

## Component #1: Data Analysis

### Stakeholder Involvement

The Special Education Services (SES) Section of the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) elicited broad stakeholder input to develop the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP). With the assistance of stakeholders who represented parents, advocacy organizations, public and private school personnel, institutions of higher education (IHEs), multiple offices within the ALSDE, and other state agency staff, the SES Section has collected and analyzed performance data for students with individualized education programs (IEPs) in order to identify a state-identified measurable result (SIMR) pursuant to the new Indicator 17 requirement from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The data analyzed include information from the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR) indicators as well as compliance monitoring data, 618 data collections, and other state-reported data (e.g., EDFacts submitted data) over the past several years.

The ALSDE staff with broad stakeholder input examined data from the SPP/APR indicators and 618 data collections in order to determine longitudinal trends and patterns. While Alabama has met and exceeded most of its SPP/APR targets for the past several years, particularly within compliance indicators, the ALSDE acknowledges that the need for improvement in results areas is clearly indicated. In data drill-down activities, the ALSDE staff and stakeholders determined key areas to consider: improving graduation rates, narrowing the achievement gap between students with disabilities (SWDs) and students without disabilities (SWODs), increasing parent involvement, and preparing students, especially those with disabilities, for college- and career-readiness leading to improved post-school outcomes. In the data selection process, the ALSDE utilized the *Alabama Logic Model: A Blueprint for State Systemic Improvement* and the method of “backward mapping” (i.e., starting with the end in mind) to identify data most closely related to the attainment of its long-term outcome of improved post-school outcomes for students with IEPs.

### Data Analysis

Data across multiple variables were reviewed to conduct a focused data analysis. The primary variables included a review of data at the school, district and state levels, a look at data by gender, race/ethnicity, disability category and educational placement, as well as a data review of student performance levels on statewide assessments. Trends and patterns were also examined to identify strengths and weaknesses over time. The data analysis yielded several areas of significance that required further analyses in order to determine root causes. The areas of significance include: Indicator 14b (Post-School Outcomes), Indicator 1 (Graduation Rates), Indicator 13 (Secondary Transition), Indicator 5 (Least Restrictive Environment), and Indicator 3c (Performance on Statewide Assessments). It should be noted that the order of indicators here does not reflect the numerical order in the SPP/APR; but instead reflects and demonstrates our application of backward mapping, the process of beginning with the end in mind.

**Indicator 14 - Post-School Outcomes.** The results for Indicator 14, which is designed to measure post-school outcomes for students who exited school with IEPs in effect and who have been exited from school for at least one year, can be found in Table 2. Although the data show that the 2010-2011 target for Indicator 14a was met, only 14% of SWDs were enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving school. In addition, in 2010-2011, the state did not meet its target for Indicator 14b and fewer than 43% of SWDs were enrolled in higher education or competitively employed.

Data for 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 show improvement in Indicators 14a and 14b; however, a point of significance that was unveiled through the Alabama Post-School Outcomes Survey is that 31.2% (in 2012-2013) and 23.6% (in 2013-2014) of surveyed students remained unengaged in any type of work or higher education/training one year post-school despite the improved performance demonstrated by the state totals. Additionally, 31% of the surveyed youth were not engaged in work or training one year post-school as reported in the FFY 2012 SPP/APR. Of those 31% who were unengaged, 42% of females and 58% of males who exited in school year 2011-2012 were reported as not engaged in any type of work or training. Therefore, even with the substantial improvements made over the past several years for this Indicator, at least one-quarter of Alabama's youth who exit school with IEPs in effect each year remain unengaged in either further training or any type of employment one year following exit. If only Indicator 14b (enrolled in higher education or engaged in competitive employment) percentages are taken into account, the percentages are even more concerning: 39.30% (2012-2013) and 37.65% (2013-2014) of former students are not enrolled in either higher education or engaged in competitive employment one year post-school.

**Table 2: Indicator 14 Post-School Outcomes Data (in Percent) from 2009-2014**

	2009 2010		2010 2011		2011 2012		2012 2013		2013 2014	
	Target	Data	Target	Data	Target	Data	Target	Data	Target	Data
Enrolled in Higher Ed (14a)	N/A	13.77	13.90	14.12	13.90	19.60	13.90	24.90	22.24	22.24
Enrolled in Higher Ed/Competitively Employed (14b)	N/A	45.41	45.60	42.78	45.60	40.20	45.60	60.70	62.35	62.35

It should be noted that Alabama utilizes the Alabama Post-School Outcomes Survey to collect data each year for Indicator 14. The survey instrument was developed based on the survey developed by the National Post-School Outcomes Center and is currently conducted by one-quarter of school districts each year who receive a list of all students with IEPs in effect who exited school the previous year by graduating with a regular high school diploma or some other credential, dropping out, receiving a graduation certificate, or aging out. It should be further noted that the Alabama Post-School Outcomes Survey response rate has consistently been around 60% due to the implementation of business rules that require local education agencies (LEAs) to open a survey for every exited student and to detail contact dates and times if there was a failure to contact individual students. Moreover, ALSDE staff follow-up with LEAs to ensure that efforts are made to contact each student on the list. To increase the survey data utility, the ALSDE procedure will be changed to administer an every other year schedule during school year 2016-2017 to facilitate better use of the post-school outcome data by the LEAs as the ALSDE improves results for Indicator 14.

In order to reach Alabama's long-term goal of improved post-school outcomes for students with IEPs, the ALSDE further examined other indicator data, such as graduation rates and secondary transition, to determine root causes and factors that have contributed to Alabama's Post-School data results. Additionally, as ALSDE staff and stakeholders reviewed other indicator data, the

question arose regarding the environments in which students had been historically educated. The ALSDE, in conjunction with a broad representation of stakeholders, have designated improvement in Indicator 14b as its SIMR with a focus on improvement in the indicators that have the greatest impact upon post-school success.

**Indicator 1 - Graduation Rates.** The ALSDE examined the graduation rate trends for SWDs compared to all students over a period of four academic years. The graduation rates for SWDs have increased from 61.0% in 2008-2009 to 76.9% in 2012-2013, likely due to the increased emphasis on reading and math initiatives as well as the state's focus on increasing graduation rates. It should be noted that pursuant to Alabama's approved Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Waiver (also known as Plan 2020), in June 2013, the ALSDE set rigorous targets for improving the graduation rate for all students, including subgroups of students.

This emphasis has impelled the operation of the entire ALSDE to reorganize not only its internal organization but the organization of the state according to 11 in-service regions. This reorganization was envisioned to improve collaboration between and among general and special education staff within the ALSDE as well as within Alabama's 135 LEAs (Note: in school years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, the ALSDE served 135 LEAs; in school year 2014-2015, the ALSDE served 136 LEAs). Moreover, the state's graduation requirements as well as the student assessment systems have undergone extensive changes as part of the ESEA Flexibility Waiver aimed at impacting student achievement and college- and career-readiness. As of the submission of the FFY 2013 SPP/APR, the graduation rate of students with IEPs has increased to 76.9%.

**Indicator 13 - Secondary Transition.** The review of Alabama's performance on Indicator 13, Secondary Transition, shows that Alabama has sustained a high level of compliance with this indicator over time. Statewide data for Indicator 13 is reviewed once per year using LEA district-approved reports submitted through the state database, STISETS. Moreover, the ALSDE staff work with LEA personnel to ensure that secondary transition is addressed for all students who are aged 16 and above. The ALSDE further requires that transition be addressed for all students entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, regardless of age.

For the last several years, the ALSDE has focused upon improving compliance and ensuring that all components are addressed for students who are transition age. However, it must be noted that although compliance has improved, the delivery of appropriate transition services to students must be examined so that results are improved commensurate with Alabama's high levels of compliance. The ALSDE and stakeholders suggest that, in concert with improved achievement levels, greater effectiveness in providing transition services will positively impact the achievement of post-school outcomes. Therefore, several actions have been initiated to improve transition outcomes for students, including improved transition instruction aligned with Alabama's Transition Standards, improved transition assessment information and resources, and revising the Transition Page of SES's IEP. Improvement in the knowledge base of parents regarding transition resources and options for their young adults was identified as a need, as well as more resources to be readily available for parents and students to assist them in transitioning from school to post-school life. In this regard, the ALSDE and the Alabama State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) worked with the Alabama Parent Training and Information (PTI) Center, known as the Alabama Parent Education Center (APEC) and Auburn University Transition Leadership Institute

(ATLI) to design a parent education module and a series of focus groups to determine the needs of parents to increase their levels of knowledge about secondary transition services and agency supports. In collaboration with ATLI, the ALSDE has developed a statewide transition needs assessment to be administered to all LEAs during spring 2015. The results of the needs assessment will be used to drive training (general and targeted TA) and professional development around secondary transition.

As part of the Alabama SPDG's Goal 3 emphasizing secondary transition and professional development, coaching, and information provided to SWDs and their families regarding secondary transition practices, the ALSDE collaborated with the APEC and ATLI. The purpose of this collaboration was to convene the first of a series of parent focus groups around the topic of secondary transition in 2013, with a follow-up utilizing the same cohorts of parents in 2014. A summary of findings of the 2013 focus group is included in this next section.

The 23 participating parents reported their highest level of education as college graduate (16), some college (5), high school graduate (1), and general education development (GED) (1). The parent group was largely female (20) with 3 males. The number of parents at each regional meeting ranged from 6 (central), to 7 (south), to 10 (north). The same parent informants will continue to participate in a focus group series each year in order to provide input as stakeholders on improvements and continued needs around secondary transition issues.

Over the course of three advisory group meetings, three questions were consistently asked of each parent:

1. What are your two greatest concerns about your transition-age child with a disability?
2. Why are these your two greatest concerns?
3. What strategies might be used to address these concerns?

The upper three domains (*Transition preparation*, 29%; *Integration*, 21%; and *Adult services*, 18%) comprised 68% of the parents' concerns. Within these three domains, the most frequent concerns were *school services*, 11%; *disability awareness*, 11%; and *access to services*, 11%, together comprising one-third of the total concern frequencies identified among the parent advisory group comments. Within the lower three domains, the single most frequent parent concern was *communication*, comprising 8% of all the concerns in the group comments.

A review of the parents' suggested strategies reveals the prevalence of the words, *information* and *services*, which suggests that parents want more information about the services available to help these students prepare for their future. To address this need, information can be provided to parents in a variety of ways, depending on their capacity to access technology-based resources and to engage transition professionals. A recurring challenge is how to match parents' communication capacity with information that is relevant, current, and authoritative.

The ALSDE and stakeholders agreed that addressing secondary transition improvement continues to be a vital need to impact positive post-school results for students with IEPs.

**Indicator 5 - Least Restrictive Environment (and Student Achievement).** Alabama's least restrictive environment (LRE) data has consistently exceeded its state targets for Indicator 5A. In 2011-2012, 83.51% of SWDs were served inside the regular classroom 80% or more of the day. This trend has continued and is reflected in 2012-2013, where the actual data were 84.82%. In 2013-2014, although there was slippage from the previous year, the state exceeded its target and the actual data were 83.83%. While most SWDs are served in the inclusive classroom, the academic achievement data on the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test<sup>+</sup> (ARMT<sup>+</sup>) administered prior to school year 2013-2014 and the ACT Aspire administered in spring of 2014 show that more focus is needed on improving achievement in the inclusive classroom. Both the achievement results and the gap between SWDs and SWODs demonstrate the need to focus on reading, math, and effective instruction in order to impact Alabama's SIMR (*...students will be able to achieve positive post-school outcomes and engage in higher education and competitive employment opportunities*). When examining Alabama's LRE data compared to its achievement data over the past several years, it became apparent that students with IEPs transitioned from middle school (6<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade) into high school (9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade) largely unprepared to succeed in rigorous high school subjects and, thereby, to transition effectively from high school into post-school adult life. After in-depth analyses of assessment and LRE data by region, all stakeholder groups expressed concern about the trend that illustrated poor performance data of SWDs who were educated in the general education setting for the majority of the school day.

While both reading/language arts and math represent low levels of achievement that demand intervention, the ALSDE (with stakeholder buy-in) intends to focus on reading improvement within the SSIP improvement activities because of the concomitant impact upon other academic performance areas, such as social studies and science. All stakeholder groups have expressed concern about the lack of reading instruction beyond the elementary grades and agreed that reading instruction should be addressed throughout the school years, particularly within middle grades. One stakeholder group noted that there was a need for increased legislative funding for reading programs to be implemented for students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Another group concluded that, in order to improve performance, it was imperative that the state include fidelity measures in teacher evaluation, train all teachers on inclusive practices, and promote/require reading instruction in Grades K-12. The stakeholders proposed four actions the state should take to improve student performance:

1. Examine the transition of students throughout the school continuum (i.e., preschool through Grade 12) to ensure that instructional interventions are effectively implemented, particularly at the middle school level.
2. Utilize instructional coaches to improve effective intervention.
3. Review existing data from current programs, such as Southeast Regional Education Board (SREB), Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), and SES data sources.
4. Improve meaningful parental involvement.

**Indicator 3 - Discussion of Statewide Assessment Data Trends for Middle School Grades.** Although the SPP/APR data showed gains in both reading and math for SWDs over the past several years according to the ARMT<sup>+</sup> achievement data, an examination of assessment data over time shows a progressively lower drop in achievement from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, which culminated in a reading proficiency rate of 37.24% for 8<sup>th</sup> graders for school year 2012-2013. The matrices from

OSEP's FFY 2012 Results-Driven Accountability Determination process further highlight the significant issues in terms of achieving reading proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Alabama regarding SWDs.

The final administration of the ARMT+ took place during the spring of 2012-2013 and the new ACT Aspire became the statewide assessment for Grades 3-8. The ACT Aspire test was adopted to ensure greater alignment with the new Alabama College- and Career-Ready Standards as part of Plan 2020. However, most recent data indicate that fewer than 20% of SWDs in Grades 3-8 scored proficient on the ACT Aspire in reading and math, respectively, with 7th graders scoring the lowest at 6.0% proficiency in Reading/Language Arts and 3.0% in Mathematics. The most recent scores on the ACT Aspire continue to show the previously observed trend of lower proficiency at the middle school level as was observed on the ARMT+ results.

In June 2013, Alabama received approval for its ESEA Flexibility Waiver and began the use of Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) during the school year 2013-2014 rather than Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Within the approved waiver, Alabama provided new AMOs based on varying performance for all subgroups, including the SWDs subgroup. The actual data indicated that only 2.29% of LEAs met the AMOs for school year 2012-2013 and 0.00% of LEAs met the AMOs for school year 2013-2014 for reading/language arts and mathematics set for SWDs in all grades assessed. It is important to note that during school year 2013-2014, Alabama implemented a rigorous new state-wide assessment system, the ACT Aspire. Thus, the ALSDE set a new baseline for assessment as a result of Plan 2020.

Alabama's assessment results for SWDs and SWODs have historically shown a significant gap (approximately 40%) between proficiency of SWDs and SWODs. During a review of previous AYP results between 2008 and 2011, the data demonstrate the gap in performance on the state assessment measured by the proficiency index. Alabama calculated a proficiency index for AYP. The proficiency method collapses grade levels and combines the percentage of students that are proficient for a school. A proficiency index score of "0" indicates the subgroup met AYP. Alabama defines proficiency as a student's performance on the state-wide assessment scoring at levels 3 and 4.

The AYP reading proficiency index for SWDs and SWODs in a three year period shows a decrease in the performance of the subgroup and a significant gap between SWDs and SWODs. With a goal of "0", the SWDs subgroup was identified as the lowest performing subgroup in the state. In 2010-2011, the only other subgroup who did not attain an index score of "0" and did not meet AYP for reading was the English language learners (ELL) subgroup (reading proficiency index = -0.38); all of the other subgroups were higher than "0" and met AYP for reading. In 2011-2012, the SWDs subgroup, who had an index score of -16.64, is the only subgroup that did not meet AYP for reading, while all of the other subgroups were higher than "0" and met AYP for reading.

The final key data related to student achievement are the reading proficiency scores compared across grade level (Alabama Report Card, 2009, 2010, 2011). Table 1 shows the change in proficiency percentages from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade for both SWDs and SWODs, as well as the difference between the two groups. Reading proficiency among the SWODs group has remained relatively constant. Reading proficiency among SWDs has been consistently 40-50% lower than

SWODs. When looking at the difference in proficiency rates between SWDs and SWODs over time, the gap has increased in middle school (e.g., 6<sup>th</sup> grade = 45.30%; 7<sup>th</sup> grade = 50.40%; and 8<sup>th</sup> grade = 51.20%). Therefore, it appears that proficiency scores have decreased at a greater rate among SWDs than SWODs as they advance in school; thus, demonstrate a need to address reading instruction among adolescents in order to adequately prepare them to enter and effectively transition from high school into higher education and competitive employment opportunities.

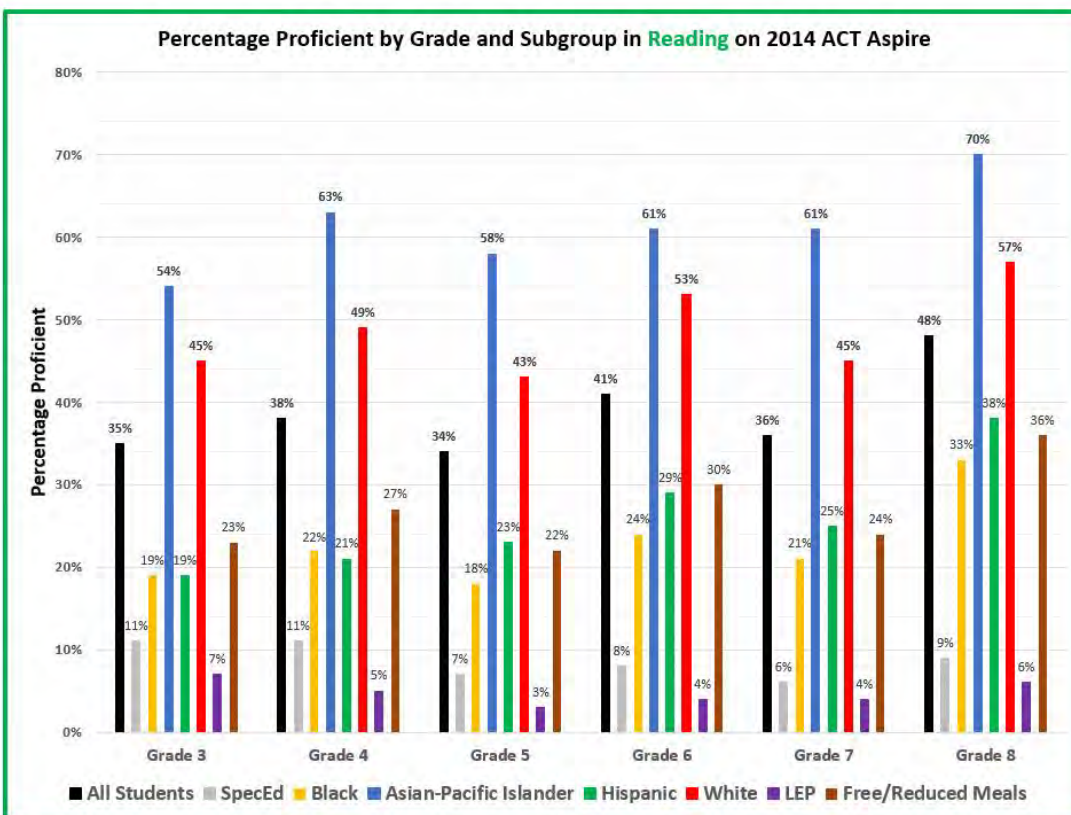
**Table 1: ARMT+ Reading Achievement Percentages of SWDs and SWODs in Grades 3–8**

School Year		3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade
2008-2009	SWDs	46.70	46.85	41.05	45.31	33.07	25.10
	SWODs	90.04	90.88	89.56	90.60	86.73	80.50
	<b>Difference</b>	<b>43.30</b>	<b>44.00</b>	<b>48.50</b>	<b>45.30</b>	<b>53.70</b>	<b>55.40</b>
2009-2010	SWDs	49.98	46.40	42.74	43.18	37.40	22.07
	SWODs	90.58	91.05	90.23	90.85	87.84	79.26
	<b>Difference</b>	<b>40.60</b>	<b>44.70</b>	<b>47.60</b>	<b>47.70</b>	<b>50.40</b>	<b>57.20</b>
2010-2011	SWDs	41.09	50.54	48.65	48.76	40.80	30.53
	SWODs	90.70	92.03	92.86	92.35	89.62	81.73
	<b>Difference</b>	<b>49.60</b>	<b>41.50</b>	<b>44.20</b>	<b>43.60</b>	<b>48.80</b>	<b>51.20</b>

During the statewide assessment administration for school year 2013-2014, Alabama implemented a new assessment system designed to measure each student's level of proficiency and preparation for college- and career-readiness, consistent with Alabama's approved ESEA Flexibility Waiver known as Plan 2020. The statewide assessment used in Grades 3-8 and high school is the ACT Aspire. The ACT Aspire is a standards-based assessment system that gauges student progression from grades 3 through 10 in English, reading, writing, mathematics, and science. The ACT Aspire is administered to all students in Grades 3-8 in Alabama public schools. As the ACT Plan sunsets in fall 2014, the ACT Aspire will be administered to all students in Grade 10. The ACT Aspire links to the ACT College- and Career-Readiness Benchmarks and aligns with College- and Career-Ready Standards. In order to provide a view of student achievement over the past several years, data from the ARMT+ was also used for the purposes of SSIP data analysis.

With the school year 2013-2014 administration of the ACT Aspire, the ALSDE set a new assessment baseline, which was reflected in the FFY 2013 submission of Alabama's SPP/APR. Results for the special education subgroup reflected low scores across the grade spans in reading, as portrayed in the graph, *Percentage Proficient by Grade and Subgroup in Reading on 2014 ACT Aspire*. The results in the graph are for SWDs taking the ACT Aspire with and without accommodations and do not include students in Grades 3-8 who took the Alabama Alternate Assessment (AAA). The data for Indicator 3c submitted in the FFY 2013 APR include scores for

students who took the AAA. The reader should note that assessment results were reported in the FFY 2013 SPP/APR as an overall score and not as disaggregated data as depicted below.



**IDEA Compliance Monitoring Data.** The SES compliance monitoring staff routinely disaggregates monitoring findings to determine the most prevalent areas of non-compliance. These findings are then used to determine focus areas for TA and to guide professional development. In the latest disaggregation of monitoring findings, areas dealing with the development and implementation of IEPs received the greatest number of citations for non-compliance.

In order to determine whether these findings presented a potential barrier to improvement, the ALSDE examined other aspects of the general supervision system. It was determined through this examination that the citations for non-compliance were all timely corrected within one year. Consistent with OSEP Memo 09-02, all child-specific noncompliance was corrected and updated data were examined to determine that the system was correctly implementing the requirement at 100%. Thus, continuing non-compliance was not determined to be a barrier toward improved results for students with IEPs.

With respect to the TA System, the IEP development and implementation issues were addressed through both targeted and intensive (LEA-specific) TA approaches delivered in each region to address these issues. Therefore, the ALSDE has determined that these identified monitoring issues should not constitute a barrier to improvement. However, ongoing data will be examined to ensure



that all areas of the ALSDE's system of general supervision are effective and work in tandem to improve outcomes for all students, especially students with IEPs.

**Other Relevant Data.** Multiple internal and external variables impact the well-being and achievement of Alabama's SWDs and SWODs, such as poverty and educational attainment of parents. Alabama's SIMR (*...students will be able to achieve positive post-school outcomes and engage in higher education and competitive employment opportunities*) is designed to target improved educational and employment outcomes for students with IEPs. Attainment of this objective would positively impact Alabama's overall economy as it relates to the rate of poverty, unemployment, and the educational attainment of future parents of young children across the State. As Alabama develops the SSIP, it is important that Alabama's contextual variables and demographics inform the development and subsequent implementation of its plan. The design of the Alabama SSIP must be flexible and able to be customized according to the demographics and uniqueness of each school community and district to reflect adequately the needs of the population of children and families they serve.

As the ALSDE and stakeholders reviewed the assessment data, the impact of the State's context in relation to poverty and Alabama's Kids Count ranking were considered to be relevant contributing factors.

With a population of approximately 4.8 million people, the contrasts in population are evident in its density. Thirteen of the 67 counties in Alabama (19.4%) have a population of under 15,000 people, yet, there are 14 urbanized areas, each with a population of over 100,000 people (U. S. Census, 2010). The larger size of the state combined with its rural and urban needs presents challenges when working with districts. The rural counties complicate the provision of technical assistance (TA) due to the lack of adequate fiscal and personnel resources for schools. The urbanized areas often have the personnel available; however, other cultural and socioeconomic factors can impede the attainment of educational outcomes for all students, especially SWDs.

The demographics of Alabama's population can generally be characterized as diverse, less educated, and poor compared to U. S. averages. According to the Kids Count (2011) index of the overall child well-being indicators, Alabama ranked 45<sup>th</sup> in the nation. In Kids Count 2014, Alabama ranked 44<sup>th</sup> among the states in child well-being. Areas of improvement noted included: early education, fewer children being born to unwed teens, and fewer dying from preventable causes. However, more were living in poverty in 2014. The percent of Alabama children living in poverty increased from 21.5 in 2000 to an average of 26.0 between 2008 and 2012. That includes 43.5% of African-American children and 44.5% of Hispanic children (Kids Count, 2014). Additionally, the state ranked 42<sup>nd</sup> in terms of economic indicators (Kids Count, 2012) and ranked 39<sup>th</sup> in 2014, so it appears that the state's economy is slightly improving over time. This improvement may be linked to the overall state recovery in terms of the economy, including employment, since the 2008 recession. The graph below illustrates Alabama's score in the Economic Well-being Domain ([http://www.aecf.org/m/databook/2014KC\\_profile\\_AL.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/m/databook/2014KC_profile_AL.pdf)).

**Table 2: National Kids Count Ranking – Economic Well-Being Domain**

Location	Data Type	2012	2013	2014
Alabama	Number	42	40	39

The percentage of African Americans in Alabama is 26.5%, which is more than double the national average. According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2011), 4.9% of residents of Alabama speak a primary language other than English. The most common language other than English is Spanish, which argues the need to address the culturally responsive educational practices as an improvement activity.

Only 81.4% of Alabamians 25 years and older have graduated from high school. Furthermore, only 21.7% of Alabamians have completed a Bachelor's degree or higher; however, nationally, the percent is 27.9 and 6.3% of the population (25 years and older) that has not completed Grade 9 (U.S. Census, 2012). In addition, the median household income in Alabama is almost \$10,000 less than the national average (\$50,000 in Alabama vs. \$59,500 nationally). The Kids Count 2012 reported that the state unemployment rate of parents was 8%. Furthermore, approximately 24.6% of children in Alabama live in a household below the poverty threshold. This percentage varies dramatically by county, from 9.9 to 52.7 percent (Kids Count, 2009). In school year 2014-2015, there are 136 school districts in Alabama, serving 744,238 students. As of October 2014, the state served approximately 82,355 SWDs, which is equal to 11.07%. Therefore, the achievement of the SIMR by the year 2020 is projected to improve overall educational attainment and employment viability of Alabama's population.

The SSIP Data Analysis and Infrastructure Analysis must be viewed through the lens of these state contextual factors in order to understand the drivers supporting current educational results in Alabama and the need for change that impacts educational attainment and effective transitions into positive post-school outcomes for young adults with disabilities.

#### **Data Issues Affecting the SSIP Data Review**

The ALSDE notes that data quality and the accessibility of data impacted the data review process. Specifically, the ALSDE has installed new systems and requirements for assessment and graduation, respectively. In addition, the departure of well-established, senior personnel in positions directly affecting assessment and other data collections, may have temporarily impacted the quality and availability of ALSDE's data processes. Due to the timeframe needed to ensure that high-quality data are verified for completeness and accuracy, the ALSDE is taking a systemic approach through data governance to implement the necessary processes to ensure the availability of quality data.

#### **Component #2: Analysis of State Infrastructure to Support – Improvement and Build Capacity**

The ALSDE began the process of examining and analyzing the components of the State Infrastructure to Support Improvement and to Build Capacity for the SSIP Implementation by attending the Southeast Regional Resource Center (SERRC) professional development meetings

during 2013, where the purpose of the meeting was to prepare states in developing the SSIP. These meetings provided analytic tools and informational resources to enable states to analyze their systems of general supervision as well as other areas that may impact the development, support and implementation of the SSIP.

Using the resources provided by technical assistance centers and the dissemination network, the ALSDE collected and analyzed extant information regarding the infrastructure to support improvement and build capacity with staff and external stakeholders. This data collection and analyses were designed to determine the factors contributing to the current status and to develop methods of leveraging existing structures to facilitate the SSIP development. The section that follows details how the ALSDE and State Infrastructure is organized to identify and support the SIMR (*...students will be able to achieve positive post-school outcomes and engage in higher education and competitive employment opportunities*).

## **Agency Organization**

### **State Board of Education**

The State Board of Education (SBOE) determines policies for public education in the state of Alabama. The SBOE consists of eight members, elected from districts, and the governor. The governor serves as the president of the SBOE by virtue of his elected office. The SBOE also constitutes the controlling authority for the Alabama community and technical colleges. The State Superintendent of Education, who is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the SBOE, is the secretary and executive officer of the board for the public K-12 schools.

### **Superintendent of Education**

The state superintendent of education is Alabama's chief state school officer and, as such, has general control and supervision over the state's K-12 public schools. The SBOE determines the authority and duties of the state superintendent. The state superintendent is responsible for administering public education as provided by the Constitution of Alabama, statutory enactments, and policies set by the SBOE, and for administering and supervising the ALSDE.

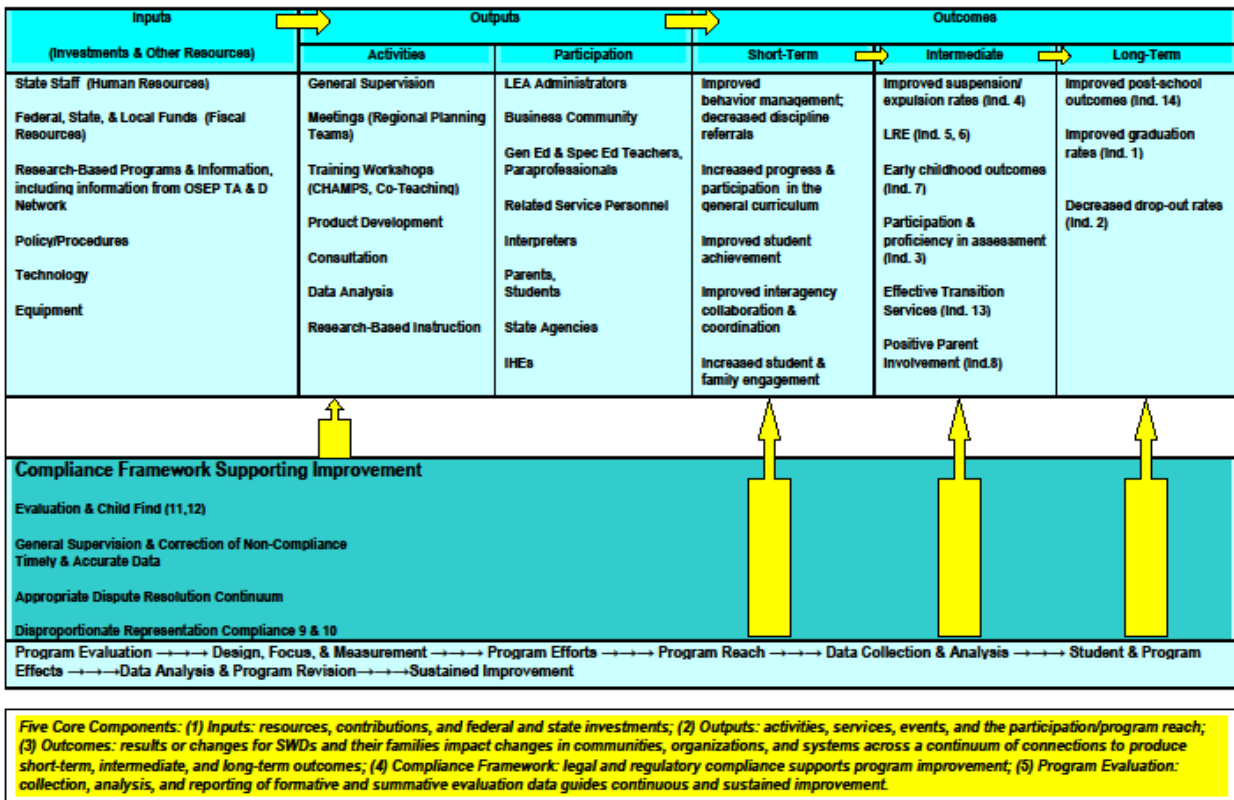
### **Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE)**

The ALSDE executes educational policy for the K-12 schools of the SBOE as well as monitors and regulates the school systems. The ALSDE is comprised of three divisions (Administrative and Financial Services; Teaching and Learning; and Research, Information, and Data Services), that oversee education professionals in 1,499 schools in 136 LEAs. The SES Section is under the Division of Teaching and Learning and is directed by the Office of Learning Support.

### **The Alabama Logic Model: A Blueprint for State Systemic Improvement**

The Alabama Logic Model was initially developed in 2009 to illustrate the interrelated nature of the SPP/APR indicators as each work in tandem toward improved outcomes for students with IEPs. The Alabama Logic Model, depicted below, outlines the long-term outcomes, including that of improved post-school outcomes for all children in the state.

**The Alabama Logic Model: A Blueprint for State Systemic Improvement**  
(A Work in Progress)



Through the use of the Alabama Logic Model, the SES's system of general supervision, which focuses upon improving both compliance and results, was mapped and analyzed to determine the infrastructure components that had the greatest impact upon the achievement of the SIMR. This analysis resulted in the SES shifting its previous focus on compliance to a greater emphasis on both compliance and results. For example, the SES integrated its monitoring process into the department's larger comprehensive monitoring process. This culminated into the leveraging of resources across multiple state and federal programs within the department to target identified areas of need and to ensure that all aspects of the SES's system of general supervision show connectedness with a focus upon improved results. This emphasis upon interdepartmental cooperation and coordination as well as the SES Section realignment to focus on improved results provides a fertile ground in which to grow areas related to the SIMR.

The SES further examined its monitoring process with a larger group of interdepartmental stakeholders to determine the impact of the monitoring and accountability system upon improving graduation rate for students with IEPs. Furthermore, the SES examined linkages between and among the systems of monitoring and accountability, the SPP/APR, systems of dispute resolution, targeted TA and professional development, and our fiscal management systems.

### **Special Education Services (SES): Vision and Mission**

The vision of the SES Section at the ALSDE is to foster positive educational outcomes for all students with special needs through leadership and service. Our mission is to provide an effective system of general supervision and oversight and to assist local education agencies (LEAs) in preparing students for college/work/adulthood for the 21st Century. This is accomplished through:

1. State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report.
2. Policies, Procedures, and Effective Implementation.
3. Reporting on Data Processes and Results.
4. Monitoring and Accountability.
5. Provision of Targeted TA and Professional Development.
6. Effective System of Dispute Resolution.
7. Responsible Fiscal Management System.

**State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report.** The SPP/APR consists of the 17 revised indicators that comprise the Office of Special Education Program's (OSEP's) new Results Driven Accountability (RDA) focus on a balance between compliance and improving results for children and youths with IEPs. The indicators are Graduation, Dropout, Participation/Performance in Statewide Assessment, Suspensions and Expulsions, Least Restrictive Environment, Preschool Least Restrictive Environment, Preschool Outcomes, Parent Involvement, Disproportionate Representation (individually and by specific disability category), Initial Evaluation, Preschool Transition, Secondary Transition, Post-School Outcomes, Resolution Sessions, Mediation, and SSIP. As part of the emphasis upon improved results, measurable and rigorous targets were established with stakeholder involvement for the state to set expectations for achieving high standards in state and local performance. Revised in 2014 for the FFY 2013 submission with stakeholder input, SPP targets are designed to be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely.

Annual state reporting of performance on the SPP indicators through the APR is an essential component of the accountability system. Annual reporting on the SPP/APR is accomplished by posting on the ALSDE Web site, through dissemination to the Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) and through media advisories. The state also reports annually to the public on the performance of LEAs compared to the state targets. The LEA Performance Profiles are posted on the ALSDE Web site no later than 120 days after submission of the APR each year.

This component of the SES's infrastructure serves as the mechanism to report and monitor the formative and summative progress of the SIMR.

**Policies, Procedures and Effective Implementation.** The *Alabama Administrative Code* (AAC) is the policy document that sets forth the state rules and requirements for the implementation of Part B of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. The AAC is updated as needed and undergoes SBOE and broad stakeholders review to ensure compliance with federal and state guidelines. It is made available for public comment and then posted for the public at large on the ALSDE Web site; hard copies are provided to LEA staff during numerous statewide, regional, and local meetings throughout the year.

Mastering the Maze is the procedures document that assists the school and provider personnel to complete the required forms through detailed explanations of each form required for the provision of free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students with IEPs in Alabama, ages 3-21. Mastering the Maze serves as an implementation guide for the special education process outlined in the AAC. Procedural compliance with state and federal requirements is monitored through the SES's Continuous Improvement Process (CIP).

To ensure that the policies and procedures are enforced, the SES Section monitors and assesses the degree of implementation through its system of general supervision and provides assistance through targeted TA and professional development. Thus, the effective implementation of SES policies and procedures is designed to positively affect the attainment of the SIMR.

**Reporting on Data Processes and Results.** To the maximum extent possible, data used in the SPP/APR are data that have been previously reported to the US Department of Education and/or other federal agencies. Data for each indicator have been reviewed by Information Systems, the SES data manager, program specialist, and other agency staff, as appropriate.

To ensure the data systems used for official reporting purposes by the ALSDE and LEAs are valid, error-free and accurate, the state has multi-level validations in place. These include school- and system-level validations, state-level collection processes and state-level validation processes. The ALSDE has implemented a District Approval process for ensuring timely, complete and accurate data submissions for reporting purposes.

The ALSDE provides LEAs with data analysis and planning tools to examine regional and local data. The goal is to assist LEAs to identify barriers to improved performance on all indicators and to support sustained improvement. The ALSDE convenes on-going training and work sessions for special education coordinators designed to sharpen the skills of data analysis and data-driven decision-making related to the interaction and linkages among the SPP/APR indicators by emphasizing the integrated nature of the indicators. These sessions are designed to deepen the understanding of the influences and contributing factors that related indicators exert upon the improvement of outcomes and results for SWDs.

**Monitoring and Accountability.** The SES participates with the department's Consolidated Monitoring Process, which is a process where multiple sections of the ALSDE monitor LEAs on a cyclical basis. Within this framework, the SES conducts a multi-phased process known as the SES CIP. The SES CIP provides an effective system of general supervision to (1) support practices that improve educational results and functional outcomes; (2) use multiple methods in identifying and correcting noncompliance within one year; and (3) use mechanisms for encouraging and supporting improvement and to enforce compliance. The SES CIP consists of a pre-staffing session prior to the on-site visit and four phases. The implementation of this framework also supports Plan 2020, Alabama's strategic plan to improve student growth and achievement, close the achievement gap, increase the graduation rate, and increase the number of students graduating from high school that are college- and career-ready to compete in our global society. Although working with multiple sections through the department's Consolidated Monitoring Process allows a strategic approach to deliver TA, an area of improvement is finding the balance between prioritizing "who gets what when" based on needs rather than schedules.

**Pre-Staffing.** The SES conducts a guided conversation using the available data and other relevant information (e.g., LEA Profiles, Dispute Resolution, accounting information, Child Count, and previous monitoring reports) to determine areas of focus/need. As a result of the discussion and data analysis of 618 and SPP/APR indicator data, a preliminary list of issues that may lead to a hypothesis will be developed. During the on-site visit for Phase I, the Monitoring Team Leader and the Special Education Coordinator will discuss contributing factors and co-develop hypotheses regarding the identified issues. A plan of action to determine “next steps” and follow-up will be developed.

**The Four Phases.** Phase I: Desk Audit; Phase II: System Profile/Fiscal Review; Phase III: Student Service Reviews (SSRs); Phase IV: State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report Data and Indicator Review. At the end of the four-year cycle, each LEA will have been reviewed in a continuous, rather than episodic manner. The review is linked to systemic change and utilizes integrated, continuous feedback and support. The TA that is generated as a result of these reviews supports change within the LEAs as a result of qualitative and quantitative data that provides for continuous improvement planning.

**Provision of Targeted TA and Professional Development.** The SES is committed to addressing the SPP/APR indicators as a system of improvement rather than isolated factors as we help educators and families create a blueprint to improve the achievement of school and post-school education, employment and adult life outcomes. This will allow the ALSDE to improve its strategy on long-term planning as well as assist LEAs in thinking about the end in mind for sustainability purposes.

To achieve this commitment, the ALSDE has developed a long-term plan that uses the indicators as a system of improvement. Framing this long-term plan is an evaluation design to determine the short-term, intermediate and long-term results produced by the department's improvement activities. This evaluation plan will utilize a variety of evaluation methodologies, including survey, focus groups and triangulation of data from extant sources. In turn, the results will direct the TA and professional development.

To ensure that staff continues to build their knowledge and awareness, the department regularly participates in TA calls, webinars and meetings provided by the OSEP and the funded Technical Assistance and Dissemination (TA&D) Centers. Information and resources are also accessed on the various TA&D Center's Web sites and then disseminated and shared with the LEAs, as appropriate.

**Effective System of Dispute Resolution.** Parents of children with disabilities must be provided with the opportunity to utilize appropriate administrative remedies when they believe that their rights or the rights of their children have been violated or when they disagree with their child's special education services. Alabama's system of effective dispute resolution is structured to facilitate the timely resolution of complaints, mediations, and due process hearing requests required for compliant dispute resolutions. Moreover, Alabama's dispute resolution process is linked into all aspects of its system of general supervision to ensure effective oversight and implementation of IDEA Part B regulations that improve results for students with IEPs and their families.

The ALSDE Web site, SES Homepage, includes information and resources (e.g., redacted due process hearing decisions) to assist parents and the public to understand the policies and procedures regarding dispute resolutions in the areas of complaints, mediations, and due process hearings. The SES also emphasizes the importance of the availability of a continuum of both informal and formal dispute resolution processes, such as effective communication strategies between families and the LEAs, working with parent organizations and stakeholders to resolve issues, and to work with LEAs and IEP Teams to ensure that all families understand the procedural safeguards available to them under the IDEA. Currently, SES is investigating the implementation of the Facilitated IEP Process to extend the options available to families and LEAs for Early Dispute Resolution.

Staff from SES is assigned to track timelines and investigate formal written complaints and due process hearing requests, as well as to track corrective actions that may result from the findings. These staff members schedule contracted trained mediators and impartial due process hearing officers on a rotating basis. The AAC details the state policy and procedures for the formal dispute resolution processes at 290-8-9.08(9)(a)—290-8-9.08(9)(c)17.(v)(V). Trainings are conducted on an ongoing basis for Dispute Resolution state staff, contracted mediators, and impartial due process hearing officers as well as their attendance at national and state meetings (e.g., LRP Conferences, Alabama Council of Administrators in Special Education (CASE) Fall Legal Conference) to ensure that these personnel have access to the most timely and relevant information regarding the IDEA regulations, as well as relevant case law and guiding legal proceedings to inform decisions. In addition, state staff utilize the resources available through the National Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) Web site, webinars, and conference calls.

The dispute resolution data for specific LEAs are reviewed during pre-staffing meetings to determine whether patterns or trends exist within written state complaints and due process hearings and to determine what issues may be occurring that may impact the provision of FAPE for students in particular school systems. These dispute resolution patterns, trends, and issues inform both on-site and off-site monitoring activities, as appropriate.

**Mediations.** This process is available as another way to resolve problems or disagreements in a child's special education program. It is a separate procedure from either filing a complaint or requesting an impartial due process hearing. When an impartial due process hearing has been requested, this procedure may also provide opportunities to reach agreement through a trained, impartial mediator. An agreement reached through mediation may end the need for a hearing. Either a parent or school official may request a mediation whenever both local school officials and parents agree to participate in the procedure.

**Complaints.** When it is believed that the public agency is violating a requirement of IDEA, the special education complaint procedure may be utilized as the appropriate administrative remedy. A signed written complaint may be sent to the State Superintendent of Education, Attention: Special Education Services. When a formal complaint is filed, the ALSDE investigates the observed/suspected violations of the IDEA requirements that may have occurred within the OSEP-specified timeline of 60 calendar days from the receipt of the complaint. A specialist will be assigned as complaint contact for each complaint filed.



***Impartial Due Process Hearings.*** The impartial due process hearing is a legal procedure to determine whether procedural safeguards required by the IDEA, such as provision of appropriate notice or parental consent for initial placement, have been followed. This procedure is also available if parents and school officials cannot reach agreement on a child's educational program.

An additional mechanism known as a resolution meeting, consistent with §300.510(a)(1) of the Part B regulations, consistent with §615(f)(1)(B)(i) of the IDEA, provides that within 15 days of receiving notice of the parent's due process complaint, and prior to the initiation of an impartial due process hearing under §300.511, the LEA must convene a meeting with the parent and the relevant members of the IEP Team who have specific knowledge of the facts identified in the due process complaint, unless the parent and the LEA agree in writing to waive the resolution meeting and when the parent and the LEA agree to use mediation to resolve the due process complaint. A qualified hearing officer, assigned by the State Superintendent of Education, will conduct the hearing. Both parties in the hearing are usually represented by legal counsel to present their cases, though this is not required by the regulations. A written decision is issued by the hearing officer after the impartial due process hearing. If dissatisfied, either party may appeal the decision in civil court.

**Responsible Fiscal Management System.** The intent of a responsible fiscal management system is to ensure compliance and accountability at both the state level and local level regarding federal and state special education funds as prescribed by federal law and/or state law. The SES staff work closely with the ALSDE Accounting staff to prepare our Part B application each year. We base our administrative and state set-aside budgets on needs and priorities that have been identified by staff and stakeholders.

Alabama's fiscal management requirements are based on the United States Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR), which is the general administration requirements applied to all federal funds and the state's general supervision requirements under the IDEA. The ALSDE must ensure fiscal accountability at each phase in the distribution and use of IDEA Part B and Preschool funds. The ALSDE has established policies and procedures for calculating and allocating flow-through funds, as well as reporting and verifying the use of IDEA Part B flow-through funds. The ALSDE follows required procurement procedures when using state set-aside funds. The following guiding principles are used to determine allowable costs by SES and to ensure that the ALSDE and LEAs are fiscally responsible:

1. Necessary - Is the expense necessary for the performance of the administration of the IDEA grant?
2. Reasonable - Is the expense a valid programmatic or administrative consideration? Is it a fair rate that can be proven and defended? A cost is reasonable if it does not exceed what a district would normally incur in the absence of federal funds.
3. Allocable - Cost must be in proportion to the value received and can only be for the benefit of special education. Authorized expenditures cannot benefit other programs other than through incidental benefit.
4. Adequately Documented - Documentation must be clear: The amount and exactly how the funds are used, the total cost of the project, and records showing performance and

compliance that could facilitate an effective audit. All recipients of IDEA funds must be able to prove that funds were spent correctly and all property purchased must be tracked.

As part of SES's general supervision system, the Fiscal Management Section works closely with the SES Monitoring Section and the ALSDE Accounting Section to assist with the activities such as monitoring LEA budgets for allowable costs; monitoring LEAs for maintenance of effort and requiring LEAs to use 15% of their VI-B and Preschool budgets if the LEA has been determined to be significantly disproportionate in any of the areas listed in the regulations; reviewing time and effort documentation; and monitoring contracts that have been developed as part of state set-aside activities. Staff in the Fiscal Management Section provides TA daily to LEAs, staff, other state agencies, etc. Staff also provides TA documents and present at state conferences to ensure an accurate understanding of fiscal compliance.

An expectation is that grant monies will be administered in accordance with generally accepted business practices while exercising prudent judgment to maintain proper stewardship of taxpayer dollars. We ensure compliance with Uniform Grant Guidance (UGG) and sections of EDGAR not included in the UGG.

***Alabama's General Fund and Education Trust Fund (ETF) Budget.*** The Alabama Legislature is responsible for creating and passing state rules and regulations that impacts education programs. The Legislature convenes in regular annual sessions except in years affected by the four year gubernatorial and legislative terms. The Legislature also has budget oversight authority for the state.

During each annual session, the Legislature passes two budgets (i.e., the General Fund and the Education Trust Fund, ETF), wherein all state funds are allocated. The ETF, which is primarily (3/4) funded through sales and income taxes through local governments, funds K-12 public schools as well as IHEs throughout the State. This method of funding the education budget in Alabama makes it vulnerable to economic downturns. Local governments also have the option of assessing their own local taxes to support public education. For this reason, there is often variance across the state's school systems based on the amount of revenue districts are able to raise. For example, the amount generated in wealthier districts may be as much as \$11,000 per student; whereas, poorer districts may be limited to \$6-7,000 per student because of depressed economies in some county or city school systems (*Montgomery Advertiser, October 12, 2014, p. 13A*).

Since ETF monies are distributed according to a "split-the-pie" approach according to the current model now operating in Alabama, the foundation treats every system the same, except for the availability of the local match. Although poor school systems can impose significantly higher millage rates than richer ones, they often end up with less revenue because of depressed property values. This ETF model, which was adopted in 1995 to equalize funding throughout the state, will require a major political effort that may necessitate a constitutional amendment needing voter approval to change.

Clearly, this lack of state school funding presents a significant challenge to improving results for all students, including SWDs. However, the ALSDE has recently taken steps to resolve this funding distribution issue so that funds are distributed based on need. In early 2013, the ALSDE has commissioned a study regarding the funding of the state's schools from 2006 to 2013 by an out-of-state company. Preliminary reports from the company suggest that an alternative structure

could involve setting a floor on spending per pupil in the state, ensuring that a base cost ensures flows of money that match the greatest needs. The final results of this study will be presented to the SBOE.

The ALSDE recognized the responsibility of ensuring that its systems of general supervision must work cooperatively and effectively to provide oversight to LEA's implementation of the IDEA. If, as noted in §300.600 of the IDEA regulations, the emphasis must be upon improving compliance and results, then the focus of the SES and, at the core of its mission, is to build the capacity and results of LEAs to improve outcomes for SWDs. Therefore, the system of general supervision supports the SIMR.

### **Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI)**

The ARI, a state-funded general education program housed within the Office of Student Learning, is a statewide K-12 initiative with a goal to significantly improve reading instruction and ultimately achieve 100% literacy among public school students. The ARI provides training to teachers to ensure that they teach in proven and effective ways, specifically by targeting the five critical areas of effective reading instruction. Evaluation data using individual student data have shown dramatic gains in performance on Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment compared with their placement at kindergarten. Currently, ARI's professional development on reading is being implemented in every Alabama school in the elementary grades, however, its professional development is not specific to instructional practices for SWDs. As a result, the ARI and SES staff worked together to offer professional development on tiered instruction in reading with professional development on Creating Effective Inclusive Environments (CEIE).

The ARI staff will continue to work closely with SES personnel and the Regional Planning Teams (RPTs) contacts to expand the professional development on tiered instruction in reading using a collaborative approach to targeted for SWDs as part of the SSIP

### **Prevention and Support Services**

The Prevention and Support Services section, housed within the Office of Learning Support, provides TA to schools and districts on school safety, discipline, attendance, drop-out prevention, Safe and Drug Free Schools, the Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Program, and Alabama School Health Services. Additionally, the Prevention and Support Services section is implementing the Learning Supports Program in multiple districts to facilitate 'wrap-around' services to improve outcomes for children who are at-risk for school failure and dropping out. In collaboration with the SES Section and the RPTs, the Prevention and Support Services Section will assist with implementing an evidence-based program (e.g., CHAMPS) as well as behavior and community professional development aligned to address the needs of SWDs and their parents as part of the SSIP.

### **Plan 2020: Alabama's Infrastructure for Scale Up and Sustainability**

Alabama's 136 LEAs are organized into 11 regional in-service centers that provide educational services to educators. Each regional in-service center is led by a state public IHE. Within the past year, these in-service centers have become the focal point of the provision of effective TA and professional development through the RPTs formed pursuant to Alabama's Plan 2020. Plan 2020 is the strategic plan for education in Alabama with the goal of preparing all students to be

successful in college and/or career upon graduation from high school. A “prepared graduate” is defined in Plan 2020, and the four priorities listed below establish the foundation of the plan.

- Alabama's 2020 Learners.
- Alabama's 2020 Support Systems.
- Alabama's 2020 Schools/Systems.
- Alabama's 2020 Professionals.

Each of the four priorities contain objectives, strategies, and targets/indicators designed to focus all available resources, completely address all critical aspects needed for each component, and make significant measureable progress by the year 2020. Implementation of Plan 2020 will improve student growth and achievement, close the achievement gap, increase the graduation rate, and increase the number of students graduating high school that are college- and career-ready and prepared to be successful in our global society. Plan 2020 also provides the structure for the state’s approved ESEA Flexibility Waiver application and guides all ALSDE department functions.

As stated in Plan 2020, Alabama’s vision is for *every* child to be a graduate and prepared for college/work/adulthood in the 21st century. A prepared graduate was clearly defined as (1) one who possesses the knowledge and skills needed to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing, first-year courses at a two- or four-year college, trade school, or technical school without the need for remediation and (2) one who possesses the ability to apply core academic skills to real-world situations through collaboration with peers in problem solving, precision, and punctuality in delivery of a product, and has a desire to be a life-long learner. The objectives for students focus on (1) achievement/growth – all students performing at or above proficiency and showing continuous improvement; (2) gap closure – all students succeeding; (3) graduation rate – every student graduating from high school; and (4) college- and career-readiness – every student graduating from high school prepared (Plan 2020, Approved ESEA Flexibility Waiver Request, June 2013).

Concurrent to the development of the Plan 2020, the state superintendent of education began a significant transformation of the ALSDE and its divisions. Prior to the transformation, when districts needed assistance for performance issues, each section worked separately with districts to address concerns. Under the transformation, cross-teams comprised of consultants from different sections (e.g., Special Education, Assessment, Curriculum, Compliance Monitoring) work together to address the performance issues of the district in need through the RPTs. This shift has required sections to coordinate and collaborate on services within districts to improve results for all students, including SWDs. This cross-collaboration among the ALSDE sections, moreover, will empower the development and implementation of the SSIP as SES personnel seek to leverage the ALSDE infrastructure for Plan 2020 (the ESEA Flexibility Waiver) as well as the existing structure of the SPDG.

### **The Alabama State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG)**

The Office of Special Education Programs funded the Alabama SPDG, Project Closing the Gap (CTG), in 2012 to work with LEAs, PTI Centers, and an IHE to:

- Create a system for expanding reading, math, and behavior general education initiatives to include specific special education content and instructional knowledge for educators and families to support student learning outcomes;
- Implement a coordinated professional development system to increase the capacity of educators and families to utilize a multi-tiered system of supports leading to improved student performance and graduation outcomes; and
- Offer professional development for educators and families on the needs of SWDs and the supports and services needed for successful post-secondary outcomes.

Through the Alabama SPDG, the ALSDE has been providing leadership and professional development to improve the implementation of evidence-based practices across the state, particularly with respect to instructional coaching, as developed by Jim Knight and Associates (2008). In November 2011, the ALSDE conducted an institute with consultants from Kansas University-Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) to facilitate discussions about Knight's work (2008; 2009) with the Big Four model. This model emphasizes the need to integrate content, instruction, assessment, and classroom management to create effective environments for students. During the professional development, staff from different ALSDE sections discussed how they were providing coaching to districts; however, the coaching was conducted in isolation from other initiatives. The institute began the shift within the ALSDE to collaborate on coaching and emphasized the use of Knight's Big Four model when working with districts. This shift, in conjunction with the superintendent's reorganization, has changed the way the ALSDE assists districts.

Based on the Big Four model (Knight, 2008), the SES Section through the Alabama SPDG sought to change content, instructional strategies, assessment, and behavior practices in the inclusive classroom. These practices espoused by Knight have been implemented in concert with the drivers of the Implementation Science Framework within the Alabama SPDG project sites and will be replicated within the structure of the Alabama SSIP. These implementation science drivers form the essential foundation for sustainability of the innovation through selection, coaching, and training, as well as through multi-tiered leadership and organizational drivers. The relationship of the Implementation Science Framework and Knight's Big Four model is illustrated through the following model:

# ALABAMA STATE SYSTEMIC IMPROVEMENT PLAN MODEL

*Closing the Gap: Improving Literacy and Mathematics Outcomes for Students with Disabilities*



Beginning with the new Alabama SPDG awarded in 2012, the ALSDE has been establishing project sites within feeder patterns in Alabama's two largest districts, with a third district added in 2014. Data from these successful SPDG projects in Alabama's two largest districts, as reported in the 2014 Grant Performance Report for the SPDG submitted in spring 2014 as well as formative data for school year 2014-2015, have impelled the scaling-up of the Alabama SPDG into the SSIP to improve achievement for SWDs included in general education classrooms.

**Alabama SPDG Reported Results.** Data from the 2014 Grant Performance Report indicates that 67.90% of SWDs or 222/327 students' progress monitoring scores improved in classrooms where their teachers were implementing the Alabama SPDG Project CTG model of co-teaching, behavior management, and linkage with content experts in programs such as ARI to improve special education teachers' ability to assist with reading instruction for SWDs. These results exceeded the baseline target of 57.90% set for these districts so that there was a 10.00% increase in progress monitoring scores between years one and two. The data examined for both districts' feeder patterns demonstrated increases in their progress monitoring for over two-thirds of the SWDs in the participating classrooms between fall 2013 and spring 2014. Additionally, the external evaluators for the Alabama SPDG examined the percentage of SWDs and SWODs that had positive gain scores on the STAR assessment during this time period. As previously mentioned, 67.90% of SWDs showed gains and 71.85% of SWODs showed increases, so that the difference in gains between the two groups was only 3.96%.

While data are still being collected within the project sites for 2015, it should be noted that as of February 2015 preliminary data indicate that the average score difference for all students between January and February 2015 was +39.45%. For SWDs, the difference was +44.05% and for SWODs, the difference was +36.37%, so that, while both groups showed gains, the SWDs showed

more growth than the SWODs on the progress monitoring assessment. For SWDs, 73.13% showed a gain in their progress monitoring scores between January and February as well as August and September. For the same time period, 67.00% of SWODs showed gains, continuing the trend toward closing the gap between general education and special education achievement. Therefore, given the strong research based design of the SSIP and the progress data yielded by the Alabama SPDG Project CTG sites, the ALSDE has confidence that the SSIP has the potential to produce the intended result of providing improved instruction to middle grade students that will prepare them to succeed in high school and thus be able to transition effectively into positive post-school outcomes.

In order to provide effective, evidence-based TA consistent with the body of knowledge and research related to the Implementation Science Framework (Fixsen & Blase, 2007) and according to the principles of adult learning espoused by Dunst and Trivette (2009), the SES Section of the ALSDE proposes to implement an ongoing initiative that utilizes the existing state infrastructure of 11 regional in-service centers and the RPTs, as specified in the design requirement of the SSIP as part of the SPP/APR for FFY 2013-2018. In this way, the SSIP will braid the existing initiatives of Plan 2020 (Alabama's ESEA Flexibility Waiver) and the Alabama SPDG.

The SSIP, in conjunction with the Alabama SPDG, will offer professional development on two levels: (1) to the TA providers and instructional coaches at the state-level; and (2) to district personnel at the local-level. The Participatory Adult Learning Strategy (PALS) approach developed by Dunst and Trivette will be the foundation for the SES's method to conduct professional development activities to support SSIP efforts in reading achievement, particularly within the middle grades. The Alabama SPDG's Goal 3 focuses upon statewide provision of information and resources to parents and educators around secondary transition services. Feeder high schools connected to the SSIP demonstration site middle schools will implement evidence-based transition practices consistent with the AL SPDG's Goal 3 efforts. This ambitious SSIP seeks to expand the evidence-based implementation of effective co-teaching (Cook & Friend, 2004), instructional coaching (Knight, 2009), behavioral management (Sprick, 2009) and effective practices in secondary transition utilizing multiple demonstration sites.

The regional in-service centers will be utilized to support an SSIP demonstration site in each of Alabama's regions to implement the Alabama SPDG Project CTG model within middle schools designated as schools with academic need and gaps in achievement between general and special education students, according to the differentiated support model set forth in Plan 2020. In addition to the academic need, the demonstration sites will be selected based on recommendations from the RPT based on the site's capacity and "buy-in" to participate in training provided and to implement the evidence-based practices to improve reading achievement, classroom management, and, ultimately, the capacity of students to transition more effectively through high school to achieve improved post-school outcomes. Therefore, through the utilization of Alabama's existing infrastructure, initiatives, and associated funding, the SIMR will be implemented and achieved by improving the practices that truly prepare SWDs for a positive and successful post-school life.

In addition to the SPP/APR information and other ALSDE data, the ALSDE staff and stakeholders examined where the SSIP had a potential impact on existing state initiatives. Four opportunities were identified:

- 1) Through the ALSDE's strategic plan (Plan 2020).
- 2) Through the reorganization of the ALSDE's divisions and approach to services.
- 3) In the ALSDE's adoption of the Big Four approach to partnerships and coaching (Knight, 2008) through the organization of the RPTs.
- 4) In the scaling-up of the Alabama SPDG's activities and results, utilizing the Implementation Science Framework (Fixen and Blasé, 2007) to ensure the sustainability of the evidence-based professional development.

Using the principles of implementation science and the research conducted by State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-Based Practices (SISEP), Alabama will focus on organizational change to ensure widespread and systemic changes in practices. Alabama's SSIP will address the organizational structures needed for effective professional development, training and coaching on instruction, and thereby increase efficiency and sustainability of the infrastructure that supports for future professional development activities and, therefore, improved practices. These elements include:

- Partnering with the ALSDE's ARI, AMSTI, and the Prevention and Support Services Section to offer integrated evidence-based professional development and support on reading, and behavior to districts and schools.
- Creating district and building leadership teams and instructional coaches to support the professional development, offer follow-up assistance to schools, and provide leadership to the RPTs.
- Providing instructional coaching to educators.
- Using technology, including online coaching, which will increase efficiency and reduce costs.
- Collaborating with the Alabama PTI Center, the RPTs, Career-Technical Education, and the IHEs to focus on secondary transition and post-secondary enrollment at IHEs and improved engagement in competitive employment for students with IEPs.

The ALSDE recognizes the need to close the gap and prepare all students for post-school success. The proposed SSIP will work with ALSDE partners, the PTI Center, IHEs, LEAs, and other partners to ensure that educators teaching in the general education classroom, as well as special educators, are receiving high quality professional development and coaching to meet the needs of all students. The proposed SSIP is based upon the development of multiple demonstration sites to impact greater numbers of SWDs across the state each year. Additionally, the instructional coaches and personnel from each demonstration site will provide not only on-site visitation to other school systems, but also will present and provide professional development within the RPT meeting structures once establishment and full installation phases are accomplished, thereby exponentially impacting greater number of educators, SWDs, and families by the school year 2020.

### **Stakeholder Involvement**

The following list represents the internal and external stakeholders involved in the data analysis and infrastructure analysis throughout the SSIP development process.

◆ *Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) Members; + Parent of a Child w/ Disability*



Betty Beale, Southeast Regional Resource Center (SERRC)  
 Jennie Autrey, Community/Business Representative [♦, +]  
 Tara Baker, Paraprofessional, Autauga County [♦]  
 Amy Blakeney, Part C Representative [♦]  
 Joe Eiland, ALSDE Representative (Office of Learning Support, Special Education Services)  
 Jan Enstrom, ALSDE Representative (Office of Learning Support, Special Education Services)  
 Theresa Farmer, ALSDE Representative (Office of Learning Support, Special Education Services/SPDG)  
 Shirley Farrell, ALSDE Representative (Office of Learning Support, Special Education Services)  
 Susan Goldthwaite, ALSDE Representative (Office of Learning Support, Special Education Services)  
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In preparation of the SSIP, the SES Section has presented information and elicited comments from stakeholders in multiple venues, including the APEC Statewide Conference, the MEGA Conference, the 2014 Spring ALA-CASE Conference, multiple SEAP meetings, and internal departmental meetings (e.g., ARI, the Improving Graduation Rate Taskforce, Office of Learning Support). All stakeholders expressed commitment to support and work toward improvement of Alabama's SIMR in collaboration with the SES Section and partners.

### **Component #3: SIMR**

The ALSDE used its Alabama Logic Model as a tool to focus on the extent to which the long-term result of improved post-school outcomes had been achieved. The next step was to examine data from relevant SPP/APR indicators (i.e., Indicator 1 – Graduation Rate; Indicator 3 – Statewide Assessments; Indicator 5 – Least Restrictive Environment (LRE); Indicator 13 – Secondary Transition; and Indicator 14 – Post School Outcomes) selected through backward mapping in order to identify possible root causes for the high percentage of exiters who remained unengaged in either higher education, any type of further training, or competitive employment or any type of employment at least one year after exiting school. Thus, the proposed SIMR (*...students will be able to achieve positive post-school outcomes and engage in higher education and competitive employment opportunities*) was identified through an analysis of the LRE data, state-wide assessment proficiency data, and the results of the Alabama Post-School Outcomes Survey. The root cause analysis conducted by the ALSDE staff and stakeholders indicates that, particularly at the middle school level, students are not reaching the proficiency levels in reading needed to effectively transition into high school and, thus, into higher education and/or competitive employment. A probable cause offered by stakeholders suggests that while reading instruction is very strong throughout the elementary grades, explicit reading instruction is far less prevalent during middle grades and high school.

#### **Demonstration Sites**

The implementation design of the SSIP proposes to braid existing programs endemic to Alabama's infrastructure (i.e., the Alabama SPDG, the ARI, and the ESEA Flexibility Waiver, Plan 2020) in order to establish multiple SSIP demonstration sites in regional in-service center locations throughout the state. Initially, 12 sites (i.e., one site in each of ten regional in-service centers and two in the larger region) would be established in middle schools to demonstrate effective inclusive practices and evidence-based reading instruction or in high schools to demonstrate high-quality secondary transition practices. Moreover, the Alabama SPDG will continue each year to issue Requests for Application packages to LEAs so that new SPDG projects utilizing these same strategies will further increase the number of exemplary sites demonstrating effective practices. The intent is to expand the number of sites throughout the state as well as to increase the number of instructional coaches to provide expertise to achieve the SIMR.

Both the selected middle school and the high school sites will utilize the provision of evidence-based professional development and instructional coaching to ensure fidelity of implementation and to sustain improvement. It should be noted that a strong emphasis in positive behavior supports training through evidence-based programs of Safe and Civil Schools is also a component of the SSIP demonstration site model. Through the establishment and installation of these SSIP demonstration sites, schools within each region will be able to visit a geographically similar site to view exemplary practices in action. Consequently, because the RPTs convene regularly to discuss best practices, the SSIP demonstration site coaches and staff will become training and consultative leaders to their entire region, as well as presenters at state conferences. Thus, by the school year 2020 (the year in which the FFY 2018 SPP/APR will be submitted), scaling-up the SSIP implementation plan will create exponentially an increase in the number of schools and districts who are implementing practices that lead to improved reading proficiency in middle

schools and improved secondary transition services. Thereby, we should see an increase in the numbers of young adults who are engaged in college or career after they exit high school.

### Stakeholder Involvement

Multiple internal and external stakeholders were involved in selecting the SIMR. Selected state activities leading up to the selection of the SIMR include the following:

- Forming a state team to coordinate the development of the SSIP.
- Convening monthly meetings with internal state department stakeholders to discuss strategies on improving graduation rates.
- Informing broad stakeholder groups consisting of other state agency staff, LEA personnel, teachers, administrators, parents, advocates, citizens/citizens with disabilities about what the SSIP is and its components.
- Facilitating a broad stakeholder engagement session organized to guide the data and infrastructure analysis process and to develop coherent improvement strategies.

Stakeholders discussed the Plan 2020 and its alignment with Alabama's proposed SSIP. Stakeholders reviewed historical SPP/APR indicator data and other relevant data as well as current data and targets. Data and targets were expressed as percentages from FFY 2013 through FFY 2018, with the FFY 2018 target reflecting measurable improvement over the FFY 2013 baseline data. Stakeholders were encouraged to consider the data, review historical trends, and review proposed targets, particularly that of Indicator 14. The ALSDE solicited feedback from stakeholders regarding the proposed targets. Stakeholders were given opportunities to propose targets if they disagreed with those proposed by the ALSDE. Stakeholders proposed no alternate targets and all stakeholders reached consensus with respect to the setting of targets for the Alabama SIMR.

### State Identified Measureable Result (SIMR)

The Alabama SIMR corresponds to SPP/APR **Indicator 14b**: *Percent of youth who are no longer in secondary school, had IEPs in effect at the time they left school, and were enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school.*

SPP/APR Targets (in Percent) for Part B Indicator 14b, Baseline and Targets						
FFY	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Target 14b ≥	62.35% (Baseline)	62.60%	62.85%	63.10%	63.35%	63.60%

#### **Component #4: Selection of Coherent Improvement Strategies**

The SES Section has collected and analyzed performance data for students with IEPs in order to identify a SIMR pursuant to the new Indicator 17 requirement from the OSEP to develop the SSIP. The performance data included the SPP/APR indicator data as well as Section 618 and IDEA compliance monitoring data collected over the past several years. The data trends and patterns yielded several areas that required further analysis in order to determine root causes. These areas of significance included: Indicator 5a (Least Restrictive Environment), Indicator 3c (Performance on Statewide Assessments), Indicator 13 (Secondary Transition), and Indicator 14b (Post-School Outcomes).

**Contributing Factors Leading to Root Cause.** Analysis of this trend data indicated that although about 85% of SWDs are placed in general education environments for more than 80% of the school day, proficiency data for SWDs have remained relatively static within the 40% range for the last few years. The trajectory from school year 2008-2009 to 2012-2013 showed slightly positive gains in reading for the aggregate of Grades 3-8 and one high school grade with percentages yielding from 40.00% to 48.67%, respectively. As reported in the FFY 2012 SPP/APR, the current overall performance for students with IEPs in reading was at 48.67% proficiency and in mathematics was at 47.25% proficiency (*Source: Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT), SY 2012-2013*).

Although the gains in achievement are encouraging, the current growth trajectory remains too flat to achieve the progressive growth needed to close the gap in achievement and graduation rates within the near future. When the data were further analyzed by grade level, it became apparent that the middle school grades in both reading and math proficiency showed a substantial drop in proficiency beginning in the sixth grade. Given that these students were predominantly educated within the general education classrooms, it appeared that they may not have received effective instruction and the appropriate supports through supplementary aids and services from special education teachers and general education personnel to support and improve their proficiency. The low achievement at the middle school levels are particularly troubling given that it is in these grades where many students, especially those with IEPs, make the decision to leave school without a diploma or to have the skills needed to become college- or career-ready. These decisions diminish the students' potential post-school outcomes and greatly increase the chances that the students will live in poverty and/or experience other negative social risks, such as incarceration, in a continuous cycle that impact future generations.

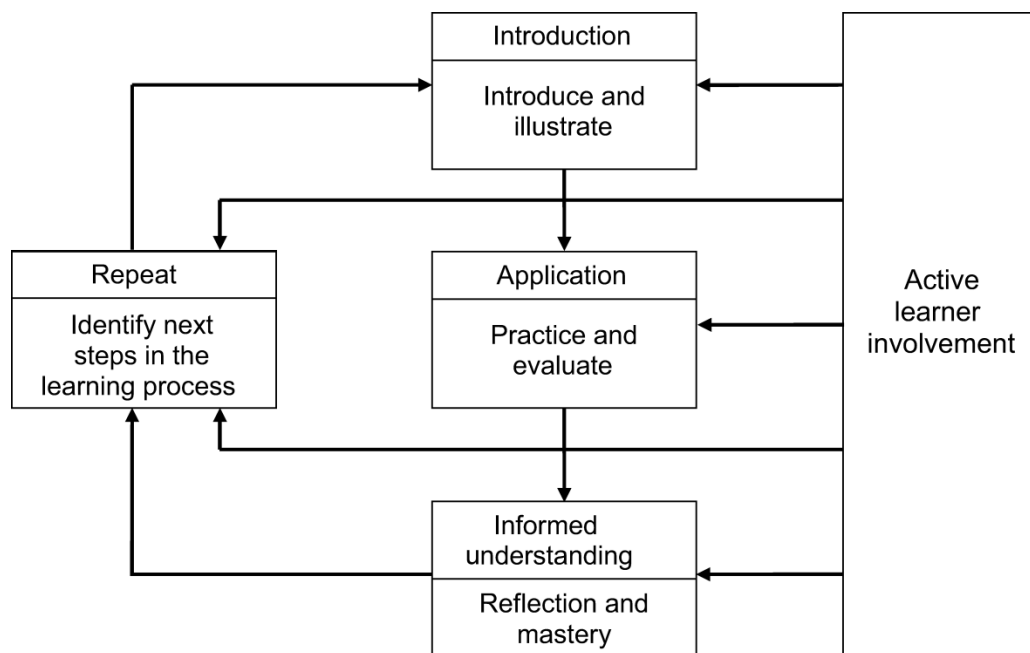
#### **Proposal for Action**

In order to provide effective, evidence-based TA consistent with the body of knowledge and research related to the Implementation Science Framework (Fixsen & Blase, 2007), according to the principles of Adult Learning espoused by Dunst and Trivette, (2009), the SES Section of the ALSDE proposes to implement an ongoing initiative that utilizes the existing state infrastructure of the 11 regional in-service centers, which encompasses a total of 12 regional demonstration sites, and the RPTs, as specified in the design requirement of the SSIP. Moreover, the ALSDE proposes to braid the existing initiatives of Plan 2020 and the Alabama SPDG to identify and implement evidence-based improvement strategies in the areas of effective inclusive environments, positive behavior supports, and evidence-based reading instruction at the middle school level connecting into secondary transition services at the high school level within 12 regional demonstration sites.

Each SSIP demonstration site will serve as a “lighthouse” to model effective evidence-based strategies designed to improve results for children with IEPs within each region. These demonstration sites will target middle school grade levels for improved reading proficiency. In addition, to address the vital need that stakeholders expressed about secondary transition, high school demonstration sites for effective implementation of secondary transition planning and practices will also be targeted to improve the delivery of secondary transition services that will affect improved post-school outcomes for students with IEPs.

As mentioned, the SSIP, in conjunction with the Alabama SPDG, will offer professional development on two levels: (1) to the TA providers and instructional coaches at the state-level; and (2) to district personnel at the local-level. The PALS model (Dunst and Trivette, 2009), the foundation for the SES’s approach to provide professional development activities, is illustrated.

### Characteristics of the PALS for a Learning Opportunity



The underlying premise of the PALS model is for learners to be actively involved and take responsibility for learning and mastering targeted knowledge and skills. According to Dunst and Trivette (2009), learners receive the most benefit from professional development opportunities when they are actively involved in all phases of the learning process. When learners are given the opportunity to use, process, and evaluate their newly-acquired knowledge and skills, their chances of achieving positive learner outcomes increase considerably. With the PALS model, learners are not required to possess a comprehensive foundational knowledge to be able to apply their knowledge and practice; instead, they can achieve positive outcomes when engaged in multiple learning opportunities. Multiple learning opportunities can provide a foundation for continuous learning and a more rich informed understanding of newly-acquired knowledge and/or skills (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). Another key feature of the PALS model is the role of the instructor or

trainer. With the PALS model, the instructors provide guided learning grounded in the learner's experiences and knowledge (Dunst & Trivette, 2009).

### **Instructional Coaches**

The SES Section of the ALSDE, hereafter referred to as the state implementation team, will use instructional coaches to support replication of this model in each of the demonstration sites. These instructional coaches will work with district and local school staff, hereafter referred to as demonstration site practitioners, to gain a contextual perspective for the district. As school staff applies the knowledge, content, and instructional approaches, the instructional coaches will perform fidelity measures to share with the state implementation team as well as with demonstration site practitioners. The instructional coaches will continue to work with demonstration site practitioners after the first year to allow staff to reflect on their practices and discuss questions, concerns, and strategies (PALS Mastery). This metacognitive skill will be an important aspect for future district self-assessment, and ultimately, for systemic change.

This initiative is designed to assign one instructional coach to work in each region (with two for Region 11), yielding a total of 12 instructional coaches to provide evidence-based professional development in collaborative school environments, co-teaching, and co-planning as well as follow-up coaching with specific emphasis upon evidence-based reading instruction delivered with fidelity. This evidence-based professional development is geared towards special education and general education teachers and staff in assigned middle schools within the designated region. The instructional coaches for the demonstration sites will also attend each RPT meeting and other regional meetings. Moreover, the instructional coaches will work with other state initiatives, such as the ARI, as appropriate, to provide information/resources on evidence-based practices that improve reading instruction for middle school students.

Each assigned instructional coach will participate in evidence-based training in Instructional Coaching 101 (Jim Knight, et al.), Co-Teaching, and behavioral management with the Alabama SPDG instructional coaches by attending trainings offered by the Alabama SPDG through its Project Closing the Gap (CTG) Goal 2. Following the first year of implementation, each demonstration site will offer visitation opportunities to other school systems within the region, thereby expanding the scope of the project over the next few years consistent with the *Cascading Logic Model (Ask "How" Five Times)*

### **Implementation Science**

In addition to the PALS model, the Alabama SSIP demonstration sites will be grounded in the research on effective implementation as successfully demonstrated by the Michigan Implementation Network (MIN). The MIN model found three fundamental features for effective implementation practices that can be applied to education programs: innovation fluency, improvement cycles, and implementation practices (2011, 2010a, 2010b).

**Innovation fluency.** Innovation fluency is about the team's knowledge and understanding about practice and has four components: (1) Research to support the practices being implemented; (2) Selecting the practice and determining whether it meets the needs of the district; (3) Determining

the key, non-negotiable features of the practice; and (4) Determining whether the practice can be replicated and implemented on a larger scale. These four components are built into the delivery of local-level TA (e.g., through data drill-downs; meeting with districts to determine needs; creating district and building level implementation teams) that will be applied in Alabama's SSIP improvement strategies and activities.

**Improvement cycles.** Improvement cycles comprise the degree to which the team focuses on continuous improvement and consists of two aspects: (1) A Plan-Do-Study-Act (P-D-S-A) cycle; and (2) Policy Enabled Practice (PEP) and Practice Informed Policy (PIP). While P-D-S-A emphasizes quick, focused changes and continuous improvement, PEP and PIP focus on removing barriers to enact systems change over the long-term. As part of Alabama's SSIP improvement strategies, the instructional coaches and local implementation teams will review and assess activities, which will allow for mid-course corrections and opportunities to recommend changes in policies, practices, and operations. In this way, each SSIP demonstration site will customize its development based on individual site strengths, needs, and priorities rather than a 'cookie-cutter', top-down approach.

**Implementation practices.** Implementation practices are about the team's attention to how the practice is implemented and can be broken down into three elements: (1) The usability of the practice; (2) The focus, intentionality, and change in practice; and (3) The factors that drive practice forward. The Alabama SSIP demonstration sites will focus upon implementation of the elements of the *Alabama State Systemic Improvement Plan Model*. The SSIP demonstration site coaches will meet regularly with the state, district, and school implementation teams to determine progress according to the above three elements of the implementation. The coaches will also meet with each other, forming a Community of Practice to reflect upon the implementation structures and the feasibility, usability, and to sharpen the focus of practices that drive improvement not only within their assigned sites but also how to extend the successful practices throughout their larger regions.

The ALSDE will provide professional development on the evidenced-based practices of:

- *Academic RtI*—reading. (e.g., Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003; Slavin et al., 1991)
- *Safe and Civil Schools*—behavior model. (e.g., Sprick, 2009; Cross, 2008; Fayette County Public Schools, 2007; Rodriguez, 2009)
- *Transition iN Training (TNT) modules*—secondary transition and post-school outcomes. (Auburn University TNT modules, 2012)
- *The Big Four*—instructional coaching approach (Knight, 2008; Knight 2009).

Additionally, the pedagogical strategies of online coaching (Rock, Gregg, Gable, & Zigmond, 2009) and adult education will be used to deliver the professional development content. It should be noted that although reading improvement will be the initial area of academic improvement for the SSIP, future plans are to implement mathematics improvement through linkages with Alabama's Math Science and Technology Initiative (AMSTI).



### Coherent Improvement Strategies

The SES Section of the ALSDE held the Alabama SSIP Phase 1 Taskforce Meeting, where taskforce members engaged in small and whole group sessions to propose and prioritize improvement strategies around the areas of LRE, participation and performance in reading assessment, and post-school outcomes/secondary transition. This meeting was a culmination of SSIP development activities involving various perspectives to assist in the selection of improvement strategies that will lead to a measurable improvement in the SIMR. Several themes emerged from the small group sessions:

1. Job embedded professional development for in-service teachers to ensure that learned strategies are implemented with fidelity.
2. Reading instruction beyond the elementary grades.
3. Transition throughout the school continuum (i.e., K-12).
4. Parental involvement that is meaningful.

As a result, the following list of strategies was developed.

Coherent Improvement Strategies	Evidence of Implementation	Timeline
State Implementation Team will:		
1. Identify 12 SSIP demonstration sites to address improvement in reading proficiency and secondary transition by utilizing evidence-based professional development, instructional coaching, and linkages with other ALSDE initiatives.	– Identified SSIP demonstration sites	SY 2014-2015 and Fall 2016
2. Select, interview and hire instructional coaches to assign to each SSIP demonstration site.	– Hired instructional coaches – Contracts	SY 2014-2015
3. Provide evidence-based training for instructional coaches in co-teaching, co-planning, behavior, and instructional coaching conducted by the Alabama SPDG.	– Sign-in sheets – Pre- and Post-training evaluations	SY 2014-2015 and SY 2015-2016
4. Select local demonstration site locations for each region consistent with the <i>Exploration Stage</i> of the	– Selection criteria – Internal stakeholder recommendations	Spring 2015

Coherent Improvement Strategies	Evidence of Implementation	Timeline
Implementation Science Framework.		
5. Provide evidence-based training for middle school staff at identified implementation sites in co-teaching, co-planning, behavior, and instructional coaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Sign-in sheets</li> <li>– Pre- and Post-training evaluations</li> </ul>	Winter/Spring 2015 (initial training); on-going
6. Provide training for high school staff at participating implementation sites in secondary transition best practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Sign-in sheets</li> <li>– Pre- and Post-training evaluations</li> </ul>	Winter/Spring 2015 (initial training); on-going
7. Examine secondary transition policy, practices, and resources to guide the statewide implementation of evidence-based secondary transition services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Revised IEP transition pages</li> </ul>	Annually
8. Link with the Alabama SPDG and Alabama PTI to provide secondary transition resources to parents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Transition Module for Families</li> <li>– Identified sites</li> </ul>	Fall 2014 and on-going
9. Identify at least three secondary transition demonstration sites to demonstrate best practices in secondary transition services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Site identification</li> <li>– Contracts</li> <li>– Site implementation team</li> <li>– Selection criteria</li> <li>– Internal stakeholder recommendation</li> </ul>	Winter/Spring 2015
10. Increase the number of secondary transition demonstration sites each year to host regional visitors and provide resources to other LEAs regarding secondary transition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Site identification</li> <li>– Contracts</li> <li>– Site implementation team</li> <li>– Selection criteria</li> <li>– Internal stakeholder recommendation</li> </ul>	Spring 2016 and on-going
11. Revise the Alabama Post-School Outcomes Survey administration schedule to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– New LEA Post School Outcomes Survey schedule</li> </ul>	Spring 2016

Coherent Improvement Strategies	Evidence of Implementation	Timeline
ensure that LEAs collect data bi-annually.		
12. Disseminate resources and information highlighting strategies that improve student performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Presentations</li> <li>– Publications</li> </ul>	Spring 2016 and on-going
13. As appropriate, collaborate with national TA Centers (e.g., National Center for Systemic Improvement, NCSI; National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, NTACT; IDEA Data Center, IDC).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– TA received</li> <li>– Resources accessed and used</li> </ul>	TBD
<b>Instructional Coaches will:</b>		
14. Conduct school team interviews to determine implementation readiness and needs consistent with <i>Exploration Stage</i> of the Implementation Science Framework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)</li> <li>– Completed Hexagon Tool: Exploring Context (NIRN, 2013)</li> <li>– Completed Stages of Implementation Analysis: Where are We? Tool (NIRN, YEAR)</li> </ul>	Winter 2015
15. Begin the <i>Installation Stage</i> and <i>Initial Implementation Stage</i> with ongoing support from assigned instructional coaches in selected demonstration sites.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Completed activity reports</li> <li>– Completed fidelity tools</li> </ul>	Fall 2015 and on-going
16. Conduct coaching sessions and classroom observations with teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Completed activity reports</li> <li>– Training sign-in sheets</li> <li>– Evaluations</li> </ul>	Winter 2015 – Winter 2016
17. Develop budgets for resources and evidence-based training for each site and feeder pattern school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Approved budgets</li> </ul>	Winter 2015 – Fall 2016
18. Collect, analyze and review progress monitoring data on a weekly basis to determine student trajectories and to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Data meeting logs</li> <li>– Student outcome data</li> <li>– Completed activity reports</li> </ul>	Fall 2015 and on-going

Coherent Improvement Strategies	Evidence of Implementation	Timeline
address performance needs.		
19. Lead site and district implementation team staff to analyze local infrastructure to determine strengths and weaknesses, including feeder pattern priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Completed analysis and results</li> <li>– Completed activity reports</li> <li>– Site/district implementation team responses based on Cascading Logic Model (Ask “How” Five Times)</li> </ul>	Spring 2015 and on-going
20. Establish and utilize Community of Practice to reflect on demonstration site implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Multiple venues to collaborate</li> </ul>	Spring 2015 and on-going
<b>Demonstration Site Practitioners will:</b>		
21. Implement the evidence-based training in co-teaching, co-planning, behavior, and instructional coaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 50% or more of intended practitioners are using the innovation with fidelity and good outcomes</li> </ul>	
22. Host visitors from other LEAs to view the implementation of evidence-based training ( <i>Full Implementation Stage</i> ).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Networking of school personnel within and across schools, districts and region</li> </ul>	Winter 2016 and on-going
23. Present at RPT meetings and/or state conferences on the implementation of evidence-based practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Demonstration site presentations</li> </ul>	By SY 2016-2017

All of the SSIP professional development coherent improvement strategies will employ a multi-faceted approach to training, coaching, and TA. Professional development will not be offered in isolation, but rather through multiple opportunities for training and follow-up coaching. By reinforcing professional development through the concepts of multiple opportunities for learning, district staff will have a deeper and more thorough understanding of their practices.

**Scaling-Up.** The *Cascading Logic Model* outlines an approach for the ALSDE to scale-up and influence a “critical mass” of school districts by the year 2020. This approach focuses the practitioner to operationalize the process of establishing new practices in existing systems by asking *how* five times. This inquiry begins with uncovering *how the students benefit* to achieve improved student outcomes regarding instruction and behavior. Then moves on to uncover *how the teachers will be supported* in their consistent use of effective innovations with high fidelity to the innovations-as-intended. Then on to *how the district and school implementation teams will be developed and supported* to ensure that the teams provide the necessary supports for teachers.

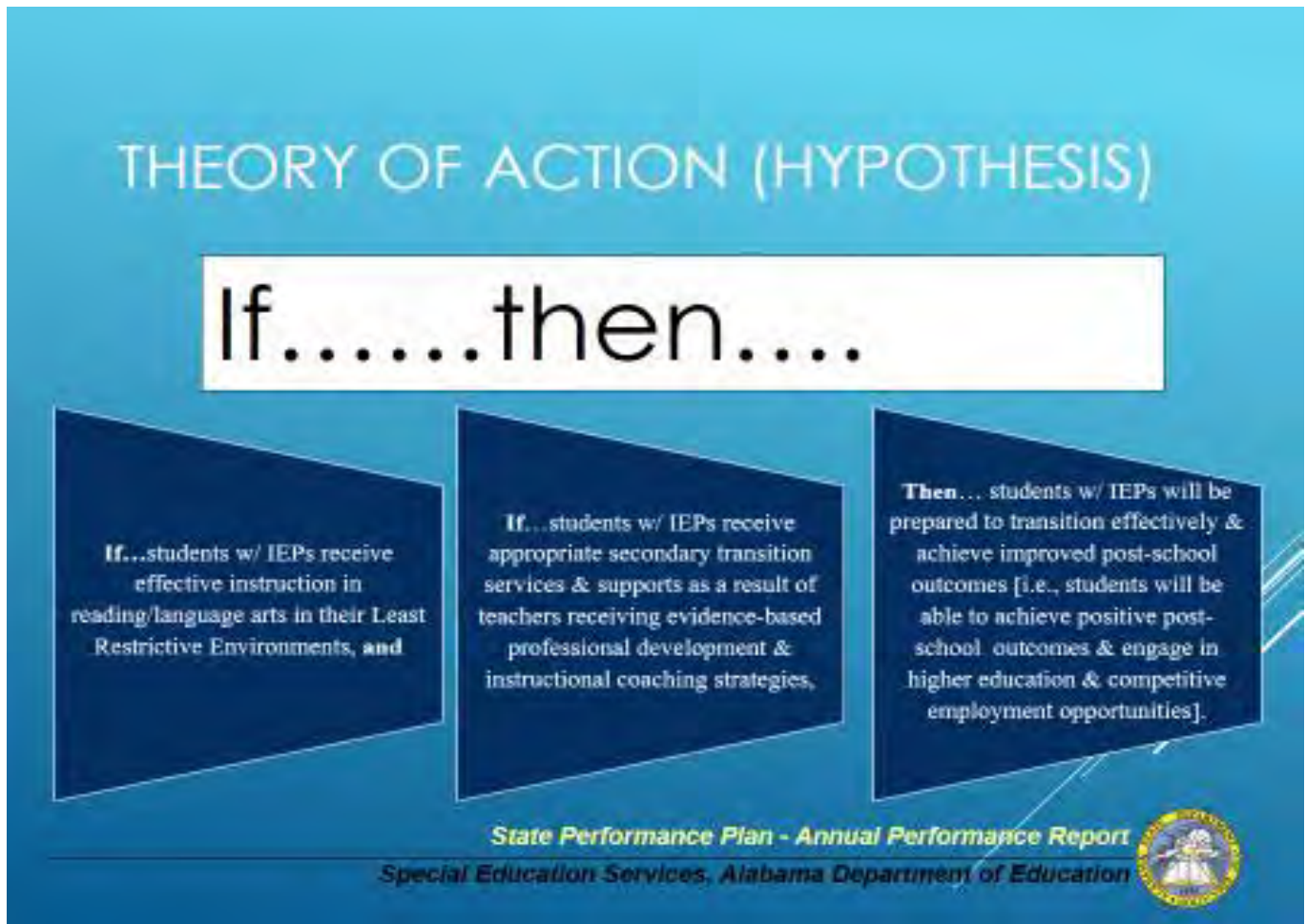
Finally, inquiry concludes with asking *how the state transformation specialists and state capacity building workgroup will be developed and supported* to expand and sustain district implementation teams. The *Cascading Logic Model* provides clear linkages between and among the various levels of the system and indicates the essential functions derived from implementation science as each level helps to create, sustain, and improve outcomes at the subsequent level.

### **Strategies for Delivering Professional Development**

The state implementation team and instructional coaches will provide professional development at the state, district, and building levels. The state implementation team will operate through the structure of the RPTs. Additionally, the state implementation team will partner with the Alabama PTI; regional in-service centers; national consultants in coaching, coaching technology, RtI, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) consultants; and other stakeholders to ensure that the SSIP demonstration site personnel have the content expertise, leadership, and organizational structures in place for success.

The SSIP demonstration sites will also explore using online coaching to provide in-the-moment professional development through technology (Rock et al., 2009). This strategy, also referred to as the bug-in-the-ear coaching, was developed at the University of Alabama. Combining Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) with a webcam, a teacher will activate the webcam, allowing a coach to view her classroom instruction. Using a Bluetooth bug, the teacher will hear suggestions from the coach while providing instruction. In addition, this same strategy will be used during non-instructional time. This evidenced-based strategy (Grier & Halcomb, 2008; Rock, Zigmund, Gregg & Gable, 2011) has been used during the last two years of Alabama SPDG and has shown to be effective in providing efficient, effective, and timely coaching to teachers.

## Component #5: Theory of Action



Through the systematic process of examining data from multiple sources collected over the past several years, the ALSDE staff and stakeholders noted that a clear pattern emerged and formed the basis for the SSIP's Theory of Action that detailed the logical progression and potential impact of the actions to be taken through the implementation of the SSIP.

The Theory of Action developed by the ALSDE staff and stakeholders hypothesized the following:

*If students with IEPs receive effective instruction in reading/language arts in their least restrictive environments, and*

*If students with IEPs receive appropriate secondary transition services and supports as a result of teachers receiving evidence-based professional development and effective instructional coaching strategies,*

*Then students with IEPs will be prepared to transition effectively and achieve improved post-school outcomes (i.e., students will be able to achieve positive post-school outcomes and engage in higher education and competitive employment opportunities).*

The Alabama Theory of Action emphasizes: (1) demonstrating achievement/growth for middle school students with IEPs, especially in reading proficiency; (2) improving secondary transition services; and (3) ensuring college- and career-readiness (Plan 2020, 2012). The proposed SIMR (*...students will be able to achieve positive post-school outcomes and engage in higher education and competitive employment opportunities*), which is captured as the “then” statement of the theory of action, was developed based on SPP/APR indicator data, the Alabama SBOE’s strategic Plan 2020, the reorganization and adoption of Dr. Jim Knight’s evidence-based partnership and coaching approach by the ALSDE, and the organization and alignment of resources and customized TA through the RPTs.

In order to move from Theory to Action, Alabama seeks to expand evidence-based practices that will result in improved post-school outcomes for SWDs. This will be accomplished by establishing a seamless system of implementation that focuses upon improved academic instruction and instructional coaching at the middle school level and improved provision of secondary transition services at the high school level, strengthening secondary transition practices and forging stronger linkages with parents, agencies, and the community.

Coaching will be provided to support fidelity of implementation of the evidence-based practices in middle schools and high schools so that Alabama’s young adults with disabilities graduate ready for college and career. Therefore, the Alabama SSIP demonstration sites configuration will reflect all aspects of the SIMR selected by the ALSDE and its stakeholders and, thereby, work to ensure the promise of a brighter future for a new generation.

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