

Alabama Transition Initiative: A Statewide Systems Change Program

Karen Rabren ¹

The Alabama Transition Initiative (ATI) was a five-year systems change grant (1996-2001) designed to increase the State's capacity to improve and expand its transition services and programs. Its major goal was to assist in the development of the necessary services, supports, and opportunities for youth and young adults with disabilities so they may reach their personal desired quality of life. The ATI plan was comprehensive and required the cooperation and coordination of many state agencies, employers, families, local schools and the general public. Even though the grant has officially ended its five year federal funding period, much of ATI's systems change program and its five initiatives continue to be promoted and implemented.

ATI's framework is provided through five initiatives: (1) Interagency, (2) Local Programs and Services, (3) Post-school Linkages, (4) Training, and (5) Student Tracking. The initiatives continue to have an impact in the development of significant changes in programs that have effectively improved transition services in Alabama. The remainder of this paper highlights the nature of these initiatives and their related progress.

Interagency Initiative

The purpose of the Interagency Initiative is to identify interagency barriers to effective transition services and develop state and local policies and procedures that eliminate or reduce those barriers, resulting in a more comprehensive, coordinated transition service system. A strong transition partnership exists among Alabama's agencies and service delivery programs, as demonstrated by the following two examples.

One exemplary transition partnership exists between the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) and local school systems who co-fund the salary for 78 school-based job coaches in 71 school systems. The co-funded job coaches represent a total financial commitment of 2.5 million dollars. ADRS funds 1.3 million of this commitment and the remaining 1.2 million is dispersed among participating local school systems.

ADRS's commitment is further evidenced by the inclusion of transition students in the caseload of 72 of its rehabilitation counselors. Transition students represent 36 percent of all the consumers served in the Vocational Rehabilitation Services program and 33 percent of all the consumers employed. The

¹ Karen Rabren, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Rehabilitation and Special Education, Auburn University; former Director of the Alabama Transition Initiative, Alabama State Department of Education.

commitment of such resources by agency transition partners represents a strong emphasis on creating a seamless system of service delivery for students with disabilities.

Another example of interagency collaboration has been the Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities' financial commitment to the Student Summer Leadership/Self-Advocacy Camp and the *Parent Training in Transition Program* (1997-2000). The Student Summer Leadership/Self-Advocacy Camp provided intense leadership training for high school students selected to represent their school system and the Parent Training in Transition Program provided family members with specific training in transition so they could better assist their young adults. These two interagency partnerships reflect the leadership, commitment, and true collaboration among Alabama's interagency transition partners, which has and will continue to result in real systems change in transition.

Local Program/Services Initiative

The second initiative, Local Program/Services, is intended to empower local education agencies and communities to implement proven effective programs and services that result in positive post-school adult outcomes. The three-prong strategy for addressing ATI's Local Program Initiative is (a) the establishment of model transition Demonstration Sites, (b) the development of a Leadership Academy from among the sites, and (c) the creation of local interagency Community Transition Teams.

The local school Demonstration Sites were selected through a request for funding proposal (RFP) process and monitored for their progress and impact with a program evaluation model. The selected sites include city and county school systems in both urban and rural areas of Alabama's four major geographic regions. Since 1996, 49 transition Demonstration Sites have been established with local public school systems. Of these, 39 were awarded mini-grants for years 1, 2, 3, and 4. In year 5, 10 new sites were funded for the 2000-2001 school year (see Figure 1 and Table 1 for name and location of ATI Demonstration Sites).

A second strategy of the Local Program/Services Initiative is the Alabama Transition Leadership Academy, which is designed to further extend training and technical assistance across the state. ATI Demonstration Sites have the opportunity to become members of the Alabama Transition Leadership Academy. These Academy members are awarded \$5,000 to provide training and technical assistance to other school systems in their geographic region. This Leadership Academy model provides school systems, who are not ATI Demonstration Sites, an opportunity to gain information from personnel who are a part of exemplary transition programs. This mentor program is expected to result in outreach that will impact all of Alabama's 128 school systems and, therefore, provide the structure for comprehensive systems change in the state.

The third and last strategy of the Local Programs and Services Initiative is the establishment of Community Transition Teams (CTT). Community Transition Team meetings are an important interagency program component at the local level. The purpose of these interagency community teams is to discover and implement new and better ways of providing transition programs and services in their own community.

These teams take advantage of the unique strengths of their individual communities while working to solve common problems.

In September 1999, 23 ATI Demonstration Sites were surveyed about the stakeholder identity of their Community Transition Teams and transition barriers in their communities. Regarding the identity of their CTT members, the survey responses identified a total of 634 transition stakeholders from 22 sites, according to their transition role. The roles with highest representation in CTTs at that time were: (a) special education personnel (21%), (b) students (19%), (c) employers (15%), and (d) parents (13%). Consumers represented a total of 32% of CTT memberships. Regarding primary community barriers to transition, 77% 45%, and 27% of the responding teams identified transportation, parental awareness/support, and curriculum, respectively.

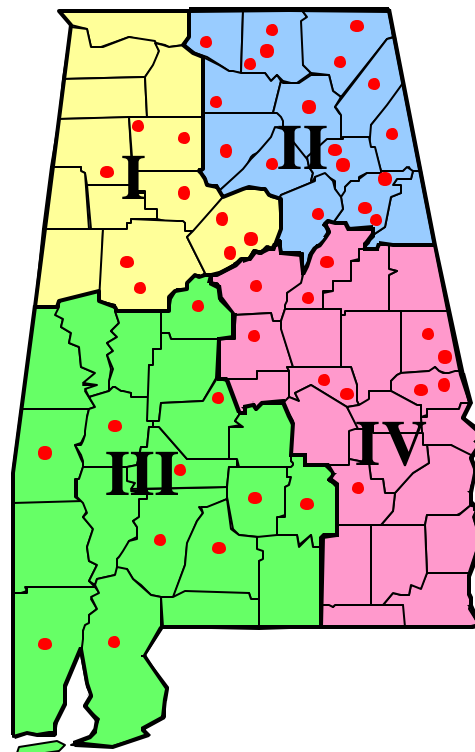


Figure 1: Geographic locations of ATI Demonstration Sites

Table 1: ATI Demonstration Sites by Regions and School Systems (A = City Schools; B = County Schools)

| | School System (A) City (B) County | City/County School | | School System (A) City (B) County | City/County School |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Region I ▼ | Jefferson(B) | Jefferson | Region III ▼ | Baldwin (B) | Baldwin |
| | Birmingham (A) | Jefferson | | Bibb (B) | Bibb |
| | Vestavia Hills (A) | Jefferson | | Butler (B) | Butler |
| | Winfield (A) | Marion | | Choctaw (B) | Choctaw |
| | Tuscaloosa (B) | Tuscaloosa | | Conecuh (B) | Conecuh |
| | Tuscaloosa (A) | Tuscaloosa | | Crenshaw (B) | Crenshaw |
| | Jasper (A) | Walker | | Selma (A) | Dallas |
| | Winston (B) | Winston | | Demopolis (A) | Marengo |
| | Haleyville (A) | Winston | | Mobile (B) | Mobile |
| Region II ▼ | Blount (B) | Blount | Region IV ▼ | Monroe (B) | Monroe |
| | Anniston (B) | Calhoun | | Wilcox (B) | Wilcox |
| | Oxford (A) | Calhoun | | Chambers(B) | Chambers |
| | Piedmont (A) | Calhoun | | Lanett (A) | Chambers |
| | Cullman (A) | Cullman | | Chilton (B) | Chilton |
| | DeKalb (B) | DeKalb | | Elmore (B) | Elmore |
| | Attalla (A) | Etowah | | Auburn (A) | Lee |
| | Gasden (A) | Etowah | | Opelika (A) | Lee |
| | Jackson (B) | Jackson | | Pike (B) | Pike |
| | Scottsboro (A) | Jackson | | Shelby (B) | Shelby |
| | Athens (A) | Limestone | | Talladega (B) | Talladega |
| | Madison (B) | Madison | | Sylacauga (A) | Talladega |
| | Huntsville (A) | Madison | | | |
| | Madison (A) | Madison | | | |
| | Marshall (B) | Marshall | | | |
| | Hartselle (A) | Morgan | | | |
| Pell City (A) | St. Clair | | | | |

Post-school Linkages Initiative

The Post-school Linkage Initiative is intended to establish and strengthen appropriate linkages among students, local adult services, and opportunities available through state agencies, communities, business and industry, and employment assistance. These linkages are accomplished, in part, through the provision of job coach services, dissemination of labor market needs, development of business/school partnerships, and existence of postsecondary networks. Post-school linkages are accomplished also through the coordination of services with special education and career/technical education. To promote this coordination, inservice training has been provided at individual school systems, regional meetings, and state conferences to teachers of special education and career/technical education about working together in the transition process. Furthermore, technical assistance documents have been prepared to assist in the continued coordination of these two secondary programs.

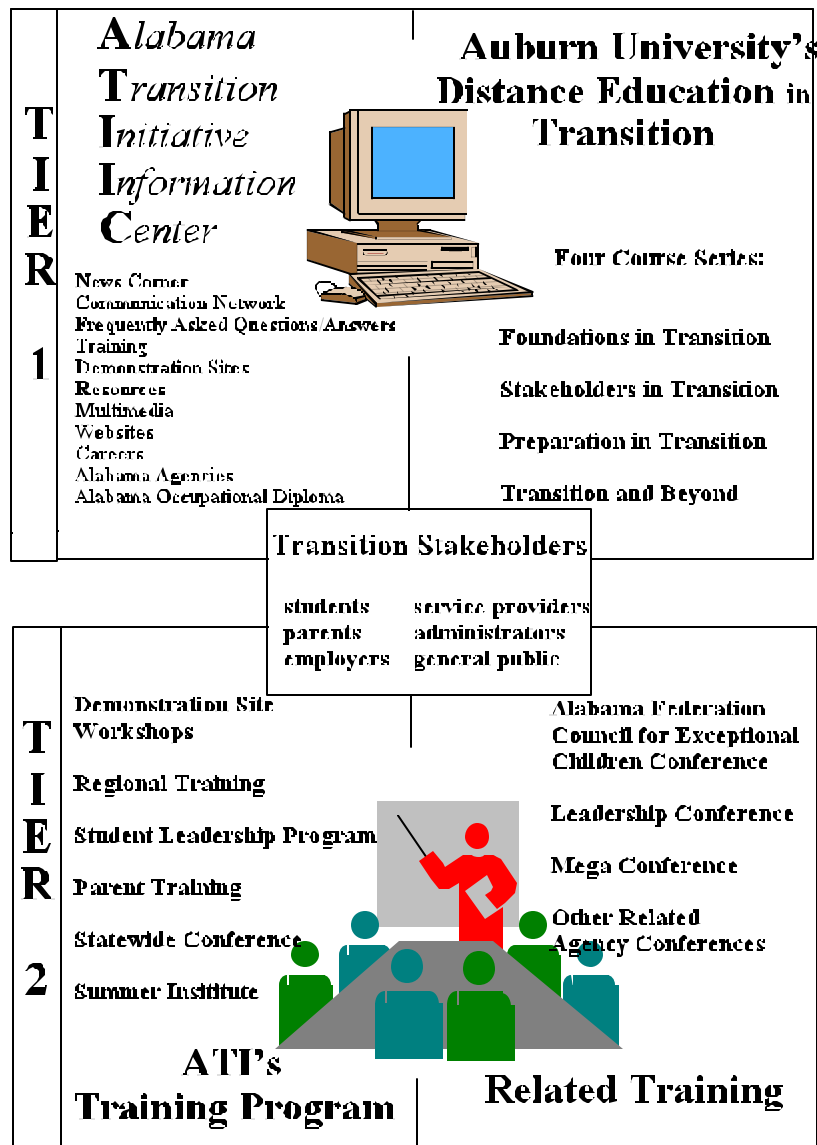
Training and Dissemination Initiative

The purpose of ATI's fourth initiative, Training and Dissemination, is to implement a comprehensive program to improve and increase the ability of all stakeholders in transition to promote and understand the transition process. This program consists of multiple training strategies, including inservice training, technical assistance, distance education, and materials development. Through these diverse learning approaches, an array of stakeholders is more effectively served (e.g., students with disabilities and families, project staff, interagency personnel, teachers and service providers, regional and local transition providers, employers, and the general public). To determine training and technical assistance needs, a 1996 statewide survey was conducted and a total of 1,098 transition stakeholders responded. These survey responses were used as a foundation for the development and refinement of a training model which depicts the organization, program delivery, and strategies, as well as the training content (see model).

The two-tiered *ATI Training Model* provides the infrastructure for the delivery of all ATI programs, through a combination of technology-based and traditional training. The primary features of the technology-based training of tier one was the Alabama Transition Initiative Information Center (ATIIC) and Auburn University's Distance Education in Transition program. Although ATTIC no longer exists as it did in its original state, the Auburn Transition Institute has recently launched an interactive Web site containing many of ATTIC's features (www.auburn.edu/rse/institute). In its early stages, ATTIC was complemented by a Distance Education Program in Transition at Auburn University (Rabren & Browning, 2001a). Three distance education courses on transition were developed and pilot tested with a total of 22 transition stakeholders in Alabama. Subsequently, one 10-week course entitled *Foundations in Transition* was implemented through the Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education at Auburn University. This course was jointly sponsored by Alabama's systems change grant, the Alabama Transition Initiative. The course was successfully completed by 66 transition stakeholders who were affiliated with ATI's Demonstration Sites. As of Fall 2002, these initial ATI training efforts have been expanded to include a

distance education master's degree in either special education or rehabilitation counseling (www.auburn.edu/rse/instruction/distance).

ATI Training Model



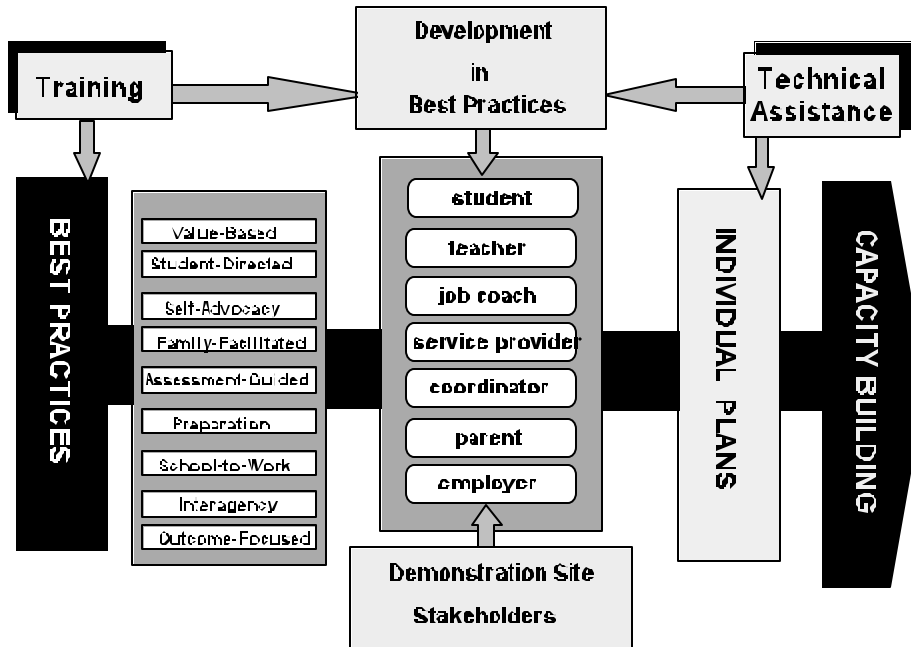
The second tier of the *ATI Training Model* involves the more traditional (or face-to-face) training such as inservice training sessions, workshops, and conferences. A significant transition training event held annually is the Alabama Transition Conference. This two and one-half day statewide event is held at the Auburn University Hotel and Dixon Conference Center in Auburn, Alabama. The purpose of this training conference, held since 1991, is to (a) increase the participants' knowledge of transition problems, issues, resources, and programs, especially as they pertain to Alabama; and (b) to expand and strengthen the network for all persons interested in Alabama's youth and young adults with disabilities who are in transition from school to work and community. The total number of participants attending the 12th annual Alabama Transition Conference exceeded 6,500. In the words of Dr. Andrew Halpern, a national leader, "*The Alabama Transition Conference is one of the country's premier programs of its kind.*"

For this second tier of traditional training, a program content model was developed which depicts training content, targeted persons for training, and training impact (Rabren & Browning, (2001b). First, this model includes a set of best practices identified in the literature, as well as through ATI's training needs assessment. For this model, these practices are classified under the generic headings of (a) student-directed, (b) self-advocacy, (c) family-facilitated (d) assessment guided, (e) preparation, (f) school-to-work, (g) interagency, and (h) outcome-focused. Each general category also includes specific best practices. Under preparation practices, for example, is functional curriculum and IEP transition planning (see program model).

The model's second element is the identification of the persons for whom the content is targeted (e.g., students, parents, teachers, adult service providers). The model assumes the need to match best practices to stakeholders in terms of their transition roles. This matching feature is in keeping with the notion that effective transition requires a coordinated set of activities, or in this case, activities based on a set of best practices aligned with stakeholder roles. Individualizing professional training in best practices to meet participant needs is especially relevant to team building at the local level. Also, the model's training impact dimension extends beyond knowledge and skills and recognizes that values and commitment are essential for systems change. Values drive the development of policies, procedures, and best practices to be employed. ATI's model acknowledges the importance of value-based practices and teaches that ". . . where best practices are the tools to be applied in our transition trade, best values should serve as a decision-making foundation for their application" (Browning, 1997, p. 69).

Over 4,500 stakeholders were trained through the first three years of the ATI Training Program. Also, transition stakeholders from all of Alabama's 67 counties were represented in one or more training sessions. The array of training participants included special education, general education, and career technical education teachers; rehabilitation counselors and job coaches; local school and state agency administrators; and parents and students.

Training Model for “Best Practices” in Transition



Finally, through the Program Evaluation System, information on the effectiveness of training programs was obtained on 2,236 trainees representing 110 individual programs. This evaluation system included an input instrument that contained information on training program objectives, methods and outcomes. With respect to outcomes, the participants at the conclusion of the program were introduced to four types of possible change that could result from training. They were then asked to indicate the degree of change (if any) they perceived as a result of their training program. The degree of change ranged from **no change**, **slight change**, **moderate change**, to **much change**.

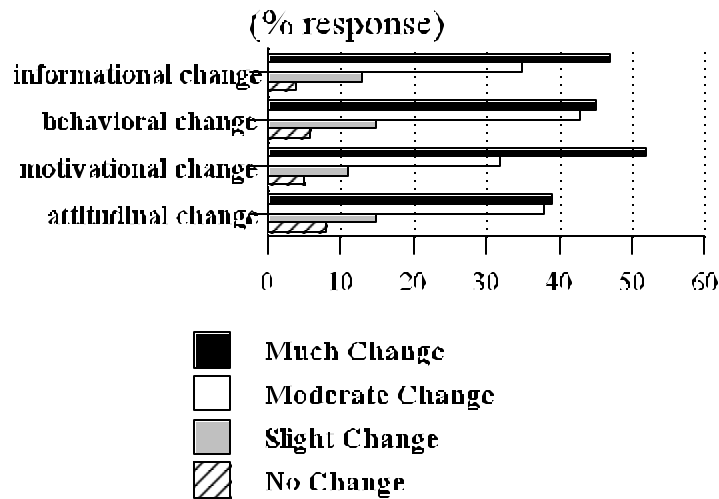
Informational Change: This term refers to the acquisition of professional knowledge. Informational change means an increase in your awareness and understanding of the subject matter of the training program.

Behavioral Change: This term refers to the acquisition of professional skills. Behavioral change means an increase in your ability to apply the subject matter of the training program.

Motivational Change: This term refers to the acquisition of professional incentive. Motivational change means an increase in your desire and drive to be involved with activities related to the subject matter of the training program.

Attitudinal Change: This term refers to the acquisition of appropriate professional values. Attitudinal change means a modification of your beliefs and perceptions related to the subject matter of the training program.

Type and Degree of Change



Presented here are the combined results from 2,236 training participants representing 110 training programs. Of the total responses across the four types of change (informational, behavioral, motivational, and attitudinal), 44% were for *Much Change*, 37% for *Moderate Change*, 13% for *Slight Change*, and 6% for *No Change*. With respect to each change area, 47%, 35%, 39%, and 52% of the participants indicated *Much Change* for informational, behavioral, motivational, and attitudinal, respectively.

Student Tracking Initiative

The fifth and final ATI Initiative is Student Tracking. The intent of this outcome-focused initiative is to (a) improve the transition planning process and related service programs at the local level, (b) serve as an accountability index for the state department regarding the performances (in-school and post-school) of its youth and young adults with disabilities, and (c) bridge Alabama's existing data collection systems currently being utilized by a variety of agencies. A blueprint for the Alabama Student Tracking System was initially articulated in the *Alabama Federation Council for Exceptional Children Journal* (Browning, Whetstone, Rabren, & Dunn, 1995).

The Alabama Student Tracking System consists of two similar instruments, an In-school Survey and a Post-school Survey, which are used to gather information about special education students at two points in time. The current In-school Survey consists of a demographic section, as well as 23 questions pertaining to (a) consumer satisfaction variables related to high school programs and experiences, (b) plans for the future, and (c) empowerment and self-determination. This survey instrument is administered to all eleventh grade students in special education. Students with disabilities who are in ungraded school placements are given the survey when they are 17 years old, prior to departing high school. The In-school Survey was developed and piloted with the **Post-school Survey form**. The current Post-school Survey is parallel to the In-school Survey in format, containing a demographic section and 27 corresponding questions, which can be divided into three general categories: (a) consumer satisfaction variables related to high school programs and experiences, (b) post-school vocational outcomes, and (c) quality of life indicators.

Currently, the student tracking program, which is housed in the Transition Institute, has tracking data on 10,325 of Alabama's high school students with disabilities: 7,373 of Alabama's 11th graders (in-school) and 2,952 former students one year out of school (post-school). For the school year 2001–2002, a total of 9,420 surveys were mailed; 4,211 (or 68%) of them were returned completed. For this most recent data collection phase, 135 and 98 Alabama high schools are represented for “in-school” and “post-school” surveys, respectively.

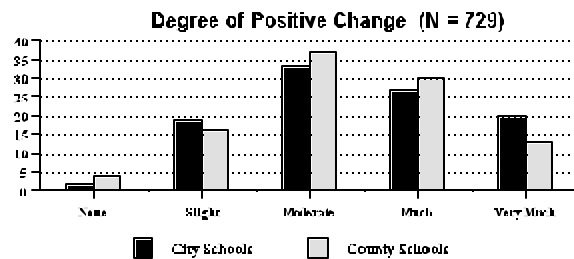
This cumulative data bank, which began in 1996, now serves as a research depository for programmatic research. As of this date, it has supplied data for three dissertations (Austin, 1999; Holder, 2000; Whetstone, 2002). Furthermore, two studies have been conducted and published. The first study reported a post-school outcome employment rate of 72% and 81% respectively, for a small sample of former transition students from rural and urban school systems (Dunn & Schumaker, 1997). A more recent study examined the employment status of 1,393 former students who received special education services and who exited from 37 of Alabama's 128 school systems between 1996–2000 (Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002). Using a hierarchical logistic regression analysis, there was an 87% probability that these students would be employed one year after high school if they held a job at the time they exited school. Other findings showed that the probability of the student having a job one year after high school was significantly greater if the student was male, had a learning disability, was from an urban school, and had a job at the time of school exit.

Statewide Study

A statewide study on Alabama's secondary schools for students with disabilities was conducted to determine among other things the impact of these five initiatives (Browning, Rabren, & Hall, 2000). In order to serve this purpose, survey instruments were developed to assess a set of content areas, including the high school program, the Alabama Occupational Diploma, the Alabama Transition Initiative, best practices in transition, stakeholders, professional development in transition, and student success. A total of 985 persons participated across seven target groups of transition stakeholders: (a) special education

coordinators (92), (b) secondary special education teachers (369), (c) career technical teachers (357), (d) job coaches (36), (e) rehabilitation counselors (48), (f) rehabilitation unit supervisors (11), and (g) parents of students with disabilities (72). The average return rate for these seven groups was 68%. In total, seven instruments yielded 203 variables. While there are items unique to each target group, there are also similar items across each of the seven instruments. The respondents represented 102 (80%) of Alabama's 128 city and county school systems.

The results of this study are reported in a 159 page document that provided an introduction to the nature of the study and over 100 easy-to-read summary narrative statements accompanied by bar graphs and 94 date-based tables ((Browning, Rabren, & Hall, 2000). One example of the findings of this study pertained to the stakeholders' perception of change. Specifically, all survey respondents were asked to indicate the degree their high school had shown *positive change* over the past several years in preparing its high school students for a successful transition. The number and percent of respondents ($N = 729$) who answered reported that the degree of positive change was *none* (26, 4 percent), *slight* (120, 16 percent), *moderate* (267, 37 percent), *much* (222, 30 percent), and *very much* (94, 13 percent).



Summary

This paper highlights many of the exciting and promising transition activities being implemented through the Alabama Transition Initiative. Since ATI's beginning in 1996, the five Initiatives discussed here have provided Alabama a framework to advance the nature and quality of its services and programs for its youth and young adults with disabilities. The successful implementation of ATI's five initiatives has been recognized by the National Transition Alliance for Youth with Disabilities as one of the most exemplary transition programs in the United States. This honor not only reflects the quality of services and best practices being implemented, but also demonstrates the commitment of *all of Alabama's transition stakeholders who are actively engaged in making a difference.*

Reference

- Austin, P. E. (1999). Post-school outcomes of Alabama students with disabilities. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.230-237). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849).
- Browning, P., Rabren, K., & Hall, G. (2001). The status of transition in Alabama: A statewide study. Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849).
- Browning, P., Whetstone, M., Rabren, K., & Dunn, C. (1995). An Alabama tracking system for youth and young adults with disabilities. *Alabama Council for Exceptional Children Journal*, 8 (1)1-7, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.221-229). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849).
- Browning, P. (1997). *Transition-in-action for youth and young adults with disabilities*. Montgomery AL: Well's Publishers.
- Dunn, C., & Schumaker, L. (1997). A follow-up study of former special education students from a rural and urban county school system. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 20 (1), Spring 1997, 43-54, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.238-246). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849).
- Holder, C. B. (2001). A critical analysis of student outcomes and "best practices" for Alabama's secondary special education transition-to-work initiative: Implications for policy and practice. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama.
- Rabren, K., & Browning, P. (2001a). Distance education program in transition. In P. Browning, C. Cox, K. Rabren, & S. Tew-Washburn (Eds.). *Transition in Alabama: Service, training and research*. (pp. 166-172). Transition Leadership Institute Rehabilitation, Auburn University.

Rabren, K., & Browning, P. (2001b). Enhancing best practices in transition. In P. Browning, C. Cox, K. Rabren, & S. Tew-Washburn (Eds.). *Transition in Alabama: Service, training and research*. (pp. 137-146). Transition Leadership Institute Rehabilitation, Auburn University.

Rabren, K., Dunn, C. & Chambers D. (2002). Predictors of post high school employment among young adults with disabilities. *Journal of Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 25, 25-40.

Whetstone, W., Jr. (2002). Alabama student outcomes and best practices in transition. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University.