

Intensive Technical Assistance Summary of Focus Group Results

July 22, 2014

The purpose of this focus group was to explore what intensive TA looks like among various centers in the TA&D Network, to hear in-depth description of current practices and challenges, and to encourage the exchange of ideas among participants from different TA centers. The information will be used to inform TACC of ideas for future topics of discussion, to provide OSEP with a better understanding of how to support TA centers, and how better to provide support to states in building capacity. In addition, OSEP is interested in information that will guide their decisions in balancing support to states at varying levels of “readiness” for TA.

TACC selected participants by contacting TA&D centers that have been charged with providing intensive TA. Out of the 10 centers contacted, nine participated. One center had two representatives making 10 participants in total. The group met for one hour during a break at the 2014 OSEP Project Directors’ Conference.

We would like to say a special thanks to our participants for their thoughtful input and for their time in the review of this document:

Marshall Peter, *Center on Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE)*

Mary Brownell, *Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform (CEEDAR) Center*

Amy McCart, *Center on Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT)*

Christina Kasprzak, *Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center*

Joy Markowitz, *IDEA Data Center (IDC)*

Kathleen Hebbeler, *IDEA Center for Early Childhood Data Systems (DaSy)*

Rebecca Zumeta, *National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII)*

Barbara Sims, *State Implementation and Scaling Up of Evidence-based Practices Center (SISEP)*

Wayne Sailor, *Center on Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT)*

Jeffri Brookfield, *Early Childhood Personnel Center (ECPC)*

Two questions were posed to participants:

- 1. How does your center operationally define the intensive TA it provides?*
- 2. We are interested in hearing about the various ways in which you select TA recipients. What are the processes you use?*

This document outlines the main themes that emerged during that session. Additional themes that emerged as part of the discussion are included in the document, as well as common challenges to providing intensive TA, and topics for future discussion.

Question 1: How does your Center operationally define the intensive technical assistance it provides?

A number of participants noted that the nature of the intensive TA is often guided by OSEP's definition provided in the Request for Proposals (RFP) for their Center. In addition, a number of other dimensions of intensive TA emerged from the discussion.

1.1 - Partnership Agreement:

Many participants described their intensive technical assistance as a partnership between their center and the TA recipient. A majority have written agreements with their TA recipients. Frequently mentioned contents of these agreements included plans, based on the recipient's goals or desired outcomes; and expectations, both of the center and of the recipients in terms of participation and the allocation of resources. Two participants mentioned including exit criteria in their centers' written agreements. It was recommended that written agreements be negotiated between the center and the TA recipient. Several mentioned that their agreements were signed documents. The primary benefit of having written partnership agreements was to establish a shared understanding between the center and the recipient at the onset of the technical assistance, and to communicate that understanding to new staff in the likely event that the TA recipient has staff turnover. One participant mentioned using the written agreement as a means to hold all partners in the TA to their commitments. One participant noted that their center renewed its TA agreements annually. Another participant uses their center's written agreements to evaluate the progress of their TA.

... in our center, an approach we are really new to, begins with a very clearly articulated outcome, in other words, this is where we are going, and then a negotiated plan that increases the likelihood greatly, that you are going to end up at that outcome.

We sign contracts that essentially clearly specify what it is that is required from the state to be a part of and what it is that they can expect from us.

1.2 - Time and Resources:

A number of participants noted “time” as a defining feature of the intensive technical assistance provided by their center. Most mentioned one-to-one multi-year partnerships with TA recipients, primarily states and districts. One participant suggested that state-level Systems Change, the type of TA that their center provided, could require up to 7 or 8 years. Another participant noted that the time required for intensive TA depends on the complexity of the change; the more complex and multi-layered the change, the longer it will take. One participant noted that the TA their center provided spanned multiple years, but was conducted with groups of states on a topic of mutual interest. A recipient representing a new center questioned whether TA could be considered “intensive” if it was provided during a 3-month period of time, or if it was only considered intensive TA if it was provided over multiple years. Two participants noted that the frequency of their intensive TA included monthly or bi-monthly meetings, often on site.

.. there's some variation, but I think that partnership over time, over what we think of as probably multiple years with shared goals around sort of a plan.

It's really an ongoing multiyear relationship, and it includes both training and coaching support to help the implementation happen.

One of the things that's really challenging that I don't think we talk enough about, how long you stay to get something in place and give it some chance of sustaining depends on how complex the change is.

Related to the commitment of time, focus group participants also suggested that resource allocation was another dimension of intensive TA. Several noted that intensive TA requires more intensive resources and that resources to support the TA should be committed by both the centers and the TA recipients. Two participants said their centers helped identify other resources to support their TA recipients, when the needed resources fell outside their center’s work scope or area of expertise. Two centers mentioned a shortage of resources for intensive TA.

We will work harder and expend more resources with the intensive states that we are working with.

And it may include in fact more extensive resources. We may go in more often. We may provide facilitation for planning. We may identify technical resources outside of the system or area of expertise.

1.3 - Systems Development/Change:

Another dimension of intensive TA frequently mentioned by participants was its emphasis on systems development or systems change. Focus group participants noted variations in the systems component or systems-level at which they targeted their TA. Most, however, said their intensive TA addressed multiple levels or components of the education system. Several mentioned that their intensive TA required the participation of both general and special education. A number of participants also noted that their centers' intensive TA involved changing both the practices of individuals and systems components.

We can help schools get terrific, but if the district isn't fully supportive, fully understanding, it has the capacity to begin to scale up and extend, then in my opinion, probably not a worthwhile expenditure.

The first few months is more teaching and directing, probably, but after about 6 months, it is more guiding and prompting, and it is all focused on systems change and systems development.

... we will be bringing some core knowledge around what it means to be a high-quality system, and they may look at one or more components of their system. They may look at their outcome measurements again, but they also may look at one of their other components in their system in finance or personnel...

1.4 - Additional Themes:

1.4a - Containing the TA:

The need to establish boundaries around the intensive TA also emerged as a theme during the focus group discussion. Promoting core knowledge, frameworks, recommended practices, specific topics, or core systems components were each mentioned as a way to put parameters around the intensive TA. One participant noted the importance of being able to “contain” the work in order to achieve desired outcomes. Another participant described it as “keeping those eyes on the prize of what we are trying to accomplish.” One participant noted that their center is working to identify the core components of a high quality system and will then work with states to improve one or more of the components.

So I think really keeping a frame around what we are here to do and what we are here to help you with and maybe what we're not here to do and perhaps directing them to resources in other places that can help them with those things but not losing sight of what we are trying to accomplish...

We've gone through a very intentional process of landing on a topic around which there was a high level of interest, and then identified a group of states who were interested in making a concerted effort over the course of a couple of years to work on that topic.

1.4b - Exiting Intensive TA:

Related to establishing boundaries around the intensive TA was the need to establish some type of exit strategy or criteria to help determine when to end the TA. This is important in cases when the goal has been met as well as when the partnership is not working.

What we haven't done yet but we're quickly approaching is to define the fading out and exit process . . .

We felt like we needed to do what states expected, and we really had trouble with an exit strategy. We couldn't figure out how we could leave and have everything go [bad] as soon as we were gone.

. . . and we provided them with a lot and had to look at it and say, "Wait a minute. How much time am I going to spend on this one before we say, you know what, this isn't going to work out, and we need to get somebody who is more committed to getting to this same end?"

Question 2: We are interested in hearing about the various ways in which you select TA recipients. What are the processes you use?

The main responses that emerged from this question were: use of a Request for Proposal/application, having defined selection criteria, and undergoing a selection process.

2.1 - RFP/Application:

The majority of participants described using an application or Request for Proposal in order to select TA recipients. The applications range from modest to rigorous but include questions for applicants to answer that help the TA centers gauge whether or not the applicant meets the centers' criteria.

We use a very modest RFP...it probably takes the state maybe a half hour or an hour to complete it. It actually states what are going to be the components of our Technical Assistance agreements, so that people know what it is that we are going to expect of them and what they can expect from us, and then we ask them three or four open-ended questions. And then Center staff evaluate the applications that we get and make a choice.

We have a pretty rigorous process for being selected. We have these criteria that you have to meet. We have rubrics for ratings, the applications when they come in. We have an online application and we have a team of reviewers.

2.2 - Selection criteria:

Participants talked about the criteria their centers look for TA recipients to meet. Examples are leadership, involvement of general education and special education, population size, level of engagement, enthusiasm, and history of statewide implementation. Many centers mentioned using rubrics to evaluate applicants on the criteria. One center mentioned that if they have more applicants than they can work with, they look for diversity across states in selecting recipients.

One point that was discussed as crucial by a few centers was the level of commitment of the recipient.

Commitment across agencies is part of our application process – they fill out information about their states across-agency partnership. They have to bring things to the table including FTE commitment – it’s a way of engaging commitment.

Another critical piece identified by many participants was the commitment and leadership of general education. However, many participants viewed this as a challenge. A few explained that there is confusion about what special education TA centers do and suggested that there is a need for better communication about TA work, and for advocacy to help general educators see that special education work can help all children.

[There are] no power brokers that can make people pay attention to these kids. I don’t think [general ed] realizes that much of what we would do would help a lot of children who are not doing well in school – That’s the sea change that needs to occur.

Are we really saying that if the adults in the room can’t get their act together, we are not going to help the kids in their school? How do you balance the leveraging point with the relationship? It’s a resource issue—there isn’t enough money to help everyone.

2.3 - Process:

In addition to an application, participants mentioned gathering information on potential recipients through conducting site visits, structured interviews, and “get-to-know-you” calls. It may be an “exploration process” that takes place over time.

Two centers mentioned receiving recommendations of TA recipients from OSEP, RRCs, other TA centers, or states recommending districts.

2.4 - Additional Themes:

Other themes that emerged during the discussion of Question 2 included the readiness of TA recipients to engage in intensive TA, the length of time intensive TA requires, and accountability.

2.4a - Readiness:

Participants mentioned that while readiness is a factor they consider during the selection process, they also struggle in thinking about how best to support recipients who may not be “ready.” Participants discussed whether or not it’s possible to provide different types of intensive TA depending on where recipients are in their readiness, or to provide targeted TA until the center is more ready. One participant suggested that training may be a solution for working with centers that can’t provide a high resource commitment but have passion and leadership. Another explained that his/her center has learned from experience over time and that the center could be more efficient if it were possible to take on more districts over time through a rolling basis.

Haven’t gotten it figured out totally. We really want to work with the higher performers further out [in order for them] to be models, and we need to bring the folks struggling up, so trying to offer different types of TA.

Helping [TA recipients] get ready at the same time as we’re evaluating their commitment. Better resource allocation – not throwing away money if not a good fit.

Anyone who applied that didn’t get intensive TA was put in targeted – we’ve made one visit to those states. Sometimes states pay for us to come back again, set goals, work with them from afar. Getting ideas about states that are more ready than aren’t. We tell them issues they need to resolve first –for intensive TA.”

A related issue raised was how much time and resources should be invested in figuring out the “fit” of TA recipients. Participants discussed the difficulty in being able to gauge the level of commitment of recipients through brief site visits and applications.

This is where I feel like we could really use some support. Should we insist that you have to have a first meeting where you bring the right people to the table? That is a resource burden because that could be a \$10,000 meeting to bring the right people to the table.

Our center is considering saying, “We will take you for up to 90 days. If these things aren’t done, then we will decide if this is a good fit.” People tell you what they want you to hear in those intake interviews – hard to fully understand in a couple of visits.

2.4b - How long should intensive TA be?

While responding to question 2, participants revisited the topic of how much time intensive TA requires—could you work with a recipient for a few months, 1-2 years, or for the duration of a center? Many suggested that it varies—depending on where the recipient is in terms of readiness or engagement, and also depending on the complexity of the work (e.g. changing practice/system change requires time). A few participants mentioned that it is important to set up expectations at the beginning as part of a partnership agreement—this allows exiting in “a comfortable way” should the recipient not meet the requirements. Along the same lines, one participant discussed developing “capacity measures” the recipient is expected to reach. That TA center will “fade out” the intensive TA when there is evidence that the recipient has maintained a defined percentage level for each measure for a certain period of time. Several participants acknowledged that concluding intensive TA within the limitations of a center’s funding period is a challenge.

There is a problem with not being able to turn our back on providing intensive TA. As an OSEP grant recipient, it is sort of incumbent on us to do everything at once even if we are building as we are trying to fly. Yet meeting people where they are—they may have great enthusiasm and low skill, or they may have less enthusiasm and high skill, and how does that relate to the kind of technical assistance and the staying-in part we are willing to do?

We’re kind of straddling the line between what we know research tells us, the amount of resources and time it takes to really result in transformation and practice change, and being held accountable for demonstrating that in a center preparing for a 3 plus 2 as opposed to 6 to 8 years.

2.4c - Accountability

Participants talked about the evaluation of their TA efforts and mechanisms for keeping states accountable for their work. Evaluation data serves as evidence of both the TA recipient’s progress as well as the TA center’s progress. One participant pointed out that when intensive TA recipients are grouped together (to address like needs), the recipients often hold each other accountable for making progress. The data can show “what it is exactly that [TA recipients] are doing and how they are changing.” Participants noted the importance of having commitment on the part of TA recipients to share data with them.

[There is] an understanding with [TA recipients] that we really need to be able to demonstrate that they are performing in order to ensure that we continue to be funded, and so we in this new group have developed a quarterly reporting format that is nested in our conceptual framework for what a high-performing

system looks like and married to a goal attainment scale. So we have a new way that we are approaching accountability.

Committed to doing the evaluation and then sharing it with you - [TA recipients] should really want that...that it be both formative and are they making the progress? And then sharing it with you as opposed to it being a separate thing. That evaluation is their evaluation of their own progress, and maybe that is part of your demonstration of your investment. When they don't make that commitment, boy, it's really hard.

Recommendations

3.1 – Selection

A clearly articulated and transparent application or nomination process should be developed for initially selecting intensive TA recipients (when TA Centers are not directed by OSEP to work with specified recipients). New TA Centers should consider gradually selecting TA recipients over time in order to refine their selection criteria, based on lessons-learned from early intensive TA efforts.

3.1a Selection Criteria

The selection process should include criteria for determining whether a TA recipient is ready to benefit from the intensive TA. Criteria mentioned during the focus group include:

- Assurances that TA recipient leadership understands the staff time and resource commitments it will be expected to make, and has agreed to honor these commitments.
- The TA recipient has a history of other successful TA efforts.
- Alignment of the intensive TA content with other initiatives supported by the TA recipient.

3.1b. Creating Readiness

If a TA Center determines that an applicant for intensive TA is not ready to benefit from the TA (based on its selection criteria), the TA Center should clearly articulate steps the applicant could take to become ready. TA Centers may also wish to develop targeted TA opportunities to help unsuccessful applicants build readiness.

For TA Centers that are directed by OSEP to work intensively with specific TA recipients, it may be helpful for TA Centers to direct recipients to products and services to build readiness. OSEP should explore which products and services are most effective for building readiness and consider what additional time readiness-building might require.

3.2 Partnership Agreements

TA&D Centers providing intensive TA should establish written partnership agreements with intensive TA recipients at the beginning of the TA partnership. These agreements should be reviewed at least annually and should include:

- Goals of the intensive TA and how often progress toward those goals will be measured and evaluated;
- Resources to be dedicated by both the TA Center and the TA recipient;
- Expectations for participation;
- Critical components of the intensive TA to be provided;
- Plans for TA recipient capacity building/expansion of TA; and
- Criteria for determining when the intensive TA will end.

3.3 Duration of Intensive TA

When developing new TA Center priorities, OSEP should consider the relationship between the complexity of change that a TA Center is being asked to support and the amount of time and resources needed for the intensive TA to achieve the desired result. This complexity may have several dimensions such as the numbers and types of partners involved or the levels or components of the system addressed.

3.4 Creating Efficiencies

Focus group participants repeatedly mentioned the substantial amount of staff time and resources necessary to provide individualized intensive TA. Grouping TA recipients with similar needs was identified as one way to increase the efficiency of intensive TA. TA Centers should continue to seek opportunities to create intensive TA efficiencies.

3.5 Clearly Articulate Parameters of Intensive TA

A number of focus group participants noted that their centers had established “core components” of the system they would address or used a framework to set parameters for their intensive TA. OSEP should encourage TA centers to establish and refine a way to delineate their intensive TA during their first year of operation if one is not clearly articulated in their application.

3.6 Collaborate to Ensure the Success of Intensive TA

Related to 3.5 above, focus group participants noted that intensive TA recipients frequently asked TA Centers to provide technical assistance that was beyond the scope and expertise of their Centers. Once the parameters of their intensive TA have been clearly articulated, TA Centers are better able to seek out and establish partnerships with other TA providers who can address the unmet needs of their intensive TA recipients.

3.7 Evaluating Intensive TA

Focus group participants recommended that future opportunities be made available for TA Centers to discuss strategies for evaluating intensive TA. In response to this

recommendation, TACC is featuring two webinars on the evaluation of TA as part of its [webinar series](#): *How do we Evaluate Technical Assistance?* (occurred on Wednesday, November 19th at 1:00 pm Eastern - recording and materials available [here](#)), and *Guidelines for Working with Third-Party Evaluators*(coming up on Wednesday, January 14th at 1:00 pm Eastern).

Challenges and Topics for Future Exploration

Our discussion also yielded mention of challenges to providing intensive TA and topics for future exploration/support.

Challenges: Several challenges to providing intensive TA were mentioned during our discussion, including:

- Scheduling – finding times everyone can be on a call (e.g. 7 states)
- Winter travel
- “Turnover is our enemy” – staff turnover can seriously destabilize intensive TA work.
- Gathering wide support at the state level (across multiple offices)
- Contending with politics in states – “figuring out what to do strategy-wise with state legislatures”
- Developing accountability mechanisms: “How do we get accountability mechanisms in place that justify the investment?”

Ideas for future discussion:

- When is collaboration across TA centers on intensive TA warranted? What does successful collaboration look like? How do we leverage one another’s resources? What’s working well? Coordinating it – are we all in one state?
- How do we evaluate outcomes for intensive TA? How do we demonstrate recipients’ increased capacity and the TA center investment?