

TO: Members of the State Board of Education

FROM: Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools

DATE: June 24, 2025

SUBJECT: Blueprint Special Education Workgroup - Update



Purpose

To provide a progress update on the Blueprint Special Education Workgroup, adopted in its Initial Blueprint Comprehensive Implementation Plan by the Blueprint Accountability and Implementation Board.

Background

On December 1, 2022, the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) adopted its Initial Blueprint Comprehensive Implementation Plan. The Implementation Plan outlined recommendations for the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to convene a Blueprint Special Education Workgroup to discuss and make recommendations on instruction and services for students with disabilities across the state of Maryland.

The Blueprint Special Education Workgroup is co-chaired by State Superintendent Dr. Carey M. Wright and Ms. Liz Zogby of the Maryland Down Syndrome Special Education Policy & Advocacy Project. The Workgroup convened sixteen (16) content meetings and one additional meeting in April 2025 to finalize prioritization of recommendations. The final meeting was held on January 29, 2025. The Addendum to the Final Report was submitted to the AIB on May 28, 2025. There were approximately 50 members appointed to the Workgroup, with representatives from MSDE, school administrators, special education and general education teachers, parents, advocates, attorneys, community partners, special education directors, physicians, and others.

Executive Summary

The presentation provides information and updates on the following:

- Blueprint Special Education Workgroup Overview
- Final Recommendations
- Prioritized Plan
- Next Steps

Action

No action is required; this information is for discussion only.

Attachments

SEW State BOE Presentation June 24, 2025.pptx

SEW Addendum to the Final Report 05.30.25.pdf

Division of Special Education

Update on the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Special Education Workgroup

June 24, 2025

Presented By | Dr. Antoine L. Hickman, Assistant State Superintendent
Liz Zogby, Special Education Policy & Advocacy

A photograph of a smiling female teacher with curly blonde hair, wearing a green shirt, giving a high-five to a young student with curly dark hair wearing a yellow and black striped shirt. They are in a classroom with other students visible in the background.

Presentation Outline

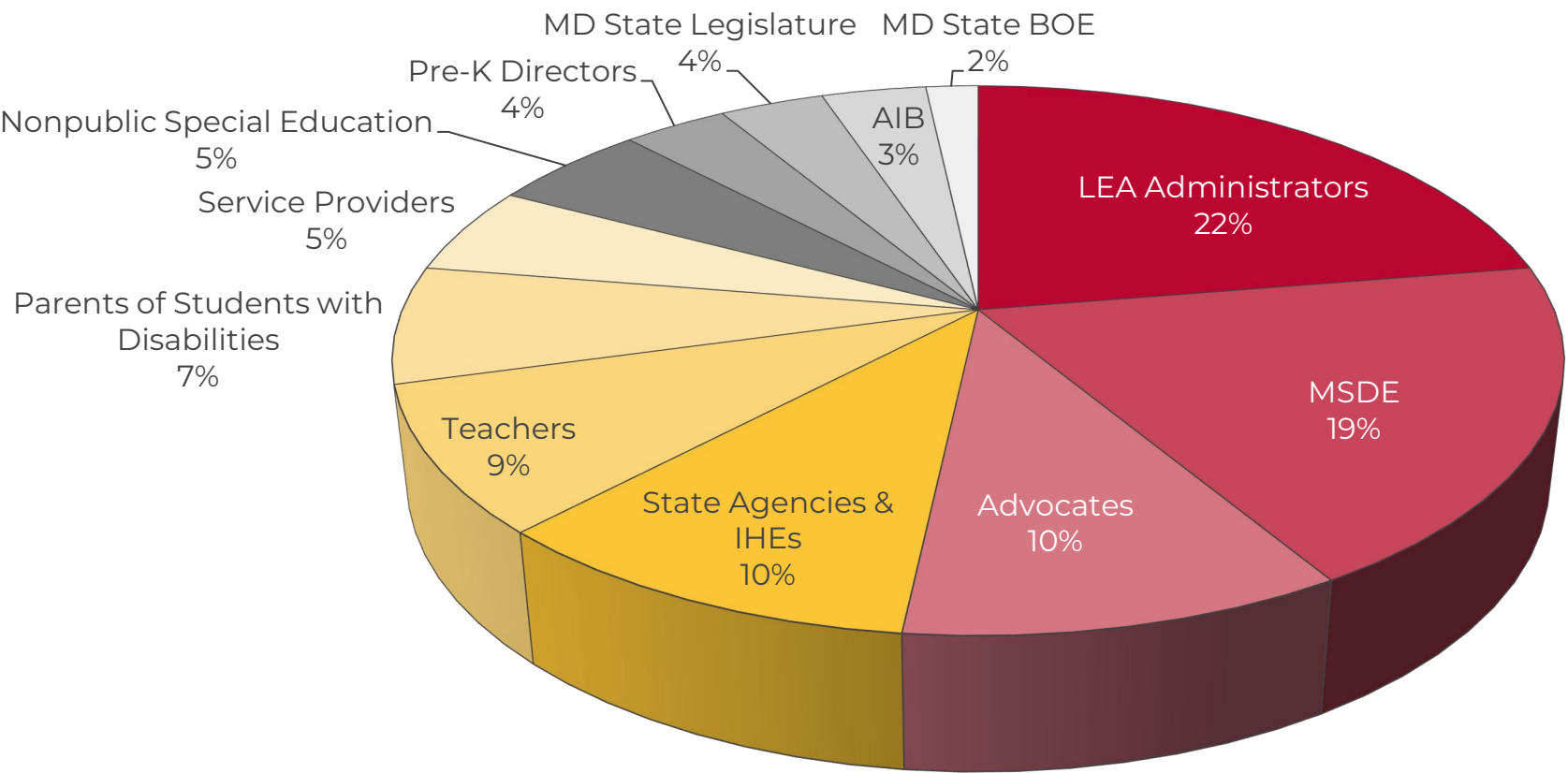
1. Special Education Workgroup Overview
2. Final Recommendations
3. Prioritized Plan
4. Questions & Answers

Blueprint Special Education Workgroup

On **December 1, 2022**, the Blueprint Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) adopted its **Initial Blueprint Comprehensive Implementation Plan**. The Implementation Plan outlines recommendations for the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to convene a Blueprint Special Education Workgroup to discuss and make recommendations on instruction and services for students with disabilities.

Workgroup Membership

The Workgroup is comprised of 58 members with representation from the following categories:



Blueprint Special Education Workgroup

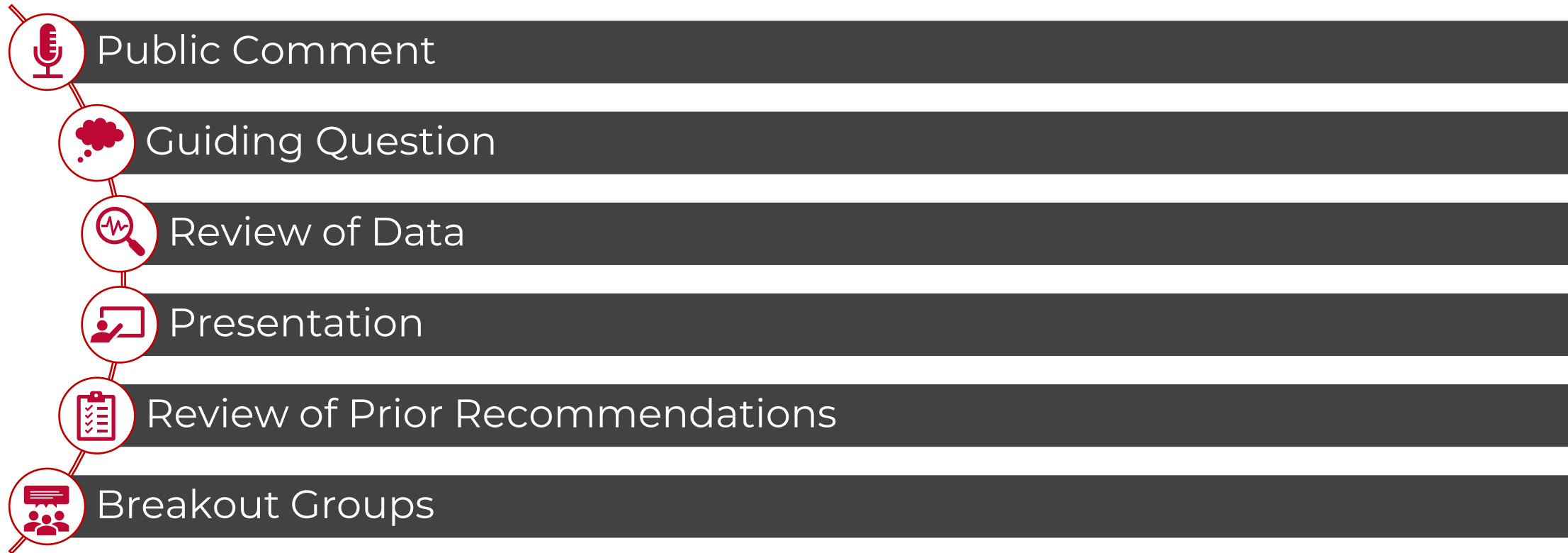
The Blueprint Special Education Workgroup held **its first meeting on August 23, 2023 and continued to meet** through **January of 2025** approximately every month.

Each meeting **focused on a specific topic related to students with disabilities** in Maryland, including:

- Existing Standards and Expectations
- Integration of Built-In Supports for ALL Students
- Teacher Quality/Inservice and Teacher Prep
- Monitoring, Accountability, and Data Collection
- IEP Development of Specially Designed Instruction
- Teacher Quality: Preparation Programs, Certification, and Professional Learning
- Staffing Delivery, Staffing, and Working Conditions
- Adequate Funding
- Least Restrictive Environment
- Significant Disproportionality
- Parent and Family Partnerships
- Early Childhood/Infants and Toddlers
- Exclusionary Discipline, Behavior, and Emotional Disability
- Transition

Meeting Structure

Meetings were initially held in a hybrid format and then transitioned to fully virtual to accommodate conflicting schedules and allow for more robust collaboration. Each meeting was organized according to the following structure:



Workgroup Reports

As part of the requirements outlined in the Blueprint Comprehensive Implementation Plan, the Special Education Workgroup produced the following reports:

- The **initial report** was published in **December of 2023** and provided background information, relevant data, national best practices, and research, in addition to initial findings and recommendations from the Workgroup.
- The **interim report** was published in **July of 2024** and was built upon the initial report and provided a preliminary list of recommendations.
- The **final report** was published in **December of 2024** and included recommendations approved to date, but because SEW meetings were ongoing through **January of 2025**, did not include a comprehensive overview of all finalized recommendations.
- The AIB approved the Workgroup continuing its work through **May 30, 2025**, and submit additional work products and a report at that time. The report serves as an **addendum to the final report**, providing an overview of the SEW's progress since the release of the final report.

Finalized Workgroup Recommendations (Part 1 of 3)

Standards and Expectations Under IDEA for SWDs to Achieve, Including Ambitious IEP Goals

- Recommendation 1: Standards and Expectations
- Recommendation 2: Monitoring
- Recommendation 3: Comprehensive Early Literacy Plan

Specially Designed Instruction

- Recommendation 4: State-Level Capacity and Guidance on Specially Designed Instruction

IEP Implementation

- Recommendation 5: Effective Implementation of IEPs

Monitoring, Data Collection, And Technical Assistance

- Recommendation 6: Review of Maryland Online Individualized Education Program

Teacher Qualifications, Recruitment, and Retention

- Recommendation 7: Knowledge, Skills, and Expertise
- Recommendation 8: Recruitment & Retention of Educators

Finalized Workgroup Recommendations (Part 2 of 3)

Capacity and Resources

- Recommendation 9: Staffing and Service Delivery
- Recommendation 10: Adequacy Study
- Recommendation 11: Minimum School Funding
- Recommendation 12: Prevention of Supplantation

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

- Recommendation 13: Previous Recommendations and LRE
- Recommendation 14: Plan for Least Restrictive Environment

Significant Disproportionality

- Recommendation 15: Previous Recommendations and Disproportionality
- Recommendation 16: Plan to Address Significant Disproportionality

Early Childhood

- Recommendation 17: Access to High Quality Pre-Kindergarten Programs
- Recommendation 18: Plan for High-Quality Childcare
- Recommendation 19: Plan to Improve State Support for Local Infants and Toddlers Programs

Finalized Workgroup Recommendations (Part 3 of 3)

Family-School Partnerships

- Recommendation 20: Plan to strengthen family-school partnerships
- Recommendation 21: Implementation plan to maintain and reinforce trust and positive family-school partnership

Secondary Transition

- Recommendation 22: Align policies of Pillar 3 of Blueprint to students with disabilities
- Recommendation 23: Plan to improve secondary transition

Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities and Participation in the Alternate Framework

- Recommendation 24: Plan for Alternate Assessment Eligibility
- Recommendation 25: Plan to improve experiences and long-term outcomes of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities

Behavior and Discipline

- Recommendation 26: Plan to reduce more restrictive placements for students with disabilities
- Recommendation 27: Educator preparation programs

A Prioritized Plan to Improve Outcomes for SWD in Maryland

Commitment to a comprehensive, coherent implementation plan

- Each Priority and Near-term Priority must be addressed with timelines
- Integrate implementation with MSDE's ongoing work
- Stagger implementation based on the capacity of MSDE and LEAs and their resources

“Implement well and at scale” not just produce well-written documents, guidance, and plans

- Change practice in schools and student outcomes across the state
- Seek and provide feedback to our stakeholders at various increments

Effective professional development and extensive technical support in the field are also crucial

Regular monitoring and refining of the plan

Actionable and accessible **guidance materials**

A Prioritized Plan to Improve Outcomes for SWD in Maryland

Foundational Priorities and Alignment to Pillars

Priority	Pillar 1	Pillar 2	Pillar 3	Pillar 4	Pillar 5
1. Ensure grade-level achievement expectations, standards, and related monitoring	✓		✓	✓	✓
2. Expand the use of evidence-based practices that enable students with disabilities to achieve grade-level standards, with a significantly larger role for general education, as well as address some of the root causes of significant disproportionality and the overreliance on more restrictive placements where students with disabilities have little to no access to their nondisabled peers, general education classrooms, curriculum, or teachers for students with disabilities	✓		✓	✓	
3. Enhance supply and retention of teachers and develop teacher capacity , ensuring Maryland’s schools have enough general and special educators, related service providers, paraprofessionals, and other critical roles , with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to effectively teach students with disabilities. These strategies employed to achieve this priority should also focus on creating more sustainable workloads and schools that better support educators	✓	✓	✓	✓	

A Prioritized Plan to Improve Outcomes for SWD in Maryland

Foundational Priorities and Alignment to Pillars (Continued)

Priority	Pillar 1	Pillar 2	Pillar 3	Pillar 4	Pillar 5
4. Address disproportionality in the identification of students with disabilities, achievement outcomes, disciplinary action, LRE, and eligibility for participation in alternate assessments		✓		✓	
5. Conduct an adequacy study of special education funding and frame legislative proposals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Strengthen family and school partnerships and collaboration with statewide and community-based organizations	✓			✓	

Near-Term Priorities and Alignment to Pillars

Priority	Pillar 1	Pillar 2	Pillar 3	Pillar 4	Pillar 5
7. Ensure LEA compliance with IDEA's Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements, including reducing the overuse of LRE-C and separate school placements, while ensuring that a broad continuum of services and supports are available		✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Review and refine or replace the Maryland Online Individualized Education Program				✓	✓

Next Steps for Educational Excellence

- **Strategic Alignment**

- Purposeful coordination of goals, policies, resources, and practices across systems and teams to ensure coherence and enhance student outcomes

- **Effective Implementation**

- Translating priorities into action through well-defined plans, targeted supports, and continuous improvement strategies that lead to lasting change

- **Shared Accountability**

- Cultivating a collective responsibility for tracking progress, evaluating results, and driving improvement through data-informed decision-making and transparency

- **Engaged Communication**

- Developing structured processes for stakeholder engagement and consistent reporting to foster trust, collaboration, and shared understanding

Questions & Answers



Special Education Workgroup Addendum to the Final Report

Improving Education for Students with Disabilities

Division of Special Education

May 2025

MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Carey M. Wright, Ed.D.

State Superintendent of Schools

Tenette Y. Smith, Ed.D.

Chief Academic Officer

Office of Teaching and Learning

Antoine L. Hickman, Ed.D.

Assistant State Superintendent

Division of Special Education

Wes Moore

Governor

MARYLAND STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Joshua L. Michael, Ph.D. (President)

Monica Goldson, Ed.D. (Vice President)

Chuen-Chin Bianca Chang, MSN, PNP, RN-BC

Alverne "Chet" Chesterfield

Kenny Clash

Clarence C. Crawford (President Emeritus)

Abhiram Gaddam (Student Member)

Nick Greer

Dr. Irma E. Johnson

Dr. Kim Lewis

Dr. Joan Mele-McCarthy, D.A., CCC-SLP

Rachel L. McCusker

Xiomara V. Medina, M.Ed.

Samir Paul, Esq.

BLUEPRINT SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKGROUP MEMBERSHIP**Co-Chairs**

Dr. Carey Wright, State Superintendent of Schools

Liz Zogby, Special Education Policy & Advocacy Project; Maryland Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition

Maryland State Legislature

The Honorable Karen Lewis Young, Senator

The Honorable Julie Palakovich Carr, Delegate

Maryland State Board of Education

Dr. Joan Mele-McCarthy, Maryland State Board of Education Member

Administrators

Dr. Antoine Hickman, Assistant State Superintendent

Kendy Anderson, Director of Special Education, Calvert County Public Schools

Becky Bowen, Middle School Administrator, Calvert County Public Schools

Michael Brown, High School Administrator, Carroll County Public Schools

Bess Cropper, Coordinator of Special Education for Maryland Infants and Toddlers Program, Worcester County Public Schools

BeeJay Dothard, High School Administrator, St. Mary's County Public Schools

Katrina Foster, Middle School Administrator, Baltimore County Public Schools

Thomas Garner, Elementary School Administrator, Washington County Public Schools

Diane McGowan, Director of Specially Designed Instruction and Compliance, Anne Arundel County Public Schools

Beth Morton, High School Administrator, Calvert County Public Schools

Sherry O'Dell, Supervisor of Special Education, St. Mary's County Public Schools

Jennifer Quirino, Elementary School Administrator, Anne Arundel County Public Schools

Maisha Strong, Elementary School Administrator, Howard County Public Schools

Lauren Tillman, Elementary School Administrator, Baltimore County Public Schools

Teachers

Cheryl Fracassi, Middle School Teacher, Kent County Public Schools

Rhea Graham, Middle School Teacher, Baltimore City Public Schools

Betsy Perry, Elementary School Teacher, Montgomery County Public Schools, MSEA

Joshua Schechter, High School Teacher, Prince George's County Public Schools

Alletha Trageser, High School Teacher, Carroll County, MSEA

Prekindergarten Representation

Imani Rose, Owner/Director

Jennifer Dorsey, Owner/Director

Service Providers

Dr. Debbie Badawi, Physician with Expertise in Disabilities

Lisa Melody, Related Services Provider, Baltimore County Public Schools

Dr. Ericka Levy, School Psychologist, Baltimore City Public Schools

Nonpublic Special Education

Agatha Callahan, Baltimore County

Joanne Hoffman, Montgomery County

Dr. David Stone, Baltimore City/Prince George's County/St. Mary's County

State Agencies and Institutes of Higher Education

Rebecca Cruz, Overidentification Expert, Johns Hopkins University

Jade Gingerich, Director of Employment and Transition Policy, MD Department of Disabilities

Maria Hernandez, NYU Metro Center

Katharine Holman, IHE/Research Professor

Dawn Jacobs Martin, Higher Education – Teacher Preparation

Reed Swier, Overidentification Expert, NYU Metro Center

Parents of Students with Disabilities

Angie Auldridge, Washington County

Janice Lepore, Baltimore County

Dee Sapp, Charles County

Winifred Winston, Baltimore County

Advocates

Rene Averitt-Sanzone, Executive Director, The Parents' Place of Maryland

Susan Barrios, Multilingual Learner Advocate, Statewide

Kalman (Buzzy) Hettleman, Special Education Advocate, Statewide

Leslie Seid Margolis, Managing Attorney and Policy Counsel, Disability Rights Maryland

Dinorah Olmos, Multilingual Learner Advocate, Statewide

Accountability and Implementation Board

Rachel Amstutz, Operations and Policy Director

Lisa Armstrong, Policy Analyst

Maryland State Department of Education Staff

Alison Barmat, Director of Family Support and Dispute Resolution, Division of Special Education

Carmen Brown, Director of Interagency Collaboration, Division of Special Education

Molly Conner, Director of Performance Support and Technical Assistance, Division of Special Education

Dr. Matthew Duque, Director of the Office of Research

Phil Lasser, Senior Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives

Dr. Brian Morrison, Director of Accountability and Data, Division of Special Education

Alex Reese, Chief of Staff

Gary Richardson, Director of Resource Management and Monitoring, Division of Special Education

Dr. Tenette Y. Smith, Chief Academic Officer of the Office of Teaching and Learning

Table of Contents

Note from the Co-Chairs	8
Executive Summary.....	9
Overview of Meetings.....	12
Meeting 13: October 16, 2024.....	12
Meeting 14: November 21, 2024.....	15
Meeting 15: December 18, 2024.....	18
Meeting 16: January 29, 2025.....	21
Recommendations.....	24
Recommendation 1: Standards and Expectations	24
Recommendation 2: Monitoring.....	24
Recommendation 3: Comprehensive Early Literacy Plan	24
Recommendation 4: State-Level Capacity and Guidance on SDI	25
Recommendation 5: Effective Implementation of IEPs.....	25
Recommendation 6: Review of MOIEP.....	25
Recommendation 7: Knowledge, Skills, and Expertise.....	26
Recommendation 8: Recruitment & Retention of Educators.....	26
Recommendation 9: Staffing and Service Delivery.....	26
Recommendation 10: Adequacy Study	27
Recommendation 11: Minimum School Funding.....	27
Recommendation 12: Prevention of Supplantation.....	27
Recommendation 13: Previous Recommendations and LRE.....	27
Recommendation 14: Plan for Least Restrictive Environment	28
Recommendation 15: Previous Recommendations and Disproportionality.....	28
Recommendation 16: Plan to Address Significant Disproportionality	29
Recommendation 17: High Quality Pre-K.....	29
Recommendation 18: Plan to Improve Access to High-Quality Inclusive Child Care.....	29
Recommendation 19: Plan to Improve State Support for Local Infants and Toddlers Programs (LITPs).....	30
Recommendation 20: Plan to Strengthen Authentic Family-School Partnerships.....	30

Recommendation 21: Implementation Plan to Maintain and Reinforce Family-School Partnership	30
Recommendation 22: Explicit Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Pillar 3.....	31
Recommendation 23: Plan to Improve Secondary Transition.....	31
Recommendation 24: Plan to Limit Participation in Alternate Assessments to Only Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities.....	32
Recommendation 25: Plan to Improve Educational Experiences and Outcomes of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities.....	32
Recommendation 26: Plan to Reduce More Restrictive Placements for Students with Disabilities	33
Recommendation 27: Evidence-Based Behavior Management Practices	33
A Prioritized Plan to Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Maryland	34
Foundational Priorities.....	35
Near-Term Priorities.....	37
Appendices.....	39
Appendix A: Meeting 13 Agenda	40
Appendix B: Meeting 14 Agenda.....	41
Appendix C: Meeting 15 Agenda	42
Appendix D: Meeting 16 Agenda.....	43
Appendix E: Recommendation Action Plan Outlines	44

Note from the Co-Chairs

The 27 Final Recommendations and Prioritized Implementation Plan in this supplemental report of the Blueprint Special Education Workgroup define a reform agenda for Maryland's special education services and practices unmatched across the nation. It's the result of 18 months of focused effort by the Maryland State Department of Education and 50 Workgroup members—teachers, parents, advocates, administrators, and others who are deeply invested in students with disabilities, their educational experiences, and long-term outcomes. We are understandably proud of this effort.

At the Workgroup's outset, its members made a commitment to one another and to students with disabilities that we would not simply admire well-known problems; that we would not produce another report of aspirational recommendations to sit on a shelf because the implementation barriers were too difficult to overcome; and that we would boldly confront "how we've always done it" and ask more of our systems and ourselves because the data is unequivocal: we are failing our children.

The process itself reflected the Blueprint's transformational vision. The Workgroup has been collaborative, transparent, laser-focused on student experiences and outcomes, and rooted in inquiry, deeply interrogating the research and our current practice.

We must acknowledge that the context into which we release this report was unimaginable when our work began. Today we face: a hobbled, if not completely dismantled, US Department of Education; an unprecedented loss of federal funding threatening critical programs, important research and support for children, schools, universities, and communities; a state reeling from federal layoffs and gaping holes in expected revenues; and communities unsure of where the next blow may land. And yet our children and our schools are counting on us to find ways to move forward.

While the current context may necessitate some adjustments to our plans, many of our recommendations are resource-neutral. They require new orientations, reorganization of resources and schedules, and new emphases in instructional and organizational practice. Fundamentally, we believe real progress is achievable. It will require our collective commitment, creativity, and persistence. We have every confidence that together Maryland's leaders, educators, families, and students can implement these reforms and build schools that every student deserves.

The next steps will be hard. We will hold one another accountable for progress. The barriers we identified at the outset—low expectations, siloing of general and special education, and the tension of state authority vs. local control—will require our vigilance. While additional funding may be challenging to secure in the near term, we will not allow resource limitations to clip the wings of our progress. Students with disabilities deserve so much more than we have delivered to date. We are committed to high expectations, services and supports that enable not only their progress but their achievement of grade-level standards, and fully preparing them for college, career, and community living.

Leading the Blueprint Special Education Workgroup has been an honor and a privilege. We are grateful to its expert membership, MSDE staff, the AIB, and the children, families, and educators across Maryland who contributed to its success. And we look forward with confidence and optimism to the work ahead.

Best,

Liz Zogby
Special Education Policy & Advocacy Project
Maryland Down Syndrome Coalition

Dr. Carey Wright
State Superintendent of Schools
Maryland State Department of Education

Executive Summary

The Blueprint Special Education Workgroup was established in the Initial Blueprint Comprehensive Implementation Plan, released on December 1, 2022, by the Blueprint Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB). The Implementation Plan requires the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to convene a Blueprint Special Education Workgroup to discuss and make recommendations on instruction and services for students and disabilities.

Blueprint Special Education Workgroup Overview

The Blueprint Comprehensive Implementation Plan specifically addresses students with disabilities (SWD) in Pillar 4: More Resources for Students to be Successful, Objective 3: Improve education for SWD. The outcome measures delineated in this objective include:

- Special education funds are used to provide consistent, high-quality special education programs in all schools; and
- Increased rate of students who require special education and/or other services and who meet annual expected progress targets as laid out in students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans.

The plan indicates that in Fiscal Year 25, MSDE and local education agencies (LEAs) will implement the Workgroup's recommendations to improve the education of students receiving special education services in Maryland's P-12 schools. As part of this work, the Workgroup is required to:

- Collect and report data on the number and percent of students receiving special education services at each P-12 school, the services available to them, and the accessibility of P-12 teachers, administrators, and staff to these students and their families;
- Review methods of teaching and providing services to students who receive special education services in P-12 schools in the State; and
- Make recommendations on improving the education of students receiving special education services in P-12 schools in the State, including whether additional funding should be provided and addressing learning loss as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Workgroup Requirements

4.3.2: MSDE shall establish a Workgroup to collect student data and review instructional methods provided to students who receive special education services.

4.3.2(a): The Workgroup shall collect data on the number and percent of students receiving special education services at each P-12 school, the services available to them, and the accessibility of P-12 teachers, administrators, and staff to these students and their families.

MSDE and AIB shall identify Workgroup members representing various special education interests who demonstrate commitment to diversity, equity, and expertise.

The Workgroup shall share its work plan with the AIB and provide regular updates on its progress.

4.3.2 (b): The Workgroup shall review methods of teaching and providing services to students who receive special education services in public P-12 schools in the State.

The Workgroup's review shall include methods used in the State and other states and other countries, including addressing learning loss related to COVID-19, in addition to recruiting and retaining special education teachers and staff.

The Workgroup may expand the scope of its review based on recommendations of its members and/or AIB and MSDE to include topics like the impact of teacher shortages on special education and resulting quality or services provided; supports provided to special educators; co-teaching models and supporting general educators in implementing co-teaching models as well as supporting special education students when a special educator is not providing services; increasing family involvement and collaboration in special education programming; and how top-performing systems structure the school day to effectively provide remediation and special education services.

4.3.2(c): The Workgroup shall make recommendations on improving the education of students receiving special education services in P-12 schools in the State, including whether additional funding is needed and addressing learning loss because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Workgroup may make other recommendations related to additional topics studied by the Workgroup.

4.3.3: The Workgroup submits a final report with its findings and recommendations, including addressing learning loss resulting from COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3.3(a): AIB shall incorporate the Workgroup's findings and recommendations into the updated Blueprint Comprehensive Implementation Plan.

The Workgroup shall submit an initial report of its findings and recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly by 12/1/23, an interim report by 7/1/24, and a final report by 12/1/24.

4.3.3(b): MSDE and LEAs shall implement the Workgroup's recommendations to improve the education of students receiving special education services in Maryland P-12 schools.

Workgroup Meetings

As an integral part of preparing for the Blueprint Special Education Workgroup Meetings, MSDE convened a series of listening sessions with a wide variety of stakeholders to assess and uncover strengths and opportunities for growth and identify best practices and exemplars in the delivery of specially designed instruction. Sessions were held in late Spring and early Summer of 2023. MSDE invited Advocates, Directors of Student Support Services and Directors of Special Education from each LEA, and Principals and Teachers from across the State, as well as all members of the Special Education State Advisory Committee, to participate in listening sessions, during which participants were placed in breakout rooms of no more than ten (10) people. MSDE staff asked a series of questions and took notes on the discussion. Please see the Workgroup's Initial Report (December 2023) for a summary of Listening Session questions and a quantitative analysis of themes and sub-themes. The themes mentioned in the Listening Sessions were instrumental in the selection of topics for the Workgroup meetings.

Beginning in August 2023, the Blueprint Special Education Workgroup was co-chaired by State Superintendent of Schools Mohammed Choudhury until his departure from MSDE on October 6, 2023, and Liz Zogby, the director of the Special Education Policy & Advocacy Project and co-chair of the Maryland Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition. Following Superintendent Choudhury's departure, Dr. Carey Wright, State Superintendent, assumed the role of co-chair with Ms. Zogby.

The Workgroup met in a hybrid format through 2023 and moved to a completely virtual format in 2024. Each meeting was focused on one or more guiding questions and topics aligned with the Workgroup requirements. Short briefs on the meeting topics were distributed to Workgroup members 10 days prior to each meeting, and members were encouraged to send any initial thoughts in writing for circulation to all members in advance of the meeting.

During these meetings, experts and practitioners highlighted national best practices and research on focus topics, and time was built into each meeting for Workgroup members to engage and collaborate. At the conclusion of each meeting, members were given an "exit ticket" to be completed within five days to respond to the questions discussed during the meeting. This feedback, along with notes from the small group discussions, were compiled, distilled, and recirculated to members. Workgroup recommendations were crafted from this feedback, sent in advance of each meeting, and approved at the subsequent meeting. Workgroup meeting agendas, a short brief on the topic, and resources were posted on the MSDE website [here](#). Agendas, the topic briefs, and distillations of the Workgroup member feedback from exit tickets and small group discussions on each topic are also included at the end of this report in Appendices A-E.

Since the release of the initial, interim, and final reports, four additional Workgroup meetings were convened:

- Meeting 13: October 16, 2024
- Meeting 14: November 21, 2024
- Meeting 15: December 18, 2024
- Meeting 16: January 29, 2025

The [initial report](#) was published in December of 2023 and provided background information, data, national best practices, and research, in addition to initial findings and recommendations from the Workgroup. The [interim report](#) was published in July of 2024 and built upon the initial report and provided a preliminary list of recommendations. The [final report](#) was published in December of 2024. Because the AIB approved a policy interpretation that the workgroup may continue its work through May 30, 2025 and submit additional work products or reports at that time, this report serves as an addendum to the final report, providing an overview of the Special Education Workgroup's progress since the release of the final report.

Overview of Meetings

MSDE welcomes meaningful input and public engagement to determine how we reduce the opportunity and achievement gaps for students with disabilities compared to same-age peers. To address the specified requirements of the AIB plan, MSDE has hosted a series of meetings starting in August of 2023. Each meeting is focused on a guiding question and includes a spotlight on best practices and research on the topic. This section provides an overview of the meetings that have been held since the release of the final report.

MEETING 13: OCTOBER 16, 2024

During this meeting, Workgroup members participated in a discussion of recommendations derived from small and large group discussions and exit tickets from the September meeting. The focus of the October meeting was Authentic Family Partnerships and the Workgroup reviewed current research on best practices for engagement and collaborated through small and large group discussions to provide input and guide the development of recommendations related to this topic.

Guiding Question

1. How can authentic family-school partnerships be strengthened, particularly to support infants, toddlers, and students with disabilities?

Issue Brief: Authentic Family-School Partnership

Before this meeting, workgroup members completed a pre-reading issue brief related to authentic family-school partnerships. The issue brief began with a review of how the importance of family-school partnerships is embedded in several education laws, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The issue brief then provided an overview of the different frameworks for family engagement and family-school partnerships from various researchers and organizations. Common themes across their work included power-sharing, co-design of engagement strategies, the need for training of educators and families, and centering the shared goal of student achievement and support.

Next, the issue brief focused in on developing meaningful parent/family involvement in the IEP process, emphasizing that family-school partnership relies upon and reinforces trust which is even more critical in the special education process where “a lack of, or broken trust is, one of the major causes of disputes between families and professionals.”¹ To limit the number of disagreements that end up in dispute resolution, the issue brief explains that we must understand the root causes leading to disputes and employ preventative strategies that enable authentic family-school partnership to extend to the IEP table even when there are disagreements.

The issue brief concluded with a review of current state and local support for families in the special education process in Maryland. First, MSDE’s family support branch was discussed which provides resources and information to families and referrals to other Maryland agencies or offices within MSDE and acts as a liaison between the LEA and the family to provide informal dispute resolution where

¹ Gershwin, T. (2020). Legal and research considerations regarding the importance of developing and nurturing trusting family-professional partnerships in special education consultation. *Journal of Education and Psychological Consultation*, 30(4), p. 4.

possible and appropriate. Next, LEA Family Support Specialists were discussed. These roles exist within each LEA and are dedicated to assisting families in a number of ways, including accompanying families to IEP team meetings or reviewing documents prior to IEP team meetings to ensure that parents have a full understanding of what will be discussed during the meeting.

Summary of Results from Virtual Roundtable on Authentic Family Partnerships

During this Workgroup meeting, results were shared from a virtual roundtable conducted with providers serving a diverse range of families across the state. The roundtable was facilitated by Dr. Antoine Hickman, MSDE Assistant State Superintendent, and Rene Averitt-Sanzone, Executive Director of The Parents' Place of Maryland. The roundtable included 12 representatives from organizations that support families in every region of the state, catering to children with a wide range of disabilities. In addition, several of these organizations also specifically serve culturally and linguistically diverse families and students. An overview of the results is included below:

Do you feel that you are an equal member of the IEP team?

- 55% feel that they are equal members of the IEP team (felt heard and valued, consistent communication)
- 45% do not feel they are equal members of the IEP team (not being heard and valued, not enough updates and communication, need more training, language is a barrier)

What would strengthen partnerships?

- Communication (friendly) and transparency
- Include parents in the planning and decision making
- Help families better understand IEPs
- More training for teachers
- Hispanic liaison

Do families feel that they are equal members of the IEP team?

- 100% reported that the families they work with and support do not feel they are equal members of the IEP team (language barriers, not feeling valued, little communication, unable to understand decisions, power imbalance)

What is working well?

- Well trained IEP teams and chairs
- Cultural brokers
- Partnership with community organizations
- Clear communication using a holistic approach
- Time for staff to observe and participate in IEP meetings

What are the barriers?

- Overwhelmed school staff
- Power imbalance
- Meeting times not convenient
- Poorly trained IEP teams
- Not having the right information and resources to make an informed decision

- IEPs not being translated
- Not enough resources for schools and families

What would strengthen partnerships?

- Communication
- Cultural brokers
- Well trained IEP teams and chairs
- Update MSDE's guidance documents
- Understand immigrant families' needs
- Be flexible with meeting times

Breakout Group Discussion Questions

Participants participated in small and large breakout groups to discuss the following questions related to authentic family partnerships:

1. What are the specific areas of capacity building needed within our schools and systems to support authentic family-school partnership?
2. How can state policy and guidance ensure that parents are full and equal partners in the special education process (e.g., addressing language/cultural barriers, ensuring parents are fully informed, etc.)?
3. What specific changes would you recommend within the special education process, including the resolution of disagreements and disputes, that would maintain and reinforce trust and positive family-school partnership?
4. What additional recommendations do you have about increasing positive family-school partnerships in Maryland?

Feedback from Exit Tickets and Small Group Discussions

State support for school/system capacity building to support family-school partnership

- Training, support, coaching, and mentoring using evidence-based practices about authentic family-school partnerships (ongoing)
- Create tool kit ("IEP facilitation in a box")/gather and disseminate best practices on meeting facilitation and collaboration skills
 - relationship building
 - including community partners providing family support in process
 - respectful dialogue/norming/tone-setting
 - meeting etiquette
 - attentiveness
 - start with positive/be strengths-based
 - active listening
 - team building
 - use family friendly language/Plain Language
 - conflict resolution
- Work with institutions of higher education to ensure that educator preparation programs include:
 - building relationships with families
 - meeting facilitation
 - participating in IEP meeting (for all gen-ed and special ed teachers)

- Communication with families:
 - Use families' preferred mode of communication
 - Pre-meetings with IEP chair, especially for families new to special education process
 - Calls with staff prior to meetings
- Cultural competency training (ongoing, proactive)

State policy and guidance to ensure parents are full and equal partners in special education process

- Standards and guidance for serving multilingual families
 - Interpretation services
 - Require translated drafts in advance of meetings
- Principals should make sure parents of SWD are included in all schoolwide activities with needed supports (e.g., interpreters)
- Periodic workshops or videos (in multiple languages) for families
- Develop cooperative training for staff and families
- Guidance clarifying that parental input should not be limited to one/particular sections of the IEP and that parents are experts on their child
- Consistent training by state on meeting facilitation
- Fund and support school staff positions
 - Multilingual Liaison position
 - Community engagement specialists

MEETING 14: NOVEMBER 21, 2024

Workgroup members participated in a review of recommendations derived from small and large group discussions and exit tickets regarding authentic family partnerships. The workgroup was then provided with an overview of secondary transition practices and support for students, including students with disabilities. The Workgroup also engaged in small and large group discussions to provide input on secondary transition to guide the development of recommendations.

Guiding Questions

1. How can predictors of post-school success be embedded in the IEP/transition process?
2. How can Maryland ensure that all students with disabilities upon exit from school are connected to a post-school pathway?
3. How can the programs and policies of the College and Career Readiness Pillar of the Blueprint explicitly include all students with disabilities?

Issue Brief: Secondary Transition

In preparation for the November meeting, Workgroup members read an issue brief focused on the elements of secondary transition and the predictors of post-secondary success. The reading began with an overview of what secondary transition entails and why secondary transition planning matters, emphasizing the profound benefits for both individuals and communities. Next, the issue brief provided an overview of the research-based predictors of post-school success which are embedded in the practices of secondary transition planning in Maryland. The overarching predictors include career and work experience, student involvement in the IEP process, inclusion in general education, transition program participation, and parental involvement and support.

The issue brief then discussed how these predictors of post-school success can be incorporated directly into the transition goals and services section of an IEP by:

- Developing measurable post-secondary goals in education, employment, and independent living
- Aligning transition services (such as job coaching, life skills training, and vocational support) with these predictors
- Using age-appropriate transition assessments to gather data on the student's strengths and preferences, guiding the selection of services
- Ensuring regular reviews of progress toward these goals, allowing the IEP team to adapt as necessary

The issue brief concluded with a discussion of federal indicator 14 (post-school outcomes), transition practices in early grades, and Blueprint Pillar Three: College and Career Readiness.

Breakout Group Discussion Questions

Participants participated in small and large breakout groups to discuss the following questions related to secondary transition:

- How can predictors of post-school success be embedded in the IEP/transition process and the broader secondary transition process? What steps can be taken to ensure that indicators are embedded earlier in a student's academic career?
- What recommendations should the SEW make to ensure that students with disabilities have the supports and services to achieve the legislative intent of college/career readiness for all students in support of improving their post-school outcomes?
- What standards and guidance can MSDE set to ensure that all students with disabilities upon exit from school are connected to a post-school pathway?
- The legislative intent of the Blueprint is for all students to be college and career ready. How can the programs and policies of the College and Career Readiness Pillar of the Blueprint (e.g., CCR standard, post-CCR pathways including CTE programs, apprenticeships, advanced academic pathways, and support pathways) advance this goal and explicitly include all students with disabilities, maintaining high standards and expectations while including those students with the highest support needs?
- What other recommendations do you have to improve the post-secondary transition planning process?

Feedback from Exit Tickets and Small Group Discussions: LRE

Embedding predictors of post-school success in the IEP/transition process and broader secondary transition process

- Parents and students should be meaningfully included earlier
- Coordinate/align IEPs with Student Success plans and ensure key predictors are being included
- More training for parents, general educators, and IEP chairs about:
 - Predictors of post-school success and how to operationalize
 - Alternatives to guardianship/supported decision making
 - Knowledge about competitive, integrated employment
 - What success looks like for students with significant support needs
- More opportunities for students to have work experience (e.g., Youthworks in Baltimore City)
- Bring in DORS and DDA earlier (especially if assistive technology device is needed after school exit)
- Ensure teams comply with transition plan requirements including:
 - Not superficial, but a coordinated set of activities

- Age-appropriate IEP goals and objectives that link to the transition plan in a meaningful way
- Thinking more broadly about transition (not just career or college) and also levels of independence and softer skills

Ensuring that students with disabilities have the supports and services to achieve college/career readiness

- Engage community business/stakeholders in process for supporting CCR for all students
- Supports in IEP need to follow students into all programs
- Explore development of another diploma option/multiple pathways to high school diplomas
- Expand capacity of CTE programs
- Remove other barriers (beyond capacity) for students with disabilities gaining access to CTE programs
- Develop micro- and nano-credentials and gain industry recognition as credentials for them
- Work with DORS and other stakeholders to make the CRD CTE program more meaningful
- Don't exclude students with disabilities from having individual reading plans in the new literacy policy
- Raise indicator 14 targets

Ensuring that all students with disabilities are connected to a post-school pathway

- Establish a process for post-school follow-up (6 months, 1 year) with help connecting to post-school support resources as needed
- Ensure MD Longitudinal Linkage tool can track students who receive special education services as category for purposes of school outcome measurement beyond one year (which could then be used to further inform standards/guidance for improving long-term outcomes)
- Meaningful guidance about IDEA's transition plan requirements and hold LEAs accountable for implementing

Explicitly including students with disabilities in the College and Career Readiness pillar of the Blueprint

- Revisit CCR standard to ensure all means all so students have obtainable standard
- Create ongoing workgroup of nonprofit and government groups who work in this space to support Blueprint implementation around CCR for students with disabilities
- Empower Transition Coordinators in LEAs with access to leadership working on Blueprint to inform the work
- Ensure students with disabilities are explicitly considered and measured in all LEA and State Blueprint implementation plans
- Provide guidance and training for general and special educators, and other staff, on including students with disabilities in all initiatives
- Explore development of inclusive apprenticeships
- Ensure students with disabilities have access to CTE programs
- Increase number/ratio of transition staff in LEAs
- Develop guidance on how related services can and should support these initiatives
- More paid and unpaid work experiences at high school level – partnerships with post-secondary programs

Other recommendations, additional comments, questions, and suggestions

- Use adult agency partners for additional knowledge and experience about successful supports and strategies for career readiness
- Guidance about Work-Based or site-based Learning (including questions like workers' comp coverage and other barriers/employer concerns)
- Ensure that students who exit IEPs to 504s have consistency in terms of career readiness supports in Student Support Success Plan

- Balance of time gaining career readiness skills and academic success

MEETING 15: DECEMBER 18, 2024

Workgroup members participated in a review of recommendations derived from small and large group discussions and exit tickets regarding secondary transition. The Workgroup then heard about the alternate framework and received a pre-reading pertaining to law and current regulations as well as Maryland's implementation of those laws and regulations. The Workgroup engaged in small and large group discussion to provide input to guide the development of recommendations related to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Guiding Question

1. What statewide policies, standards, and guidance should MSDE establish and provide for the appropriate identification of students eligible to take the alternate assessment and to improve the educational experiences and long-term outcomes for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?

Issue Brief: Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities and Participation in the Alternate Framework

In preparation for the December meeting, Workgroup members read an issue brief focused on students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and participation in the alternate framework. The brief began with an overview of how the law relates to this topic, focusing on the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Maryland law and Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR).

Next, the issue brief discussed evidence-based best practices for educating students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The reading explained that to improve the educational experiences and long-term outcomes for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, evidence-based practices for these students should be central to the efforts of systems, schools, and educators. This can be achieved through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), inclusion in general education classrooms, and evidence- and research-based instructional practices for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

The issue brief concluded with an overview of additional areas for consideration related to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and participation in the alternate assessment including content standards vs. achievement standards, not precluding students who take the alternate assessment from pursuing a regular high school diploma, and the question of whether students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are part of "all students" in Maryland.

Breakout Group Discussion Questions

Participants participated in small and large breakout groups to discuss the following questions related to this session's topic:

- What statewide policies or guidance could MSDE implement to ensure that only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are being determined eligible for participation in the alternate assessments?
- What recommendations do you have for adjustments to existing Maryland policies, practices, and procedures in Maryland to ensure that students participating in the Alternate Framework:
 - Are receiving instruction related to content standards,

- Are not precluded from attempting to complete the requirements of a high school diploma, and
 - Are not determined eligible for the Alternate Framework at a very young age (especially prior to 3rd grade)?
- What statewide standards and guidance based on evidence-based practices could MSDE establish and disseminate to improve the educational experiences and long-term outcomes of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?
- What recommendations are suggested to ensure that areas of focus, initiatives, and policies of the Blueprint and MSDE include consideration of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?

Feedback from Exit Tickets and Small Group Discussions

Eligibility for participation in alternate assessments

- Prohibit young children from being found eligible for alternate assessment
- Remove requirement to identify certificate/diploma on IEPs for young learners
- Focus on communicative competence
- Mandatory training for IEP teams/educators on applying criteria
- System to review district-level decision-making and address patterns of over-identification
- Accessible resources so families can make informed decisions
- Training and guidance on instruction for students with moderate cognitive disabilities who are “on the cusp” of eligibility
- Accountability on implementation of current guidance with fidelity
- Do not permit “alternate classrooms”

Ensuring that students eligible for the alternate assessment receive instruction aligned to the state challenging academic content

- Training for general and special educators and administrators on what standards-aligned instruction looks like for these students
- Monitor IEPs for alignment to content standards
- Safeguard/support collaborative planning time for general and special educators
- Develop and share model/state-recommended curricula and accessible instructional materials and best practices for instruction (TIES resources)
- More opportunities (LEAs limit possibilities for these students)
- Offer targeted support where needed
- Promote UDL

Ensuring that students eligible for the alternate assessment are not precluded from attempting to complete the requirements of a high school diploma

- Clear guidance for all IEP team members (including families) on this requirement; direct training; what does it look like for a student who is eligible for alternate assessments to pursue a diploma
- Guidance on staffing
- Break the link between placement and assessment
- Establish clear alternate pathways to earning a diploma
- Allow flexibility in course requirements and assessments
- Require transition planning in middle school to prepare diploma eligibility

- Equity in access to credit-bearing courses and appropriate supports

Ensuring that students eligible for the alternate assessment are not determined eligible at a young age

- Prohibit children from being found eligible for alternate assessment prior to 3rd grade
- Appropriate supports for inclusion
- Strengthen early intervention services and progress monitoring
- Require evidence-based multi-disciplinary evaluations before eligibility decisions, focusing on long-term potential
- Train IEP teams to understand developmental variability
- Provide guidance and support to LEAs on how to expand opportunities, do things differently, let go of “this is what we do/always did”
- Accessible resources for families for informed decision-making

Suggestions for statewide standards and guidance based on evidence-based practices to improve outcomes for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities

- UDL
- Appropriate supports for inclusion
- Standards-based IEPs
- Evidence-based curricula and instructional resources tailored to students; ensure that IEPs are truly individualized to every student’s needs
- Early, comprehensive transition planning to prepare students for postsecondary opportunities; same standards for preparation as students without disabilities
- Training for educators on evidence-based instructional strategies and AT
- Resources to help families and communities support students’ goals
- Trainings that include general educators, special educators, and families “all in the room together”

Recommendations to ensure that areas of focus, initiatives, and policies of the Blueprint and MSDE include consideration of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities

- Review all forms, guidance, BP programs for inclusion of all students, with explicit references to students with significant cognitive disabilities
- Micro-credentialing and nano-credentialing in CTE programs
- Multiple pathways to career readiness and access to more opportunities
- Equitable resource allocation including targeted funding and resources to support specialized programs, AT and staff training; decisions not hinging on available resources, finances, staffing
- Accountability: include metrics tracking outcomes for students with significant cognitive disabilities in state reporting and evaluations
- Training for administrators and educators on how BP initiatives apply to these students
- Address bias
- Engage stakeholders (families, advocates, experts) in policy development and implementation

Additional questions/comments

- Implementation of these reforms with ruffle many feathers. What measures will be included so that the priority is the needs of the students and not the pushback of admin and staff?
- How will MSDE ensure consistent implementation across all districts?

- How will the state monitor and evaluate long-term outcomes of these students to assess the effectiveness of these policies?
- What strategies are being developed to ensure active partnership with families in decision-making and implementation?
- Additional training on recognizing the difference between cognitive ability and learned helplessness
- Break the cycle of how and why we do things; often times we are the actual barrier to a student meeting their potential

MEETING 16: JANUARY 29, 2025

Workgroup members discussed recommendations derived from small and large group discussions and exit tickets from the previous meeting. The Workgroup was also given an overview about behavior and discipline and received a pre-reading providing context and data. The Workgroup then engaged in small and large group discussions to provide input and guide the development of recommendations related to behavior and discipline.

Guiding Question

1. What statewide policies, practices, and supports should MSDE establish and provide to prevent exclusionary discipline and strengthen the development of students' lagging skills and coping skills to minimize concerning behavior?

Issue Brief: Behavior and Discipline

In preparation for the January meeting, Workgroup members read an issue brief focused on behavior and discipline. The issue brief began by providing context and data around challenging behavior among K-12 students, explaining that while not all students with challenging behaviors have an IEP, many do. Outside of school years affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of students with disabilities in Maryland who have received exclusionary discipline (e.g., in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions) has consistently approached 10%. In addition, students with disabilities are disciplined at approximately twice the rate of Maryland's overall student population.

Next, the issue brief discussed IDEA's safeguards to reduce expulsion or long-term suspension for students with disabilities, requiring a Manifestation Determination "within 10 school days of any decision to change the placement of a child with a disability because of a violation of a code of student conduct" and includes all LEA, parent, and other relevant members of the IEP team. Although the Maryland Guidelines for a State Code of Discipline, last updated in 2014, notes the importance of following IDEA, these safeguards have not prevented many students with disabilities from receiving exclusionary discipline.

The issue brief then provided an overview of best practices for addressing challenging behavior, explaining that the frequency of challenging student behaviors in schools and the reliance on exclusionary practices highlights the need for more proactive and more constructive approaches to addressing challenging behavior. A number of schools across the country have proven that most problematic behavior can be dramatically reduced primarily through non-exclusionary means through a multifaceted approach that focuses on prevention, skill development, and adult support. This approach focuses on managing and preventing behavioral issues by identifying situations that trigger challenging behaviors and teaching missing skills such as coping skills, emotional regulation, effective communication skills, etc.

Breakout Group Discussion Questions

Participants participated in small and large breakout groups to discuss the following questions related to behavior and discipline:

- What policies, procedures, and technical assistance can MSDE implement to reduce exclusionary practices for students with disabilities?
- What steps can MSDE take to ensure that educators have the appropriate training to proactively support students' behavioral and social emotional needs?
- What supports do teachers and administrators need to ensure that all students with disabilities in their schools have access to appropriate behavioral interventions?
- What additional recommendations do you have for policies and practices that may reduce exclusionary practices, help increase student regulation and coping skills, and proactively limit concerning behavior for students with disabilities?

Feedback from Exit Tickets and Small Group Discussions

Policies, procedures, and TA to reduce exclusionary practices

- Adopt a statewide evidence-based model for trauma-informed behavioral support
- Policy and procedures:
 - Specific to behavioral concerns for students with IEPs
 - All schools must have in-school suspension options
 - Accountability because even with training, some people truly believe in punitive approaches and exclusion
- Update COMAR so BCBAs supervise TBA staff (to ensure those with specialized training in positive behavior supports are supervising staff supporting and implementing behavior interventions)
- Guidance to LEAs on discipline policies to limit uses of suspension
- Guidance on classroom management systems and strategies that are evidence-based, not rooted in reward/punishment, repository of resources
- Training on restorative practices and non-punitive methods of behavior support
- Collaborative time to build relationships and community of adult learners
- Ensure IEPs are being fully implemented; student knows what supports they should have; don't place developmentally inappropriate demands on students
- One-to-one support for students when warranted (checklist eligibility and available funding)
- Intentional re-entry for students who have been suspended and missed content
- Focus on functional communication for students including assistive technology (with training for students and staff)

Ensuring educators have the appropriate training to proactively support students' behavioral and emotional needs

- Training should be:
 - For all general and special educators, administrators, support staff
 - Mandatory and standardized
 - Regular/ongoing (with paid time off to take trainings, at least twice a year)
- Training should be about:
 - Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum implementation
 - Tiered interventions/Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS)
 - "Progressive disciplinary measures" with incorporation of skill-building over consequences
 - Trauma-informed approach to behavior and working with autistic kids
 - Understanding social, emotional, behavioral development

- Mental health training
 - Implicit bias
 - Understanding IDEA and role of general educators in IEP process
 - Differentiated instruction
 - Positive behavior support
- Educator preparation programs should increase training and practicum experience related to evidence-based behavioral interventions, classroom management best practices, developing positive relationships, Tier 1 behavior management strategies, differentiated instruction, MTSS for behavior
- Professional learning opportunities for administrators on evidence-based de-escalation strategies and how to support classroom exit and return to classroom for dysregulated students and trauma-informed practices for students with disabilities

Additional recommendations to reduce exclusionary practices, increase student regulation and coping skills, and proactively limit concerning behavior for students with disabilities

- Parent/family engagement (home visits with multiple school staff, connect with other agencies, training for parents)
- Make SEL part of daily instruction including conflict resolution component
- MSDE should engage directly with LEAs to understand student needs and staffing needs from stance of support and facilitate LEA collaboration and looking at exemplary programs and districts
- Training for local school boards on behavior supports including rules and regulations, policies, procedures, and best practices

Recommendations

The Workgroup is committed to making research-based systemic recommendations that will revisit and improve every aspect of education for Maryland's students with disabilities. To that end, the following recommendations focus on the themes explored during Workgroup meetings.

As the Workgroup continued its study of evidence-based practices to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, it identified additional recommendations to improve statewide systems and policies that will enable Maryland to implement these recommendations. A final list of recommendations is included below.

The Maryland State Department of Education's Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services has initiated plans for each of the approved recommendations which include major components, key activities within each major component, timeline for activities, lead, support partner(s), and completion date. A draft of the actions associated with each recommendation has been included in Appendix B.

STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS UNDER IDEA FOR SWDS TO ACHIEVE, INCLUDING AMBITIOUS IEP GOALS

Recommendation 1: Standards and Expectations

COMAR and MSDE guidance should be revised to explicitly provide:

- Students without significant cognitive disabilities are legally entitled to IEP goals and services that enable them to meet grade-level standards. When these students are behind grade-level standards, they should receive IEP goals/services that enable them to close or narrow the gap between standards and their performance levels.
- Students with significant cognitive disabilities are legally entitled to IEP goals/services that enable them to access grade-level content standards (i.e., the general education curriculum) and meet alternate grade-level standards. Goals should be based on evidence-based instructional practices, related services, and LRE principles that maximize their potential.

Recommendation 2: Monitoring

Review state monitoring tools and compliance protocols to ensure that IEP goals narrow or close the gap between present levels of achievement and grade-level standards, and that, based upon research and professional judgment, IEP services are reasonably calculated to enable the goals to be achieved.

Recommendation 3: Comprehensive Early Literacy Plan

MSDE should develop a comprehensive early literacy plan to ensure that all students in general education receive evidence-based instruction, including high-dosage tutoring, within an MTSS/Response to Intervention (RTI) framework in general education, with the highest priority in grades K-3.

SPECIALLY DESIGNED INSTRUCTION

Recommendation 4: State-Level Capacity and Guidance on SDI

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan to address state-level capacity and guidance around implementing specially designed instruction (SDI). This plan should include:

- MSDE should increase its capacity (staff positions, knowledge base, and/or means) to provide sufficient guidance and TA
- Guidance and TA to LEAs, including review of current Technical Assistance Bulletins and creation of more accessible guidance for educators and staff, to increase understanding that SDI requires evidence-based specially designed instruction as part of services that are reasonably calculated to enable each student's goals to be achieved
- Dissemination of a menu of evidence-based best practices that LEAs must select from (subject to waivers); availability of TA on the evidence-based best practices based on ongoing needs assessments and monitoring; and guidance on factoring in, where appropriate, IEP Team judgment
- The relationship between RTI and SDI (a continuation of the discussion of MTSS/RTI under the Topic of Integration.)

IEP IMPLEMENTATION

Recommendation 5: Effective Implementation of IEPs

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan to address effective implementation of IEPs, including technical assistance, uniform data collection and monitoring, within 60 days. The plan for a plan should include:

- Technical assistance, including more direct support and coaching for IEP Teams and LEAs from MSDE; clear, achievable standards linked to available resources; menus of evidence-based best practices (instruction and interventions); accessible differentiated guidance documents for educators; and professional development
- Uniform data collection, including the need for review and revision of current data elements and technical assistance for collection and analysis of the data
- Monitoring: clear communication of the monitoring requirements and the criteria used to determine compliance, a balance between support and enforcement, and review of composition of Monitoring teams.

MONITORING, DATA COLLECTION, AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Recommendation 6: Review of MOIEP

MSDE should review the Maryland Online IEP (MOIEP), including data collection, reporting capabilities, user experience, and current mechanisms for feedback and revision, and report on suggested improvements and/or alternatives within six months.

TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Recommendation 7: Knowledge, Skills, and Expertise

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan with tasks and timelines within 60 days to ensure that general and special educators have the knowledge, skills, and expertise needed to effectively teach students with disabilities (as compiled by the Workgroup). The plan should consider:

- A review and revision of the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) to align standards and competencies, clinical experiences, and entrance and exit requirements for educator preparation programs (EPPs) and the requirements for initial licensure and renewal of licensure for educators and administrators with the knowledge, skills, and expertise needed to effectively teach students with disabilities
- A review in collaboration with Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs) of current EPPs (traditional and alternative), focusing on the development of general and special education teacher candidates who can effectively teach students with disabilities
- Developing standards in collaboration with LEAs and IHEs for systemic support of early career teachers (e.g., IHE faculty in schools as coaches)
- Developing standards in collaboration with LEAs for professional learning and ongoing support, coaching, and mentoring of general and special education teachers and related service providers to effectively teach students with disabilities

Recommendation 8: Recruitment & Retention of Educators

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan with tasks and timelines within 60 days to enhance supply and encourage retention of general and special educators. This plan should consider:

- Development of innovative recruitment protocols in collaboration with Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC)/IHEs and LEAs (e.g., dual certification programs, programs for general educators to add special education licensure, School to Teacher pipeline/recruitment of high school students, Grow Your Own programs, paid student teaching, and loan forgiveness)
- Developing a rebranding strategy for special education
- Developing teacher career ladders in collaboration with LEAs that provide adequate co-planning and noninstructional time, provide equal opportunity to special education teachers, and consider innovative proposals for additional training (e.g., teacher sabbaticals, paid summer training programs)
- Determining if paperwork can be reduced for teachers and related service providers
- Developing professional learning for principals in collaboration with LEAs on developing inclusive mindsets and high expectations in school communities and improving school culture, including more respect and support for educators

CAPACITY AND RESOURCES

Recommendation 9: Staffing and Service Delivery

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan with specific tasks and timelines within 60 days to set evidence-based baseline standards for staffing and service delivery, with mechanisms for flexibility with

justification, emphasizing a focus on student needs not financial constraints, and developed with consideration of the specific ideas generated by the Workgroup. This plan should include:

- Updating guidance for LEA development of staffing plans, with enhanced emphasis on transparent processes, vacancy reporting, and connection of staffing plans to improved student outcomes
- Standards for teacher/staff to student ratios for different service delivery models at elementary, middle, and high school levels
- Baseline standards for special education teacher and related service provider workloads, including the use of Blueprint-required noninstructional time
- Standards for the role of IEP chair, including scope, training, and funding this position
- Standards for paraprofessionals and 1:1 aides, including qualifications, training and ongoing professional development, determining appropriate support for students, data collection on their use, and ensuring adequate supervision

Recommendation 10: Adequacy Study

Within 90 days MSDE should research and share the options, costs, and potential funding and contracting requirements to commission an adequacy study of Maryland's special education funding that considers and makes recommendations related to:

- The adequacy of the foundation program to prevent inappropriate referrals to special education and to narrow achievement gaps
- Establishing a system of multiple weights for special education funding based on disability and/or level of service/support needs
- Feasibility of the minimum school funding requirement
- The timing of funding disbursements to account for changing needs during the school year
- Costs of transportation
- Costs of nonpublic school placements and the state/local cost-sharing formula

Recommendation 11: Minimum School Funding

MSDE should provide a written summary of work recently completed, a timeline for other work already under way (which is soon to be completed), and any other next steps to provide short-term guidance to LEAs about how to meet the Blueprint requirement for minimum school funding with respect to special education funds and still ensure a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities.

Recommendation 12: Prevention of Supplantation

MSDE should provide a written summary of work recently completed, a timeline for other work already under way (which is soon to be completed), and any other next steps to prevent LEAs from supplanting local special education funds with Blueprint special education funds.

LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT (LRE)

Recommendation 13: Previous Recommendations and LRE

Many of the standards, policies, and procedures suggested in the Workgroup's previous recommendations are also essential for increasing placements of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and decreasing the variability of Maryland's LRE placements (across LEAs, disability categories, race, and assessment type). These previous recommendations include:

- Achievement of grade-level standards by all students with disabilities, establishing the legal requirements of the IEP process, and holding LEAs accountable for implementation (Rec 1, 2, and 8)
- Increase resources (Rec 10-12)
- Standards related to: evidence-based specially designed instruction (Rec 4), staffing plans and service delivery models allocations (Rec 9), and positions like paraprofessionals and IEP chairs (Rec 9)
- Direct support and coaching of IEP teams and LEAs from MSDE (Rec 5)
- Ensuring educators and administrators have the requisite knowledge, skills, and expertise through EPPs, professional learning, and licensure requirements (Rec 7)
- Students who are eligible to participate in the alternate assessment must have meaningful access to and meet alternate achievement standards

Recommendation 14: Plan for Least Restrictive Environment

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan with specific tasks and timelines to decrease variability of LRE data by LEA, race, disability category, and assessment type, and increase placements in general education classrooms (decreasing placements in LRE C and separate schools). The plan should include:

- Standards, guidance, technical assistance, and monitoring focused on:
 - The use of supplementary aids and services;
 - Implementation of evidence-based specially designed instruction;
 - Eligibility determinations for disability categories;
 - MTSS implementation; and
 - Master schedules
- LEA action plans on LRE, reviewed and approved by MSDE, with mechanisms for accountability
- Support from MSDE to increase the capacity of schools to meet the needs of all students including:
 - Guidance on seeking out and providing additional resources and support for students, schools, and LEAs needed throughout the year
 - Direct consultation with inclusion experts where staff can bring questions, issues, and particular student situations for practical advice
 - Formal mechanisms for sharing expertise and connecting schools/LEAs to outside experts, professional learning, and mental/behavioral health experts
 - Enhanced standards and guidance for documenting, justifying, and monitoring students being recommended for more restrictive environments, particularly the most restrictive environments.

SIGNIFICANT DISPROPORTIONALITY

Recommendation 15: Previous Recommendations and Disproportionality

Many of the standards, policies, and procedures suggested in the Workgroup's previous recommendations are also essential for addressing, reducing, and ultimately eliminating significant disproportionality in identification/eligibility, placement, and discipline. The previous recommendations include:

- Achievement of grade-level standards by all students with disabilities, establishing the legal requirements of the IEP process, and holding LEAs accountable for implementation (Rec 1, 2, and 8)

- Increase resources (Rec 10-12)
- Standards related to: evidence-based specially designed instruction (Rec 4), staffing plans and service delivery models allocations (Rec 9), and positions like paraprofessionals and IEP chairs (Rec 9)
- Direct support and coaching of IEP teams and LEAs from MSDE (Rec 5)
- Ensuring educators and administrators have the requisite knowledge, skills, and expertise through EPPs, professional learning, and licensure requirements (Rec 7)

Recommendation 16: Plan to Address Significant Disproportionality

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan with specific tasks and timelines within 60 days for reducing and eliminating significant disproportionality in identification/eligibility, placement, and discipline. The plan should involve the development of a statewide approach with standards and guidance, stakeholder feedback, TA and professional development, and monitoring, and should include:

- Review of Maryland's methodology for determining significant disproportionality with attention to data timeliness, flexibility currently afforded to LEAs with decreasing risk ratios, and the different standards for general and special education
- Development of standardized eligibility determination checklists for all disability categories
- Models for innovative uses of Comprehensive Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CCEIS) funds
- Identification of root causes including structural causes and explicit and implicit bias in tools and staff
- Development of standards and guidance about responding to behavior in ways that address underlying student needs, review local codes of conduct, and consider alternative approaches including Restorative Practices

EARLY CHILDHOOD**Recommendation 17: High Quality Pre-K**

To increase access to inclusive high-quality Pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-old children with disabilities, comply with federal and state law, and meet the intent of the Blueprint to eliminate achievement gaps and ensure that all young children are ready for kindergarten:

- The General Assembly should expand Tier 1 to include all 3- and 4-year-old children with disabilities, regardless of family income, for prioritization seats and for full funding
- MSDE shall ensure that 3- and 4-year-olds with disabilities who attend publicly funded Pre-K programs receive the services and supports they need by providing guidance to the LEA, holding LEAs accountable for the distribution and monitoring of Blueprint special education weight funding, along with guidance on the different funding streams for Pre-K students with disabilities
- MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with tasks and timelines to meet the specific challenges of Pre-K expansion and a mixed delivery system that will meet the needs of students with disabilities, including recruiting and preparing private Pre-K providers, transportation, and facilities requirements

Recommendation 18: Plan to Improve Access to High-Quality Inclusive Child Care

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 90 days with specific tasks and timelines to improve access to high-quality inclusive childcare for infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities. The plan should address:

- The need for increased and improved provider training that is on-site or at accessible times and includes knowledge on the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and inclusive practices beyond behaviorist approaches
- Increased resources for providers to prioritize inclusion
- Staffing needs through partnerships with IHEs and high school programs

Recommendation 19: Plan to Improve State Support for Local Infants and Toddlers Programs (LITPs)

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 90 days with specific tasks and timelines to improve the state support for Local Infants and Toddlers Programs (LITPs) in implementing evidence-based practices in early intervention to meet the individual needs of children with disabilities and their families. The plan should address:

- Standards and guidance to ensure fidelity of implementation of reflective coaching (parent and peer), teaming, authentic assessment and primary service provider models, as well as the use of other evidence-based practices (including implementation of assistive technology, family centered practices, routines-based intervention within the natural environment) and service delivery models as needed
- Guidance for LITPs on cross-jurisdictional service provision
- Guidance and updates on policy changes for LITPs on staffing challenges related to a 12-month program staffed with primarily 10-month employees
- Outreach barriers and challenge
- Guidance on the roles and responsibilities of each of the three agencies responsible for implementation of early intervention services

FAMILY SUPPORT AND PARTNERSHIPS

Recommendation 20: Plan to Strengthen Authentic Family-School Partnerships

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 90 days to strengthen authentic family-school partnerships, particularly to support infants, toddlers, and students with disabilities, which should be incorporated into state guidance, technical assistance, and monitoring protocols as appropriate, including:

- Ongoing training, support, coaching, and mentoring using evidence-based practices on authentic school-family partnership and cultural competency utilizing community partners (i.e., families and family-serving organizations)
- Collaboration with institutions of higher education to ensure educator preparation programs include skills and knowledge for building relationships with families, meeting facilitation, best practices for communication with families, and specifically participation in IEP meetings (for general and special educators)

Recommendation 21: Implementation Plan to Maintain and Reinforce Family-School Partnership

To maintain and reinforce trust and positive family-school partnership, MSDE should develop an implementation plan to include the following proposed changes to the special education process:

- Make MOIEP changes including automatic language translation, mobile device DocuSign access, and use of plain language as part of the MOIEP revision process that includes authentic stakeholder engagement including families and teachers
- Collaborate with unions to develop best practice guidance for contracts that allow for increased flexibility in IEP meeting times through incentives, stipends, or other provisions
- Work with community partners to develop standards and guidance for serving multilingual families including interpretation services, translated drafts before IEP meetings, and staff roles (e.g., multilingual liaison, community engagement specialists)
- Provide technical assistance and training for school staff on meeting facilitation and conflict resolution, including development of an “IEP facilitation tool kit”
- Develop cooperative training with family-led organizations for staff and families on the IEP process and workshops/videos (in multiple languages) for families and model family-school partnerships
- Explore new partnerships to bring neutral facilitators and community partners into the IEP process

SECONDARY TRANSITION

Recommendation 22: Explicit Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Pillar 3

MSDE should ensure the programs and policies of Pillar 3 of the Blueprint explicitly include students with disabilities in their design and measurable outcomes by taking the following steps:

- Revisit the College and Career Readiness (CCR Standard) considering endorsements, multiple indicators to demonstrate mastery, and a broader frame of college, career, and community readiness
- Utilize partnerships (with businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies) to create more employment pathways, inclusive apprenticeships, and an ongoing workgroup to advise and support Blueprint implementation around CCR for students with disabilities
- Explore the development of another diploma option/multiple pathways to high school diplomas
- Develop micro- and nano-credentials in Career and Technology (CTE) programs and gain industry recognition as credentials for them
- Revise the Local Education Agency (LEA) Blueprint Implementation Plan template to ask LEAs to explicitly report on how they are planning for students with disabilities in their work implementing Pillar 3

Recommendation 23: Plan to Improve Secondary Transition

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with specific tasks and timelines to improve secondary transition and ensure that predictors of post-school success are embedded earlier in students' academic careers. The plan should address:

- Earlier and more meaningful inclusion of parents/guardians (with particular attention to support needed by non-English speaking families)
- Earlier and more meaningful inclusion of students
- Additional training for parents, general educators, and IEP chairs
- More opportunities for work experience, addressing current barriers (e.g., support, staffing, transportation, scheduling)

- Standards and guidance about transition plan requirements as a coordinated set of activities with meaningful, age-appropriate goals and objectives; LEA staffing of secondary transition; utilization of related service providers to support transition services and work experiences; and work-/site-based learning (including specific barriers like workers' comp coverage)
- Increased access to CTE programs, addressing capacity and other barriers
- Improving the Career Research Development (CRD) program with standard competencies across LEAs and industry support to make it an industry-recognized credential (IRC) through collaboration with DORS and other stakeholders
- Post-school follow-up process

STUDENTS WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

Recommendation 24: Plan to Limit Participation in Alternate Assessments to Only Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with specific tasks and timelines to ensure that only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are being determined eligible for participation in the alternate assessment. The plan should include:

- Development of a standard preventing eligibility determinations of very young students. The Workgroup's recommendation is that no student should be determined eligible prior to the IEP that will be in effect during their first year of required state assessment; and that the earliest determinations of eligibility should only include students who all team members agree have the most significant cognitive disabilities
- Clearer eligibility criteria and more explicit guidance and training on the eligibility tool (including accessible information for families)
- Improved implementation and enhanced monitoring of existing guidance on access to assistive technology and speech and language services, particularly for young children
- Development of guidance and professional learning related to instruction for students with moderate cognitive disabilities who are "on the cusp" of eligibility (and may not qualify because of adaptive and social skills)

Recommendation 25: Plan to Improve Educational Experiences and Outcomes of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with specific tasks and timelines to improve the educational experiences and long-term outcomes of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities by aligning their instruction with the State's challenging academic content standards and not precluding students from attempting to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. The plan should address:

- Development of guidance and professional learning (e.g., direct coaching) for general and special educators and administrators and parent training on what standards-aligned instruction looks like for these students and what it means to "not preclude" students from attempting to complete the requirements for a high school diploma
- Dissemination of model-state-recommended curricula and accessible instructional materials and best practices for instruction (e.g. TIES resources)
- Development of a standard limiting identification of students before high school as "pursuing a certificate of program completion"
- Development of a standard prohibiting "alternate assessment classrooms"

- Development of standards and guidance that prioritize communicative competence for students with significant cognitive disabilities and focus on access to assistive technology
- Ensure access to credit-bearing courses and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs
- Safeguard collaborative planning time

BEHAVIOR AND DISCIPLINE

Recommendation 26: Plan to Reduce More Restrictive Placements for Students with Disabilities

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with specific tasks and timelines to reduce more restrictive placements for students with disabilities. The plan should include:

- Adoption of a statewide evidence-based model for trauma-informed behavioral support that prioritizes relationship building and greater consistency from preK-12
- Regular/ongoing, standardized training for all general and special educators, administrators, and other school staff to support implementation of the model and on:
 - Evidence-based de-escalation strategies
 - How to support classroom exit and return to classroom for dysregulated students
 - Trauma-informed practices for students with disabilities
- Guidance on:
 - Team approach to designing individualized interventions
 - Staffing models for implementation (including mental health specialists, social workers, crisis intervention staff, and appropriate supervision of any 1:1 aides implementing behavior interventions)
 - Eligibility for one-to-one support
 - Discipline policies that limit use of suspension
 - Evidence-based classroom management systems and strategies
 - Evidence-based SEL curricula
 - Functional communication for students including assistive technology (with training for students and staff)
 - Family/parent engagement including home visits, connection to other agencies/resources, training opportunities
- Training for local school boards on behavior supports, including rules and regulations, policies, procedures, best practices

Recommendation 27: Evidence-Based Behavior Management Practices

MSDE in collaboration with LEAs and IHEs should ensure that educator preparation programs increase training and practicum experience related to evidence-based behavioral interventions, classroom management best practices, developing positive relationships, Tier 1 behavioral management strategies, differentiated instruction, the role of general educators in the IEP process, and MTSS for behavior.

A Prioritized Plan to Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Maryland

The special education workgroup (SEW) has thoughtfully addressed many areas of need to dramatically improve outcomes for students with disabilities in Maryland. The equally thoughtful recommendations envision not a tweaking of current practices and approaches, but a far-reaching reform. MSDE is committed to broad and sweeping improvements embodied in the recommendations of the Blueprint Special Education Workgroup (SEW).

While this is not a new focus or commitment, central to the Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) efforts will be the realization of the goal of special education is to assist all students with disabilities to achieve proficiency on grade-level standards. Change of this scope will take time, capacity, funds, collaboration, and a hyper-focus on effective implementation. It will also require a great deal of collaboration within MSDE as the implementation of the recommendations cuts across many MSDE departments, not just the special education team. While not every recommendation can be implemented at once, as some will require additional financial resources and human capital, the changes undertaken will bring us closer to the comprehensive vision defined by the recommendations taken as a whole.

While the goal is to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, the work and changes to practice impact general education and general educators as much as they impact special education and special educators. For this reason, engaging in a broad swath of school and district leadership will be required for effective implementation.

This document establishes MSDE's top priorities from the recommendations of the SEW. It also specifies the tasks, timelines, and additional resources required. As many of the recommendations are interconnected, the priorities and implementation plans have been grouped by focus areas.

This work is integral to and aligned with the Maryland Blueprint and its goal of "all Maryland students leaving high school globally competitive and prepared for success in postsecondary education, work, and life." Neither this overarching Blueprint goal nor the established pillar-level goals—increasing the rate of kindergarten readiness, increasing the rate of Maryland graduates who are college and career-ready, eliminating achievement gaps across all grades and student groups, and increasing participation in post-CCR pathways—will be achieved without the reforms recommended here. The work is embedded in each of the Blueprint's five pillars: Early Childhood Education; High-Quality and Diverse Teachers and Leaders; College and Career Readiness; More Resources for Students to Be Successful; and Governance and Accountability.

Another key threshold point is the deep importance of MSDE's support for LEAs as reforms move forward. This support must be provided differently than in the past, using formats and mechanisms that are actionable and accessible and reach IEP tables, classroom teachers, other school staff, and families. MSDE must provide clear and feasible standards and guidance, monitoring, technical assistance, professional development, and continuous timely feedback.

The Priorities are divided into two parts: Foundational Priorities and Near-term Priorities. All priorities are essential, but Foundational Priorities provide the basis for all other work. Alignment of each priority to the pillars of the [Blueprint for Maryland's Future](#).

FOUNDATIONAL PRIORITIES

1. Ensure grade-level achievement expectations, standards, and related monitoring (Pillar 4: More Resources for Student Success; Pillar 5: Governance and Accountability)

MSDE should develop COMAR regulations and guidance to require IEP goals and services that enable all students (including those taking alternative assessments²) to meet grade-level standards.³ When students are behind grade-level standards, IEP goals and services should enable them to close or narrow the gap between the standards and their current performance levels.

Furthermore, MSDE should develop state monitoring tools and compliance protocols to ensure that IEP goals are narrowed or close the gap, and that, based on research and professional judgment, IEP services are reasonably calculated to enable the goals to be achieved.

2. Expand the use of evidence-based practices that enable students with disabilities to achieve grade-level standards, with a significantly larger role for general education, as well as address some of the root causes of significant disproportionality and the overreliance on more restrictive placements where students with disabilities have little to no access to their nondisabled peers, general education classrooms, curriculum, or teachers for students with disabilities (Pillar 1: Early Childhood Education; Pillar 3: College and Career Readiness; Pillar 4: More Resources for Student Success)

The goal of IDEA is to ensure that all students with disabilities master the same grade-level standards as their non-disabled peers and that special education, related services, and general education services assist in achieving this goal. Currently, few students with disabilities in the state reach this goal. While research has shown that general education teachers, general education core instruction utilizing universal design for learning, and general education interventions (MTSS/RTI) are critical elements of grade-level mastery for all students including students with disabilities, LEAs have not generally adopted practices and supports that sufficiently integrate general and special education. A growing body of knowledge of “what works” has been identified, but not yet widely adopted.

The results of failing to use (and use with fidelity) evidence-based best practices are long-standing and growing achievement gaps for students with disabilities, pervasive issues of significant disproportionality in special education identification, placement, discipline, and over-reliance on more restrictive placements for students with disabilities have little to no access to their nondisabled peers, general education classrooms, curriculum, or teachers due to insufficient in district supports and services.

While insufficient school district support represents a significant challenge, it is important to recognize that other critical issues also contribute to the overall problem. These include the need for more support

²Students who are eligible for participation in the alternate assessment should be enabled to meet alternate academic achievement standards while having meaningful access to and making progress in the same grade-level content standards as their peers.

³Students who take the regular assessment (i.e., MCAP) should meet its proficiency standards and students who take the alternate assessment should meet the alternate academic achievement standards. All students are instructed based on the same content standards that define the curriculum.

from State Education Agencies (SEA), insufficient funding, systemic bias, inequitable resource allocation, and a lack of training and capacity among educators and administrators. Addressing these multifaceted issues is essential for creating a more effective and equitable education system.

The focus of this priority is birth through transition and includes both academic and behavior-related best practices.

3. Enhance supply and retention of teachers and develop teacher capacity, ensuring Maryland's schools have enough general and special educators, related service providers, paraprofessionals, and other critical roles, with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to effectively teach students with disabilities. These strategies employed to achieve this priority should also focus on creating more sustainable workloads and schools that better support educators (Pillar 2: High-Quality and Diverse Teachers and Leaders)

Implementing the other foundational focus areas will be difficult without enough skilled staff. The chronic and increasing shortages of special education staff are a threat to successfully improving the outcomes for SWD. The three prongs of this multi-faceted plan to enhance the supply and retention of teachers and develop greater teacher capacity will reinforce each other. This work will be deeply interconnected with the development of standards for staffing (including paraprofessionals and IEP Chairs), service delivery, and specially designed instruction.

To effectively improve retention of teachers, MSDE must also help enhance school and district capacity to better meet the needs of students with challenging behaviors, which will benefit students and teachers alike.

4. Address disproportionality in the identification of students with disabilities, achievement outcomes, disciplinary action, LRE, and eligibility for participation in alternate assessments (Pillar 4: More Resources for Student Success)

Disproportionality has increased significantly in the state over the years and currently, 18 of 24 LEAs have been identified as significantly disproportionate. Too many LEAs have been chronically disproportionate, despite years of effort, corrective action plans, and third-party support. This priority seeks to reverse the troubling trend, learn from past failed efforts, and chart a new course to tackle the challenge.

5. Conduct an adequacy study of special education funding and frame legislative proposals (Pillar 4: More Resources for Student Success; Pillar 5: Governance and Accountability)

An important element of the SEW's charge included a thorough and updated review of special education funding. Significantly improving outcomes for students with disabilities will require adequate funding that is efficiently spent.

Past studies of the topic did not provide a reliable methodology for determining evidence-based calculations of the costs of an adequate education, including weights, that enable all students with disabilities to meet grade-level standards.

The SEW also requested that at the same time as the adequacy study proceeds, MSDE should review related questions pertaining to minimum school funding requirements, the timing of funding disbursements to LEAs, transportation costs, the state/local cost-sharing formula for nonpublic school placements and preventing LEAs from supplanting local education funds with Blueprint special education funds.

6. Strengthen family and school partnerships and collaboration with statewide and community-based organizations (Pillar 4: More Resources for Student Success)

Families are indispensable to the support of students with disabilities, but some current school and district practices create boundaries, friction, or confusion between families and schools. MSDE will help codify best practices for fostering authentic school-family partnerships and help scale their adoption. Central to this effort will be the development of best practices for inclusive IEP meetings and the development and adoption of best practices for IEP team chairs (or others who lead the IEP process).

Strengthening schools, districts, and state partnerships with statewide disability and community-based organizations will also strengthen parent-school partnerships. School systems needn't address these challenges alone as other organizations can help.

NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES**7. Ensure LEA compliance with IDEA's Least Restrictive Environment requirements, including reducing the overuse of LRE-C and separate school placements, while ensuring that a broad continuum of services and supports are available (Pillar 5: Governance and Accountability)**

IDEA requires all students to be educated in the least restrictive environment required to meet their needs. In Maryland, the placement patterns of students vary greatly from LEA to LEA, suggesting that external factors more than student needs drive much of the decision-making related to LRE placements. The work related to Priorities 1, 2, and 3 discussed above will be essential for addressing these problems. In addition, the SEW called for explicit attention to improved implementation of the LRE principle through LEA action plans based on MSDE standards and guidance, MSDE support for increasing the capacity of schools and LEAs to meet the needs of all students, and additional requirements for placing students in more restrictive environments.

A central element of increasing access to the Least Restrictive Environment will be to increase LEA capacity to meet the needs of (1) students with challenging behaviors and (2) students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

8. Review and refine or replace the Maryland Online Individualized Education Program (Pillar 4: More Resources for Student Success; Pillar 5: Governance and Accountability)

IEPs are the critical documentation of goals and services for students with disabilities and are central to ensuring accountability and compliance with applicable legal principles and state standards and guidance. The current MOIEP system requires review and revision to data collection, usability, and reporting capabilities, with consideration of families who do not speak English. Additionally, the SEW called on MSDE to suggest possible alternatives to the MOIEP.

Implementation

A central recommendation of the work group was to "implement well and at scale" not just produce well-written documents, guidance, and plans. The goal is to change practice in schools and student outcomes across the state. One of the keys to implementing this plan effectively is to conduct multiple reviews of progress from a wide range of stakeholders as guidance is developed. We will seek and provide feedback to our stakeholders at various increments, ensuring that their input is incorporated.

Effective professional development and extensive technical support in the field are also crucial components. Regular monitoring and refining of the plan will be necessary, and adjustments may be

made as needed based on the feedback received. Additionally, actionable and accessible guidance materials that are well-organized and easy to find are essential to the success of this implementation.

To follow through on the recommendations, MSDE is committed to a comprehensive, coherent implementation plan. As noted earlier, each Priority and Near-term Priority must be addressed with timelines that integrate implementation with MSDE's ongoing work and stagger implementation based on the capacity of MSDE and LEAs and their resources. The implementation plans will identify where the tasks and timelines are contingent on additional funding to increase MSDE staff capacity and external support, as needed.

In each area, the general structure of the work plan will include:

- Development of guidance and standards based on best practices and broad input from stakeholders.
- Stakeholder feedback on draft documents and plans: Stakeholders include LEAs, teachers, families, community members, and advocates
- Revision: There may be multiple cycles of development, feedback, and revision
- Dissemination: Standards and guidance documents produced throughout the plan shall be enhanced, more usable, and accessible for use by school staff
- Technical assistance and professional development updated annually based on lessons learned from the field
- Monitoring after support and guidance are provided

Appendices

APPENDIX A

Meeting 13 agenda (October 16, 2024)

APPENDIX B

Meeting 14 agenda (November 21, 2024)

APPENDIX C

Meeting 15 agenda (December 18, 2024)

APPENDIX D

Meeting 16 agenda (January 29, 2025)

APPENDIX E

Recommendation Action Plan Outlines

Appendix A: Meeting 13 Agenda

**Special Education Workgroup Agenda****Wednesday, October 16, 2024 | 4:00 – 6:00 p.m.**YouTube streaming link: <https://youtube.com/live/00sRjNqQn-g?feature=share>**Welcome**

- Dr. Carey Wright, Interim State Superintendent of Schools
- Liz Zogby, Special Education Policy & Advocacy

Public Comment**Review of September feedback****Proposed Recommendations and Large Group Discussions****Authentic Parent & Family Partnerships**

- Overview
- Pre-Reading

Discussion

- Small-Group Discussion
- Large Group Report Out

Special Education Blueprint Report Updates**Exit Ticket Reflections****Wrap Up/Closing**

Appendix B: Meeting 14 Agenda



Special Education Workgroup Agenda

Thursday, November 21, 2024 | 4:00 – 6:00 p.m.YouTube streaming link: https://youtube.com/live/VsIM_5_BkDE?feature=share**Welcome**

- Dr. Carey Wright, State Superintendent of Schools, Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)
- Liz Zogby, Maryland Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition and Special Education Policy and Advocacy Project

Public Comment**Review of October feedback**

- Authentic Family Partnerships

Proposed Recommendations and Large Group Discussions**Secondary Transition**

- Overview
- Pre-Reading

Guest Speakers

- Molly Conner, Branch Chief, Performance Support and Technical Assistance, MSDE
- Richard Kincaid, Senior Executive Director, Office of College and Career Pathways, MSDE
- Phil Lasser, Senior Executive Director, Office of the State Superintendent, MSDE
- Jade Gingerich, Director of Employment and Transition Policy, Maryland Department of Disabilities

Discussion

- Small-Group Discussion
- Large Group Report Out

Special Education Blueprint Report Updates**Wrap Up/Closing**

Maryland State Department of Education

Appendix C: Meeting 15 Agenda



Special Education Workgroup Agenda

Wednesday, December 18, 2024 | 4:00 – 6:00 p.m.YouTube streaming link: <https://www.youtube.com/live/nreLuv7-Vcc>**Welcome**

- Dr. Carey Wright, State Superintendent of Schools, Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)
- Liz Zogby, Maryland Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition and Special Education Policy and Advocacy Project

Public Comment**Review of November Feedback**

- Secondary Transition

Proposed Secondary Transition Recommendations and Large Group Discussions**Overview of Topic: Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities
Group Discussions**

- Small-Group Discussion
- Large Group Report Out

Report Updates

- Submitted to AIB on December 1, 2024
- Posted of Blueprint Special Education Workgroup Webpage

Wrap Up/Closing

Maryland State Department of Education

Appendix D: Meeting 16 Agenda



Special Education Workgroup Agenda

Wednesday, January 29, 2025 | 4:00 – 6:00 p.m.YouTube streaming link: <https://youtube.com/live/1ljUlzy9Z5A?feature=share>**Welcome**

- Dr. Carey Wright, State Superintendent of Schools, Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)
- Liz Zogby, Maryland Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition and Special Education Policy and Advocacy Project

Public Comment**Review of December Feedback**

- Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Proposed Recommendations**Overview of Topic: Behavior and Discipline****Group Discussions**

- Small-Group Discussion
- Large Group Report Out

Moving Forward

- Dues Dates
- Meeting Dates

Thank you for Your Ongoing Commitment

Maryland State Department of Education

Appendix E: Recommendation Action Plan Outlines**Recommendation 1: Standards and Expectations**

COMAR and MSDE guidance should be revised to explicitly provide:

- Students without significant cognitive disabilities are legally entitled to IEP goals and services that enable them to meet grade-level standards. When these students are behind grade-level standards, they should receive IEP goals/services that enable them to close or narrow the gap between standards and their performance levels.
- Students with significant cognitive disabilities are legally entitled to IEP goals/services that enable them to access grade-level content standards (i.e., the general education curriculum) and meet alternate grade-level standards. Goals should be based on evidence-based instructional practices, related services, and LRE principles that maximize their potential.

- A. Determine appropriateness of revising COMAR
- B. Develop a standard for IEP development to close or narrow the gap
- C. Develop/revise MSDE resources and guidance documents
- D. Obtain stakeholder feedback and make final revisions to resources and guidance documents
- E. Roll-out of process and provide implementation guidance to LEAs/Pas
- F. Support LEAs/PAs with local training and implementation

Recommendation 2: Monitoring

Review state monitoring tools and compliance protocols to ensure that IEP goals narrow or close the gap between present levels of achievement and grade-level standards, and that, based upon research and professional judgment, IEP services are reasonably calculated to enable the goals to be achieved.

- A. Consider addition of monitoring staff to increase capacity
- B. Identify best practices for the monitoring of narrowing the achievement gap
- C. Investigate inclusion of content experts in the current Case Study process
- D. Disseminate new monitoring tools to local leaders across the state and replace outdated version on the MSDE website
- E. Implement a revised monitoring and accountability criteria based on updated guidance

Recommendation 3: Comprehensive Early Literacy Plan

MSDE should develop a comprehensive early literacy plan to ensure that all students in general education receive evidence-based instruction, including high-dosage tutoring, within an MTSS/RTI framework in general education, with the highest priority in grades K-3.

- A. LEA development of Literacy Plans that address curriculum and instruction, professional learning, MTSS, instructional leadership, and community, culture, and engagement
- B. Professional learning on the science of reading (SoR)
- C. Strengthening teacher preparation

- D. Aligning standards, curriculum, and assessments and curriculum with the science of reading
- E. Maryland state literacy plan
- F. Dyslexia course

Recommendation 4: State-Level Capacity and Guidance on SDI

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan to address state-level capacity and guidance around implementing specially designed instruction (SDI). This plan should include:

- MSDE should increase its capacity (staff positions, knowledge base, and/or means) to provide sufficient guidance and TA
- Guidance and TA to LEAs, including review of current Technical Assistance Bulletins and creation of more accessible guidance for educators and staff, to increase understanding that SDI requires evidence-based specially designed instruction as part of services that are reasonably calculated to enable each student's goals to be achieved
- Dissemination of a menu of evidence-based best practices that LEAs must select from (subject to waivers); availability of TA on the evidence-based best practices based on ongoing needs assessments and monitoring; and guidance on factoring in, where appropriate, IEP Team judgment
- The relationship between RTI and SDI (a continuation of the discussion of MTSS/RTI under the Topic of Integration.)

- A. MSDE will conduct a needs assessment to determine the technical assistance needs from local education agencies (LEAs) and public agencies (PAs)
- B. MSDE will leverage national TA centers to build an appropriate TA plan to meet the needs of LEAs and PAs, based on the results of the needs assessment XXX
- C. MSDE will build the internal capacity of staff members through professional learning to meet the needs of LEAs and PAs, based on the results of the needs assessment
- D. Update and revise MSDE resources and guidance documents, including technical assistance bulletins (TABs)
- E. Identify targeted groups of teachers and staff for capacity building
- F. Identify channels, means, and opportunities to build capacity for each targeted group of teachers and staff
- G. Seek feedback on targeted groups and targeted channels, means, and opportunities
- H. Draft an initial roll out plan
- I. Draft a long-term plan for sustained capacity building
- J. Seek feedback on initial and long-term capacity building plans
- K. Implement plans
- L. Check and adjust based on agreed-upon metrics

Recommendation 5: Effective Implementation of IEPs

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan to address effective implementation of IEPs, including technical assistance, uniform data collection and monitoring, within 60 days. The plan for a plan should include:

- Technical assistance, including more direct support and coaching for IEP Teams and LEAs from MSDE; clear, achievable standards linked to available resources; menus of evidence-based best practices (instruction and interventions); accessible differentiated guidance documents for educators; and professional development
- Uniform data collection, including the need for review and revision of current data elements and technical assistance for collection and analysis of the data
- Monitoring: clear communication of the monitoring requirements and the criteria used to determine compliance, a balance between support and enforcement, and review of composition of Monitoring teams.

Workstream I: Technical Assistance

- MSDE will conduct a needs assessment to determine the technical assistance needs from local education agencies (LEAs) and public agencies (PAs)
- MSDE will leverage national TA centers to build an appropriate TA plan to meet the needs of LEAs and PAs, based on the results of the needs assessment. This includes revising shared standards by which the effectiveness of PL and TA are measured by
- Based on feedback of both the needs assessment and national TA centers, MSDE will audit and revise current practices to ensure alignment with the needs of LEAs/PAs and best practices and standards
- Based on the results of the audit, MSDE will provide guidance documents and technical assistance that are accessible and responsive to educator need
- The staff members delivering professional learning will monitor the effectiveness of PL and TA based on standards

Workstream II: Uniform Data Collection

- Document current data collection and reporting procedures
- Research and modify data elements and data collection processes
- Review and revise technical assistance for collection and analysis of data
- Implement technical assistance

Workstream III: Monitoring

- Based on revised and newly generated guidance, amend monitoring tools
- Implement a revised monitoring accountability criteria based on updated guidance

Recommendation 6: Review of the MOIEP

MSDE should review the Maryland Online IEP (MOIEP), including data collection, reporting capabilities, user experience, and current mechanisms for feedback and revision, and report on suggested improvements and/or alternatives within six months.

- Meet with stakeholders to gather suggested improvements for the MOIEP
- Gather information on other states' online IEP systems
- Determine preliminary feasibility and interest in potential enhancements
- Obtain information about projected costs
- Develop an RFP to evaluate the MOIEP and provide suggestions for improvement

Recommendation 7: Knowledge, Skills, and Expertise

MSDE should develop a plan with tasks and timelines within 60 days to ensure that general and special educators have the knowledge, skills, and expertise needed to effectively teach students with disabilities (as compiled by the Workgroup). The plan should consider:

- A review and revision of COMAR to align standards and competencies, clinical experiences, and entrance and exit requirements for educator preparation programs (EPPs) and the requirements for initial licensure and renewal of licensure for educators and administrators with the knowledge, skills, and expertise needed to effectively teach students with disabilities
- A review in collaboration with IHEs of current EPPs (traditional and alternative), focusing on the development of general and special education teacher candidates who can effectively teach students with disabilities
- Developing standards in collaboration with LEAs and IHEs for systemic support of early career teachers (e.g., IHE faculty in schools as coaches)
- Developing standards in collaboration with LEAs for professional learning and ongoing support, coaching, and mentoring of general and special education teachers and related service providers to effectively teach students with disabilities

- A. Review and revise COMAR to align standards and competencies, clinical experiences, and entrance and exit requirements for educator preparation programs (EPPs) and the requirements for initial licensure and renewal of licensure for educators
- B. A review in collaboration with IHEs of current EPPs (traditional and alternative), focusing on the development of general and special education teacher candidates who can effectively teach students with disabilities
- C. Developing standards in collaboration with LEAs and IHEs for systemic support of early career teachers
- D. Developing standards in collaboration with LEAs for professional learning and ongoing support, coaching, and mentoring of general and special education teachers and related service providers to effectively teach students with disabilities

Recommendation 8: Recruitment & Retention of Educators

MSDE should develop a plan with tasks and timelines within 60 days to enhance supply and encourage retention of general and special educators. This plan should consider:

- Development of innovative recruitment protocols in collaboration with MHEC/IHEs and LEAs (e.g., dual certification programs, programs for general educators to add special education licensure, School to Teacher pipeline/recruitment of high school students, Grow Your Own programs, paid student teaching, and loan forgiveness)
- Developing a rebranding strategy for special education
- Developing teacher career ladders in collaboration with LEAs that provide adequate co-planning and noninstructional time, provide equal opportunity to special education teachers, and consider innovative proposals for additional training (e.g., teacher sabbaticals, paid summer training programs)

- Determining if paperwork can be reduced for teachers and related service providers
- Developing professional learning for principals in collaboration with LEAs on developing inclusive mindsets and high expectations in school communities and improving school culture, including more respect and support for educators

- A. Development of innovative recruitment proposals in collaboration with MHEC/IHEs and LEAs. (e.g., dual certification programs; programs for general educators to add special education licensure; School to Teacher pipeline/recruitment of HS students, Grow Your Own programs, paid student teaching, and loan forgiveness)
- B. Developing a rebranding strategy for special education
- C. Determining if paperwork can be reduced for teachers and related service providers
- D. Develop teacher career ladders in collaboration with LEAs that provide adequate co-planning and non-instructional time, provide equal opportunity to special education teachers, and consider innovative proposals for additional training
- E. Developing professional learning for principals in collaboration with LEAs on developing inclusive mindsets and high expectations in school communities, and improving school culture, including more respect and support for educators

Recommendation 9: Staffing and Service Delivery

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan with specific tasks and timelines within 60 days to set evidence-based baseline standards for staffing and service delivery, with mechanisms for flexibility with justification, emphasizing a focus on student needs not financial constraints, and developed with consideration of the specific ideas generated by the Workgroup. This plan should include:

- Updating guidance for LEA development of staffing plans, with enhanced emphasis on transparent processes, vacancy reporting, and connection of staffing plans to improved student outcomes
- Standards for teacher/staff to student ratios for different service delivery models at elementary, middle, and high school levels
- Baseline standards for special education teacher and related service provider workloads, including the use of Blueprint-required noninstructional time
- Standards for the role of IEP chair, including scope, training, and funding this position
- Standards for paraprofessionals and 1:1 aides, including qualifications, training and ongoing professional development, determining appropriate support for students, data collection on their use, and ensuring adequate supervision

Workstream I: Updated Guidance for Development of Staffing Plans

- A. Create new staffing plan guidance
- B. Review staffing plans as part of LAFF submission

Workstream II: Standards

- C. Create new staffing plan guidance
- D. Baseline standards for special education teacher and related service provider workloads, including the use of Blueprint-required non-instructional time
- E. Standards for the role of the IEP chair, including scope, training, and funding this position

- F. Standards for paraprofessionals and 1:1 aides, including qualifications, training, and ongoing professional development, determining appropriate support for students, data collection on their use, and ensuring adequate supervision

Recommendation 10: Adequacy Study

Within 90 days MSDE should research and share the options, costs, and potential funding and contracting requirements to commission an adequacy study of Maryland's special education funding that considers and makes recommendations related to:

- The adequacy of the foundation program to prevent inappropriate referrals to special education and to narrow achievement gaps
- Establishing a system of multiple weights for special education funding based on disability and/or level of service/support needs
- Feasibility of the minimum school funding requirement
- The timing of funding disbursements to account for changing needs during the school year
- Costs of transportation
- Costs of nonpublic school placements and the state/local cost-sharing formula

- A. Propose legislation for funding adequacy for 2026 legislative session
 B. Submit request for proposal for adequacy study, if legislation passes

Recommendation 11: Minimum School Funding

MSDE should provide a written summary of work recently completed, a timeline for other work already under way (which is soon to be completed), and any other next steps to provide short-term guidance to LEAs about how to meet the Blueprint requirement for minimum school funding with respect to special education funds and still ensure FAPE for students with disabilities.

- A. Work recently completed

Recommendation 12: Prevention of Supplantation

MSDE should provide a written summary of work recently completed, a timeline for other work already under way (which is soon to be completed), and any other next steps to prevent LEAs from supplanting local special education funds with Blueprint special education funds.

- A. Draft Education Article for the prohibition of supplantation related to the use of local funds expended on students with disabilities year over year
 B. Develop documentation for Maintenance of Local Effort Compliance
 C. Communication of new regulation/Education Article
 D. Implementation of new regulation/Education Article

Recommendation 13: Previous Recommendations and LRE

Many of the standards, policies, and procedures suggested in the Workgroup's previous recommendations are also essential for increasing placements of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and decreasing the variability of Maryland's LRE placements (across LEAs, disability categories, race, and assessment type). These previous recommendations include:

- Achievement of grade-level standards by all students with disabilities, establishing the legal requirements of the IEP process, and holding LEAs accountable for implementation (Rec 1, 2, and 8)
- Increase resources (Rec 10-12)
- Standards related to: evidence-based specially designed instruction (Rec 4), staffing plans and service delivery models allocations (Rec 9), and positions like paraprofessionals and IEP chairs (Rec 9)
- Direct support and coaching of IEP teams and LEAs from MSDE (Rec 5)
- Ensuring educators and administrators have the requisite knowledge, skills, and expertise through EPPs, professional learning, and licensure requirements (Rec 7)
- Students who are eligible to participate in the alternate assessment must have meaningful access to and meet alternate achievement standards

Recommendation 14: Plan for Least Restrictive Environment

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan with specific tasks and timelines to decrease variability of LRE data by LEA, race, disability category, and assessment type, and increase placements in general education classrooms (decreasing placements in LRE C and separate schools). The plan should include:

- Standards, guidance, technical assistance, and monitoring focused on:
 - The use of supplementary aids and services;
 - Implementation of evidence-based specially designed instruction;
 - Eligibility determinations for disability categories;
 - MTSS implementation; and
 - Master schedules
- LEA action plans on LRE, reviewed and approved by MSDE, with mechanisms for accountability
- Support from MSDE to increase the capacity of schools to meet the needs of all students including:
 - Guidance on seeking out and providing additional resources and support for students, schools, and LEAs needed throughout the year
 - Direct consultation with inclusion experts where staff can bring questions, issues, and particular student situations for practical advice
 - Formal mechanisms for sharing expertise and connecting schools/LEAs to outside experts, professional learning, and mental/behavioral health experts
 - Enhanced standards and guidance for documenting, justifying, and monitoring students being recommended for more restrictive environments, particularly the most restrictive environments.

Workstream I: Professional Learning

- A. Develop resources addressing inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities
- B. Develop and revise technical assistance documents that address LRE
- C. Improve the documentation and consistency in implementation of MTSS
- D. Provide PL and TA on the development of Master Schedules
- E. Revise monitoring tool to require substantive review of determinations

Workstream II: LEA Action Plans

- F. Review/approve improvement plans for LEAs who do not meet LRE targets (Indicators 5 and 6) in Report Cards

Recommendation 15: Previous Recommendations and Disproportionality

Many of the standards, policies, and procedures suggested in the Workgroup's previous recommendations are also essential for addressing, reducing, and ultimately eliminating significant disproportionality in identification/eligibility, placement, and discipline. The previous recommendations include:

- Achievement of grade-level standards by all students with disabilities, establishing the legal requirements of the IEP process, and holding LEAs accountable for implementation (Rec 1, 2, and 8)
- Increase resources (Rec 10-12)
- Standards related to: evidence-based specially designed instruction (Rec 4), staffing plans and service delivery models allocations (Rec 9), and positions like paraprofessionals and IEP chairs (Rec 9)
- Direct support and coaching of IEP teams and LEAs from MSDE (Rec 5)
- Ensuring educators and administrators have the requisite knowledge, skills, and expertise through EPPs, professional learning, and licensure requirements (Rec 7)

- A. Identify LEA category of analysis for significant disproportionality in identification, discipline, and placement
- B. Review/approve root cause analysis and self-assessment summary
- C. Review/approve CCEIS plan portion of LAFF application
- D. Monitor impact of CCEIS plan to reduce and eliminate significant disproportionality

Recommendation 16: Plan to Address Significant Disproportionality

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan with specific tasks and timelines within 60 days for reducing and eliminating significant disproportionality in identification/eligibility, placement, and discipline. The plan should involve the development of a statewide approach with standards and guidance, stakeholder feedback, TA and professional development, and monitoring, and should include:

- Review of Maryland's methodology for determining significant disproportionality with attention to data timeliness, flexibility currently afforded to LEAs with decreasing risk ratios, and the different standards for general and special education
- Development of standardized eligibility determination checklists for all disability categories
- Models for innovative uses of CCEIS funds

- Identification of root causes including structural causes and explicit and implicit bias in tools and staff
- Development of standards and guidance about responding to behavior in ways that address underlying student needs, review local codes of conduct, and consider alternative approaches including Restorative Practices

- A. Identify structural causes resulting in significant disproportionality in identification, disciplinary removal, and placement
- B. Align innovative use of grant funds
- C. Identify professional learning options to facilitate general educator cultural responsiveness to support student outcomes
- D. Identify adjustments to plan design or implementation

Recommendation 17: High Quality Pre-K

To increase access to inclusive high-quality Pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-old children with disabilities, comply with federal and state law, and meet the intent of the Blueprint to eliminate achievement gaps and ensure that all young children are ready for kindergarten:

- The General Assembly should expand Tier 1 to include all 3- and 4-year-old children with disabilities, regardless of family income, for prioritization seats and for full funding
- MSDE shall ensure that 3- and 4-year-olds with disabilities who attend publicly funded Pre-K programs receive the services and supports they need by providing guidance to the LEA, holding LEAs accountable for the distribution and monitoring of Blueprint special education weight funding, along with guidance on the different funding streams for Pre-K students with disabilities
- MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with tasks and timelines to meet the specific challenges of Pre-K expansion and a mixed delivery system that will meet the needs of students with disabilities, including recruiting and preparing private Pre-K providers, transportation, and facilities requirements

Workstream I: The General Assembly should expand Tier 1 to include all 3- and 4-year-old children with disabilities, regardless of family income, for prioritization for seats and for full funding

Workstream I: General Assembly

- A. Recommendation A is a legislative one; as such, the MSDE is unable to establish internal steps to satisfy this recommendation

Workstream II: Publicly-Funded Pre-K

- B. Provide guidance on the distribution and monitoring of Blueprint special education weight funding
- C. Provide guidance on accessing and braiding funds for PreK special education
- D. Clarifying the responsibilities of LEAs and private providers for SWDs
- E. Revise MOU template/directions and/or develop additional guidance materials reflecting decisions about responsibilities and funding

Workstream III: Plan for a Plan

- F. Recruiting and preparing private PreK providers to serve children with disabilities
- G. Addressing transportation and private providers for children with IEPs

- H. Addressing facilities requirements for Pre-K SWD
- I. Establish, update, and publish inclusive facilities recommendations for students with disabilities

Recommendation 18: Plan to Improve Access to High-Quality Inclusive Child Care

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 90 days with specific tasks and timelines to improve access to high-quality inclusive child care for infants, toddlers, and young children with disabilities. The plan should address:

- The need for increased and improved provider training that is on-site or at accessible times and includes knowledge on the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and inclusive practices beyond behaviorist approaches
- Increased resources for providers to prioritize inclusion
- Staffing needs through partnerships with IHEs and high school programs

Workstream I: The need for increased and improved provider training that is on-site or at accessible times and includes knowledge on the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and inclusive practices beyond behaviorist approaches

Workstream I: Increased and Improved Provider Training

- A. Childcare providers will take an "Including All Children" training as part of their licensure requirements
- B. Develop online, accessible inclusion resources for childcare providers

Workstream II: Increased Resources for Providers to Prioritize Inclusion

- C. Provide inclusion resources in the Including All Children and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) training
- D. All training developed by MSDE approved trainers/training organizations must incorporate strategies to support children with special needs

Workstream III: Staffing Needs Through Partnerships with IHEs and High School Programs

- E. CTE teachers conduct MSDE's "Including All Children and the ADA"

Recommendation 19: Plan to Improve State Support for Local Infants and Toddlers Programs

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 90 days with specific tasks and timelines to improve the state support for Local Infants and Toddlers Programs (LITPs) in implementing evidence-based practices in early intervention to meet the individual needs of children with disabilities and their families. The plan should address:

- Standards and guidance to ensure fidelity of implementation of reflective coaching (parent and peer), teaming, authentic assessment and primary service provider models, as well as the use of other evidence-based practices (including implementation of assistive technology, family centered practices, routines-based intervention within the natural environment) and service delivery models as needed
- Guidance for LITPs on cross-jurisdictional service provision
- Guidance and updates on policy changes for LITPs on staffing challenges related to a 12-month program staffed with primarily 10-month employees

- Outreach barriers and challenge
- Guidance on the roles and responsibilities of each of the three agencies responsible for implementation of early intervention services

Workstream I: Standards and Guidance to Ensure Fidelity of Implementation

- A. Continue the work of the State Systemic Improvement Plan supporting implementation and scale-up of evidence-based practices
- B. Build the capacity of the LITPs to implement and sustain the EBPs with fidelity
- C. Increase knowledge and skills around early intervention best practices by enhancing the Maryland Early Intervention Personnel Standards
- D. Build the knowledge and skills of early intervention staff on a variety of topics
- E. Build the capacity of current and emerging Birth-K leaders to create effective intervention systems

Workstream II: Guidance for LITPs on Cross-Jurisdictional Service Provision

- F. Review existing guidance and practices
- G. Develop and disseminate updated guidance

Workstream III: Guidance and Updates on Policy Changes

- H. Gather information on staffing and scheduling strategies used across the state and in other states with “ED-led” infants and toddlers programs
- I. Develop and disseminate a guidance document outlining options for LITPs

Workstream IV: Outreach Barriers and Challenges

- J. Increase referrals to MITP, especially of infants under 1 year of age
- K. Decrease the percentage of referrals that are closed due to the inability to contact or parents declining to consider early intervention
- L. Based on the analysis of referral and enrollment data, conduct targeted outreach activities to underserved groups

Workstream V: Guidance on the Roles and Responsibilities of Each of the Three Agencies

- M. Analyze current distribution of responsibilities between agencies

Recommendation 20: Plan to Strengthen Authentic Family-School Partnerships

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 90 days to strengthen authentic family-school partnerships, particularly to support infants, toddlers, and students with disabilities, which should be incorporated into state guidance, technical assistance, and monitoring protocols as appropriate, including:

- Ongoing training, support, coaching, and mentoring using evidence-based practices on authentic school-family partnership and cultural competency utilizing community partners (i.e., families and family-serving organizations)
- Collaboration with institutions of higher education to ensure educator preparation programs include skills and knowledge for building relationships with families, meeting facilitation, best practices for communication with families, and specifically participation in IEP meetings (for general and special educators)

- A. Core competencies and family engagement support

- B. Align NAFSCE's training for technical assistance
- C. Partner with Johns Hopkins CTE for artificial intelligence technical assistance

Recommendation 21: Implementation Plan to Maintain and Reinforce Family-School Partnership

To maintain and reinforce trust and positive family-school partnership, MSDE should develop an implementation plan to include the following proposed changes to the special education process:

- Make MOIEP changes including automatic language translation, mobile device DocuSign access, and use of plain language as part of the MOIEP revision process that includes authentic stakeholder engagement including families and teachers
- Collaborate with unions to develop best practice guidance for contracts that allow for increased flexibility in IEP meeting times through incentives, stipends, or other provisions
- Work with community partners to develop standards and guidance for serving multilingual families including interpretation services, translated drafts before IEP meetings, and staff roles (e.g., multilingual liaison, community engagement specialists)
- Provide technical assistance and training for school staff on meeting facilitation and conflict resolution, including development of an "IEP facilitation tool kit"
- Develop cooperative trainings with family-led organizations for staff and families on the IEP process and workshops/videos (in multiple languages) for families and model family-school partnerships
- Explore new partnerships to bring neutral facilitators and community partners into the IEP process

- A. Sharing examples of how some counties have trainings in multiple languages
- B. Parent panel

Recommendation 22: Explicit Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Pillar 3

MSDE should ensure the programs and policies of Pillar 3 of the Blueprint explicitly include students with disabilities in their design and measurable outcomes by taking the following steps:

- Revisit the College and Career Readiness (CCR Standard) considering endorsements, multiple indicators to demonstrate mastery, and a broader frame of college, career, and community readiness
- Utilize partnerships (with businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies) to create more employment pathways, inclusive apprenticeships, and an ongoing workgroup to advise and support Blueprint implementation around CCR for students with disabilities
- Explore the development of another diploma option/multiple pathways to high school diplomas
- Develop micro- and nano-credentials in Career and Technology (CTE) programs and gain industry recognition as credentials for them
- Revise the Local Education Agency (LEA) Blueprint Implementation Plan template to ask LEAs to explicitly report on how they are planning for students with disabilities in their work implementing Pillar 3

Workstream I: Expanding College, Career, and Community Readiness Pathways

- A. EI&SE and OCCP will explore the development of diploma options/multiple pathways to high school diplomas
- B. Develop micro- and nano-credentials in Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Workstream II: Strengthening Partnerships and Accountability for Equitable Access

- C. Increase access to employment pathways through work readiness opportunities

Recommendation 23: Plan to Improve Secondary Transition

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with specific tasks and timelines to improve secondary transition and ensure that predictors of post-school success are embedded earlier in students' academic careers. The plan should address:

- Earlier and more meaningful inclusion of parents/guardians (with particular attention to support needed by non-English speaking families)
- Earlier and more meaningful inclusion of students
- Additional training for parents, general educators, and IEP chairs
- More opportunities for work experience, addressing current barriers (e.g., support, staffing, transportation, scheduling)
- Standards and guidance about transition plan requirements as a coordinated set of activities with meaningful, age-appropriate goals and objectives; LEA staffing of secondary transition; utilization of related service providers to support transition services and work experiences; and work-/site-based learning (including specific barriers like workers' comp coverage)
- Increased access to CTE programs, addressing capacity and other barriers
- Improving the Career Research Development (CRD) program with standard competencies across LEAs and industry support to make it an industry-recognized credential (IRC) through collaboration with DORS and other stakeholders
- Post-school follow-up process

Workstream I: Early Engagement and Training

- A. Develop digital resources and provide virtual/in person training opportunities to improve parent involvement in the secondary transition planning

Workstream II: Comprehensive Transition Planning

- B. Continue to provide the standards and guidance related to secondary transition planning across Maryland
- C. More opportunities for work experience, addressing current barriers

Workstream III: Expanding Career Readiness and Access

- D. Promote equity and access in CTE by raising awareness, removing barriers, and supporting inclusive teaching practices
- E. Improving the Career Research Development (CRD) program with standard competencies across LEAs

Recommendation 24: Plan to Limit Participation in Alternate Assessments to Only Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with specific tasks and timelines to ensure that only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are being determined eligible for participation in the alternate assessments. The plan should include:

- Development of a standard preventing eligibility determinations of very young students. The Workgroup's recommendation is that no student should be determined eligible prior to the IEP that will be in effect during their first year of required state assessment; and that the earliest determinations of eligibility should only include students who all team members agree have the most significant cognitive disabilities
- Clearer eligibility criteria and more explicit guidance and training on the eligibility tool (including accessible information for families)
- Improved implementation and enhanced monitoring of existing guidance on access to assistive technology and speech and language services, particularly for young children
- Development of guidance and professional learning related to instruction for students with moderate cognitive disabilities who are "on the cusp" of eligibility (and may not qualify because of adaptive and social skills)

- A. MSDE will review and update eligibility criteria
- B. MSDE will provide accessible information to families regarding participation and eligibility for the Alternate Framework
- C. Improved implementation and enhanced monitoring of existing guidance on access to assistive technology and speech and language services
- D. Support for students with moderate cognitive disabilities

Recommendation 25: Plan to Improve Educational Experiences and Outcomes of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with specific tasks and timelines to improve the educational experiences and long-term outcomes of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities by aligning their instruction with the State's challenging academic content standards and not precluding students from attempting to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. The plan should address:

- Development of guidance and professional learning (e.g., direct coaching) for general and special educators and administrators and parent training on what standards-aligned instruction looks like for these students and what it means to "not preclude" students from attempting to complete the requirements for a high school diploma
- Dissemination of model-state-recommended curricula and accessible instructional materials and best practices for instruction (e.g. TIES resources)
- Development of a standard limiting identification of students before high school as "pursuing a certificate of program completion"
- Development of a standard prohibiting "alternate assessment classrooms"
- Development of standards and guidance that prioritize communicative competence for students with significant cognitive disabilities and focus on access to assistive technology
- Ensure access to credit-bearing courses and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs

- Safeguard collaborative planning time

- A. Guidance and professional learning on standards-aligned instruction
- B. Development of standards
- C. Ensure access to credit-bearing courses and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs
- D. Safeguard collaborative planning time

Recommendation 26: Plan to Reduce Exclusionary Practices for Students with Disabilities

MSDE should develop a plan for a plan within 60 days with specific tasks and timelines to reduce exclusionary practices for students with disabilities. The plan should include:

- Adoption of a statewide evidence-based model for trauma-informed behavioral support that prioritizes relationship building and greater consistency from preK-12
- Regular/ongoing, standardized training for all general and special educators, administrators, and other school staff to support implementation of the model and on:
 - Evidence-based de-escalation strategies
 - How to support classroom exit and return to classroom for dysregulated students
 - Trauma-informed practices for students with disabilities
- Guidance on:
 - Team approach to designing individualized interventions
 - Staffing models for implementation (including mental health specialists, social workers, crisis intervention staff, and appropriate supervision of any 1:1 aides implementing behavior interventions)
 - Eligibility for one-to-one support
 - Discipline policies that limit use of suspension
 - Evidence-based classroom management systems and strategies
 - Evidence-based SEL curricula
 - Functional communication for students including assistive technology (with training for students and staff)
 - Family/parent engagement including home visits, connection to other agencies/resources, training opportunities
- Training for local school boards on behavior supports, including rules and regulations, policies, procedures, best practices

- A. See recommendations and major components associated with recommendations 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, and 16

Recommendation 27: Evidence-Based Behavior Management Practices

MSDE in collaboration with LEAs and IHEs should ensure that educator preparation programs increase training and practicum experience related to evidence-based behavioral interventions, classroom management best practices, developing positive relationships, Tier 1 behavioral management strategies, differentiated instruction, the role of general educators in the IEP process, and MTSS for behavior

- A. See recommendations and major components associated with recommendations 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 22, 23, and 24

