

OVERVIEW

The Alabama State Systemic Improvement Plan Design

Description of Need: The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), Special Education Services (SES), collected and analyzed performance data for students with IEPs as part of the development of the Phase I State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP). Analysis of this trend data indicated that about 85 percent of students with disabilities (SWDs) were placed in general education environments for more than 80 percent of the school day [FFY 2012 Annual Performance Report (APR)], yet proficiency data for SWDs has remained relatively static within the 40 percent range for the last few years. The trajectory from 2008-2009 (40.00 percent) to 2012-2013 (48.67 percent) showed slightly positive gains in reading for the aggregate of Grades 3-8 and one high school grade. The overall performance for students with IEPs in reading and mathematics was reported in the FFY 2012 APR at 48.67 percent and 47.25 percent proficient, respectively [Source: *Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT)*, SY 2012-2013]. Given that these students were predominantly educated within the general education classrooms, these data suggested that there were concerns regarding students receiving appropriate supports through supplementary aids and services from special education teachers and general education personnel to support and improve their proficiency around literacy first, and then mathematics.

During School Year (SY) 2013-2014, Alabama began using a new assessment system, the ACT ASPIRE, which utilized a computer-based assessment system with fewer paper and pencil administrations. The resulting data reflected much lower performance levels across all subgroups, but dramatically lower for special education populations. The ACT ASPIRE test scores continued their downward trajectory for the special education subgroup after the 2014-2015 administration. In FFY 2014, the statewide proficiency in Reading for students with IEPs was 10.24 percent, down from 15.68 percent in the FFY 2013. In Math, the proficiency rate for FFY 2014 was 13.79 percent; the FFY 2013 rate was 17.64 percent.

As the ALSDE analyzed Post-School Outcomes (PSO) data for the previous years, staff noted that nearly 40 percent of former students with IEPs in place at the time they left school were not engaged in either college or a career one year after exiting school.

When these data were further analyzed by grade level, it became apparent that the middle school grades in both reading and math proficiency experienced substantial drops beginning in the sixth grade with eighth grade performance noted as particularly concerning, further increasing the urgency of the demand for improved instructional methodology so students with IEPs could experience improved educational opportunities in order to achieve more positive outcomes from high school to post-school life. Clearly, ensuring that students who enter ninth grade are prepared to succeed at challenging high school coursework is an important factor in improving future graduates' successful entry into college or careers with competitive wages. Therefore, Alabama, in conjunction with its stakeholders, selected "Improved Post-School Outcomes" as its State-Identified Measurable Result (SIMR).

Basis for Action: In order to achieve the SIMR, the ALSDE planned to focus upon its Theory of Action, an If-Then statement linking academic instruction, transition services, and post-school outcomes. This offered the hypothesis that providing effective, evidence-based technical

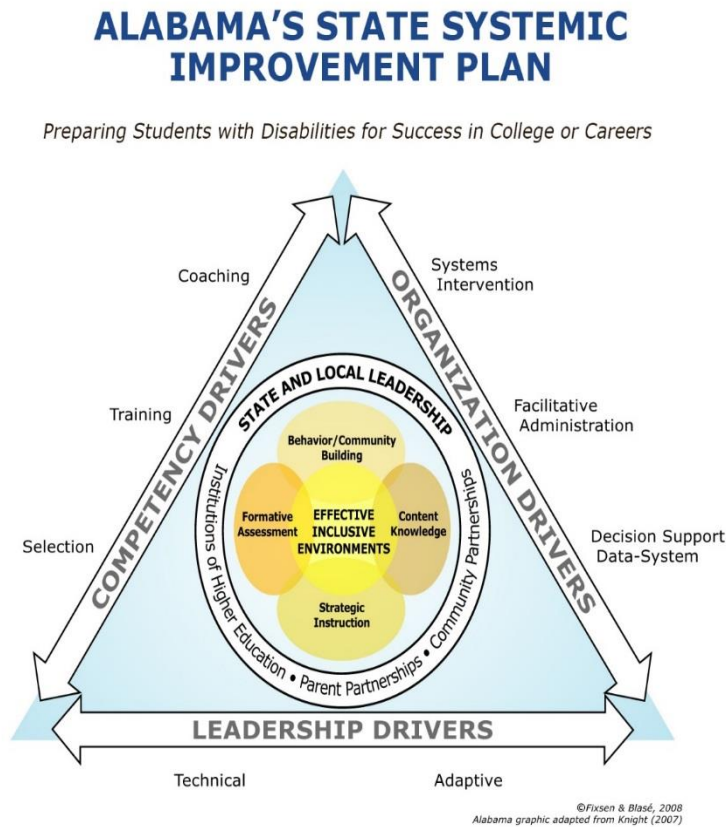
assistance consistent with the body of knowledge and research related to the Implementation Science Framework (Fixsen et al., 2005) to impact the academic achievement of middle school students would better prepare students for secondary school work and, thus, facilitate more effective transitions from high school to post-school life. In order to accomplish this result, the ALSDE has established a series of middle school demonstration sites focusing upon academic and behavioral improvement. Similarly, the ALSDE has established secondary transition demonstration sites to implement evidence-based transition practices, including: instruction, community-based vocational instruction, and self-determination/self-advocacy. Additional sites, will be selected each year of the SSIP.

Therefore, the ALSDE, SES, began implementing an ongoing project that utilized the existing state infrastructure of eleven regional in-service centers and the Regional Planning Teams (RPTs), as specified in the design requirement of the SSIP as part of the FFY 2013-18 State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report. The structure of the SSIP braided the SSIP components with the existing successful work of the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) awarded in 2012, and Alabama's Plan 2020 to create demonstration sites in selected middle schools to be demonstration sites of exemplary models for effective co-teaching, co-planning, and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS). The model was grounded and supported within the research-based Implementation Science framework (Fixsen et al., 2005), Co-teaching (Friend & Cook, 2013), Co-planning (Ploessl et al., 2010), and Instructional Coaching (Knight, 2007). The synthesis of these variables, implemented with high fidelity, was intended to create effective inclusive environments for SWDs and to result in an improved school climate and culture for all students.

The SSIP was designed to utilize one or more trained instructional coaches to work in each region (with two for Region 11). The SSIP Instructional Coaches were hired to provide follow-up support through coaching as part of an evidence-based professional development (PD) model (Brown et al., 2005) to middle school site personnel. Additionally, SSIP Instructional Coaches provide support to the district Implementation Teams who were provided PD in co-teaching, co-planning and PBIS (Tier II) (i.e., CHAMPS). These SSIP demonstration site and district Implementation Teams consisted of administrators, special education and general education teachers and staff working at selected SSIP Demonstration Site middle schools within the region. Linkages will continue to be developed and strengthened with the regional Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), as well, to ensure that districts received specific emphasis upon literacy and strategic instruction.

The SSIP Instructional Coaches for the SSIP demonstration sites attend RPT and other regional meetings, as needed. During SY 2014-2015, one SSIP Demonstration Site was selected for the implementation of Secondary Transition best practices around instruction and community-based vocational instruction (CBVI), with additional sites to be added for SY 2016-2017. SSIP Instructional Coaches with transition-specific expertise have been selected to work with each site to improve planning and practice for secondary transition. The ALSDE projects that new sites will be added each year to showcase best practices in secondary transition and improving instruction and transition services using evidence-based transition curricula, CBVI, and linkages with other agencies to improve students' post-school success. Simultaneously, the ALSDE will be working to develop and improve the statewide infrastructure of policies, practices, and data usage designed to improve transition services leading to positive post-school outcomes for SWDs.

Figure 1. The Alabama SSIP Model - Illustration of the variables that comprise the Alabama SSIP model as adapted from the Creating Effective Inclusive Environments demonstration project (SPDG).



Targeted technical assistance from the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) is being provided to support the ALSDE to improve secondary transition practices throughout the state.

Each SSIP instructional coach has participated in evidence-based professional learning in Instructional Coaching 101 (Knight, 2007), Co-Teaching (Friend & Cook, 2013), Co-Planning (Ploessl et al., 2010), and evidence-based PBIS (i.e., Safe & Civil Schools) (Sprick, 2009) offered by the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG). Following the first year of Exploration (SY 2014-2015), eight SSIP demonstration sites began working toward achieving a high-degree of fidelity of implementation within the evidence-based practices listed above, as measured by

external project consultants in order to determine demonstration status to offer visitation/observation opportunities to other school systems within the region, thereby expanding the scope and impact of the project over the next few years through scaling-up into additional schools and districts.

The SSIP Instructional Coaches have also received ongoing training in the principles of the Implementation Science Framework and meet regularly (virtually, as well as on-site) as a Professional Learning Community to discuss progress, barriers, and program updates.

The Alabama SSIP and the Implementation Science Framework

Competency Driver—Selection: As previously noted, the Alabama SSIP Model is grounded within the Implementation Science Framework. In the Competency Driver of the Implementation Science Framework, Selection, Training, and Coaching are essential components of successful, sustainable change. As of December 2015, demonstration sites in Regions 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 11 have been selected to work toward becoming middle school demonstration sites. The site in

Region 9 is also implementing evidence-based practices around secondary transition. Ongoing selection efforts are continuing in regions 3, 7, and 8 to ensure appropriate site identification for the SSIP demonstration site project and to ensure that the sites selected to participate have concurrent academic need as well as faculty and administrative support for sustained change. Figure 2 shows the present map of the SSIP demonstration sites as of winter 2016. It should be noted that the site in Region 6 is exploring a scale-up to another school site within Region 6. The Implementation Science Framework Hexagon Tool, (Fixsen et al., 2005) will be used to explore the site's readiness for inclusion within the project. Additional demonstration sites for effective secondary transition practices are being identified using the tool during winter and spring 2016, with more sites to be added during SY 2016-2017.

Figure 2. Map of SSIP Regional Demonstration Sites

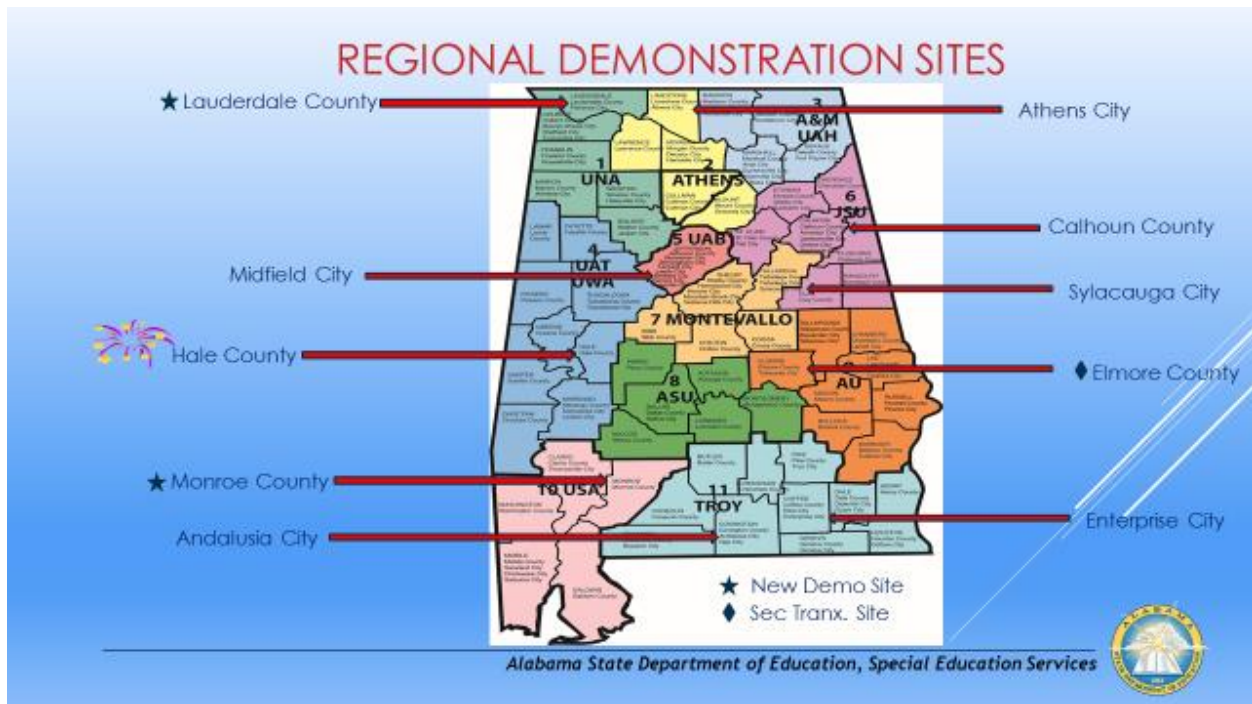


Table 1. List of SSIP Demonstration Sites

Region	LEA	Demonstration Site	Selection Year
1	Lauderdale County	Brooks High School (7-12 Grade)	Winter 2016
2	Athens City	Athens Middle School	Fall 2015
4	Hale County	Greensboro Middle School	Fall 2015
5	Midfield City	Rutledge School	Fall 2015
6	Calhoun County	White Plains Middle School	Fall 2015
7	Sylacauga City	Nichols-Lawson Middle School	Fall 2015
9	Elmore County	Wetumpka Middle School	Fall 2015
10	Monroe County	Monroeville Middle School	Winter 2016
11a	Andalusia City	Andalusia Junior High School	Fall 2015
11b	Enterprise City	Coppinville Middle School	Fall 2015

Competency Driver—Coaching: Criteria for selecting the successful instructional coach candidates have specified that the applicant possess classroom and administrative experience, with expertise in working with both administrators and teachers at the middle school level. The current SSIP Instructional Coaches are retired personnel who have been employed in Alabama school systems, and include retired special education administrators, principals, one retired LEA superintendent, a reading specialist, and a transition specialist. Ten SSIP Instructional Coaches have been hired as of December 2015, with additional applicants expressing interest.

Effective coaching by appropriately-trained personnel has proven to be an essential component to support the implementation of evidence-based practices in co-planning/co-teaching and the implementation of PBIS practices (i.e., CHAMPS). The SSIP Instructional Coaches who are assisting with secondary transition have extensive experience within the area, and are able to assist school personnel to problem-solve regarding the potential barriers to implementation, such as scheduling, transportation, and linkages to other agencies.

Competency Driver – Training: Initial professional learning and training in evidence-based practices [i.e., co-teaching, co-planning, and PBIS (i.e., CHAMPS) for the demonstration site teams] was conducted on February 3-5, 2015. During this time, the school teams co-planned with the SSIP and the ARI District Coaches to develop action plans designed to lead to the establishment and roll-out of the future demonstration sites. During February-May 2015, SSIP Instructional Coaches worked with their assigned Implementation Team to address the needs for each specific school. It is important to note that this model was designed to be implemented to reflect the strengths and needs of each individual site so that growth was “owned” by the Implementation Team and involved personnel. Therefore, the principles of change reflected in the Alabama SSIP Model will be the constant across sites but the process and decision-making within those parameters will be variables responsive to individual site needs.

Additional training in schoolwide PBIS (i.e., Safe and Civil School Foundations; CHAMPS) and classroom PBIS behavioral approaches was conducted during spring 2015, as well as at the

individual sites throughout the spring and summer (2015) months in conjunction with the AL SPDG training efforts. The ALSDE, SES Section, provided implementation grants to each SSIP demonstration site. Budgets included monies for the purchase of evidence-based intervention resources in Reading and Math, needed materials and supplies based on site needs as determined by the Implementation Teams. Full implementation of the demonstration sites began in fall 2015, and observational visits at one of the sites began during spring 2016, with other sites anticipating becoming “Demonstration Ready” within the 2016-2017 school year.

In December 2015, in partnership with the Alabama SPDG, Randy Sprick, Ph.D of Safe & Civil Schools began working with multiple system-wide teams from the SSIP Demonstration Site systems in three-year cohorts (2015-2018) to scale-up implementation of schoolwide PBIS, Tier II, (i.e., Safe & Civil Schools Foundations) across additional schools.

Organization and Leadership Drivers: Other critical variables are those found within the Leadership and Organizational Drivers that require the formation of active, functioning collaborative site and district Implementation Teams who receive training together and are, thus, able to guide implementation through the lens of evidence-based practice implementation and decision-making. The development and active implementation of these Site and District Implementation Teams have facilitated the essential “buy-in” component that has become a hallmark of the project’s success. Moreover, it is within these teams that ongoing data-discussions and data-based decisions are made to maximize teaching and learning outcomes. Many sites have developed “data rooms” with data posted on the walls to facilitate ongoing analysis and discussion (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Illustration of Greensboro Middle School’s data room where the teams meet to discuss progress and student instructional needs.



Full Exploration and Installation-stage implementation of the demonstration sites began in fall 2015, with each team meeting with staff from the ALSDE to discuss Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) detailing expectations and implementation agreements around each aspect of the SSIP Model. According to the MOUs, the SSIP demonstration site teams agreed to meet regularly to

discuss implementation progress, barriers, and to examine student test and progress monitoring data. External consultants and evaluators worked with staff regarding fidelity of implementation and site progress along the continuum of demonstration status. One site has been deemed ready to host visits beginning spring 2016.

An evaluation plan with a Project Logic Model has been developed to guide the evaluation and to ensure there are appropriate measures and feedback loops built within the evaluation design. This Evaluation Plan is included, as required, within Component #3: Evaluation (see pp. 41-61) along with evaluation results. It should be noted that the AL SSIP contains both a Logic Model Overview (found on p. 43) and a comprehensive Logic Model (found in Appendix III).

EMERGING RESULTS

Although the sites have been implementing the components of the AL SSIP Model for not quite one year, some emerging positive results for all students have been measured in several of the sites. For example, following the implementation of the schoolwide PBIS (i.e., Safe & Civil Schools Foundation) principles, one site has logged an 87 percent reduction in office discipline referrals for the first semester during SY 2015-2016; another site has noted decreases in the following from December 2014-December 2015:

- 23 percent fewer after-school detentions;
- 78 percent fewer in-school detentions;
- 67 percent fewer students were removed from school buses for disciplinary reasons;
- 67 percent fewer Saturday School sessions were used as a disciplinary method; and
- 64 percent fewer students experienced out-of-school suspensions.

Student-teacher conferences increased by 13 percent and time-out was used 7 percent more than other, more exclusionary, methods. Academically, the same school has logged improved results according to its progress monitoring data, with the sharpest trajectory noted in the sixth-grade growth, with an increase of +9 percentage points in reading and +14 percentage points in math.

Throughout the spring semester in 2015, the SSIP Instructional coach and consultants working with Alabama's SSIP and SPDG visited the classrooms, modeled effective instructional strategies, and consulted with the teachers and administrators to review the school's progress and provide constructive feedback to ensure fidelity of implementation of evidence-based practices in co-teaching, co-planning, and PBIS. The teachers in most sites reported improved collaborative relationships with each other and the administrators regularly conducted "walk-throughs" to provide feedback to the teachers. The SSIP Implementation Teams continued to meet regularly to discuss implementation issues, to problem-solve, and to examine formative data for each student in the school, as well as the ACT ASPIRE results when the state assessment results became available. In several sites, the teachers also included the students in the data discussions, assisting them to review their own data on the periodic assessments and to understand the skills they needed to focus upon to improve.

SPOTLIGHT ON HALE COUNTY'S GREENSBORO MIDDLE SCHOOL: THE FIRST SSIP DEMONSTRATION SITE

As has been previously mentioned and illustrated in Figure 2, the SSIP demonstration sites were selected across Alabama, reflecting the varying demographics to be found across Alabama. It is important to note that Hale County's Greensboro Middle School is the first site to be judged "Demonstration Ready" by an external consultant. "Demonstration Ready" status indicates that the site has attained a high level of fidelity in co-planning and co-teaching and implementation of classroom PBIS (i.e., CHAMPS). Staff from other districts in the region and across the state are making plans for both virtual and on-site visits.

Greensboro Middle School is a high-poverty, high-minority rural middle school with over 85 percent of its students eligible for free or reduced school lunch. Data from the 2015 Alabama Kid's Count notes that Hale County faces multiple risk factors for poverty, such as higher unemployment rates (6.8 percent) than the 5.6 percent experienced state-wide; 38.8 percent of its children live in poverty, as compared to Alabama's statewide 27.7 percent. In 2014, the per capita income for the county was just over \$18,000 annually, which was at least \$10,000 less than the per capita income for Alabama.

Staff from the ALSDE, SES, and the AL SSIP's external evaluator visited the school in January 2016. Classroom observations concurred with the reports from external consultants: co-planning and co-teaching was being implemented with a high level of fidelity, utilizing multiple approaches from Friend and Cook's (2013) literature. The day the team visited, they observed the special education and general education teachers (co-teaching dyads) implementing the Stations and Parallel approaches (Friend & Cook) with a high-degree of fidelity. Student engagement measures in all observed classes revealed nearly 100 percent engagement among students during the lessons, with no negative behavioral events observed. Posters detailing the classroom PBIS (i.e., CHAMPS) expectations were posted in each classroom. Moreover, teachers exhibited a high level of positive engagement with students during instruction and the climate within each classroom and the entire school was positive and conducive to learning. Transitions in hallways were orderly and efficiently accomplished so that teachers and students maximized instructional time.

During a meeting with the Greensboro Middle School principal and staff, the ALSDE visitors mentioned the District Attendance Award Banner displayed beside the school's front door. The principal admitted that the school had, in fact, won the attendance award for two consecutive quarters. One visitor asked the names of the programs they were implementing that were responsible for such success and the principal smiled and replied quietly, "The students enjoy coming to school now."

As a result of the stronger collaboration among the faculty as well as with the district staff, the culture of the school has become more inclusive, as all teachers have taken ownership of all students, no longer drawing lines between general and special education students. Teachers stated they have observed that students are gaining confidence and becoming more engaged in class participation than ever before. The special education teacher spoke of her own professional growth through her increasing classroom responsibilities and the improvement she saw in her students. Her increased confidence inspired this young special education teacher to lead the construction of

the “Reading Café”, (see Figure 4), a spacious reading area furnished with comfortable, locally-crafted seating and decorated by pennants from all Alabama universities hanging on the walls—a place where students could sit and read during class breaks, daring to dream of once-unimaginable futures at a state university.

Figure 4. Illustration of Greensboro Middle School’s Reading Café.



Results from the first progress monitoring period from September to December indicated that students had made encouraging gains in the co-taught classes at Greensboro Middle School. In one inclusive class containing six students with IEPs, two of the six made gains of 20 points or better during the first progress monitoring on literacy and reading. The whole class data was based on 21 students: 11 students made gains of 25 points or better, eight students made no gains, and two students did not test. Specific gains were made in the areas of key ideas, vocabulary acquisition, and text complexity for students with IEPs. The largest gains were made in the areas of key ideas and text complexity.

Clearly, much work remains to be done to achieve Alabama’s ambitious SIMR of increasing the percentage of SWDs who are engaged in college or competitive employment after high school graduation. Barriers of poverty, disability, and internal and external risk factors that are unique to each SSIP demonstration site present tremendous obstacles to overcome in a state where about one in four of its students live in poverty. It would be counter-productive to believe that each site will show identical, consistent rates of progress throughout this project. Yet the district administrators and the faculty, SSIP Instructional Coach, and staff of Greensboro Middle School have created a culture of high expectations for student achievement and ambitious aspirations despite generations of poverty.

These dedicated educators have shown us that zip code need not be destiny for the children and families living within its boundaries. Through intentional work guided by evidence-based practice and effective teamwork, they have kindled a flame that yields a bright and steady light, illuminating their students’ paths into richer and more fulfilling tomorrows.

