not reach its full potential with nearly half of its population sitting on the sidelines. Alabama can do better, and it will take making Alabama’s workforce programs more effective and efficient.

The mission of workforce development must be to recruit, train, employ and retain Alabamians into high-demand jobs.

One of our greatest needs remains within our healthcare workforce, especially in Rural Alabama. There is simply no denying it, and we need more people to fill just about every kind of healthcare job out there – doctors, nurses, techs, you name it.

Last year, I introduced the idea of the Alabama School of Healthcare Sciences.

We used our successful School of Cyber Technology and Engineering, as well as our other specialty schools, as the blueprint. This school will directly expose young men and women from around Alabama, and particularly rural students, to various healthcare fields. And it gives them options. Maybe they want to graduate with a credential to immediately start working a high-wage career, or maybe they want to go to college and become a nurse or maybe even attend medical or dental school.

We will now give these students an opportunity and a state-of-the-art school to attend.

Over the last year, we have finalized the plans, and I am proposing we locate this school in Demopolis. Already, we have received tremendous community support, and the gold standard of rural healthcare is just a few steps away from the proposed site where these students will learn. And on top of all of this, the feasibility report commissioned by the Legislature last year has once again validated Demopolis as the ideal location for this important school – folks, let’s get this important project done.

I'll say this: Demopolis already has a proven track record of producing Alabama's healthcare leaders.

Dr. Selwyn Vickers, who I am proud to have joining us tonight, is proof positive of that.

As a young boy, born in Demopolis, Dr. Vickers' parents showed him that hard work could help him achieve anything he put his mind to, and boy, were they right.

Today, Dr. Vickers is one of the top doctors in the world, while currently serving as president and CEO of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

Students in every Alabama county have the potential to benefit from an education in Demopolis, just like Dr. Vickers did, and we will accomplish that through the Alabama School of Healthcare Sciences. Members of the Alabama Legislature, investing in this project is one of my top priorities this session, and I am calling on you to make this a reality.

Dr. Vickers once said in an interview that education is the great equalizer, and I could not agree more. Thank you, Dr. Vickers, for your contributions to our state and our nation, and for being here tonight. Will you please stand to be recognized?

During my inaugural address, I promised the people of Alabama that ensuring every Alabama student receives a high-quality education would be my number one focus during this term.

And members, while I am always delighted to spend some time with you all, I am especially proud we are joined by many of our young people tonight.

We heard the beautiful music from our Jasper High School students who hail from Pro Tem Reed's hometown. Thank you, all, for being here tonight! Please stand and let us recognize you.

This last year, one of the highlights for me personally was visiting our 15 Turnaround Schools. 4th graders from one of those schools – ABC Elementary in my home county of Wilcox – are here with us this evening.

Folks, these boys and girls had the highest reading gains in the entire state of Alabama last year! This deserves to be celebrated! ABC Elementary, please stand to be recognized!

I believe in every single one of our students in Alabama, and when you set the bar high for them, these boys and girls can reach their fullest potential.

The progress being made at ABC Elementary can certainly be credited to our Turnaround Schools Initiative, as well as these students here tonight, their classmates back home, their parents and their teachers. We must double-down on the success of our Turnaround Schools Initiative.

After I was sworn in for my second term, I established the Governor's Commission on Teaching and Learning. The Commission provided a report that will serve as our blueprint for improving student outcomes over the next three years.

Chief among those recommendations is fully funding both the Numeracy and Literacy Acts.

Our teachers are being trained in the science of math and reading, and we are preparing them not only to teach our kids today, but also of the future. All the work we have done through the Numeracy and Literacy Acts is critical to our success.

And I will say this again crystal clear: If you all send any version of a delay of the Literacy Act to my desk, I will veto the bill.

Ensuring our students are proficient readers and ready for the next grade is simply too critical. And these Wilcox County kids have proven when the right resources and curriculum are in place, they can do it!

I am very proud of the fact that during my time serving as your governor, together, we have invested a new historic amount in our public schools each year. This year, we will, once again, have the largest Education Trust Fund in our state's history.

We must also fulfill our promise to have the highest starting salary for our teachers among our neighboring states. Let's get that done this Session.

Improving our state's education system is a process, and we have to meet the needs of all students. As governor, I realize the way to do that is to make sure there are opportunities available for our children.

For some families, that means having the chance to send their child to a charter, magnet or private school, or to homeschool them. School choice is a spectrum, and last year, we recognized that to expand our options in Alabama, we had to first improve our existing options – charter schools and the Alabama Accountability Act. You accomplished that – thank you.

Now, our next step is to provide our parents, beginning with those most in need, education savings accounts, which will further us on our journey to become the most school-choice friendly state in the nation.

Passing an education savings account bill that works for families and for Alabama is my number one legislative priority, and I am proud to have our education budget chairmen, Senator Arthur Orr and Representative Danny Garrett carry the CHOOSE Act.

Once we get this legislation across the finish line, we will prepare for the program to begin in the 2025-2026 Academic Year. For its first two years, we will be helping families who might not otherwise have the option to afford to send their children to the school of their choice through these \$7,000 education savings accounts.

For the third year and beyond, ALL families will be eligible for the program.

As additional families choose to participate in the program, and as our revenues increase, we can grow the program responsibly so that it can be fully universal for every Alabama family who wishes to participate.

This program will be effective and sustainable, and it will serve as the catalyst for making Alabama the most school choice friendly state in the nation for years to come.

My goal is to put us on a trajectory to make our program fully universal, while also maintaining our full and total support for public education. At the end of the day, I believe the CHOOSE Act – packaged with providing our K-12 teachers the highest starting salaries – will help our public schools become even stronger.

And I believe we will continue working towards our goal of being in the top 30 nationally when it comes to student outcomes.

Folks, I am confident in Alabama's future, because I am confident in our students. I have met thousands of these young people, and I am more encouraged by the day.

I am also proud of Alabama. I am proud of our citizens. And I am proud to continue leading our state forward.

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.