

How States Access TA from ED-funded Centers October, 2014

The purpose of this focus group was to gather information from State Education Agency staff involved with the State Personnel Development Grants (SPDG) about how they access technical assistance (TA) from centers funded by the US Department of Education. The focus group took place at a national meeting of Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) SPDG grantees held in Washington DC in October, 2014.

TACC staff, in collaboration with OSEP's SPDG Program Lead, generated a pool of potential focus group participants from the SPDG meeting registration list. Factors such as grantee title/position, state geographic location, and SPP/APR determination status were used to narrow the pool to ten focus group invitees. Ultimately seven invitees participated in the focus group. All were SPDG Directors or had similar roles on their state's SPDG.

The focus group began with introductions and a review of the TA&D "Placemat" (visual representation of TA providers funded by the US Department of Education). Participants were asked if they were familiar with the Placemat and whether they had received TA from centers listed on the Placemat. Half indicated that they were familiar with the Placemat. The majority of participants (5 out of 7) said they had received TA from one or more of the OSEP-funded TA&D Centers listed on the Placemat. Fewer participants said that they had received TA from Comprehensive Centers, Regional Educational Laboratories, or Equity Assistance Centers. Several said that they knew very little about the TA centers funded outside of OSEP.

Following this discussion, three questions were posed to participants:

- 1. How did you access the TA you received from centers on the placemat?***
- 2. What information would make it easier for you to connect with TA centers?***
- 3. What should TA centers know about your state?***

This document outlines the main themes that emerged under each focus group question. Additional themes that emerged as part of the discussion are also included in the document, as well as common challenges to accessing TA, and finally, topics for future discussion.

Question 1: How did you access the TA you received from centers on the placemat?

Focus group participants described a variety of informal and formal ways that they accessed technical assistance from TA Centers on the placemat. For the purposes of this analysis, they will be discussed in terms of outreach and application.

1.1 - Outreach:

The term “outreach” is being used to describe instances where States or TA Centers have initiated a TA relationship without engaging in a formal application or contractual bidding process. Focus group participants described instances in which their state reached out to a TA Center for support and instances when a TA Center offered to support the state without an explicit request for support. Many participants described experience with both types of outreach. Several participants noted occasions when their state initiated contact with a TA Center, based on their need for support in that Center’s area of expertise. One participant mentioned inviting a TA Center into their state to work with an existing group outside of the state agency. Another mentioned having an initiative already in place, and then reaching out to a TA Center for assistance. Another mentioned extensively using resources on a TA Center’s website.

One participant described an instance where a TA Center approached them, and as a result of that interaction, the State formalized the relationship with the TA Center through their SPDG application.

1.2 - Application:

When TA Centers establish an application process for technical assistance, it is usually designed to establish an “intensive/sustained” relationship between the TA Center and the TA recipient. OSEP describes intensive TA in this way:

Technical assistance (TA) services are often provided on-site and require a stable, on-going relationship between the TA Center staff and the TA recipient. TA services are defined as negotiated series of activities designed to reach a valued outcome. This category of TA should result in changes to policy, program, practice, or operations that support increased recipient capacity and/or improved outcomes at one or more systems levels.

A number of focus group participants described seeking this kind of support from a TA Center through an application process. Several noted that their applications were successful and resulted in beneficial relationships with TA Centers.

... it was kind of fortunate, because they were soliciting states to do [a specific TA focus], and that was something we were interested in, so it was just a nice fit, and we're going to start working with them.

[TA Center staff] was just incredibly helpful to us, because we didn't know what we were doing, if you want to know the truth. It was much harder than we thought, than we ever knew what we were getting into.

One participant noted that although their application for TA was successful, their state was unable to maintain an intensive relationship with the TA Center.

We applied for intensive TA with them originally, and were accepted, but we were not in a position at that time to really do all the things that they were doing with the intensive states, so we kind of went on an inactive status...

1.3 - Application-related concerns:

As focus group participants discussed their experiences in applying for TA, several related concerns emerged. These concerns are described below.

1.3a - Notice of the availability of TA applications:

A number of focus group participants revealed that they had concerns about how and when states were notified of the availability of a TA Center's application and who received the invitation within their agency. Some suggested that it was not enough to send an invitation to state agency leadership, as the notice might not funnel down within the agency. Another participant said that the timing of the invitation to apply for TA affected their ability to submit an application.

So what I don't know is... if you're going to apply [for TA], who does that [invitation] go to? It's kind of like in school districts. As an example, we are required to send everything to our superintendents, but then if we do that, we also have principal lists and stuff, and we can start going down deeper to the people that we know really need to get the information.

The challenge for us is who gets it [invitation to apply]. A lot of things don't cross my desk. It might come to our commissioner. It might go to a different consultant in my bureau. If it doesn't come across my desk, I don't know about it. So are there other strategies we can use within our internal state system, or more broadly, that allows us all to kind of be on the same page with that?

1.3b - Competition

A number of focus group participants questioned whether an application process was a suitable approach for selecting states to receive TA. One suggested that if the TA content was designed to meet states' needs, it should be made available to any state with that need. Another suggested that the application process could actually be a deterrent to states seeking needed TA.

I know that sometimes you have to do a competition, but sometimes we kind of think, well, it shouldn't be a competition. If it's a good thing for people to do, then everybody should have access to it.

... some of the competitions are a little strenuous for what you're actually going to end up getting, and that's a real disincentive.

1.3c - Consequences of unsuccessful applications:

It was also noted in this discussion that when invitations to apply for TA were issued to State leadership who then funneled them to staff to complete, it calls attention to unmet needs and can put staff in an uncomfortable position, particularly if the application is unsuccessful. Often there is neither staff capacity (in terms of time or expertise), nor resources to address these unmet needs without the support of an external TA provider.

...when an invitation goes to the commissioner, it goes through all the leadership, and then it gets to my desk, and then we apply and we don't get it, it's sometimes like, whew, I would have just wished this hadn't come my way, because then you've brought it to everybody's attention. And no matter what you said why you don't get it, you still didn't get it. And it's just becoming more apparent. I don't know how to fix that, and I don't know whether other people have that same experience, but it puts you in a funny position within the Department.

1.4 - The importance of relationships to TA access

Another theme that emerged when talking to focus group participants about how their states access TA was the importance they placed on trusted, valued, and often long-standing relationships with TA providers. Throughout the discussion, many TA centers and staff members were mentioned fondly and by name. A few examples are noted below. Names of specific TA centers and staff have been removed to ensure participant confidentiality.

I can't say enough for our [Regional Resource Center name]. We will so miss that, and that connection we had with those people, knowing us and knowing about our state and how we operate and what our initiatives are.

I have worked with [TA provider name] for over 12 years now from the [TA Center name], which is really good to have that longstanding kind of relationship with the center.

Over the years, we've used the same places and have the same respect for the work through [multiple TA Center names], and then also, we have a wonderful PTI in our state here.

Of course, we worked with the [TA Center name] all last year, as a targeted state, and the two people that were assigned to our state were incredibly helpful. [TA Provider names] were just incredibly helpful to us. . .

Question 2: What information would make it easier for you to connect with TA Centers? In what ways would it be easiest for you to get that information?

2.1 Key Information for TA Recipients:

The information participants noted as most important to them in seeking TA included:

- what TA/content is being offered
- how to apply
- what is required of TA recipients
- the duration of the TA
- the intensity/level of support of the services (general, targeted, intensive TA)

Knowing in advance how specialized the TA will be would enable recipients to better gauge how well the TA fits their needs. One person articulated, “How can we decipher whether or not it’s worth our effort to apply for it or attempt to access it?”

There's always some kind of community of practice, a webinar, a teleconference, whatever it is, but as a user on the other end, it's exciting to know those are out there and I can go touch base, but I don't know at what tiered level that conversation is going to be around, and that would be very helpful, because we've sat on many of those, and it's like, "Oh, this is kind of like a basic Tier 1. We don't really need that. We need something targeted or more intensive." So it would be nice if those conversations could be organized that way and structured so we could know. Otherwise, sometimes we'll have a whole team of people sit around and listen, spend an hour, and it's wasted time.

And if the audience is clearly defined—so if I know, all right, this is who this webinar, this conversation, this community of practice is targeted for, then we'd be better able to decide whether it's a good thing for us to join. Sometimes we shy off because I just can't sit through another call, another webinar on the same topic.

2.2 How are TA Opportunities Disseminated?

In addition, participants talked about wanting to know how TA opportunities are being disseminated. One issue a few participants have faced is that notices about TA do not always go to the people who would be involved in the work.

...They said, "Well, 2 years ago we sent out this application." Well, it never got to me, and sometimes they get to a level, and it doesn't always filter down to those of us who do the work. There are higher-ups who are political, and they do what they do, and then in the building where I work, it's all of the program work. It probably came across my desk, but I don't remember that. A lot of things don't cross my desk. It might come to our commissioner. It might go to a different consultant in my bureau. If it doesn't come across my desk, I don't know about it, so are there other strategies we can use within our internal state system, or more broadly, that allows us all to kind of be on the same page with that.

One way participants have found out about TA opportunities is through presentations at conferences—participants specifically noted that it has been helpful to learn from centers during the OSEP Project Director's Conference. Another method was through email blasts such as notifications sent out by the IRIS Center. One person explained that everyone in their office is asked to join center distribution lists so that announcements don't fall through the cracks. A couple of participants emphasized the importance of personal relationships in connecting with TA opportunities—whether it be through their Regional Resource Center liaison, or through direct acquaintance with TA providers. One person noted that these relationships helped develop “a common language and common understanding.”

2.3 Methods for Receiving Information About TA

When asked the ways in which participants would like to receive information, many talked about the need for a central hub that offers an organized, searchable format. Suggestions included an online directory, web platform and an app. A centralized place would prevent states from having to visit individual websites and could be continually updated.

I think I could see this as an online directory, where it would give, not an extensive description of what the center does, you know, how you access their services, that sort of thing, and then click on the link to their website, because it's time-consuming to go out to all of these different websites, if you can just have it all there together and be able to—and I like the way this is organized, by topic areas. So, if I was looking for data, something to help with data, I could just go to the section of the directory for data and see what was there.

Do you have the ability to build an app? Because everybody walks around with their—that would be easy to use, so it captures all the data. It keeps it on, and you could search by what you input that you need. Data technical assistance. Type in "data" and it's going to pop up.

Question 3: What should TA centers know about your state?

Participants discussed the importance of TA centers knowing the context within their state—for example, looking at a state's SPP/APR to learn what the state is focusing on, and then gaining an understanding of the state system that is in place—what connections exist to share resources across the state.

At some point, all of us have to start figuring out how we best connect and share resources, and not just, "Well, you go here for this one, and go here for this one." Subsequently, how do they all work together? So who are you working with, and how do we collaborate and build on that, and not to build all these separate things?

However, participants also commented that because states are uniquely different, it is difficult to fully understand state context without having a relationship with the state. Relationships (through personal connections or an assigned state liaison) enable not only a clearer understanding of the context but a historical perspective on how the state has evolved over time.

Recommendations

1. **Online directory:** In order to increase state awareness of TA opportunities, OSEP should consider (with TACC's assistance) creating an online hub/directory. Information from each TA provider would be presented in a structured format using standardized terms, making it easy for users to understand. This electronic one-stop shop could include different entry points to access TA information—through searching by content area, by state, or through a master calendar of TA applications. Within each search path, users could refine their search by criteria such as level of TA and target audience. The directory could be updated on an annual basis and could be made an extension of the Placemat or a separate online resource.
2. **Categorizing TA Content:** State staff is frequently pressed for time, and may be hesitant to participate in TA events because they don't know enough about the content being delivered, or they spend time in TA that does not meet their needs. It would be beneficial to states, and others, if TA centers (with TACC's assistance) could agree on a way to categorize their TA.

A number of categorization strategies could be considered, including depth of content of TA (awareness - skills), stage of implementation (exploration – full implementation), level of staff expertise (novice – expert) or by target audience (state, district, local).

3. **Support to states:** States often spend considerable time, thought and effort applying for TA and may not be accepted because they lack “readiness” or because they are not a good fit for a TA center. However states may still have significant needs. TA centers should consider ways to support these states—through pointing them to other resources. For example, a state that applies but is not accepted for intensive TA may be able to benefit from targeted TA services/resources that would help prepare the TA center for intensive TA. OSEP could consider writing RFPs in a way that would allow TA centers to accept states gradually over time. This would enable the TA center to learn from previous experiences and in certain cases, TA centers could accept states they formerly rejected at a point when both the center and the state are in a better position to work together.