

Transforming Central Alabama Through Educational Support

Written by Ann Marie Stephens

Children in Central Alabama are experiencing a struggle that is hard to see at first glance. These children do not have the support they need to learn the reading and math skills that will allow them to succeed in their education. Thankfully, a nonprofit called Better Basics sees this struggle and has been helping to put these students on the path to academic mastery.



Better Basics in action

Founded in 1993, Better Basics is a nonprofit in Birmingham, Alabama, that helps children in Central Alabama from birth through 12th grade develop the educational skills they need to succeed. Better Basics' [mission](#) is “to eradicate illiteracy among children in Central Alabama. We [Better Basics] deliver reading and math instruction and resources to empower the educationally vulnerable.” Better Basics provides children it serves with academic and community programs to meet their learning needs.

Currently, Better Basics says [“in Birmingham, Bessemer, Leeds, Fairfield City Schools, and Talladega County Schools”](#) there are students that receive Better Basics programming. Recent test scores in these areas have shown that many schools in these districts are full of students who aren't reading well enough to keep up in school. According to the Alabama State Department of Education, 42 out of 49 schools in these school districts had at least 20% of their third-graders who took the 2021-2022 Alabama Comprehensive Assessment Program test under the third-grade reading benchmark. At least 50% of third-graders in 15 schools tested below this benchmark. This situation is an issue because the National Research Council noted in 1998 that

people are at a much higher risk of not getting a high school diploma if they are poor readers when they finish third grade.



Children participating in Better Basics Summer STEAMER program.

Thankfully, Better Basics is working to combat the statistics in these school districts by offering diverse academic programs. For example, [30-A-Day](#) is a book club program for elementary school students to help them develop reading skills and a love of reading. In contrast, another program called [Wise Words](#) allows volunteers to share their love of reading with first-graders through classroom read-alouds. Fairfield public school students from

Kindergarten through high school also have access to [Hope 21st Century Community Learning Centers](#), which are “out-of-school” centers at every Fairfield School System school that offer pursuits such as homework help and exercise throughout the year. Lastly, during the summer, Better Basics hosts [Summer STEAMER](#) programming that provides science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM) educational activities to elementary school students. This way, children are still retaining the knowledge they’ve learned while they’re out of school.

Better Basics does much of its work, however, through its Academic Tutoring, Reading Intervention and Math Intervention programs. For [Academic Tutoring](#), elementary school students meet individually with a Better Basics tutor to receive tutoring in reading skills in which the student needs the most help. The nonprofit’s intervention programs, however, go a step further. Better



Students during Better Basics Math Intervention program.

Basics employs certified instructors to deliver its intervention programs. Depending on the

program, each teacher teaches a few elementary school students as a group in either [reading](#) or [math](#). Students make significant improvements with this help.

Both the statistics and the testimony of people connected with Better Basics show this improvement. Better Basics has recorded that [comprehension ability had developed by 54%](#) in Reading Intervention students during 2021-2022. Better Basics also says that students in the Math Intervention program more than doubled their “foundational mathematics skills” proficiency in this same school year.



*Better Basics Board of
Directors Secretary Lynn
Kirkland, Ed.D., Ed.S., M.A.*

Better Basics Board of Directors Secretary Lynn Kirkland, Ed.D., Ed.S., M.A., testified to this. “The data is clear with Better Basics. We pre-test and post-test children both with literacy and mathematics intervention programs, and the data has been clear every year that I’ve been here and prior to my arrival that we make a difference with the children with the interventions,” Kirkland said.

Geovonna Caves, a former intervention teacher, said she has also seen students become more assertive in their reading skills from the reading intervention program. She gave the example of Skylar, one of her previous intervention students, whose attitude and reading ability quickly changed from timid and weaker to sure and stronger, respectively, as Caves worked with her.

“When I came to her class to pick her and her classmates up, she was always the first one to run out of the door, to give me a hug,” Caves said. “[She was] excited about our sessions now; she had been so hesitant in the past. Towards the end, when we started testing, she was actually the top reader in her group.” Caves said. “Being involved in a small group setting and having the opportunity to work on her reading skills without so many people around, it helped her a lot, and she gained so much self-confidence.”



Dolley Parton Imagination Library and Reading Mentor Coordinator Geovonna Caves

Although Better Basics impacts students through academic programs, it also facilitates four initiatives in Central Alabama communities to help even more. The first program, [Books for Birmingham](#), is where children from academically and educationally at-risk communities, who might not have access to books, are given books for free. According to Better Basics, around 2700 children received books last school year because of this program working with the



Better Basics Book Nooks program

assistance of institutions. The second program, [Book Nooks](#), facilitates Better Basics placing mini-libraries in urban Birmingham communities, where children can take books for free and feel confident that Better Basics will restock the books. The third program, [Community-Wide Read Alouds](#), are one-day events that reach local school districts' classrooms. Thousands of fifth-grade down to pre-kindergarten students are visited by volunteer guest readers and receive free copies of the books read.

The final program is a partnership between Better Basics and the [Dolley Parton Imagination Library](#), which allows children in Central Alabama five years old

or younger to receive books. Better Basics covers the costs, so these books do not cost the children or their families anything. Caves said parents tell her positive feedback on how children grow in their interest in reading because of this program, [which Caves now coordinates](#). She related how parents of children who receive these books will tell her, “She’s so excited about these books; she wants to take them to the doctor, to the park, you know, to grandma’s house, and we read them over and over and over.”

With everything it does, Better Basics has impacted many students. [According to Better Basics](#), “In 2021-22, Better Basics served over 22,000 children in Central Alabama. We gave away over 70,000 books to children in our communities.” To do this, it

relies on lots of donations and volunteers. Better Basics Volunteer Coordinator and UAB student Adalie Westin said it was delightful to volunteer for Better Basics last school year. “It almost gave me, I know it’s cheesy, but like a sense of purpose you know, where it was like I was motivated weekly to go see her, and it was fun, and it was easy,” Westin said. “For something with such high reward and little cost, I don’t see why anyone wouldn’t do it.”



*Better Basics Volunteer and
Community Reads Coordinator
Adalie Westin*

There are no signs of Better Basics slowing down its drive to provide each child in Central Alabama the education they deserve. These struggling students will only resolve their learning challenges with solid support. Better Basics’ example shows others the importance of supporting the children that might someday shape Alabama. Whether handing out books or teaching a child how to multiply, Better Basics is taking those small steps that should help shape our society for the better. To learn more about Better Basics, visit its [website](#).