

State Systems Change Spotlight: Alabama

Challenge: How can intensively supporting State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) pilot sites contribute to broader scale-up goals?

The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) aims to increase the number of students with disabilities who achieve positive post-school outcomes and engage in higher education or competitive employment opportunities. Through their SSIP and State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG), Alabama is focusing on improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities by working to increase student engagement; improve academic performance; and provide effective, inclusive learning environments. The state developed a network of demonstration sites to help support the scale-up of these practices. This spotlight highlights Alabama's approach to supporting selected middle schools to become demonstration sites, a key strategy in their overall SSIP scale-up efforts.

State Context

When Alabama analyzed student outcome data for the purposes of selecting a State Identified Measurable Result (SIMR) for the focus of their SSIP, they found that almost 40% of students with disabilities were not engaged in either competitive employment or higher education 1 year after leaving the K-12 system. The overall goal of Alabama's SSIP is to increase this percentage, in part, by addressing root causes at the middle school level. State data revealed that middle school students with disabilities were struggling in reading and mathematics and therefore were not always well prepared for challenging curricula in high school. However, low student achievement in middle school existed despite a *high* rate of inclusion of students with disabilities in the general classroom setting. As a result, the state decided that in addition to focusing on improving the quality of instruction and academic supports, their SSIP must also ensure that inclusive classroom environments are positive, effective places for students with disabilities to learn.

Public School Facts: Alabama

Districts: 137
Schools: 1,467
Students: 743,893
Students with Individualized Education Programs: 84,280

Alabama's SSIP builds upon successful strategies supported by its SPDG, specifically the creation of demonstration sites in selected middle schools around the state that serve as exemplary models for effective co-teaching, co-planning, and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). To establish these demonstration sites, the state selected middle schools from diverse geographic regions that demonstrated the need, readiness, and willingness to engage in the project. Participating schools received training in instructional coaching, co-teaching, and schoolwide and classroom positive behavioral supports. Participating schools received "mapping training" focused on creating schedules for students with disabilities that maximize co-teaching and co-planning success. The schools were also matched with an instructional coach to guide their implementation efforts.

Strategies for Success

After the first year of SSIP implementation, ALSDE staff conducted observations in participating middle schools using a fidelity tool to determine schools' readiness to serve as a demonstration site. Alabama identified several strategies that helped selected schools become "demonstration ready":

- *Did not apply a "one-size-fits-all" approach to site support.* The state provided clear expectations for the project and specified non-negotiables (e.g., participation in required trainings) but also allowed for differentiation and customization that met the unique needs of each site. The state acknowledged the importance of local culture and context to increase buy-in from participating sites and ensured that support provided by the state was responsive and tailored.
- *Selected clearly defined, research-based practices as the focus of the SSIP.* Alabama's SSIP is anchored in specific research-based practices including co-teaching, co-planning, PBIS, and instructional coaching. The high-quality training provided around these practices (see below) and the research base supporting each helped to establish the project's credibility and fostered commitment from participating sites. In addition, the state grounded its SSIP in the Implementation Science frameworks¹, attending to implementation drivers, implementation teams, and feedback loops throughout every step of the project.
- *Provided high-quality professional development and coaching support.* The state ensured SSIP trainings and coaching were of high quality. SSIP evaluation data indicate that 87.89% of participants reported the trainings were of high quality and 73.64% reported they were satisfied with the coaching they had received. The state was intentional about coach selection, choosing retired personnel (e.g., special education administrators, principals, instructional specialists) who were employed in Alabama school systems. These coaches received extensive

¹ Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Retrieved from <http://ctndisseminationalibrary.org/PDF/nirmonograph.pdf>

training and opportunities to network with one another throughout the project. They provided intensive support to demonstration sites, averaging 150+ coaching hours per year, per site. The quality and frequency of coaching support and professional development have resulted in high levels of satisfaction from participating sites as well as gains in key student outcome measures. (See below for more details.)

- *Offered guidance and resources to support selected schools to serve as effective demonstration sites.* Once a school was determined to be “demonstration ready,” the state provided resources and guidance to help the school effectively share its practices and learnings with visitors. For example, the state set an expectation that all demonstration sites would develop resources for visitors about their implementation practices, schedules and protocols for visitor observations, and comment forms so visitors could capture their reflections to share with the school. These expectations are included as part of the state’s SSIP evaluation plan.

Impact of Strategies

Alabama’s SSIP has generated some exciting early results.

- In all, 88% of students with disabilities in middle school demonstration sites saw gains on progress monitoring in the 2015–16 school year, surpassing a benchmark goal of 45%.
- In that same time frame, 48% of students with disabilities in demonstration sites posted gains on *ACT Aspire*, surpassing a benchmark goal of 40%.
- Demonstration sites also saw notable decreases in the number of unexcused absences, chronic absences (defined as a student missing 10% or more of a semester) and as chronic tardies.
- Alabama also made gains on its SIMR. In the federal fiscal year (FFY) 2015 reporting year, 70% of students were enrolled in higher education or competitively employed, a 5% increase from the FFY 2014 reporting year.

Recommendations for States Facing Similar Challenges

- Honor the needs of participating sites and tailor the support to each site’s unique context.
- Build strong, trusting relationships with participating schools so they are ready and willing to become demonstration sites and support scale-up efforts.
- Provide high-quality support and coaching to participating sites to increase the likelihood of adoption with fidelity of research-based practices.
- Offer guidance, resources, and protocols to demonstration sites to ensure they offer high-quality learning opportunities to visitors.

Available Resources

- National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI), Technical Assistance State Facilitators (Find your state on the map [here.](#))
- NCSI Systems Change Service Area Team Technical Assistance Support (Contact: Dona Meinders at dmeinde@wested.org or Jana Rosborough at jrosbor@wested.org)
- The National Implementation Research Network's Active Implementation [Hub](#)

About this resource: This resource was developed by members of the NCSI Systems Change Service Area Team, including Susan Hayes (WestEd), Dona Meinders (WestEd), and Jana Rosborough (WestEd) with support from Gena Nelson (AIR). The content was developed under cooperative agreement number #H326R140006 (NCSI) from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. Project officers: Perry Williams and Shedeh Hajghassemali.