

APPENDIX B

ACTIVITIES OF THE REGIONAL RESOURCE CENTERS

The Regional Resource and Federal Center Program assists State education agencies (SEAs) in building their capacity to improve services for infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities. The role of the six Regional Resource Centers (RRCs) is to provide advice and technical assistance as well as distribute information to administrators and educators in SEAs, local education agencies, and other appropriate public agencies. Information related to the activities conducted by the RRCs is included in every OSEP Annual Report to Congress.

Technical Assistance to States: The Regional Resource and Federal Center Network

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provides guidance and support to States implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through a variety of technical assistance and information dissemination projects. Prominent among these is the Regional Resource and Federal Center (RRFC) Network. This section of the *Annual Report to Congress* provides a general overview and assessment of the RRFC Network, illustrates its unique technical assistance capacity, and features RRC assistance provided to States in their self-assessment and planning activities under OSEP's new Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP). That assistance has begun to affect attitudes, practices, and approaches in the States.

Overview of the RRFC Network

The RRFC Network is a national program of technical assistance and information dissemination designed to help state education agencies (SEAs) and Part C lead agencies improve their systems of early intervention, special education, and transition services through the development and implementation of policies, programs, and practices focused on enhancing educational results for infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities. The Network is composed of six RRCs serving all States and Territories and the Federal Resource Center (FRC). The current six RRCs and the FRC have been funded since October 1998 through cooperative agreements and contracts that are projected to continue through May 2003. The FRC supports RRC work in States by coordinating information and activities across regions and by serving as a key connection with the other technical assistance and dissemination projects funded by OSEP and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) within Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS).

The RRFC Network provides both proactive and responsive technical assistance on a variety of issues affecting children with disabilities and their families. Since October 1998, the Network has collectively responded to over 2,100 requests for information on research, policies, and practices. More than 460 technical assistance agreements have been negotiated with States to help improve services and supports for this population. Technical assistance has been provided on hundreds of issues affecting the lives of children ages birth through 21.

The RRCs are linked to each other and to other OSEP-funded projects through a system of RRFC liaisons and national RRFC work groups. An assigned RRFC network liaison is responsible for regular communication with each of the national OSEP-funded projects about RRFC roles, functions, and initiatives and helps link RRCs to that project's efforts. Work groups involve representatives from other relevant projects and meet via monthly teleconferences. Current work group issues include:

- Content areas of critical importance (e.g., monitoring, large-scale assessment, State Improvement Plans, and grants);
- RRFC administrative or coordination issues (RRFC policy direction, evaluation and reporting, information services); and
- National technical assistance events and products (e.g., technology use for dissemination, alternate assessment forum, OSEP leadership conference).

General Evaluation of the RRCs

In the 2000-2001 school year, the RRCs underwent a third-party evaluation that included self-studies by each RRC, a survey of other technical assistance and dissemination projects funded by OSEP, and a survey of State "customers." Data are still being gathered and analyzed; however, preliminary results indicate that the RRC program is viewed as a critical link in the research-to-practice chain and is well regarded by the State clients. For example, over 80 percent of the State-level respondents who had requested services related to IDEA implementation reported that the quantity of *services were adequate* to meet their needs and were *provided in an effective manner*. Ninety-six percent of the users of technical assistance from RRCs attributed their satisfaction to *timely responsiveness to our requests for assistance*.

In addition, the RRCs are viewed by other OSEP-funded projects as essential links in the information development, transfer, and grant application process. Over 75 percent of the respondents indicated that they were "very clear" about the RRC role, mission, services, and Network structure. No project responding to a question about the RRC role said that the RRCs duplicated their project's efforts. Regular communication among RRCs and other projects was reported as the norm. When asked what they thought were the benefits of the RRC Network as a whole, project respondents suggested a variety of linking functions. A few comments from respondents are illustrative:

Appendix B: Technical Assistance to States: The Regional Resource and Federal Center Network

[The benefits of the RRC Network as a whole include] Regional and State-specific responses and capacity development for national initiatives. Implementation requires support and linkages to resources. The RRC structure addresses this need.

RRC experiences inform the national effort and give a “reality check” so that we can gauge the plausibility of emerging ideas. This potential can only be carried out by regional/State-specific organizations. For the potential to be realized, RRCs must stay responsive to States and continually seek linkages.

The RRC network supports the development of pockets of expertise at individual centers that are efficiently made available to other centers and the larger community of users. I’ve been very impressed by the ability of [RRC] information specialists . . . to go out and see if any RRC has done [a particular type of] work.

RRCs serve as models of collaboration.

The RRCs’ primary clients, SEA survey respondents, also reported high degrees of satisfaction with the services they have received and noted the positive impact of the RRC Network’s structure, function, and effectiveness as a model for supporting State capacity building and effecting systemic change. For example:

We have been extremely pleased with the services and assistance provided by the RRC. They are critical to our mission.

The RRC is staffed with professionals who are designed to assist States with capacity building and systemic change.

I believe the RRC structure is an effective model in that they provide a wide range of resources for States and are easily accessible.

I couldn’t begin to express how exemplary the RRC network is, but we utilize their services consistently and frequently.

They understand how the Federal government works and what the State’s responsibilities are.

Both the State customers and the other OSEP-funded projects consider the regional structure of the RRFC Network a critical factor in the timely delivery and reality base of RRC services.

The RRC Roles in CIMP

Because State requests for assistance with CIMP represent an increasing portion of RRC work, the remainder of this report uses CIMP to illustrate how new or emerging needs are addressed by the RRCs. In the case of the CIMP, RRCs have increased their capacity to provide in-depth technical assistance at national, regional, and State-specific levels. Initial data indicate wide client satisfaction with the assistance and positive effects within the States.

RRFC Capacity Building, Preparation, Resource Development, and Networking on CIMP. As a new issue or initiative arises, RRCs prepare to assist States via staff training and resource sharing on the issue in question as well as development, gathering, and synthesis of resource materials. In the case of CIMP:

- All RRCs participated in the OSEP “Monitoring Academy” to prepare them to provide assistance on the CIMP.
- Almost all RRC staff are involved and trained, but RRCs usually assign a staff member or two to keep all staff up-to-date, provide information to and from OSEP regarding the monitoring process, and to stay abreast of activities in each State. RRC monitoring staff report on activities in other regions, lead staff in brainstorming and planning monitoring activities in each State, assist with site planning and facilitation, and coordinate access to written materials.
- The RRFC monitoring work group conducts monthly teleconferences to exchange experiences and resources and to help prepare for national activities.
- Information is collected from each monitoring activity and made available to staff and to the entire RRC Network through the RRC Information Centers.
- RRCs work with OSEP to facilitate planning and input sessions on the monitoring process, including an October meeting on development of State Improvement Plans and a November stakeholder meeting on the overall monitoring process.
- The RRCs worked with OSEP to develop and maintain a National Monitoring and Promising Practices web site.

National and Multiregional Activities. To assist States efficiently and effectively on an issue, the RRCs will often coordinate national and multiregional training events and collaborate on products that are important resources for many States. For example, OSEP, the RRFC Network, and NECTAS collaborated to conduct

Appendix B: Technical Assistance to States: The Regional Resource and Federal Center Network

Summer Institutes 2000 for SEAs and Part C lead agencies to build their capacity to conduct self-assessments of their Part B and Part C programs. The institutes were held July 13-14 in Salt Lake City, Utah, and July 18-19 in Chicago, Illinois. There were 262 people from 45 States at the Salt Lake institute and 140 representatives from 36 States at the Chicago institute. Participants and presenters included staff from SEAs, Part C lead agencies, RRCs, NECTAS, and OSEP.

The outcome evaluation results indicated a high level of satisfaction regarding the value of the institutes. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being high, the mean satisfaction score for both institutes was 4.45. Some comments made by Part B and Part C participants included:

This was one of the best activities conducted by the U.S. Department of Education; it really demonstrated a collaborative effort between the Department and other technical assistance and dissemination projects.

The institute gave our State team valuable information regarding the self-assessment process, we are excited to return and begin a self-assessment of our Part C and B programs.

The institute gave our State team an opportunity to collaborate and get to know the OSEP staff; they provided the direction we needed to begin this important process.

This was the first time Part B and Part C staff came together to work on a common goal. We commend OSEP and the RRCs for doing an outstanding job in organizing and implementing the institute, it was time well spent.

RRCs may partner with other OSERS-funded organizations to support State assistance. In a national effort to make IDEA, its regulations, and OSEP-approved assistance papers widely and inexpensively available to policy makers, educators, families and others, the Western RRC joined with three other technical assistance and dissemination projects to produce a national compact disc (CD-ROM). The CD-ROM has a browser for efficient search capacity and is available in annual editions with update links so that agencies and individuals have immediate access to the latest information on practices and compliance with the law.

RRCs also collaborate across regions on a less-than-national basis when appropriate. For example, the Mid-South and Northeast RRCs co-sponsored a pre-institute for Self-Assessment prior to the Salt City and Chicago institutes to help the six States in their adjacent regions be well prepared for the information provided at the institutes. Participants also praised this event as an effective way to help States.

Finally, the RRCs draw upon each other. The States in the Mountain Plains region were among the first to experience CIMP. The director of that center has been called upon by other RRCs to serve as a consultant to the States in other RRC regions on several occasions, speaking on regional conference calls, presenting at regional conferences, and providing advice and counsel based on his early and ongoing experiences. Similarly, when Puerto Rico requested assistance in CIMP, the Southeast RRC called upon a staff member from the Northeast RRC who was a native of Puerto Rico, to assist, translate, and help ensure cultural sensitivity. In the evaluation of their steering committee meeting, participants commented on the “convenience that the TA provider spoke our language.” Another participant wrote that “Her presentation was clear and, above all, the overheads in Spanish were great and hit the target. Something very positive is that she knows our culture and understands our concerns.”

Regional Activities. Multistate activities within the RRC regions provide the opportunity for States to learn from each other on a more interactive basis than national, large-scale events allow. Participants in events and recipients of products express a high degree of satisfaction with any RRC efforts that allow them to interact with peers in other States. The regional activities in 1999-2000 included:

- A wide range of regional conferences, training events, conference calls, and updates on the OSEP monitoring process through forums for SEA special education directors, Part C lead agencies, and regional work groups;
- Ongoing dissemination of information about CIMP and continuing contact with States in the regions to keep them updated on the latest news regarding the process, to share information regarding data collection and self-evaluation, and to provide them with copies of other States’ products and formats to be used as models; and
- Development of documents and resources materials. For example, the Great Lakes RRC (GLARRC) developed two reference documents, one on the most common Part B data sources and one on Part C data sources, as resource material for States preparing their self-assessments. GLARRC has also created a working draft document that illustrates the linkage between the language in IDEA and its requirements and the CIMP indicators. The Western RRC designed, produced, and launched the use of a CD-ROM to distribute IDEA regulations and statute information. An annual national edition and customized versions for three States have been developed to date.

**Appendix B: Technical Assistance to States: The Regional Resource
and Federal Center Network**

State-Specific Activities. National, multiregional, and regional activities represent only a small portion of the assistance RRCs provide to States on CIMP. The majority of time is spent with individual States. RRCs have provided a variety of technical assistance to over 35 States that initiated or conducted self-assessments and public input sessions and to those that are starting on improvement planning. During some intense development periods, RRC staffs were engaged with State teams weekly. The table below briefly illustrates the types of technical assistance and activities provided to States.

Types of Technical Assistance	Related Activities
Information and materials	Collecting and compiling self-assessments from other States, parent/administrator surveys, examples of data sources.
Conceptualization, planning, and preparation for CIMP phases	Participation in and facilitation of planning meetings, helping determine/promote the involvement of parents and consumers as stakeholders on steering committees, designing self-assessment activities and forms, preparing information to facilitate public input.
Awareness and communication	Providing overviews of the CIMP to steering committees and State advisory committees, helping develop plans for public awareness.
Consultation, process facilitation, and State staff training during self-assessment	Convening meetings with Part B and Part C administrative staff to initiate planning, instructing staff regarding the CIMP, presenting data analysis summaries, providing data consultation and assistance, facilitating public input sessions.
Process, output, outcome, and impact evaluation	Designing and implementing evaluations and providing ongoing feedback, compiling evaluation reports.
Linking and networking	Facilitating opportunities for State representatives to shadow and learn from other States being monitored.
Consultation, facilitation, and other support to make changes	Attending OSEP on-site visits as observers to help the States plan adequate responses, assist in designing a framework to respond to the monitoring report, facilitate meetings with OSEP and steering committee to develop improvement strategies, develop technical assistance to support the State's ability to implement improvement strategies that address monitoring findings.

Client Satisfaction and Initial Effects of RRC Assistance on CIMP. The RRCs have provided hundreds of technical assistance activities on CIMP, and the State recipients of those services are highly complimentary of this Network provided by OSEP. One client's feedback is illustrative of the level of satisfaction:

[RRC] staff did “ . . . an excellent job prior, during and post the public forums. Their skills in facilitating these large groups should be commended . . . they demonstrated the range of skills necessary to gather the kind of information that the Federal government required. In addition, the staff was extremely effective and accurate in conveying information to the Federal staff and mediating any potential

difficulties. Overall, we felt supported by the NERRC staff and were very pleased that they were with us through this difficult process.”

Since change is typically a 3- to 5-year process, the long-term effects of the CIMP and the assistance provided to States by the RRCs have yet to be fully realized. However, a number of effects are being observed:

- Part B and Part C lead agency staff know more about each other’s contexts, mandates, programs, and personnel, and there is increased interaction and collaboration on issues beyond CIMP.
- Participants in the CIMP exhibit increased awareness, knowledge, and skills regarding IDEA requirements, promising practices, and the use of data for decision making (e.g., how to consider State data in relation to national comparison data).
- New data collection and analysis systems are being developed to provide better monitoring data in the future.
- State agency personnel increasingly appreciate the perspectives of parents, consumers, and local service providers.
- SEAs and Part C lead agencies have increased capacity to implement the OSEP monitoring process; further, many aspects of the process, especially self-assessment, are being adapted by States for monitoring local programs.
- State staff and other stakeholders have increased access to up-to-date information and resources regarding promising practices in special education and, to some extent, general education.
- There is increased collaboration, information sharing, and networking among the State directors of special education and their staffs within and across regions.

Most important, critical and previously unidentified needs are emerging, and activities are being initiated to address those needs. Some key issues receiving increased attention are transition (Part C to Part B, grade to grade, and school to postschool), access to and progress in the general curriculum, and the broad area of SEA general supervision.

Summary

Monitoring activities and support to States represent an area of RRC assistance increasingly requested in recent years. The RRCs have responded by strengthening their capacity to support States in this important area. RRC assistance, at national, regional, and State levels has had a positive effect on State policies and practices, interagency relationships, and, ultimately, on programs, services and results for children with disabilities. The RRCs represent a vital component of the national technical assistance and information dissemination infrastructure that links policy development to policy implementation and research to practice at the State and local levels. With over 460 technical assistance activities and nearly 2000 information responses in scores of other topical areas, the RRFC Network continues to serve a critical linking and support role in ensuring that the expectations of the IDEA are met for all infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities and their families.