

# THIS IS ALABAMA



Piedmont students enjoy technology-based learning in an otherwise traditional classroom. Provided by Piedmont schools

## Innovation + education = transformation

### RURAL ALABAMA SYSTEM USES TECHNOLOGY TO EDUCATE STUDENTS, REVITALIZE COMMUNITY

In the small town of Piedmont, in the Appalachian foothills of northeast Alabama, students have the world at their fingertips. A commitment to innovative education has made their school system a nationally recognized leader in learning.

In 2009, Piedmont City Schools became the first system in Alabama to adopt a one-to-one device initiative when mPower Piedmont put laptops into the hands of students in grades 4 through 12. Three years later, kindergarteners and elementary students were using personal iPads and MacBooks in their WPA-era school, too.

But this was never simply a laptop initiative, says Dr. Matt Akin, superintendent. "It's a learning initiative. We use technology as a tool to truly individualize learning."

Piedmont built a citywide wireless network that was "the game changer," Akin says, because then every child had access to on-demand learning.

Today, every high school student takes at least one online course. These courses expand the curriculum, giving students access to five foreign languages and classes ranging from health science to hunter safety. They also learn time management and problem solving. "It takes self-discipline and organization to do online study," Akin says. "These are skillsets they might not get in a traditional class."

The schools' technology lets teachers tailor lessons to individual students, reach at-risk students, quickly assess students' progress, offer lessons during the summer (40 percent of middle-school kids take summer classes for high-

school credit), and expand the curriculum in ways that make learning intuitive and fun.

"What we're doing doesn't work unless you have very talented and qualified teachers who are also willing to teach in a different way," Akin emphasizes.

This school system, with an enrollment of 1,250, is attracting lots of attention. Former President Barack Obama recognized Piedmont's technology initiatives and personalized learning as a national model.

The middle school is a Verizon Innovative Learning School. Piedmont High School, a national Blue Ribbon School, was named an Apple Distinguished School, and U.S. News & World Report recognized it as the No. 2 "Most Connected High School" and one of the best educational programs in the U.S.

Some 40 percent of the students are enrolled in Advanced Placement courses; there's a 99 percent graduation rate; and since 2013, every district graduate who has applied to college has been accepted.

"This was always a community transformation initiative," Akin says.

When Piedmont's textile mills shut down, most of the jobs disappeared and the community began to die. School and community leaders looked for ways to revive things, decided schools should be the catalyst and made education a top priority in Piedmont's budget.

"It has always been collaborative," he adds. "Whether it's the mayor or a parent or a bank president, we all believe in what we're doing."

Written for This Is Alabama by Susan Swagler.

## There's no better place to do this noble work

I am proud to be in Alabama at the helm of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, now celebrating its 25th year of service to the community.

When asked to join the dedicated board and staff team of this significant cultural institution in 2015, I was both excited and humbled by the opportunity. After all, BCRI is widely recognized as a crown jewel among peer institutions that seek to tell the story of disenfranchised people whose courage and determination have transformed a nation and continues to inspire social change across the globe.

Amid the afterglow of the 88th birthday celebration honoring the memory of Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. in the newly designated Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, and the bittersweet farewell this week to the first African American U.S. President, my focus has shifted to what comes next.

A divided America, following an unprecedented presidential campaign and anticipating a transition to new leadership, has left many citizens searching for common ground and renewed hope for the future. Looking back at Birmingham's civil rights history in the 1960s, and contemplating the work that remains to correct injustices faced by African American and other diverse communities, Alabama is the right place for me to help change the world.

As the Birmingham community and other Alabama stakeholders develop the new Civil Rights National Monument, I'm eager to expand existing partnerships, forge new alliances statewide, increase philanthropic support and establish new standards of excellence with the help of all our citizens.

Indeed, we can be an example, in perpetuity, of ongoing progress toward a just and equitable society.

In the words of Dr. King, I invite my fellow citizens to "Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in."

— Andrea L. Taylor is president and CEO of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

### Alabama by the numbers

## 2 percent

Graduates of the University of Alabama in Huntsville have economic outcomes that rank among the top 2 percent of college graduates across the United States, according to a recent Brookings Institution report.



### Alabama changed the world when ...

Horace Clemons and Saul Berenthal developed the Oggun Iron Horse, a tractor that runs on a 19-horsepower gas or diesel engine designed for small-scale farming. It weighs just 1,500 pounds and is sold for as little as \$10,000. — AL.com

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