By Dana Beyerle

Business Council of Alabama Chairman Fred McCallum studied chemistry in college, earned a law degree, and rose in the ranks to become president of AT&T Alabama, the telephone, long distance, and cellular communications giant.

An interesting combination, chemistry and law. In McCallum’s case they were mixed successfully in the mortar of business and helped prepare him to become the top executive in a highly competitive and important technology and communications business.

As the 2014 chairman of the BCA, the state’s foremost business advocacy organization, McCallum is using the pulpit to enhance Alabama’s education opportunities so students can compete with their national and global counterparts.

“There is not a stronger argument that we can’t afford to not have the best education system in the world than how we need to fight to keep Alabama on the list of places people want to do business,” McCallum said in an interview. McCallum said it used to be easy evaluating school systems simply by looking “next door.”

“Today we have to compare how our schools perform in light of what other countries across the world are doing,” he said. “The United States is no longer in the clear lead in the education arena.”

That global outlook was one reason he took a lead in supporting Alabama’s College and Career-Ready Standards, which provide grounding for education and “give us a look at where we are as a country in education attainment and how we compare with others and each other.”

In 2010 the Alabama State Board of Education adopted internationally benchmarked Common Core State Standards along with selected Alabama standards. The combination is one of the most comprehensive set of standards in the nation, ensuring students are prepared for a successful future.

There was a serious political attempt to quash Common Core this year but McCallum, the BCA, and others were successful in keeping them.

“It is particularly important for the schools in Alabama to understand how we rank compared with other states,” McCallum said. “We know we have a lot of competition in the education arena in other states and we need the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards to understand how we are doing and where we need to improve.”

McCallum will hand the BCA chairman’s gavel to the 2015 chairman at the BCA’s Annual Meeting in December. He said he wants his year at the helm to be remembered as one in which the newly formed Business Education Alliance of Alabama continues to be a premier business education advocate.

The BEA, formed in 2013 with former state School Superintendent Joe Morton as chairman and president, released a significant study on high school dropout rates during the BCA’s Governmental Affairs Conference in early August.

“Moving that structure forward and coming out with a major study, I’m very proud to be a part of that,” said McCallum, who has been involved in other education efforts in Birmingham and elsewhere in Alabama. “One of our organization’s goals the last three years and one of my personal goals in the BCA this year was to take another step forward in establishing business as the leading voice for positive change in education.”

In reflecting on McCallum as BCA chairman, BCA President and CEO William Canary said, “Fred McCallum has reminded, inspired and motivated us by what President Theodore Roosevelt once said, ‘Far and away the best prize life has to offer is working hard at work worth doing’.

“As chairman, Fred has advanced the Business Education
Alliance. He leaves a legacy that reminds us all that the children of today are the leaders of tomorrow.”

McCallum said business needs and depends on well-rounded, highly educated students and the fear is there won’t be enough to fill future jobs.

“To the extent you improve education, high schools, career tech, and focus on those types of programs, you can have a fairly immediate impact on your bottom line,” McCallum said. “Being able to fill those with qualified employees helps them become successful.”

By any measure, McCallum’s career has been successful.

Born and raised in Florence, McCallum majored in chemistry at Auburn University and then earned a law degree at the University of Alabama. After clerking for a U.S. District Judge, McCallum joined a private law firm in Birmingham and in 1987 became an in-house attorney for South Central Bell Telephone Co., a predecessor to AT&T.

He moved up the corporate ladder during stints in Mississippi, Florida, and Georgia, and entered the management track in 2002.

“I had spent a great deal of time in legal working with regulatory and legislative aspects of our business and this led to an opportunity to move from the legal side to the policy side of the business,” McCallum said.

McCallum returned to Alabama in 2008 after the acquisition of then-BellSouth by AT&T and became president of the Alabama division of AT&T.

McCallum said an especially fulfilling time in his career was leading the legal team that worked to enter the long distance business in nine states.

“It took a tremendous amount of effort, resources, and teamwork,” McCallum said. “It proved to me that you can do anything if you firmly commit and persevere.”

As BCA chairman, McCallum is the past chairman of the BCA’s political arm, ProgressPAC, chaired this year by Martin Abroms, president and managing shareholder of Abroms & Associates PC, in Florence.

ProgressPAC helped elect pro-business legislators in 2010. “Our No. 1 goal obviously in the 2014 elections is to keep a pro-business Legislature. There’s a lot of hard work by staff and BCA members who have gone about the process of administering the PAC in an efficient and targeted way. We are enjoying great success in elections we have played a role in.”

McCallum said other goals included moving the BCA agenda through the 2014 legislative session, a session that produced significant pro-business laws to help businesses continue to succeed. In addition to supporting the Alabama College and Career-Ready Standards, he said pushing an updated Taxpayers Bill of Rights to a successful conclusion was a highlight of his year. The update, called TBOR II, creates a tax adjudication system independent of the Alabama Department of Revenue.

McCallum said the challenge is to continue to grow the state’s pro-business environment using the BCA. “The BCA gives businesses in our state a structure and a very competent, efficient organization that can compile all the business issues, organize them, listen to members, and put together an agenda to guide the work of the BCA at the local, state, and national levels,” he said.

McCallum said education improvement will continue to be a major issue for business, followed by economic development policies that allow Alabama to meaningfully compete for new business opportunities for our state.

“We have the opportunity to increase our international business trade and we have a real need to adopt updated economic development incentives, or packages, that support our efforts to recruit businesses into Alabama,” McCallum said. “We are also at risk if we don’t continue to make significant strides in the education attainment of our students.”

“We’ve got to get a firm plan for all stakeholders, the Legislature, state board of education, the school superintendent and two-year college chancellor, support them and keep moving in a positive direction,” he said.

McCallum also believes in promoting the partnership between local Chambers of Commerce and the statewide Business Council of Alabama through the Chamber of Commerce Association of Alabama.

“The BCA-CCAA partnership has been incredibly successful and it has the opportunity to be even more powerful in the future,” he said.