

ALIGNED 



# IARSS AlignED Continuous Improvement

WHITE PAPER

**IARSS** SUPPORTING SCHOOLS. STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS.



# Executive Summary

Continuous improvement is essential for every school in Illinois. Yet, many improvement efforts struggle to produce lasting results due to initiative overload, fragmented systems, inconsistent implementation, and a lack of sustained support (Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2012; Nahar et al., 2022; Shakman et al., 2020). Schools and districts need more than isolated programs or short-term interventions. They require a coherent process that builds organizational capacity, strengthens adult practice, and creates the conditions for long-term success (Bryk et al., 2015; Shaked & Schechter, 2019).

The Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS) developed the AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework to meet this need. Grounded in research on continuous improvement, systems thinking, implementation science, shared leadership, and organizational learning, AlignED provides a practical, evidence-based approach for helping schools and districts identify priorities, implement effective strategies, monitor progress, and adapt over time (Bryk et al., 2015; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2016; Senge, 2006). Through a four-phase cycle of Focus, Identify & Plan, Implement & Monitor, and Examine & Reflect, the framework guides educators as they move beyond compliance-driven planning toward a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

What differentiates AlignED is its emphasis on systems alignment, collaborative leadership, and job-embedded support. Research shows that effective implementation requires leadership alignment, strong data systems, coaching, fidelity monitoring, and professional learning that is connected to educators' daily work (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fixsen et al., 2005). AlignED is delivered through Illinois' statewide network of Regional Offices of Education (ROEs) and Intermediate Service Centers (ISCs), whose local relationships and expertise allow for both a unified statewide framework and customized support responsive to local context.

Ultimately, AlignED is designed to improve not only plans or programs, but the foundational systems behind teaching and learning. By strengthening leadership, collaboration, implementation practices, and organizational learning, Illinois schools and districts can build sustainable growth in adult practice, organizational culture, and student outcomes (Galdames-Calderón, 2023; Robinson, 2007). Through a shared commitment to continuous improvement, Illinois has the opportunity to advance a more coherent, equitable, and high-performing educational system for every student.

## What is AlignED?

AlignED is a systems-based continuous improvement framework developed by IARSS to help schools and districts achieve sustainable improvement. Through collaborative leadership, data-informed decision making, continuous learning, and job-embedded support from Illinois' Regional Offices of Education (ROEs) and Intermediate Service Centers (ISCs), AlignED builds the capacity of educators and organizations to improve outcomes for all students.





# The Case for a Systems-Based Continuous Improvement Approach

An effective Continuous Improvement (CI) framework is not a series of isolated events. It is a disciplined, iterative process anchored in systems thinking (Shakman et al., 2020). The essential components include contextual understanding, coherent alignment, two-way communication protocols, disciplined improvement cycles, distributed leadership, and attention to the human side of change. These components actively address the challenges that impede many CI efforts: initiative overload, structural misalignment, and both knowledge and trust gaps.

## The Challenge in School Improvement

- **Initiative Overload:** Constant, competing mandates create change fatigue. Strategies are often displaced by new requirements before they can take root, leading to premature abandonment (Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2012; McChesney & Cross, 2023).
- **Structural Misalignment:** When districts and schools operate in silos without shared mental models, efforts and resources remain detached from classroom reality (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2012; Jensen et al., 2016; Nahar et al., 2022).
- **The Knowledge Gap:** The “explosion of professional knowledge” without enough human capital to make sense of it in the context of local data while also carrying out administrative tasks leads to significant lag between research and practice (Nahar et al., 2022).
- **The Trust Gap:** Without relational trust and psychological safety, a “compliance-first” culture takes root, causing staff to default to old habits once pressure subsides (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Edmondson, 1999; Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2012).

AlignED reflects this research and leans into the understanding that when leadership and reflection are shared and teams feel ownership, CI work is much more likely to be sustained over time, even as roles may shift (Day & Sammons, 2020; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). This is “people work”, none of which happens unless the educators doing it feel supported and have the trust and space to try, reflect, and improve. The teams at the ROEs and ISCs throughout the state are perfectly positioned to make the connections and provide the support necessary for success (Edmondson, 1999; Lyle & Peurach, 2022; Newman et al., 2017).





# The IARSS AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework

The AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework is grounded in research showing that sustainable school improvement requires more than isolated initiatives. Lasting change happens when district and school teams align around shared goals, use evidence to guide decisions, strengthen adult practice, and continuously reflect and adapt over time.

The following Theory of Action describes how AlignED supports teams in building the coherence, capacity, and culture needed to improve outcomes for students.

## AlignED Theory of Action

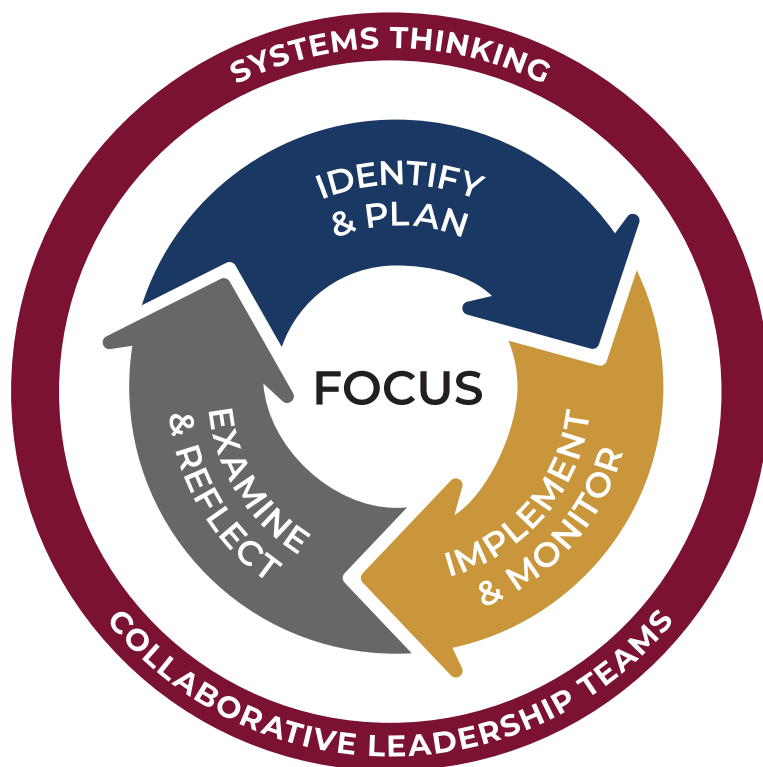
**IF** aligned district and school teams use a systems-based continuous improvement process grounded in data, evidence, open communication, and a commitment to learning and change,

**THEN**, educator capacity, adult practice, and organizational culture will improve, fostering a learning organization that drives sustained and equitable student outcomes.

## The AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework

The AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework provides a systematic, collaborative approach to strengthening schools and districts through continuous learning, implementation, and reflection. Grounded in the principles of Systems Thinking and Collaborative Leadership Teams, the framework helps educational organizations align people, processes, resources, and practices around a shared vision for student success.

Rather than viewing improvement as a one-time initiative, AlignED recognizes that sustainable change occurs through recursive cycles of inquiry, action, learning, and adaptation.



By fostering coherence across the system, building leadership capacity, and promoting shared ownership of outcomes, the AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework creates the conditions for lasting improvements in adult practice, organizational effectiveness, and student success.



## The IARSS AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework

### Anchor

**Focus** represents the disciplined attention required to sustain meaningful improvement. It serves as the anchor of the continuous improvement cycle, ensuring that teams remain committed to a limited number of high-leverage priorities aligned to student success. Focus helps schools and districts avoid initiative overload, maintain coherence, and direct resources, energy, and decision-making toward the most important work.



This language aligns closely with the research-based themes throughout the AlignED white paper: systems alignment, distributed leadership, disciplined improvement cycles, implementation science, and organizational learning.

### Guiding Principles

**Systems Thinking** recognizes that schools and districts function as interconnected systems rather than isolated programs, departments, or initiatives. Effective improvement occurs when leadership, resources, structures, instructional practices, and communication processes are aligned around shared goals. Through a systems lens, teams examine relationships, patterns, and root causes to ensure that improvement efforts create coherent and sustainable change across the entire organization.



**Collaborative Leadership Teams** bring together diverse perspectives to share responsibility for improvement efforts. Through distributed leadership, collective ownership, and shared decision-making, teams build organizational capacity, strengthen implementation, and sustain improvement over



time. Collaborative teams create the conditions for trust, continuous learning, and collective efficacy while ensuring that improvement efforts remain aligned from the district level to the classroom.

### Continuous Improvement Process Components

**Identify & Plan** is the process of determining the most important priorities for improvement through data analysis, stakeholder input, and root-cause analysis. Teams examine evidence to understand current performance, identify barriers to success, and establish a focused direction for improvement. Based on this analysis, teams develop measurable goals, select evidence-based strategies, define implementation actions, and align resources to support successful execution.



**Implement & Monitor** focuses on putting improvement plans into action with consistency, fidelity, and ongoing support. Teams carry out planned strategies, provide professional learning and coaching, and collect evidence of implementation and impact. Continuous monitoring allows leaders and teams to assess progress, identify challenges early, and make timely adjustments to improve outcomes.



**Examine & Reflect** is the process of evaluating implementation and impact to determine what is working, what needs adjustment, and what has been learned. Teams engage in structured reflection using evidence from implementation and outcome data to assess effectiveness and inform future decisions. Reflection drives organizational learning and leads directly back into planning, creating a continuous cycle of improvement.





# What Differentiates the IARSS AlignED Framework from Other Vendor Paradigms

## Systems Approach vs. Instruction-Only Models

When schools try to improve, they often focus on one specific program or teaching method. This approach does not always work in the long run. Research shows that to truly make a difference, schools need to look at the system as a whole, not just one part of it (Fullan, 2016; Senge, 2006). The AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework is different because it emphasizes the importance of working to ensure all functions are aligned. This means that school leaders, teachers, and staff all need to be on the same page and work together to make improvements.

Research shows that to truly make a difference, schools need to look at the system as a whole, not just one part of it.

This approach also helps avoid a problem with models sold by vendors: they are often not implemented with sufficient fidelity or organizational support. Studies have shown that even research-based programs will not work without strong leadership, coherent systems, and a clear plan (Fixsen et al., 2005). The AlignED framework intentionally incorporates these conditions by

aligning leadership and organizational structures, establishing clear processes for continuous improvement, fostering a positive culture of collaboration and trust, and supporting ongoing adult learning. As a result, schools and districts build the internal capacity needed to sustain improvement over time rather than relying on external programs or support.

## Improvement Science vs. Compliance-Driven Planning

Another key difference is that the AlignED Framework focuses on real improvement rather than just following the rules. Many school improvement plans are created just to meet requirements. They do not actually lead to meaningful changes. In contrast, AlignED uses a cycle of inquiry in which educators identify problems, try out solutions, and refine their approach based on evidence. In this way, the framework guides districts and schools to become true learning organizations that evolve over time.

This approach is based on research centered on looking at the root causes of problems rather than just treating the symptoms (Leithwood et al., 2020). The AlignED framework helps districts do this by providing a process for analyzing data and making decisions. This method also allows the schools to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances, which is important in today's fast-paced educational environment.

## Partnership vs. Purchased Program

The AlignED model is also unique in that it emphasizes partnership and collaboration rather than the utilization of a purchased product. When schools buy a program, they often receive fixed



## What Differentiates the IARSS AlignED Framework from Other Vendor Paradigms

support but must implement it on their own. In contrast, AlignED includes tailored support and coaching, helping educators to translate research into practice in their own contexts.

Research reveals that this type of integration is critical for helping teachers learn and grow (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The AlignED approach provides “shoulder-to-shoulder” coaching, through which educators work together to develop solutions that meet their needs. This technique also allows schools to respond to changing circumstances and priorities rather than being locked into a predetermined plan.

In short, the AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework is different because it focuses on people, not programs. It accentuates the importance of collaborating, looking at the big picture, and concentrating on real improvement. By doing this, school districts can create a system that’s sustainable, scalable, and responsive to the needs of all students.

### What Makes AlignED Stand Out?

Schools and districts are often presented with a wide range of improvement models, programs, and consulting services that promise better outcomes. While many of these approaches include valuable tools or strategies, they often focus on isolated aspects of improvement rather than on the broader systems required to sustain meaningful change. Research consistently shows that lasting improvement occurs when leadership, organizational structures, instructional practices, and continuous learning processes are aligned and supported over time.



The AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework was developed specifically for Illinois schools and districts to address these challenges. Rather than providing a stand-alone program, AlignED offers a comprehensive, systems-based approach that combines evidence-based improvement processes, leadership development, coaching, and ongoing support. The comparison on the following page highlights key differences between AlignED and more traditional vendor-based models, demonstrating how AlignED builds internal capacity, fosters collaboration, and fosters sustainable improvement that endures long after contracts end.



## What Differentiates the IARSS Aligned Framework from Other Vendor Paradigms

### Comparison Chart

|                              | IARSS Aligned                                                                      | Other Models                                                          |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Designed For</b>          | Designed specifically for Illinois schools and districts                           | Designed for broad application across diverse contexts                |
| <b>Who Leads the Work</b>    | Led by experienced Illinois educators and leaders                                  | Typically led by external consultants or contracted providers         |
| <b>Sustainability</b>        | Focuses on building sustainable systems for continuous improvement                 | Often emphasizes short-term implementation of programs or initiatives |
| <b>Approach</b>              | Provides a comprehensive approach that includes the what, how, tools, and coaching | Often focused primarily on processes, programs, or resources          |
| <b>Partnership Model</b>     | Offers ongoing, job-embedded support and partnership                               | Provides support that is often limited in duration and scope          |
| <b>Customization</b>         | Adapts to local needs, priorities, and community context                           | Relies on standardized approaches across settings                     |
| <b>Capacity Building</b>     | Builds internal leadership and organizational expertise                            | May create dependence on external providers for ongoing support       |
| <b>Collaboration</b>         | Promotes collaboration, shared ownership, and collective responsibility            | Often operates through isolated or siloed improvement efforts         |
| <b>Systems Alignment</b>     | Aligns leadership, systems, resources, and instructional practices                 | Improvement efforts may remain disconnected across the organization   |
| <b>Learning &amp; Growth</b> | Supports continuous learning, reflection, and adaptation                           | Frequently emphasizes compliance and implementation over learning     |



# Statewide Infrastructure and Capacity

## The Power of the 38 Regional Offices of Education and Intermediate Service Centers

The 38 Regional Offices of Education (ROEs) and Intermediate Service Centers (ISCs) are uniquely positioned to lead continuous improvement efforts in schools across Illinois. Unlike other educational vendors, the ROEs and ISCs are statutorily required to elevate the standard of teaching and improvement of schools (Elevation of Standard of Teaching, 1961). This alignment ensures that all continuous improvement efforts provided by the ROEs and ISCs are not only compliant but also coherent and aligned with state priorities and accountability systems.

## Localized Expertise and Relationship-Based Support

With a legacy spanning more than 150 years, the ROEs and ISCs have provided foundational “boots-on-the-ground” support through a cadre of over 260 professional learning experts who work shoulder to shoulder with school leaders, teachers, and school staff. This level of localized expertise is unmatched. Unlike other vendors who often bring “boxed programs” or “one size-fits-all” solutions, ROE experts have a longstanding presence in the regions they serve, allowing them to customize efforts to the specific needs and goals of each school. Since ROE and ISC offices maintain long-term and established relationships with their districts, they foster a culture of trust and collaboration that allows for continuous, sustainable support rather than the misaligned, one-time interventions typical of other external vendors.

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## Scale Advantages and Systemic Impact

The network of 38 regional offices offers significant advantages to districts and schools through its cadre of 260 professional learning experts across the state. This core infrastructure enables the ROEs and ISCs to deliver localized, high-quality support at scale while meeting local needs. Not only are the ROEs/ISCs able to provide affordable and resource-efficient solutions, but they are also able to make effective professional learning accessible to every school, regardless of size or budget. By supplying a systematic process for CI along with job-embedded coaching across districts, the ROE/ISC network creates a cohesive statewide improvement network. This collective capacity results in a robust statewide process for CI, allowing the 260 professional learning experts to bring systematic, differentiated support to schools based on regional context.



## Statewide Infrastructure and Capacity

### Research-Supported Effectiveness

The AlignED Framework is grounded in research that confirms its impact. Studies show that systems thinking is necessary since schools function as complex systems in which sustainable improvement depends on understanding and responding to the relationships among all parts of the system, rather than to isolated parts (Shaked & Schechter, 2017). Furthermore, studies on adult learning stress that real-time, job-embedded coaching is the core driver of effective learning and improved outcomes for adults and students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Finally, a main component of AlignED emphasizes distributed leadership as an essential mechanism for improving student outcomes and overall school effectiveness (Galdames-Calderón, 2023).

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### Building Internal Capacity for Sustainability

ROEs and ISCs have traditionally woven a web of support for leaders, learners, and school improvement teams, serving as trusted partners in school improvement efforts. Sustaining growth requires building internal capacity through leadership, learning, and organizational structures. Development of effective leadership teams is essential to this effort, as collaborative teams are better positioned to monitor, maintain, and adapt change efforts over time (Ghasemy et al., 2024; Hickey, et al., 2024).

To bolster leadership teams, ROEs and ISCs can provide educators with ongoing professional learning that steadily impacts skill development, ensuring sustainability through collaboration and job-embedded approaches (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2024). Continuous monitoring, reflecting, and evaluating school improvement efforts by embedding data use and feedback cycles into practice empowers organizations to assess progress and respond strategically (Dedering & Pietsch, 2025). Such practices are better accomplished with distributive leadership structures, sharing critical roles of responsibility across stakeholders, increasing engagement, and creating accountability through a sense of collective ownership in the school improvement process (AIR, 2024; Shabalala, 2024). These definitive elements reflect research on shared leadership and organizational sustainability, which emphasizes that collaborative leadership systems are key to sustaining innovation and long-term effectiveness (Hadfield et al., 2025; Hasselgren et al., 2021).



# Evidence-Based Summary

The AlignED Continuous Improvement Framework is grounded in decades of educational research spanning the concepts of continuous improvement, systems thinking, leadership, implementation science, and student learning. Rather than relying on a single program or methodology, the framework synthesizes findings from multiple fields to create a practical, research-based approach to sustainable school improvement. The research summarized below demonstrates that the core components of AlignED are backed by a substantial body of evidence and reflect practices consistently associated with stronger organizational performance and improved student outcomes.

| Research Theme         | What the Research Shows                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Key Research Base                                                                                                                       | AlignED Framework Application                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Continuous Improvement | Sustainable improvement occurs through disciplined cycles of inquiry, testing, reflection, and adaptation rather than one-time initiatives or compliance-driven planning. Organizations improve when they continuously learn from evidence and refine their practices.  | Anderson et al. (2024); Bryk et al. (2015); Foster-Fishman & Watson (2012); Nahar et al. (2022); Shakman et al. (2020)                  | AlignED uses a recursive four-phase improvement cycle (Focus, Plan, Implement & Monitor, Examine & Reflect) that supports continuous learning and adaptation.                     |
| Systems Thinking       | Schools function as complex, adaptive systems. Improvement efforts are most successful when leadership, structures, resources, communication, and instructional practices are aligned around shared goals.                                                              | Chrispeels et al. (2008); Foster-Fishman & Watson (2012); Fullan (2016); Senge (2006); Shaked & Schechter (2017, 2019)                  | AlignED applies systems thinking by aligning leadership teams, resources, communication structures, and improvement efforts from the district level to the classroom.             |
| Shared Leadership      | Distributed leadership increases organizational coherence, collective ownership, implementation fidelity, and sustainability. Collaborative leadership structures are associated with stronger school improvement efforts and resilience during leadership transitions. | Day & Sammons (2020); Galdames-Calderón (2023); Hadfield et al. (2025); Hasselgren et al. (2021); Lambert (2002); Printy & Marks (2006) | AlignED intentionally develops District Leadership Teams, School Leadership Teams, and Collaborative Leadership Teams to distribute responsibility and build collective efficacy. |

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## Evidence-Based Summary

| Research Theme                                    | What the Research Shows                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Key Research Base                                                                                                                         | Aligned Framework Application                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Data Use &amp; Implementation Science</b>      | Improvement efforts are most effective when organizations use data to identify needs, monitor implementation, evaluate impact, and make evidence-based adjustments. Successful implementation requires coaching, feedback loops, implementation monitoring, and attention to adult learning.                                | Bernhardt (2017); Darling-Hammond et al. (2017); Dederig & Pietsch (2025); Fixsen et al. (2005); Leithwood et al. (2020); Robinson (2007) | AlignedED emphasizes root-cause analysis, progress monitoring, implementation fidelity, feedback cycles, coaching, and evidence-based decision making throughout the improvement process. |
| <b>Student Outcomes</b>                           | Research consistently demonstrates that improved leadership practices, professional learning, collaborative cultures, instructional coherence, and effective implementation lead to stronger student achievement and school performance. Improvements in adult practice precede and drive improvements in student outcomes. | Bernhardt (2017); Darling-Hammond et al. (2017); Galdames-Calderón (2023); Hill & Papay (2022); Kraft et al. (2018); Robinson (2007)      | AlignedED focuses first on strengthening educator capacity, organizational culture, and instructional practices as the primary mechanisms for improving student learning and outcomes.    |
| <b>Human Side of Change (Cross-Cutting Theme)</b> | Lasting change depends on trust, psychological safety, collective efficacy, and meaningful engagement of those responsible for implementation. Without these conditions, improvement efforts frequently stall or disappear.                                                                                                 | Edmondson (1999); Lyle & Peurach (2022); Newman et al. (2017)                                                                             | AlignedED prioritizes relationship-building, collaborative learning, psychological safety, and practitioner ownership to ensure sustainable implementation and continuous growth.         |

The AlignedED Framework is not a theoretical model developed in isolation. It represents the practical application of decades of research on continuous improvement, systems thinking, organizational learning, implementation science, shared leadership, and student achievement. Each component of the framework reflects evidence-based practices proven to increase the likelihood that improvement efforts are implemented effectively, sustained over time, and ultimately lead to enhanced student outcomes.



# Conclusion: Advancing Continuous Improvement in Illinois

Continuous improvement is not reserved for a subset of schools. It is essential for all schools in Illinois. Regardless of size, geography, or designation, every district and school can benefit from a systematic approach that strengthens adult practice, bolsters organizational effectiveness, and advances student learning. A unified, systems-based framework provides the structure needed to move beyond isolated initiatives and create coherent, sustainable improvement efforts focused on long-term success.

The IARSS, together with the ROEs and ISCs across the state, is uniquely positioned to lead this work. Through deep local relationships, statewide reach, and ongoing job-embedded support, the ROE/ISC network combines a shared improvement framework with the flexibility to meet the unique needs of each district and school.

The ultimate purpose of CI is to build the capacity of educators and organizations to learn, adapt, and improve over time. As leadership, collaboration, instructional practice, and organizational learning strengthen, schools become better equipped to best serve all students. The result is improved student outcomes, greater equity, and a culture of excellence that can be sustained long after individual initiatives end.

Illinois has an opportunity to establish a statewide culture of continuous improvement grounded in collaboration, shared learning, and collective responsibility.

Looking ahead, Illinois has an opportunity to establish a statewide culture of continuous improvement grounded in collaboration, shared learning, and collective responsibility. By working together through a common framework and a commitment to continuous growth, schools, districts, ROEs, ISCs, and state partners can ensure that every student, in every community, has access to the high-quality educational opportunities they deserve.





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## Acknowledgments:

This white paper was written by a statewide team of Regional Office of Education and Intermediate Service Center leaders and school improvement specialists on behalf of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS). The authors gratefully acknowledge the many educators and practitioners whose feedback and expertise strengthened this publication.

## Acknowledgment of AI-Assisted Development:

Artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT (OpenAI), Gemini (Google), and NotebookLM (Google), were used during the development of this document to support literature synthesis, content organization, drafting, and editorial review. These tools were used as aids to the writing process and not as authoritative sources. The authors reviewed, verified, and edited all content and are solely responsible for the final document and its conclusions.



**AlignED** was developed by IARSS in collaboration with Illinois' ROEs and ISCs.



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