ALSDE ANNOUNCES STRUCTURAL CHANGES FOR THE ALABAMA READING INITIATIVE
A Renewed Focus on K-3 Grade Reading Proficiency

Montgomery, Ala. – In an effort to bolster Alabama’s reading proficiency rates, the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) is making changes to the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI). Budget cuts in the flagship initiative have caused officials to renew their focus on making sure the ARI is being administered efficiently and is having a significant impact in the areas where it is needed most.

The allocation of resources, both financial and human, has been differentiated between two groups of schools: those with third grade reading scores on the 2015 ACT Aspire assessment above the state average of 35.11 percent proficiency (Tier 1) and those that are below (Tier 2).

Each Tier 1 school will receive approximately $18,296 and Tier 2 schools will receive approximately $76,000 for funding a full-time reading specialist. Additional funds are being provided to districts with decreased funding to assist during this transition year. In order to maintain this yearly allocation, schools must show progress in reading outcomes for students in third grade. Those schools falling into Tier 2 will receive prioritized service and will enter into a contract with the ALSDE relating to program design, implementation, performance indicators and expected outcomes.

Interim State Superintendent Dr. Philip Cleveland said being fiscally responsible and ensuring Alabama is receiving a viable return on its investment are essential – second only to making sure Alabama students read on grade level.

“Reading is the cornerstone to all other learning. In order to make sure we are preparing our young people to succeed, a premium has to be placed on the importance of reading comprehension in the early grades,” Cleveland said. “I believe the changes we are making to ARI now will yield significant gains in our student achievement levels.”

The renewed focus on kindergarten through third-grade (K-3) reading will streamline support to allow for local reading coaches at all Tier 2 schools with a third grade. That is the year in which the ability to read on grade level is first assessed using the ACT Aspire.

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Adjustments in regional support to districts and schools have taken place; however, important elements such as providing professional development for foundational reading, dyslexia, and other resources for educators remain intact.

In order to ensure student success, agreements from school systems to ensure commitment to the program and additional accountability measures are in place. Schools identified as Tier 2 must also agree to develop and implement an ARI professional development plan with ALSDE collaboration; use the funds allocated for approved activities; and ensure ARI-funded personnel spend at least 80% of the time performing duties as identified in the job description for ARI reading specialists.

Founded in 1998 with 16 pilot schools, the ARI has proved to be an effective tool to improve reading instruction in Alabama. It was once lauded by the United States Department of Education in a 24-page publication it produced entitled ALABAMA, How Reading Helps a State Make the Grade. After nearly 20 years of expanding literacy throughout the state, Cleveland said ARI continues to be a viable initiative; however, adjustments are needed to make sure the program is running at peak efficiency and is reaching the students who need it most first.

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