

# ALABAMA SCHOOL JOURNAL

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## School funding under siege

Dr. Hubbert shares concerns about growing abuse of corporate tax tricks.

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## Proposed AEA constitutional amendments

Delegates need to know how you want them to vote.

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## Board certified teachers share experiences

Gaining national board certification helps teachers grow.

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## National science conference in Birmingham

Conference features short courses, science store, and NSTA Showcase.

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## New Online Survey says start schools much later

AEA's first Online Survey, the latest feature to be added to the AEA Web site, www.myaea.org, has produced some interesting results.

For the very first survey, 291 respondents answered the survey question: "Do schools start too early?" Of those responding, 84.9 percent said "yes" schools are starting too early, while 9.1 percent said "no" and 3.4 percent said that the school start date did not make much of a difference.

Several respondents shared their concerns about starting school in early August.

• "Our school system begins in early August. This year with temperatures of 100+ for all of August and part of September, it was terrible. There was no going outside. We have so many students with health situations that the heat is unbearable."

• "We simply need to go to year around schooling. I need time off in the spring, summer, fall, and winter. Children need the same. I have been teaching for 13 years and see how everyone would benefit from short breaks. After summer vacation we spend too much time re-teaching students. Year round school would help the United States keep up with other nations."

• "I think all schools in Alabama should be on the same schedule. That would make it easier for everyone statewide. We have teachers at our school with children in other school systems within Marshall County that have completely different calendars."

• "The high temperatures in August were very dangerous to our students. There was a traffic jam. Students had to get off the bus to cool off. It registered 112 degrees on the bus. My opposition to schools starting before Labor Day is for health reasons. Our students deserve better consideration. It is very hypocritical to worry about test scores, healthy lunches, etc., and continue this practice."

• "As a teacher standing out in the traffic line for twenty minutes in the heat of the morning and the afternoon was miserable. Our children also have to ride the bus to four schools and by the time my son reached my school the temperatures on the buses were well above 100-108 for about 15 days in August."

• "My classroom is located where it is battered by the sun all day long. My AC never works right and I have to use three fans all day long. This year when watching the buses in the afternoon, you could see the bus drivers going along spraying water on the children to cool them. That is insane!"

• "Starting and air conditioning schools during the hottest month of the year is ridiculous. Many AC systems are old and over-stressed anyway. I have been in the classroom a long time and 10 days of instruction are not going to make or break whether a child does well on a standardized test. Test scores were higher 15 years ago when school started at a reasonable date."

### What's your opinion about No Child Left Behind?

The newest AEA Online Survey available now at www.myaea.org asks for your input on the question: Do you think that NCLB has been good or bad for students and for our schools? What is your opinion? See the results in the next *Alabama School Journal*.

## Problems in federal tutoring program show pitfalls of for-profit companies operating in public schools

An investigation by the Alabama Education Association (AEA), reported by the *Alabama School Journal* and the *Mobile Press-Register*, found widespread irregularities and questions of effectiveness in a Mobile private tutorial firm that received \$1.1 million in contracts, paid for by federal funds.

Recent reports say that the Mobile County Public School System shut down a summer camp operated by Achieving Greatness Tutoring (AGT) over the summer because of improper practices, and new questions are now being raised about oversight and implementation of the private tutoring provisions under No Child Left Behind.

AGT was operating a summer day camp where children were playing checkers and line dancing rather than learning reading and math, according to Mobile County school officials. These allegations are similar to those first reported by the *Journal* about the shoddy educational practices of the company's after-school tutoring program. Questions were also raised by the Mobile School System about the state's inability to suspend the company's accreditation.

While AGT qualified for large contracts in 2005 and 2006, Mobile County took the extraordinary steps of sending two letters to state department officials requesting that the license of the company be revoked. Under federal law, local school officials have little power to limit the ability of tutoring companies to conduct business in schools that qualify for the service because of low test scores.

Money to pay for the tutoring comes from Title I funds, and federal regulations limit the ability of local school systems to oversee these companies and prohibit their activities. Only the state can revoke a company's ability to compete for tutoring business.

When a school becomes eligible for tutoring services,



a limited number of parents selected by the system are notified about tutorial services available for their children, up to \$1,400 in services outside of school. Usually an enrollment fair or other event is set up by the district where programs can be reviewed and children enrolled.

Mobile complained to state officials that AGT solicited directly to parents, regardless of school or eligibility, in clear violation of federal rules, causing confusion and a flood of applications to the school system that were forged to look like official Mobile documents.

Later, Mobile sent a second letter to state department officials outlining the financial problems AGT was experiencing, again in violation of federal rules. After learning of these financial difficulties, in the form of missed paychecks and other problems, the AEA began to investigate AGT. Local AEA officials found dubious education practices, including lack of curriculum and slipshod pre- and post-testing, verified by interviews with many current and former AGT staff.

"It seems to me that the

regulations of this NCLB tutoring program are more concerned with privatization and profit than teaching and learning," said local AEA UniServ Director Wade Perry. "The state seemed to be either unwilling or unable to reign these people in. This turned out to be a huge waste of the taxpayers' dollars, and I am glad we could help put a stop to it."

Since officials with AEA began investigating, AGT asked to be removed from the state's list of eligible tutoring providers and is no longer doing business in the state.

### Where tutoring works

While the experience of AGT shows flaws in the system, there are effective tutoring programs being implemented in Mobile.

The non-profit Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) set up a tutoring program, run by a former principal and staffed for the most part by retired teachers wanting to still contribute.

"We are not doing this to make money," said MAEF Director Carolyn Akers. "Anyone can see we are running the program to see this isn't a revenue generating enterprise. We do it because it is a fundamental part of our organization, improving learning in our schools."

The MAEF tutorial program is run by retired principal Dr. Hilder Wilson, a 30-year veteran of public schools and a dedicated educator. The MAEF after-school program employs roughly 40 tutors over more than a half dozen sites. Unlike AGT, the non-profit maintains a strict eight-to-one student to teacher ratio at all sites, and measures progress using the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT) standard pre- and post-test.

"At the end of each year we have the data to see progress of the child," said Wilson. "We serve everyone that the school system designates, English

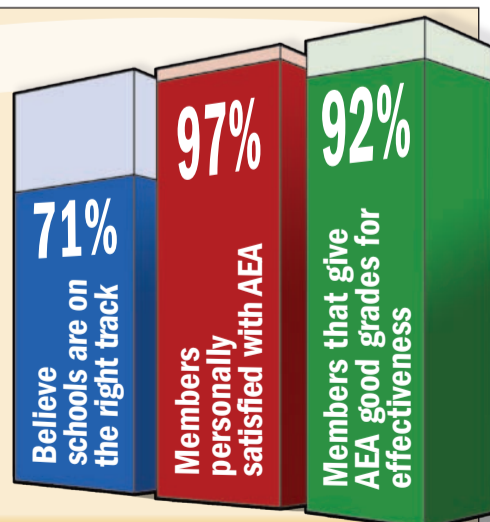
**Dubious tutoring programs get federal funds**

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## What do you think...?

A good question to always ask is: "How are we doing?" The results of a recent poll indicate that Alabama schools and AEA are doing pretty well.

Earlier this year AEA's **Capital Survey Research Center** conducted its annual member survey, polling 547 teachers and education professionals across the state to find out what they think about public schools and the association itself. The center recently finished its analysis of the results, and some interesting findings surfaced. Here is what members think...



### ...about administrators

71% Give their local principal a good grade

69% Give their local superintendent a good grade

59% Give their local school board a good grade

### ...about AEA

47% Believe AEA is a professional association that bargains for members

29% Believe AEA is a professional association

17% Believe AEA is a professional union

### ...about discipline

56% Believe student discipline is a problem

56% Believe teachers do not have authority to discipline students

76% Believe parental failure to discipline children is a problem