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GUIDANCE LETTER #2

What does the term “Statewide System of Support” mean under the Comprehensive Centers Program?

Background

Comprehensive Centers are charged with increasing and enhancing the capacity of states to help LEAs and schools achieve the goals of No Child Left Behind. The term “state” is construed broadly by the Comprehensive Centers Program to include not only the state educational agency (SEA) but also the construct identified by the state as its statewide system of support.

There is a recognition that the long-term success of No Child Left Behind requires a strong state role in LEA and school improvement. The number of Title I schools identified for improvement jumped by 50 percent in the 2004-05 school year, from about 6,000 schools to more than 9,000, or nearly one-fifth of all Title I schools. While this rate of growth in identified schools is unlikely to continue, the addition of tested grades and subjects as the new NCLB assessments are phased in, combined with rising annual proficiency thresholds on the path to 100-percent proficiency by 2013-14, will increase the difficulty of making adequate yearly progress and lead to additional identifications for improvement in subsequent years. Moreover, the sixth year of NCLB implementation will bring growing demand for the more comprehensive improvement measures required under corrective action and restructuring. Districts will be faced with the challenge of undertaking significant interventions at many schools while continuing to offer meaningful public school choice and supplemental educational service options to students and their parents. And, increasingly, those districts will themselves be identified for improvement and corrective action. No Child Left Behind anticipated these developments, and not only envisioned but required a strong state role in developing and delivering comprehensive leadership and technical assistance in the area of LEA and school improvement. Under the law, states must "establish a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement for local educational agencies and schools" receiving funds under Part A of Title I. More specifically, the law requires states to create school support teams to provide expert advice and other assistance to help LEAs and schools analyze their improvement needs and develop and implement appropriate plans to meet those needs. In addition, states are responsible for carrying out comprehensive and effective improvement measures for LEAs that have been identified for improvement and corrective action.

The Closing Date Notice for the program competition reflects this charge very specifically under Priority 4 (Regional Technical Assistance Activities):

“To meet this priority, the work of the proposed Regional Centers must involve activities that address state technical assistance needs by--

(d) assisting state efforts to build *statewide systems of support* for districts and schools in need of improvement, partly by leveraging the resources of Content Centers and other sources of scientifically-based education research and high-quality technical assistance on behalf of state and district clients...”

What does the term “Statewide System of Support” mean under the Comprehensive Centers Program?

First, the concept of a statewide system of support under the Comprehensive Centers Program must be consistent with the language included in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in the reauthorization of ESEA Title I. States are required to establish a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement for local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools receiving Title I funds.

According to NCLB the statewide system of support must include the following--

- The state’s school support teams assigned to work in or with schools in improvement;
- Provision of support as determined by the state educational agency to be necessary and available to school support teams;
- Distinguished teachers and principals from Title I schools that have been especially successful in improving academic achievement (Note: distinguished teachers and principals are often members of the school support teams); and
- Additional approaches such as providing assistance through institutions of higher education or educational service agencies.

However, the concept under the Comprehensive Centers Program needs to go beyond this statutory description in the following two ways. First, the concept needs to be grounded in a common-sense acknowledgement of the words included in the term “statewide system of support”, namely “system” and “support.” According to *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* a system is “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole.” Therefore, a statewide system of support must have a coherent design for both identifying/creating system elements and coordinating the effective and efficient use of those elements to accomplish the system of support’s purpose. In addition a system should be designed to last for a sufficient period to justify the investment made to create and maintain it. The most appropriate meaning of the word support in this context is probably (again, from *Webster’s*) “to hold up or serve as a foundation or prop for....” This recognizes that the purpose of the statewide system of support is to buttress and improve the efforts LEAs and schools are making to increase educational achievement for every student. There is also the sense of a continuing relationship (i.e., serve as a foundation), implying that the assistance is not a one-time occurrence.

The second extension relates to the nature of the statewide system of support. The statutory description focuses primarily on human resources, that is, staff coming from SEAs, educational service agencies, schools, and institutions of higher education. The Comprehensive Centers Program recognizes that, in addition, a statewide system of support needs to include components of an SEA's infrastructure (e.g., information management systems and data systems integrated to support all parts of the SEA), a state's technology network (e.g., online training and networking, Web-based resources), a state's communication system to facilitate improvement efforts and use evidence of success to advocate improvement, and a state's sets of policies and guidance related to all aspects of education governance, management, and instruction and supportive of an integrated statewide system of support. Each of these can be helpful to LEAs and schools, and all can be part of the work Comprehensive Centers do with SEAs.

All states are required to have statewide systems of support that focus on helping LEAs and schools in need of improvement. At this time, however, states are in various stages of development ranging from very rudimentary systems to highly developed systems. . Given the variation in these systems, it is the job of the Comprehensive Centers Program to assist states in developing or enhancing their statewide systems of support in order to build SEAs' capacity to help LEAs and schools achieve the goals of No Child Left Behind.

What activities do elements of the statewide system of support engage in, what services do elements of the statewide system of support provide?

At ED's request Westat Inc. recently prepared a set of profiles of states' assistance efforts; activities and services performed by elements of a statewide system of support can be extrapolated from these profiles. These include, but are not limited to:

- Consulting across all aspects of management, organization, and instruction as it relates to the development and enhancement of statewide systems of support;
- Advising on the reallocation of resources to better support improvement efforts;
- Providing tools and training to help schools and districts diagnose areas of greatest need, including the analysis of data (student level and other) for decisionmaking;
- Assisting in the development of improvement plans, including the identification of resources needed for plan implementation;
- Serving as the "critical friend" providing objective feedback on existing conditions and the process of effecting changes;
- Developing repositories of information and tools related to effective or promising practices; and
- Advising on the selection of training and resources districts and schools should consider using.

The full report can be found at:

http://www.centerforcsri.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=277&Itemid=85