

Building Teacher Capacity for Inclusive Autism, Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, and Intellectual Disability Education in Underserved Public Schools

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A District Training Model for Special Educators, General Educators, and Paraprofessionals Serving Learners with Complex Communication Needs

Executive Summary

Inclusive special education succeeds or fails not only on the quality of an individual student's IEP, but on whether the adults across the school day know how to implement that IEP in ordinary classroom routines. In the United States, the need is urgent. In 2022–23, about 7.5 million students ages 3–21 received IDEA services in public schools, representing 15 percent of all public-school students, while CDC surveillance now estimates that about 1 in 31 eight-year-old children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder. At the same time, schools continue to report significant staffing and hiring challenges, with special education long standing out as one of the hardest areas to staff. These realities are especially consequential in underserved public schools, where shortages of specialized personnel often make day-to-day implementation fragile and inconsistent. [1]

This white paper argues that the central problem in many districts is a **teacher-capacity gap**. IDEA, Section 504, ADA Title II, and *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1* already establish strong legal expectations: meaningful access to the general curriculum, an IEP reasonably calculated to enable progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances, equal educational opportunity, and communication that is as effective for students with hearing, vision, or speech disabilities as it is for others. Yet those duties are often translated into paperwork, placements, or isolated “specialist knowledge,” rather than into repeatable staff routines that general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals can use. [2]

To address that implementation problem, this paper proposes **The Alfonso Teacher-Capacity Framework™**, a six-component, district-usable model that translates specialized expertise into a coherent professional development and instructional support system. The six components are: disability awareness and competence-building; IEP implementation as instructional practice; autism instructional strategies; sign-supported and communication-aware teaching; behavior and sensory supports; and inclusive lesson adaptation. Each component is grounded in existing law and publicly available national resources, including the High-Leverage Practices in Special Education, AFIRM autism modules, PBIS implementation tools, CAST's UDL Guidelines, and DCMP's accessibility resources. [3]

The model is intentionally designed for low-cost scalability. Districts do not need to wait for ideal staffing levels or expensive commercial programs to improve inclusive instruction. A three-phase district sequence is proposed: capacity mapping, training plus coaching, and codification. This sequence is supported by broader professional-development evidence showing that coaching and feedback outperform workshop-only approaches, and by schoolwide implementation research showing that systems improve when training is coupled with fidelity supports, data use, and local routines. [4]

Two PBIS examples illustrate practical logic. A 2025 PBIS brief on the Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support Initiative reports that Missouri SW-PBS has provided training and support to build local capacity and highlights descriptive data and a peer-reviewed article showing effects on attendance and exclusionary discipline for all students, including students with disabilities. A 2026 PBIS practice brief on a rural middle-school demonstration describes how a district used a preexisting PBIS framework to integrate mental-health supports and documents the district conditions that enabled implementation. The lesson is not that a single state or rural site offers a blueprint for everyone. The lesson is that coach-supported capacity building can improve outcomes when districts align professional learning, implementation support, and ordinary supervision structures. [5]

Because no target state or district was specified, this paper is written at the U.S. federal and national-resource level. It therefore offers a model intended for local adaptation. Its practical claim is straightforward: underserved public schools can improve inclusive outcomes not by treating specialized knowledge as the private property of a single unusually skilled educator, but by turning that knowledge into a district-wide training system.

Introduction

The strongest inclusive schools are not necessarily those with the most specialists; they are the schools in which existing expertise is distributed across teams. That is the practical problem this white paper addresses. In many districts, students with autism, deaf and hard-of-hearing needs, intellectual disabilities, and complex communication needs are formally “included,” yet their instructional access remains uneven from classroom to classroom, adult to adult, and period to period. The legal architecture for inclusive education is substantial. The implementation of the architecture is often thin. [6]

The scale of the challenge is national. NCES reports that 7.5 million public-school students were served under IDEA in 2022–23. CDC reports that autism prevalence in the latest ADDM surveillance is about 1 in 31 among eight-year-olds. At the same time, NCES has repeatedly documented staffing pressure and hiring challenges in public schools, with special education standing out as a persistently short-staffed field. When these trends intersect with high-poverty, rural, or otherwise underserved districts, schools often respond with patchwork solutions: overreliance on one-to-one support, workshop-only training, inconsistent use of accommodations, and the assumption that “placement” itself produces access. It does not. [7]



IDEA itself anticipated that implementation would require much more than a location. Congress stated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by ensuring access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom to the maximum extent possible, providing aids and supports in the regular classroom, supporting high-quality professional development, using positive behavioral interventions and supports, and supporting technology and assistive technology.^{^1} Congress also expressed an important design principle: special education should become “a service for such children rather than a place where such children are sent.”^{^2} Those findings are not mere rhetoric. They point toward a system in which adult capacity is built around instructional access rather than around labels or placements alone. [8]

The argument of this paper is therefore practical and systemic. If inclusive education depends on consistent access to communication, disability-responsive teaching, behavior planning, sensory supports, and lesson adaptation, then districts need a training architecture that can spread those practices beyond a single classroom or a single expert. That is the purpose of the Alfonso Teacher-Capacity Framework: to translate legal duties and evidence-based practices into a replicable district system for improving inclusive instruction in underserved schools.

Why Inclusion Requires More Than Placement

Inclusive education fails when it is defined too narrowly. A student can sit in a general education classroom and still lack access to the lesson, peer discussion, teacher’s demonstration, behavioral expectations, or the communication channel through which learning occurs. IDEA’s least restrictive environment requirement does not simply prefer proximity to nondisabled peers; it requires that students be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate and removed from regular education only when education in regular classes with supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.^{^4} That language puts instructional supports, not physical location alone, at the center of the analysis. [9]

The IEP structure reinforces this point. IDEA requires the IEP to state the student’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, explain how the disability affects involvement and progress in the general education curriculum, set measurable annual goals, identify special education and related services, specify supplementary aids and services, and include program modifications or supports for school personnel.^{^5} It also requires the participation of at least one regular education teacher when the child is, or may be, in the regular education environment, and directs that regular education teachers participate in determining positive behavioral supports, supplementary aids and services, program modifications, and support for school personnel.^{^9} These are not paperwork details. They are instructions for distributed implementation across adult roles. [10]

The Supreme Court’s decision in *Endrew F.* makes the same point in substantive terms. The Court rejected the notion that an IEP is sufficient if it offers merely “more than de minimis” progress and held instead that an IEP must be reasonably calculated to enable a child to make



progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances.^6 The Court emphasized individualized judgment, meaningful goals, and responsiveness to the student's actual progress. In practice, that standard raises the stakes for implementation. An IEP cannot be "appropriate in light of the child's circumstances" if the adults charged with carrying it out have never learned how to translate it into classroom actions. [11]

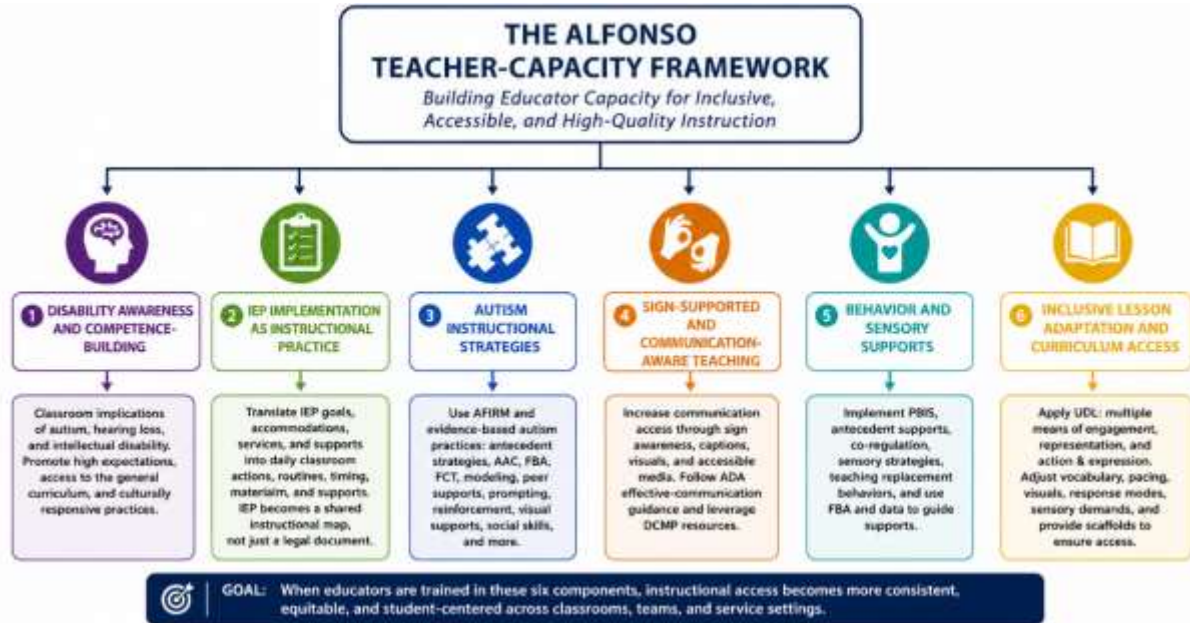
Section 504 and ADA Title II broaden the access analysis in ways that matter especially for deaf and hard-of-hearing learners and other students with communication disabilities. Section 504's school FAPE regulation defines an appropriate education as regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the individual educational needs of disabled students as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met.^7 ADA Title II requires public entities to furnish appropriate auxiliary aids and services when necessary to ensure an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from services and programs, and DOJ's guidance explains that effective communication is determined in relation to the nature, length, complexity, and context of the communication and the individual's usual method of communication.^8 The joint Education/Justice guidance for public schools is explicit that schools must apply both the IDEA analysis and the Title II effective-communication analysis when meeting the communication needs of IDEA-eligible students with hearing, vision, or speech disabilities. [12]

This is why inclusion requires more than placement. Meaningful inclusion demands, at minimum, four kinds of work: curriculum access, communication access, behavior and sensory access, and collaborative adult implementation. When any one of these is missing, formal inclusion can coexist with practical exclusion. The district problem, then, is not just where a student is assigned. It is whether ordinary classroom systems have been built to make participation real.

The Alfonso Teacher-Capacity Framework™

The Alfonso Teacher-Capacity Framework proposed in this paper is a school-facing, district-usable model for converting special-education expertise into an organized training system. It is not a separate curriculum and not a new compliance layer. It is a professional-development and instructional-support architecture that translates legal obligations and evidence-based practices into routines educators can use across ordinary school settings. Its core premise is that instructional access becomes more stable when adult teams are trained in common routines rather than left to improvise around disability-specific needs. [13]

Figure 1. The Alfonso Teacher-Capacity Framework



The framework's first component is **disability awareness and competence-building**. IDEA is oriented toward unique needs, access to the general curriculum, and high expectations rather than toward static labels. The High-Leverage Practices initiative, developed by CEC with CEEDAR, organizes core special education practice into collaboration, data-driven planning, instruction, and intensifying intervention as needed.^{^3} In the Alfonso model, disability awareness training moves teachers beyond diagnosis vocabulary and toward classroom implications: how autism may affect predictability needs, social communication, regulation, and flexible responding; how hearing loss affects access to spoken instruction, peer dialogue, and demonstrations; and how intellectual disability often changes pacing, explicitness, repetition, and instructional load. The point is not to make every teacher a diagnostician. It is to make every teacher more instructionally fluent. [14]

The second component is **IEP implementation as instructional practice**. Too often, IEP training is treated as compliance orientation rather than as classroom craft. Under the Alfonso model, each annual goal, accommodation, related service, and support is translated into visible teacher actions: what changes during instruction, when it changes, who carries it out, and how follow-through will be monitored. This approach is directly consistent with IDEA's requirement that the IEP specify present levels, effects on access to the general curriculum, measurable goals, supplementary aids and services, program modifications, and support for school personnel, as well as the regular educator's role in determining and implementing those supports. [10]

The third component is **autism instructional strategies**. AFIRM's modules guide educators through the step-by-step process of planning for, using, and monitoring evidence-based practices with autistic learners from birth to age 22, and the associated NCAEP review identifies 28 evidence-based practices. The practical value for districts is enormous: autism support is not a



single program, but a decision set. Depending on the learner and context, staff may need antecedent-based interventions, augmentative and alternative communication, functional behavior assessment, functional communication training, modeling, peer-based interventions, prompting, reinforcement, self-management, social narratives, social skills training, technology-aided instruction, video modeling, or visual supports. District training should therefore focus on matching practice to student need and ensuring implementation fidelity, not on generic goodwill. [15]

The fourth component is **sign-supported and communication-aware teaching**. This is included even for districts that do not operate full sign-bilingual programs. IDEA's IEP "special factors" require teams to consider communication needs generally and, for a child who is deaf or hard of hearing, to consider the child's language and communication needs, opportunities for direct communication with peers and staff in the child's language and communication mode, and opportunities for direct instruction in that mode. ADA Title II requires appropriate auxiliary aids and services, while the school-specific DOJ/ED guidance reminds districts that IDEA and ADA analyses both matter. DCMP, meanwhile, provides federally supported accessible educational media, training, and captioning guidance. In the Alfonso model, sign awareness does not replace interpreters or Teachers of the Deaf; it equips classroom staff to improve visual accessibility, reduce communication lag, align demonstrations with the student's visual channel, and improve peer interaction. [16]

The fifth component is **behavior and sensory supports**. IDEA specifically directs IEP teams to consider positive behavioral interventions and supports when behavior impedes learning, and Congress identified PBIS as one of the approaches that make education more effective for children with disabilities.^{^1} The Center on PBIS describes PBIS as a multi-tiered framework to improve social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, and its evaluation briefs conclude that PBIS qualifies as an evidence-based practice for reducing exclusionary discipline and improving social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. A 2026 brief summarizes additional research indicating that students with disabilities benefit from implementing Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity. In the Alfonso model, this component shifts schools away from reactive discipline and toward proactive environment design, explicit teaching of behavioral expectations, antecedent supports, co-regulation, and formal problem-solving when needed. [17]

The sixth component is **inclusive lesson adaptation and curriculum access**. CAST's UDL Guidelines remain the most widely recognized public framework for designing learning environments with multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression.^{^3} The Alfonso model applies that logic to daily lesson design. Teachers are trained to vary representation, response modes, pacing, visual organization, vocabulary load, task complexity, sensory demands, and demonstration formats while maintaining essential learning goals. For students with intellectual disabilities, this usually means tighter sequencing, more explicit modeling, chunked directions, repeated practice, and closer alignment between lesson objectives and student response demands. For autistic learners, it often means visual schedules, clearer transitions, predictability, and reduced ambiguity. For deaf and hard-of-hearing learners, it

means front-loading vocabulary, protecting sightlines, captioning media, and making peer discussion formats visible and accessible. [18]

Together, these six components form a practical theory of action: when districts systematically train adults in disability understanding, IEP translation, evidence-based autism supports, communication access, positive behavioral and sensory supports, and lesson adaptation and instructional access, instructional access becomes less dependent on individual heroics and more dependent on ordinary system routines.

Training General Educators and Paraprofessionals

A capacity model lives or dies on whether it can reach the adults who spend the most time with students. In most schools, that means general educators and paraprofessionals as much as special educators. IDEA already embeds general educators in the IEP process, and research on paraprofessional support suggests that districts cannot rely on support staff without also establishing a clear training and supervision structure for them. [19]

The literature is now fairly clear on two points. First, paraeducators are essential but often undertrained. Second, professional development is more durable when delivered and reinforced through ongoing coaching rather than isolated workshops. A 2023 systematic quality review of special education teacher-delivered training for paraeducators concluded that it may be a sustainable approach, identified 11 studies with moderate or high rigor, and found behavioral skills training to be the most common method. More broadly, Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan's meta-analysis of 60 causal studies found positive pooled effects of teacher coaching on both instruction and student achievement. Those findings support a district design in which special educators function not only as case managers, but as coaches of implementation. [20]

In the Alfonso model, training of general educators and paraprofessionals proceeds through a repeating cycle. Special educators identify one or two priority practices, model them briefly, provide guided practice, observe their use in the classroom, offer performance feedback, and revisit the routine until it becomes routine. Paraprofessionals are trained not merely to "help," but to implement defined supports: prompting hierarchies, visual cue routines, communication access procedures, peer-support facilitation, reinforcement systems, and accommodation follow-through. General educators are trained to organize the lesson so those supports fit within instruction rather than sit beside it. This addresses a long-standing risk in inclusive schooling: when paraprofessionals are used extensively without adequate training, supervision, or role clarity, schools can unintentionally create dependency, social separation, or inconsistent instruction. [21]

A district does not need a large external training budget to do this well. It does need protected time, narrow priorities, repeated observation-and-feedback cycles, and supervisor involvement. That is why the Alfonso model emphasizes codified routines over inspirational rhetoric. Teachers and support staff need to know, for example, what to do before a lesson starts, during a

video, during partner talk, during transition, when a student loses regulation, or when accommodation cannot be implemented as planned. Capacity grows when those answers are standardized enough to be coached, measured, and improved.

Communication Access for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Learners

Communication access deserves a dedicated section because it is commonly oversimplified. In many schools, “deaf access” is reduced to whether an interpreter is present, or whether a student has a hearing device, while the broader classroom ecology remains inaccessible. Federal law is more demanding than that. Under IDEA and its regulations, IEP teams must consider the language and communication needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing learners and their opportunities for direct communication with peers and professional personnel in their language and communication mode. Under ADA Title II, schools must ensure communication that is as effective as communication with others, using auxiliary aids and services when necessary. The joint DOJ/ED guidance stresses that the public-school analysis must account for both IDEA and Title II. [22]

For classroom practice, that means four things. First, schools must protect the **visual channel**: sightlines to the speaker, interpreter, captions, board, and demonstration must be organized rather than left to chance. Second, schools must improve **instructional timing**: rapid talk, simultaneous speaking, and poorly sequenced demonstrations can turn even a nominally accommodated classroom into a linguistically inaccessible one. Third, schools must make **peer interaction** accessible; communication access is not just access to teacher talk, but to social learning, group work, routines, and school life. Fourth, schools must align **media accessibility** with classroom use by ensuring captions, accessible visual information, and interpretable pacing. DCMP’s resources and Captioning Key are useful here because they convert accessibility expectations into production and classroom-use standards. Gallaudet’s Clerc Center and the National Deaf Center likewise emphasize that access includes peer communication, visual supports, and effective use of interpreting or captioning—not simply the existence of accommodation on paper. [23]

The Alfonso framework deliberately includes **sign-supported communication awareness** rather than only formal interpreting services. That distinction matters. Sign awareness for teachers and staff is not offered as a substitute for qualified interpreters, credentialed personnel, or individualized decisions. It is offered as a way to make classrooms more visually intelligent: using consistent visual cues, identifying speakers, pausing during transitions, pre-teaching vocabulary, planning where adults stand during instruction, synchronizing demonstrations with interpretation or captions, and teaching peers routines that make group interaction accessible. In underserved schools where full deaf-education staffing may be limited, this kind of communication-aware teaching can materially improve access even before more intensive services are added. [24]

Implementation in Underserved U.S. Public Schools

Comparative Resource Table

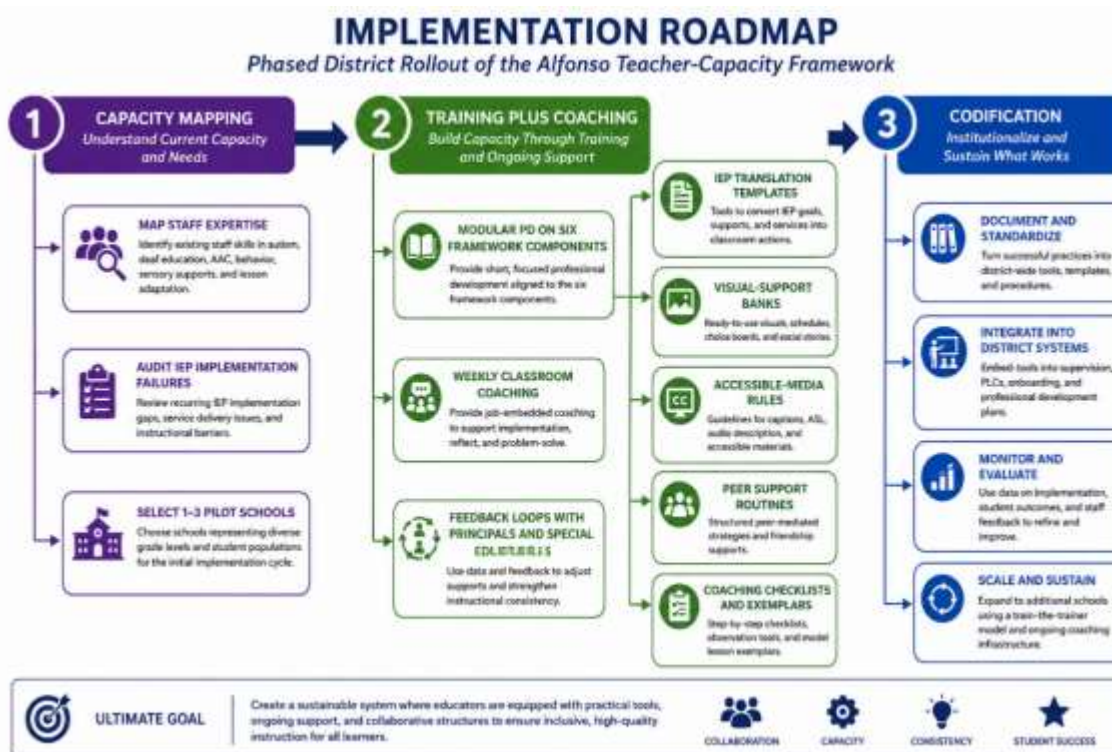
Resource	What it contributes	Cost/access profile	Best district use
IDEA / Section 504 / ADA	Legal basis for FAPE, LRE, IEP supports, effective communication, auxiliary aids and services	Public law and federal regulations	District policy, IEP training, compliance-to-practice translation
HLPs	Concise special education practice framework across collaboration, planning, instruction, and intervention	Publicly accessible guidance and PD materials	Organizing staff practice language and coaching targets
AFIRM / NCAEP	Step-by-step autism EBP modules and paraeducator supports; 28 autism EBPs	Free public modules	Autism-focused staff training and fidelity support
PBIS	Multi-tiered behavior framework, implementation tools, PD blueprint, fidelity tools	Federally supported TA center resources	Schoolwide behavior systems, data use, coaching, discipline reduction
CAST UDL	Framework for lesson design using multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression	Publicly accessible guidelines	Universal lesson-adaptation training
DCMP	Accessible media, captioning guidance, ASL/captioned resources, educator PD	No-cost or federally supported access for eligible users	Communication access, media rules, staff training
All entries are based on official national or federally supported resources. [26]			

The most persuasive feature of the Alfonso framework is that it can be implemented in resource-constrained settings without waiting for ideal staffing or expensive program purchases. IDEA already provides the policy rationale for professional development, positive behavioral supports, technology, and classroom-based supplementary aids and services. HLPs provide a concise practice architecture. AFIRM provides free autism-focused modules, including paraeducator supports. PBIS provides a federally supported implementation framework and a professional

development blueprint. DCMP provides no-cost or federally supported accessible media and training resources. Much of the content infrastructure already exists. What many districts lack is not the conceptual toolkit, but the systematization. [25]

A low-cost district implementation sequence can proceed in three phases.

Figure 2. Three-Phase Implementation Sequence

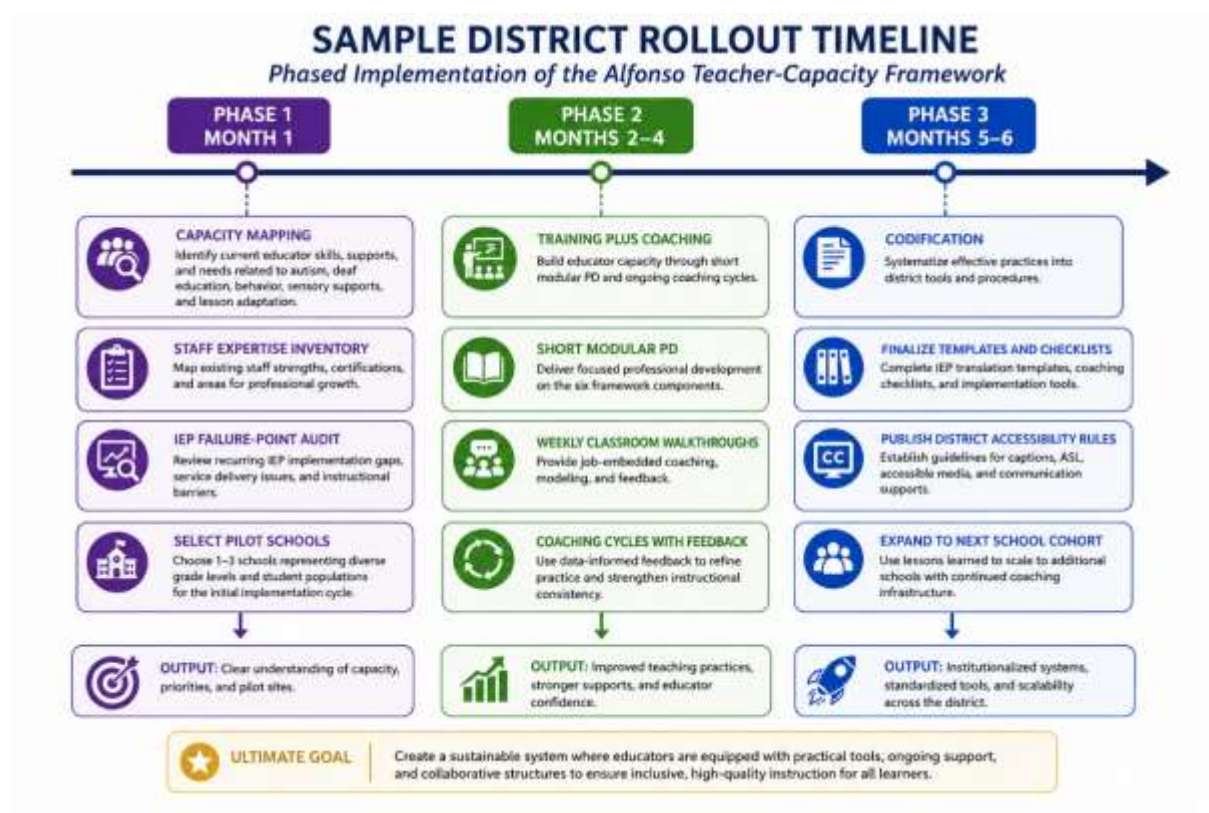


The sequencing matters. Workshops alone seldom scale practice. Districts scale by documenting routines, embedding them into supervision, and reducing the instructional ambiguity that causes accommodations and supports to disappear from daily use. This is consistent with coaching research and the PBIS professional development blueprint, which emphasizes identifying core content, implementation supports, evaluation, and local capacity building. [27]

A practical case study for this logic appears in the PBIS center's 2025 brief on the Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support Initiative. The brief describes Missouri SW-PBS as a long-running capacity-building effort supported by national PBIS infrastructure and reports that descriptive data and a recent peer-reviewed article show positive effects on attendance and exclusionary discipline for all students, including students with disabilities. A 2026 PBIS practice brief on enhancing PBIS implementation to identify and deliver mental-health supports in a rural middle school describes how a district supported a school in interconnecting mental-

health practices within an existing PBIS framework and identifies the district supports that made the work possible. These examples support a larger conclusion: underserved schools can improve outcomes when training, coaching, and district systems are aligned. [5]

District Rollout Timeline



Evaluation Metrics

A district model should be judged by implementation and student outcomes, not by the number of workshops delivered. Reasonable metrics include the following.

Domain	Example measures
Adult learning	Completion of framework modules; pre/post teacher confidence; coaching participation rates
Fidelity	Percentage of IEP accommodations observable in instruction; use of visual supports; classroom PBIS fidelity; accessible-media compliance
Communication	Captioned-video compliance; interpreter/caption alignment checks; peer-

Domain	Example measures
access	interaction accessibility routines; documented communication plans
Student outcomes	Attendance, office discipline referrals, suspensions, time in general education, assignment completion, goal progress, and engagement indicators
Team functioning	Frequency of collaborative planning, paraprofessional supervision logs, and school-level action-plan completion

These measures reflect the logic of IDEA implementation, PBIS evaluation, and coaching-based professional development, while remaining feasible for resource-constrained districts. [28]

Sample District Tools

Tool	Purpose	Core fields
IEP translation template	Convert legal IEP language into classroom practice	Annual goal; accommodation/support; when used; by whom; in which routine; evidence of implementation; progress-monitoring cue
Coaching checklist	Standardize observation and feedback cycles	Target practice; observe/model/feedback status; fidelity notes; next action; follow-up date
Visual-support bank	Build a reusable district repository	First-then boards; schedules; transition cards; discussion cue cards; lab/demo visuals; partner-work routines
Accessible-video rule sheet	Reduce communication failures during media use	Captions required; vocabulary preview; interpreter/caption positioning; pause points; discussion format
Paraprofessional support checklist	Clarify role and supervision	Student goals supported; prompt hierarchy; reinforcement routine; data to collect; communication to teacher
Lesson-adaptation exemplar set	Show what inclusive adaptation looks like in practice	Original task; barrier analysis; representation changes; response options; pacing/scaffold changes; non-negotiable objective

This paper is strongest on federal law, national technical-assistance resources, and public evidence frameworks. It is less granular on state interpreter credentialing rules, local qualifications for paraeducators, collective-bargaining constraints, and district funding formulas, which vary materially across jurisdictions. District rollout should therefore include state-specific policy checks, local personnel and bargaining review where relevant, and an audit of available

related-service capacity. That limitation does not weaken the model's prospective impact. It clarifies the next layer of adaptation required to move from a national framework to a local operating system. [29]

Conclusion

The central contribution of this white paper is a shift in unit of analysis. Too much inclusive special education is still organized around the individual expert and the individual child, as though high-quality implementation can be secured one relationship at a time. The Alfonso Teacher-Capacity Framework argues instead for the district as the proper unit of design. Schools improve not only when specialists know what to do, but when specialists can teach others to do it consistently. [30]

That proposition is strongly aligned with U.S. law and current national resources. IDEA emphasizes access to the general curriculum, aids and supports in the regular classroom, professional development, PBIS, and technology. *Endrew F.* demands meaningful, individualized progress. Section 504 and ADA Title II require equal educational opportunity and effective communication. HLPs, AFIRM, PBIS, CAST, and DCMP together already provide much of the public infrastructure needed to train educators in inclusive practice. What is missing in many underserved districts is not theory. It is a usable system that converts theory into routines. [31]

The Alfonso framework offers such a system. By organizing adult learning around six concrete components and by sequencing implementation through capacity mapping, training plus coaching, and codification, the model moves inclusive education from isolated excellence to institutionalized capacity. That is the practical recommendation of this paper and, for underserved public schools, the most scalable path from compliance to meaningful access.

About the Author



Dr. Raymond V. Alfonso is a special education practitioner, educational researcher, and inclusive education specialist with more than fifteen years of professional experience serving learners with autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, and deaf and hard-of-hearing populations in both the Philippines and the United States. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Education (Major in Special Education) from St. Joseph's College of Quezon City, a Master of Arts in Education (Major in Special Education) from the Eulogio "Amang" Rodriguez Institute of Science and Technology (EARIST), and a Bachelor of Elementary Education from the Philippine Normal University. In addition to his graduate training, he has completed specialized coursework in American Sign Language through the Philippine Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and Filipino Sign Language at De La

Salle–College of Saint Benilde, reflecting his commitment to accessible communication for deaf learners. Dr. Alfonso has served as a special education teacher in the Philippines for over thirteen years and currently teaches students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Florida public schools, where he designs individualized educational programs (IEPs), implements evidence-based behavioral and instructional interventions, collaborates with multidisciplinary teams, and mentors paraprofessionals. His professional work integrates inclusive instructional design, communication support, transition planning, and educator capacity building, with a sustained focus on developing scalable systems that improve educational outcomes for students with complex learning and communication needs in underserved public schools.

Endnotes

1. **IDEA findings on effective education.** Congress stated that education for children with disabilities can be made more effective by ensuring access to the general curriculum in the regular classroom to the maximum extent possible, by providing aids and supports in the regular classroom, by supporting high-quality professional development, by using positive behavioral interventions and supports, and by supporting technology and assistive technology. See 20 U.S.C. § 1400(c)(5)(A), (D)–(H). [32]
2. **Special education as service, not place.** IDEA’s findings include Congress’s statement that special education should become “a service for such children rather than a place where such children are sent.” See 20 U.S.C. § 1400(c)(5)(C). [33]
3. **HLPs and UDL.** CAST’s UDL Guidelines are organized around enabling multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. CEC and CEEDAR’s High-Leverage Practices are organized around collaboration, data-driven planning, instruction in behavior and academics, and intensifying intervention as needed. [34]
4. **Least restrictive environment.** IDEA requires that children with disabilities be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate, and removed from regular education only when education in regular classes with supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. See 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(5)(A). [9]
5. **Required IEP content.** IDEA requires that the IEP include present levels, the effect of disability on progress in the general curriculum, measurable annual goals, special education and related services, supplementary aids and services, program modifications, and supports for school personnel. See 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i). [35]
6. **The *Endrew F.* substantive standard.** The Supreme Court held that an IEP must be reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances, rejecting the “merely more than de minimis” standard. See *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1*, 580 U.S. 386 (2017). [11]



7. **Section 504 school FAPE regulation.** Section 504 defines an appropriate education as regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the individual educational needs of disabled students as adequately as those of nondisabled students. See 34 C.F.R. § 104.33(b)(1). [36]
8. **ADA effective communication.** DOJ guidance explains that covered entities must provide auxiliary aids and services when needed for effective communication, with analysis dependent on context and the individual's normal method of communication. Title II regulations require public entities to furnish appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to afford equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs or services. See 28 C.F.R. § 35.160 and ADA.gov guidance. [37]
9. **Regular education teacher role in IEP implementation.** IDEA requires the regular education teacher, as an IEP Team member, to participate in determining appropriate positive behavioral interventions and supports, supplementary aids and services, program modifications, and support for school personnel. See 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(B), (d)(3)(C); 34 C.F.R. § 300.324(a)(3). [38]
10. **Communication needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing learners.** IDEA's special factors require IEP teams to consider the language and communication needs of children who are deaf or hard of hearing, including opportunities for direct communication with peers and staff and direct instruction in the child's language and communication mode. See 34 C.F.R. § 300.324(a)(2)(iv). [39]
11. **AFIRM and autism evidence base.** AFIRM modules are free instructional resources that guide educators in planning for, using, and monitoring evidence-based practices with autistic learners from birth to age 22, and the 2020 NCAEP review identifies 28 evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with autism. [40]
12. **PBIS as an evidence-based framework.** PBIS is described by the national center as a multi-tiered framework for improving social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, and systematic review findings support PBIS as an evidence-based practice for reducing exclusionary discipline and improving social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. [41]
13. **PBIS and students with disabilities.** A 2026 PBIS brief summarizes research indicating that, when PBIS is implemented with fidelity, students with disabilities experience improved social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes and reduced exclusionary discipline. [42]
14. **DCMP as federally supported access infrastructure.** DCMP provides accessible educational videos, teaching tools, professional development, captioning guidance, and related accessibility resources, with major funding from the U.S. Department of Education. [43]



15. **Teacher coaching and paraeducator training.** Evidence reviews support coaching and special education teacher-delivered paraeducator training as sustainable methods for improving implementation fidelity and instructional practice. [44]
16. **Missouri and rural PBIS examples.** The Missouri SW-PBS brief and the 2026 rural middle-school PBIS brief are examples of district-supported implementation that connect training, coaching, and local capacity-building to student outcomes and sustainable systems. [5]

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