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**COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL ASSISTANCE
CENTERS PROGRAM:
FINAL REPORT ON THE EVALUATION**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2000



COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL ASSISTANCE CENTERS PROGRAM:

FINAL REPORT ON THE EVALUATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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2000

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The Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers Program at a Glance

The Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers help states, school districts, and schools meet the educational needs of children served under ESEA. As of September 2000, 15 regional centers are being operated under cooperative agreements by the following grantees. Telephone numbers and Web addresses follow their names and locations.

Region I (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont): New England Comprehensive Assistance Center, Education Development Center, Inc., Newton, Mass., (800) 332-0226, <http://www.edc.org/NECAC/>.

Region II (New York): New York Technical Assistance Center, the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University, New York, N.Y., (800) 4NYU-224 or (212) 998-5100, <http://www.nyu.edu/education/metrocenter/nytac/nytac.html>.

Region III (Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, and Pennsylvania): Region III Comprehensive Center at the George Washington University, Center for Equity and Excellence in Education, George Washington University, Arlington, Va., (800) 925-3223 or (703) 528-3588, <http://r3cc.ceee.gwu.edu>.

Region IV (Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia): Region IV Comprehensive Center at AEL, Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Inc., Arlington, Va., (800) 755-3277, <http://www.ael.org/cac/>.

Region V (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi): Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Metairie, La., (504) 838-6861 or (800) 644-8671, <http://www.sedl.org/secac/welcome.html>.

Region VI (Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin): Region VI Comprehensive Assistance Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wis., (888) 862-7763 or (608) 263-4220, <http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/ccvi/>.

Region VII (Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma): Region VII Comprehensive Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Okla., (800) 228-1766 or (405) 325-1729, <http://region7.ou.edu>.

Region VIII (Texas): STAR (Support for Texas Academic Renewal) Center, Intercultural Development Research Association, San Antonio, Tex., (888) FYI-STAR, <http://www.starcenter.org/>.

Region IX (Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah): Southwest Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center, New Mexico Highlands University, Rio Rancho, N.Mex., (505) 891-6111, <http://www.cesdp.nmhu.edu/swcc/>.

Region X (Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming): Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Comprehensive Center, Region X, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, Ore., (503) 275-9500, <http://www.nwrac.org>.

Region XI (Northern California): Region XI Comprehensive Assistance Center, WestEd, Oakland, Calif., (800) 645-3276, <http://www.wested.org/cc/>.

Region XII (Southern California): Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center, Los Angeles County Office of Education, Downey, Calif., (562) 922-6343, <http://sccac.lacoe.edu>.

Region XIII (Alaska): Alaska Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center, Southeast Regional Resource Center, Juneau, Alaska, (888) 43-AKRAC or (907) 586-6806, <http://www.akrac.k12.ak.us>.

Region XIV (Florida, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands): Region XIV Comprehensive Center, Educational Testing Service, Tampa, Fla., (800) 756-9003, <http://www.ets.org/ccxiv>.

Region XV (Hawaii, American Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Republic of Palau): Pacific Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center, Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, Honolulu, Hawaii, (808) 441-1300, <http://www.prel.org>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings

- The Comprehensive Centers have succeeded in establishing a customer base at the school, district, and state levels, but that customer base is a small one. Sixteen percent of all districts with poverty rates above the national median received services from a Comprehensive Center in 1998-1999.
- The centers are providing "comprehensive" assistance, and are targeting their services in response to the priorities established in their authorizing legislation. The Comprehensive Centers are more likely to serve their highest-priority school and district customers, targeting both high-poverty districts and schools, and districts and schools serving large numbers of English language learners, migrant students, and American Indian students.
- Most Comprehensive Centers' customers gave the centers high ratings for the accessibility, quality, and utility of their services. Customers report that after their state education agency, they are more likely to consult the Comprehensive Centers than any other source of assistance. Because the Comprehensive Centers have been at times unable to provide the volume of services that the antecedent centers have provided, some customers have been dissatisfied with the level and kinds of assistance they have received. Some customers reported dissatisfaction with the utility of Comprehensive Centers' services for the extent to which their services responded to specific local conditions, or their own needs and interests.
- Most Comprehensive Centers' customers report that the centers' assistance has had an effect on their own work. Customers were more likely to report that assistance had generated awareness of new information within their organizations than they were to report that assistance had prompted changes in practice.
- The Comprehensive Centers program faces ongoing challenges. The Centers' broad mandate and limited resources have forced them to make choices about whom they will serve and the breadth and depth of services they will provide. As a result, they have organized most of their work around a small group of key initiatives that engage the centers in long-term relationships with customers.

Overview of the Study

The Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, which amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, represents a departure in federal education policy. The categorical programs funded under the reauthorized ESEA are designed to work together to enable all students, especially those who live in areas of poverty and have special educational needs, to reach high and challenging academic standards. Instead of operating separate, categorical services to support students' "regular" educational program, the U.S. Department of Education encourages states and districts to use ESEA programs to reinforce state and community reform efforts geared to challenging state standards.

To support this shift in the implementation of federal education programs, Congress replaced the U.S. Department of Education's existing network of 48 categorically based ESEA technical assistance centers with 15 Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers. The new Comprehensive Centers were to pioneer a new form of comprehensive, cross-program assistance to support standards-based reform as envisioned in other sections of the law. This new vision of comprehensive assistance emphasizes the dissemination of new ideas and practices that strengthen teaching and learning for all children served under ESEA, over a more narrow focus on helping grantees respond to the administrative or programmatic requirements of a single categorical program.

As authorized under Title XIII of the ESEA, the Comprehensive Centers provide intensive professional development, training and technical assistance to states, local education agencies (LEAs), schools, American Indian tribes, community-based organizations, and other ESEA grantees in a long list of areas. They include: (1) improving the quality of instruction, curricula, assessments, and other aspects of school reform; (2) implementing effective schoolwide programs; and (3) meeting the needs of children, especially children in high-poverty areas, migrant children, immigrant children, limited English proficient (LEP) children, neglected or delinquent children, homeless children, American Indian children, and children with disabilities. Comprehensive Centers are required to assign highest priority to serving: (1) Title I schoolwide programs and (2) LEAs and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)-funded schools with the highest percentage or numbers of poor children. This specific focus on high-poverty schools and districts is unique to the Comprehensive Centers among ED's various technical assistance programs.

The U.S. Department of Education set regional boundaries and allocated funds for individual Comprehensive Centers based on the concentrations of Title I-eligible, limited English proficient, migrant, and American Indian children in the area. In creating the Comprehensive Centers program, Congress greatly expanded the range and scope of the centers' responsibilities relative to the work of the 48 categorically-organized technical assistance centers that had served ESEA grantees before 1994. At

the same time, Congress drastically reduced the resources available to support the new program by funding the Comprehensive Centers at approximately half the level of the previous programs.

The evaluation of the Comprehensive Centers addressed two basic questions: (1) How are the Comprehensive Centers fulfilling their statutory mission, as embodied in Title XIII of the ESEA?; and (2) How does the centers' work contribute to educational change and improvement in the states, districts, and schools that they serve? To ensure the quality of the Comprehensive Center program, Title XIII of ESEA requires the U.S. Department of Education to conduct regular surveys of customers to determine if they are satisfied with their access to and the quality of Comprehensive Center services. The evaluation was also designed to satisfy this requirement.

Data collection for the evaluation, conducted by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) of Washington D.C., was carried out in three phases:

- Phase 1 consisted of site visits to all 15 Comprehensive Centers, beginning in November 1998, interviews with professional staff at all of the organizations that contribute to the centers' work, and a review of key center documents.
- Phase 2 consisted of three different surveys of customers and potential customers of the Comprehensive Centers, administered in spring and summer 1999. The first customer survey was directed to a random sample of 1,086 *gatekeepers* in states, districts, schools, and other organizations that received services from the Comprehensive Centers in 1998, drawn from customer lists compiled by the centers. (Gatekeepers are customers of the Comprehensive Centers who request or negotiate for services on behalf of the organizations they represent.) The second customer survey was directed to 1,123 *participants* in a sample of 30 major Comprehensive Center activities, such as intensive professional development and model schools initiatives. (These customers are the end-users of Comprehensive Center assistance.) The third survey was directed to *potential customers* of the Comprehensive Centers in a nationally representative sample of 1,122 districts with poverty rates above the national median. This survey was sent to the district-level staff member most directly responsible for the administration of ESEA programs.
- Phase 3 consisted of 15 case studies, conducted in spring and summer 1999, of center services to states and local sites (both districts and schools), and eight case studies of collaboration among Comprehensive Centers and between the centers and other technical assistance providers. We selected case study sites where the effects of the technical assistance provided could reasonably be observed by spring or summer 1999.

The final evaluation report consists of three volumes. *Volume I: Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers Program: Final Report on the Evaluation* synthesizes the information gathered by the evaluation. *Volume II: Case Studies of Center Services to State and Local Sites and Case Studies*

Collaborative Activities contains case studies of center services to states, districts, and schools, and profiles of collaboration among centers and other technical assistance providers. *Volume III: Comprehensive Center Profiles* describes the mission and goals, organization and staffing, needs assessment strategies, portfolio of services, and collaboration activities with other technical assistance providers, for each of the 15 centers.

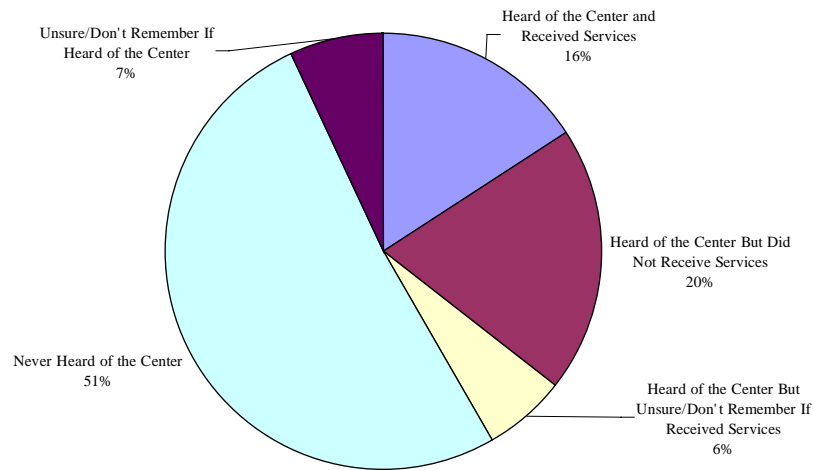
Comprehensive Center Customers

The Comprehensive Centers have reached a number of their potential customers at the school, district, and state levels. A review of the entire portfolio of Comprehensive Center activities shows that the centers, as a network, allocate resources in roughly equal proportions to the state, district, and school levels.

- **Most end-users of Comprehensive Center training and technical assistance are based in schools.** Two-thirds of all participants in a sample of 30 major Comprehensive Center initiatives were based in schools. Seventy percent of all school-based participants (accounting for half of all participants) reported that they were teachers.
- **Sixteen percent of all districts with poverty rates above the national median received services from a Comprehensive Center in 1998-99,** based on a nationally representative survey of 1,122 potential district customers (see Exhibit 1). An additional 26 percent reported that they had heard of the Comprehensive Centers but had not received services or were not sure if they had received services.
- **The Comprehensive Centers provide services to SEAs in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and nine Pacific entities.** In 1998, two-thirds of all state-level federal program managers reported that they had received services from the Comprehensive Centers.

The Comprehensive Centers are more likely to serve their highest-priority school and district customers, targeting both high-poverty districts and schools, and districts and schools serving large numbers of English language learners, migrant students, and American Indian students:

Exhibit 1
Percent of Potential District Customers Nationwide Reporting That They Had
Heard of the Comprehensive Center Serving Their Region, and That They Had
Received Services
(n = 799)



How to read this exhibit: Sixteen percent of potential district customers report that they have heard of the Comprehensive Centers and received services from the Center serving their region. Potential district customers are defined here as all districts with rates of student poverty above the national median.

- Nationwide, districts with high rates of poverty and districts with significant enrollments of LEP students, American Indian students, and migrant students were more likely to report that they had received services from the Comprehensive Center serving their region, compared with other potential district customers. For example, 40 percent of districts with LEP enrollments greater than 25 percent reported that they had received services, compared with 16 percent of all potential district customers (see Exhibit 2).
- Almost two-thirds of gatekeepers who represent districts that received services and three-quarters of gatekeepers who represent schools that received services reported that the majority of their students were eligible for free- or reduced-price lunches. (These gatekeepers are customers of the Comprehensive Centers who negotiate for services on behalf of the organizations they represent.) Almost a third of district-level gatekeepers and 38 percent of school-level gatekeepers reported very high concentrations of poverty, with 75 percent or more of their students eligible.
- Sixty-nine percent of school-level gatekeepers reported that their school operated a Title I schoolwide program.
- Almost half of gatekeepers in schools served by the centers reported that their school enrolled a significant proportion of limited English proficient students (that is, more than 10 percent of their total enrollment). Similarly, almost a third of gatekeepers reported that their schools had a significant proportion of American Indian students (more than 10 percent of their total enrollment).

Exhibit 2
Percent of Potential District Customers Reporting That Someone in Their District Had Received
Technical Assistance from a Comprehensive Center Serving Their Region,
by District-level Demographics

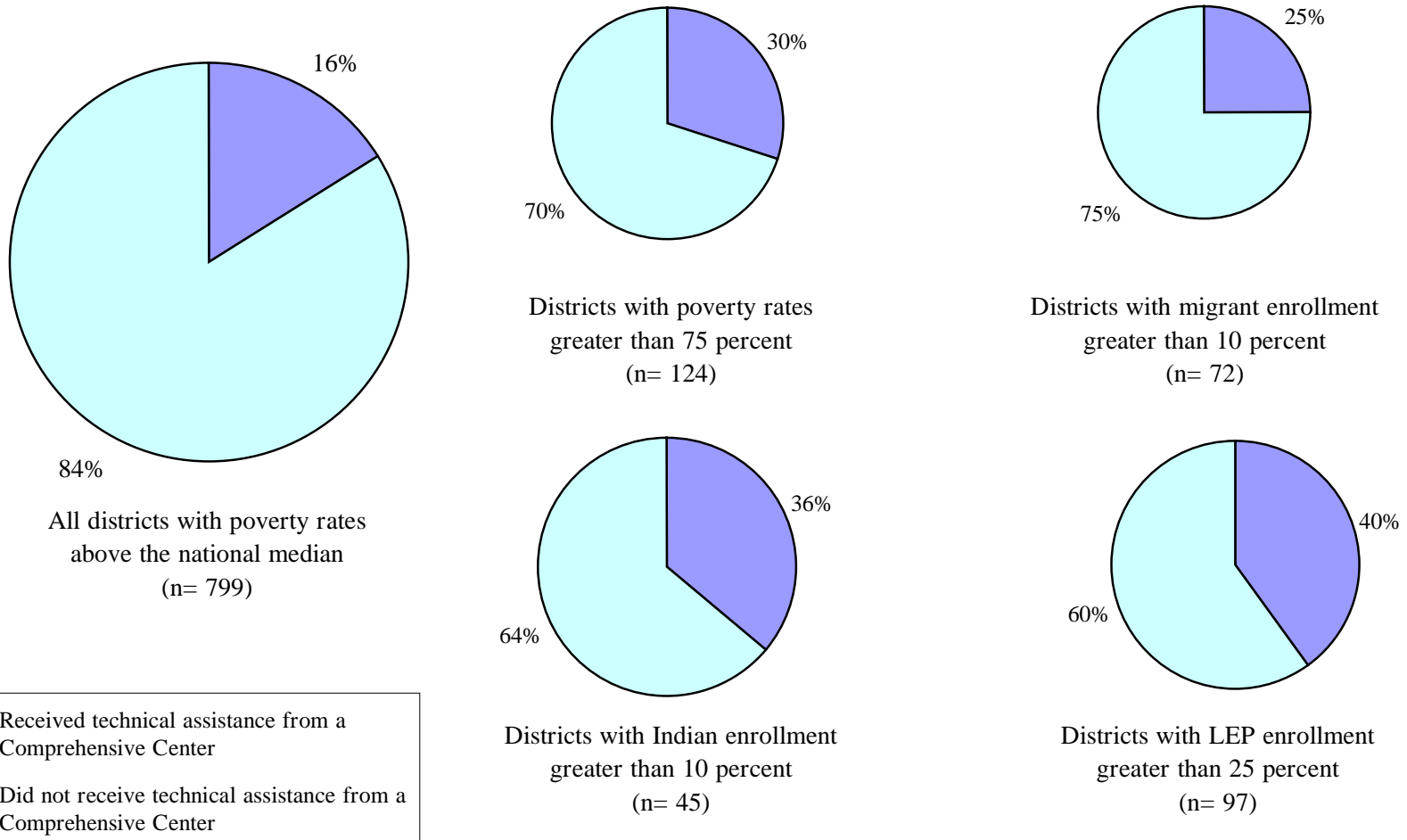


Exhibit reads: Sixteen percent of all districts with poverty rates above the median reported that someone in their district had received technical assistance from the Comprehensive Center serving their region.

Gatekeepers seek out Comprehensive Center services because the services are free, and because they have reason to believe that they will be useful. The reasons most commonly cited for seeking out Comprehensive Center products and services were: (1) products and services are free of charge (with 87 percent of gatekeepers reporting that this was a "very important" or "moderately important" reason for seeking assistance); (2) the centers have a reputation for providing high-quality assistance (86 percent); and (3) products and services are easily accessible (85 percent).

Survey data from potential district customers suggest that increased marketing and outreach efforts would create additional demand for center services. Among high-poverty districts that knew about the centers but had not received services, the reasons most often cited for not making use of center products and services were: (1) not receiving information about center products or services (with 44 percent of districts reporting that this was a reason for not using center services); (2) not having time to learn about center products and services (36 percent); and (3) not knowing whom to contact at the center (31 percent). Few potential customers reported that they had avoided the centers because they did not need their assistance or because they had a negative impression of the centers' work. Only one percent of potential customers reported that they had requested assistance, but that the center had not been able to provide it. These findings suggest that many more districts would be interested in receiving center services, given additional outreach efforts.

Portfolio of Services

The Comprehensive Centers organize most of their work around a small group of key initiatives that engage the centers in long-term relationships with customers. They can be classified into three broad categories: (1) professional development initiatives, (2) model schools and partnership sites, and (3) continuing consultation with states, districts, and schools. These initiatives command most of the centers' staff time and other resources. In addition, most Comprehensive Centers operate a "dual track" of services that includes a set of much lower-intensity activities designed to reach a wider audience. These lower-intensity activities include single, "one-shot" workshops and dissemination of written materials.

The Comprehensive Centers are fulfilling the intent of their authorizing legislation to provide "comprehensive" assistance. As the reauthorized ESEA has sought to shift emphasis from the implementation of parallel programs for special populations of students to more comprehensive reforms, the aims of technical assistance have shifted from strengthening the performance of single

categorical programs to supporting the work of entire schools or school support systems. On surveys, gatekeepers most commonly reported that their organization received assistance on topics usually

associated with comprehensive, standards-based reform as envisioned in ESEA. According to gatekeepers who represent organizations that received services from the centers, the topics most commonly addressed by those services are: (1) student assessment (with 49 percent of all gatekeepers reporting that their organization received assistance on this topic); (2) improving curriculum and instruction in reading and language arts (49 percent); (3) implementing schoolwide programs (48 percent); (4) challenging standards and accountability (45 percent); and (5) analyzing student achievement data and interpreting the results (43 percent).

Categorical assistance—including help in carrying out the provisions of specific ESEA programs and addressing the needs of specific student populations—is also a major focus of center services. Almost half of gatekeepers reported that their organizations received assistance in serving special student populations, with almost one-quarter receiving assistance for LEP students. About one-third of gatekeepers reported that their organization received assistance in responding to the provisions of at least one ESEA program.

Customer Satisfaction with Comprehensive Center Services

Most Comprehensive Center customers gave the centers high ratings for the accessibility, quality, and utility of their services. This finding is true for both gatekeepers, who are responsible for requesting services from the Comprehensive Centers on behalf of their organizations, and participants in center activities, who are the end-users of Comprehensive Center assistance.

- Eighty-five percent of gatekeepers reported that they were “very satisfied” or “moderately satisfied” with the accessibility of center products and services. Gatekeepers gave similar ratings for all types of services (satisfaction was lower with regard to the accessibility of center Web pages and electronic products).
- Eighty-six percent of gatekeepers reported that they were “very satisfied” or “moderately satisfied” with the overall quality of the assistance they received. Gatekeeper ratings of quality were similar for all topics of assistance.
- More than 75 percent of gatekeepers and participants gave the centers ratings of “excellent” or “good” on various dimensions of quality and utility.

Gatekeepers in high-poverty schools and districts are as likely to be satisfied with center services as gatekeepers in lower-poverty schools and districts.

Some customers were less satisfied with the utility of Comprehensive Center services, as related to their specific needs. Both gatekeepers and participants gave Comprehensive Center services

the lowest ratings for the extent to which their services responded to specific local conditions or their own needs and interests (see Exhibits 3 and 4):

- Twenty-four percent of participants and 16 percent of gatekeepers rated center services "fair" or "poor" on the extent to which they responded to local conditions.

A small proportion of respondents in our case study sites expressed dissatisfaction that they were not receiving the same volume of services, nor the same degree of specialized expertise, as they had received from the categorical technical assistance centers operated by ED before 1994.

After their state education agency, gatekeepers report that they are more likely to consult the Comprehensive Centers than any other source of assistance. Approximately two-thirds of gatekeepers report that they "always" or "sometimes" turn to the Comprehensive Center for help in areas that are important to them.

On average, Comprehensive Centers with larger budgets generated higher levels of customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction varied by individual Comprehensive Center, and in most cases these variations were quite pronounced. The study tested many possible hypotheses to explain this variation. Only one variable appears to be consistently related to various measures of customer satisfaction: the size of the center's budget. Although it is not true that all large centers receive high ratings of customer satisfaction and all small centers receive low ratings, the relationship between size and satisfaction across the entire network of 15 centers is strong and statistically significant. Specifically, every \$100,000 increase in center budget corresponds with a 2 percentage point increase in the number of gatekeepers reporting that they are "very satisfied" with the overall quality and accessibility of center services.

The explanation for this finding appears to be that larger centers, on average, provide a higher volume of higher-intensity, more expensive services to their customers. Centers with larger budgets tend to have more resources available for each of the customers they serve, and customers of larger centers do, in fact, report that they receive more services. It appears that customers of larger centers are more satisfied with the quality and accessibility of the services as a result.

Exhibit 3

Gatekeepers' Ratings of the Quality and Utility of Comprehensive Center Products and Services (n=542)

Compared with similar products and services available from other sources, how would you rate the quality of the products and services you received from the Comprehensive Center on each of the following dimensions?					
Compared with similar products and services available from other sources, how would you rate the overall USEFULNESS of the products and services you received from the Comprehensive Center?					
<u>Dimensions of Quality and Utility</u>	<u>Percent of Gatekeepers Reporting</u>				<u>Not able to judge</u>
	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>	
Addressed our organization's needs and interests	52	29	11	3	6
Accuracy of content	51	31	5	2	12
Timely	50	32	8	5	6
Reflects sound research or the most current thinking in the field	50	29	6	2	12
Useful and accessible format	49	30	11	4	6
Useful for guiding improvement efforts	48	31	10	4	7
Responsive to local conditions	48	29	12	4	7
Presentation and format	42	35	8	2	12
Extent to which the Center provided knowledge and expertise not available within your organization	42	34	9	2	13
Ability to respond in depth to all of your questions and interests	42	33	10	3	12

How to read this exhibit: Fifty-two percent of gatekeepers rate Center services "excellent" for the extent to which they addressed their organization's needs and interests.

Note: Rows may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Exhibit 4

**Participants' Ratings of the Quality and Utility of Center-Sponsored Activities
(n=675)**

Compared with similar products and services available from other sources, how would you rate the quality of the Center's assistance related to [the activity] in each of the following areas?					
Compared with similar products and services available from other sources, how would you rate the overall USEFULNESS of [the activity] on each of the following dimensions?					
<u>Dimensions of Quality and Utility</u>	<u>Percent of Participants Reporting</u>				
	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Not able to judge</u>
Reflects sound research or the most current thinking in the field	54	37	6	1	3
Accuracy of content	51	41	5	1	2
Presentation and format	44	41	12	2	1
Accessibility to participants	44	41	12	2	1
Timely	43	39	12	3	3
Useful for guiding improvement efforts	43	39	12	3	3
Opportunities for networking among participants	41	38	13	5	3
Addressed my needs and interests	38	44	13	3	2
Ability to respond in depth to all of your questions and interests	36	46	14	2	2
Responsive to local conditions	30	42	18	6	4

How to read this exhibit: Fifty-four percent of participants in Center-sponsored activities rated as “excellent” the extent to which the activity reflected sound research or the most current thinking in the field.

Note: Rows may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Effects

Most Comprehensive Center customers report that the centers' assistance has had an effect on their own work. This finding holds true for both gatekeepers, who are responsible for negotiating services with the Comprehensive Centers on behalf of their organizations, and participants, who are the end-users of Comprehensive Center assistance. For example, Exhibit 5 shows that:

- Eighty percent of participants and 77 percent of gatekeepers reported that they had gained new information as a result of center assistance.
- Seventy-two percent of participants and 61 percent of gatekeepers reported that they had incorporated something they had learned from the center into their work.

Exhibit 5

Percent of Participants and Gatekeepers Reporting on Effects of Center Assistance on Their Work

Overall, what effect, if any, has Comprehensive Center assistance had on your own work?		
<u>Effect</u>	<u>Percent of Participants (n=669)</u>	<u>Percent of Gatekeepers (n=573)</u>
I have gained some new information	80	77
I have informally shared ideas with colleagues	74	**
I have incorporated into my job something I learned from the Center	72	61
It confirmed what I was already doing	60	49
I have communicated the ideas to colleagues or others through training, technical assistance, or similar activities	50	**
I have provided technical assistance to others in support of federal programs	**	40
It has had little or no effect on how I do my job	9	9
Other	3	4

** Item not included in the survey instrument for this group of respondents.

How to read this exhibit: Eighty percent of participants reported that Center assistance allowed them to gain new information and additional perspectives.

Individual effects varied among different groups of customers:

- Participants in center activities were more likely to report that the activity had an effect on the way they do their job if they received follow-up services from the center.
- Participants who cited multiple purposes for participating in an activity were more likely to report that the activity had an effect on the way they do their job.

Comprehensive Center customers were more likely to report that assistance had generated awareness of new information within their organizations than they were to report that assistance had prompted changes in practice:

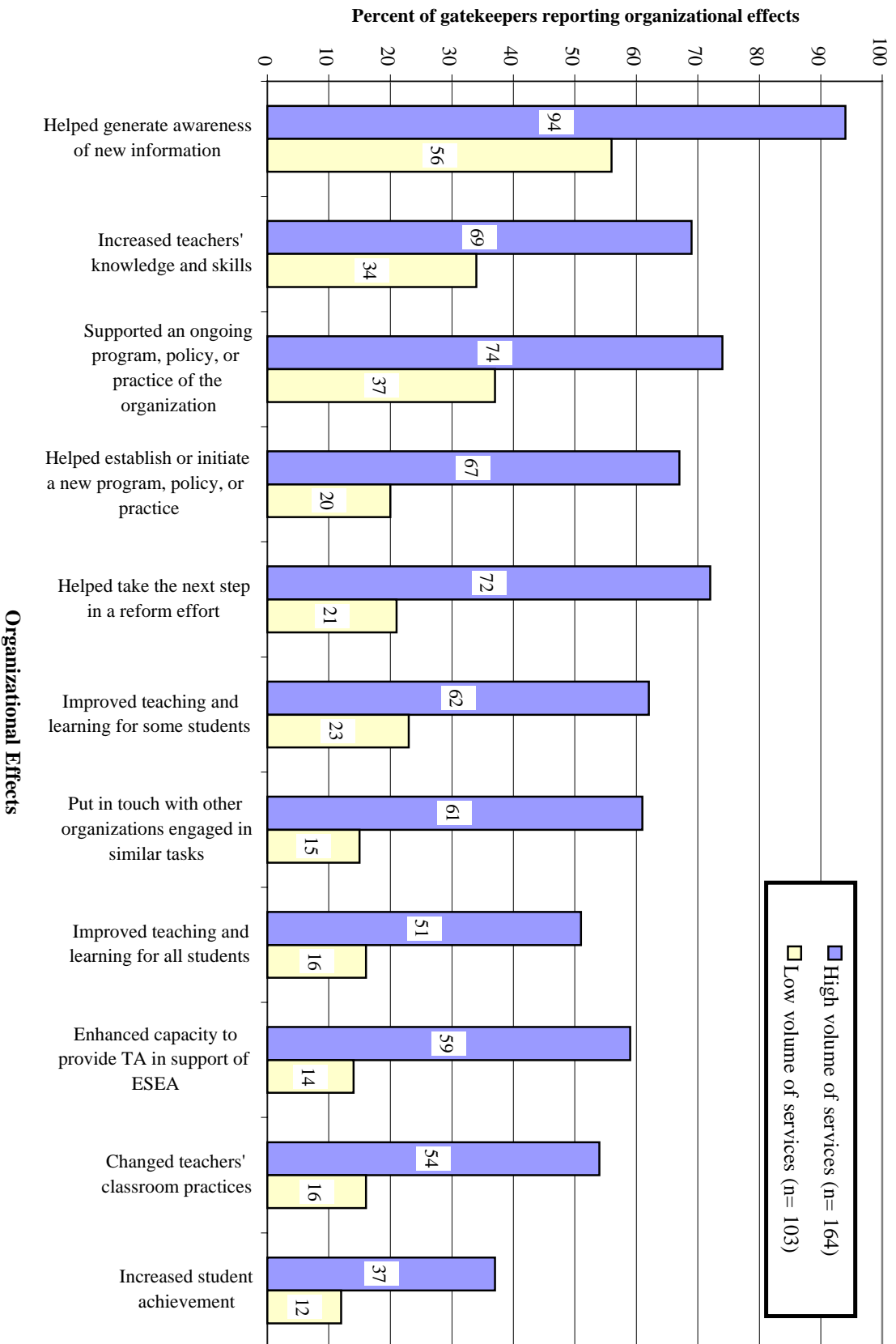
- More than three-quarters of participants and gatekeepers reported that center assistance generated awareness of new information within their organization.
- Almost half of participants and gatekeepers reported that center services helped their organization carry out a major, planned improvement effort.
- About a third of participants and gatekeepers reported that center services prompted their organization to initiate a new practice.

Organizational effects varied significantly by the characteristics of the service and the type of organization served:

- Gatekeepers whose organizations received a higher volume of services were more likely than those who received a lower volume of services to report all types of organizational effects (see Exhibit 6).
- Schools were more likely than districts or states to report that Comprehensive Center services had changed teachers' classroom practices, improved teaching and learning for all students, and increased student achievement. This finding is explained by the fact that services to schools are more likely to be designed to directly affect classroom practice (see Exhibit 7).
- States were more likely than districts or schools to report that the centers' assistance had enhanced their organization's capacity to provide technical assistance in support of ESEA programs (see Exhibit 7).

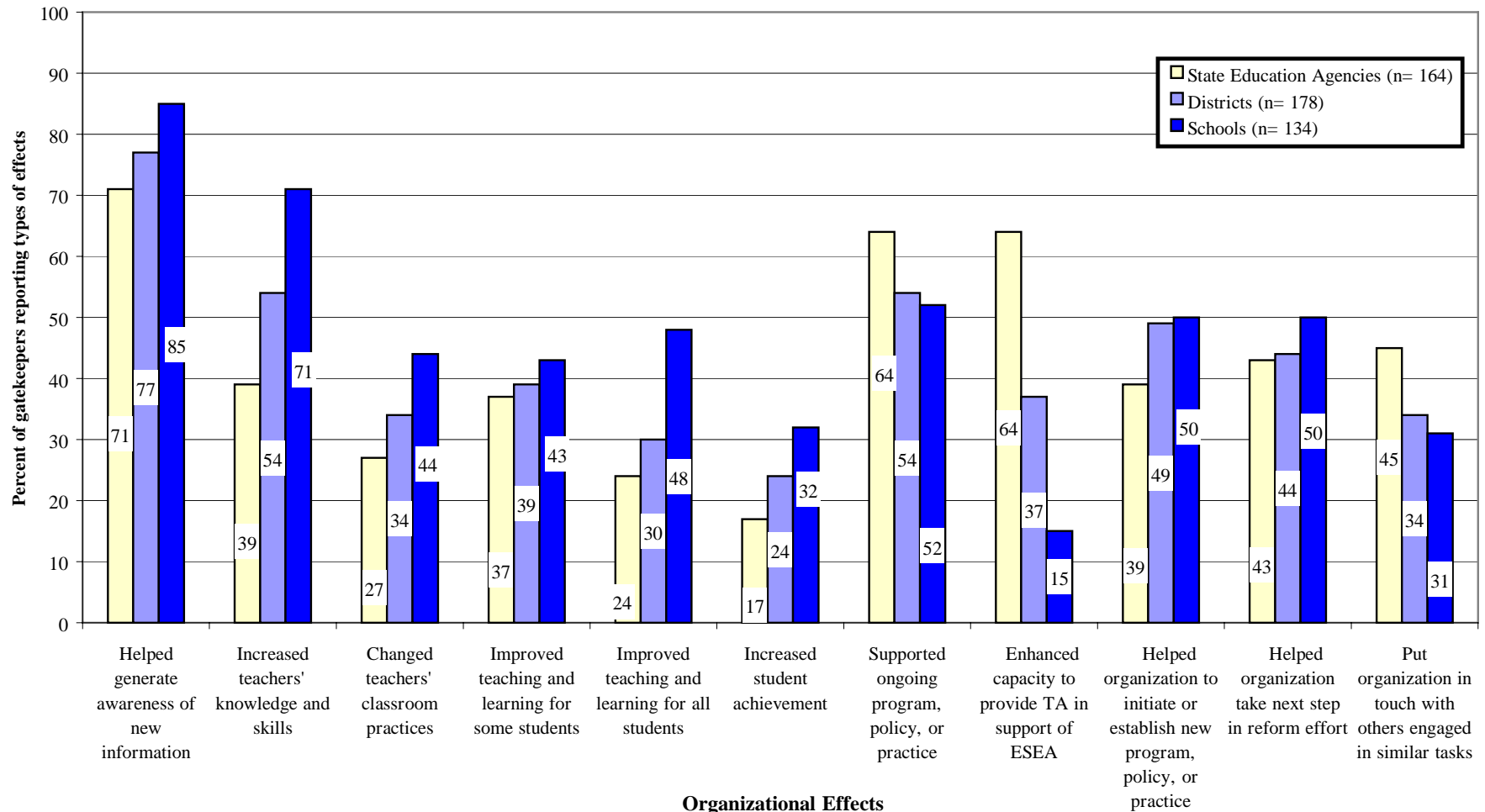
Among our case study sites, federal program administrators maintained that the Comprehensive Centers played a key role in assisting them to respond to the requirements of the reauthorized ESEA. In several states respondents explained that center staff members had helped to extend their capacity by filling in gaps left by their own limited staffing and resources--by

Exhibit 6
Percent of Gatekeepers Reporting Organizational Effects of Center Assistance
by Volume of Services



How to read this exhibit: Ninety-four percent of gatekeepers in the top quartile of customers by volume of Center services reported that Center assistance helped generate awareness of new information compared with 56 percent of gatekeepers in the bottom quartile of customers by volume of Center services.

Exhibit V.7
Percent of Gatekeepers Reporting the Types of Effects Center Assistance Had on
Their Organization's Work, by Type of Organization



How to read this exhibit: Seventy-one percent of state education agencies reported that Center assistance helped generate awareness of new information, compared with 77 percent of districts and 85 percent of schools.

conducting training sessions on the state's behalf or by helping with grant applications. At the local level, Comprehensive Center assistance has supported schools throughout the schoolwide planning process and in the development of written plans; however, the assistance has had limited effect on the development of local capacity in schools for planning on their own.

Just over one-half of all center customers reported that the centers' work had helped to increase teacher knowledge and skills, and just over one-third reported that the assistance had resulted in a change in classroom practices. End-user participants in activities directly targeted to instruction were more likely to report effects on teaching and learning. Changes in teaching and learning were a specific goal of center services in only four of our local case study sites. In these sites, teachers reported making changes in their classroom practices, though these changes were limited in scope.

Increases in student achievement were the least commonly reported effect of Comprehensive Center services, with about one-quarter of both participants and gatekeepers reporting that the centers' work had helped to improve student achievement. This finding is not surprising when we consider that technical assistance activities have, at best, an indirect effect on student learning. Indeed, participants in activities specifically designed to improve teachers' knowledge and skills were more likely to report effects on student achievement as a result of Comprehensive Center assistance. Among the four local case study sites where services were specifically targeted at schools and classrooms, one had data showing improvements in student outcomes. However, the Comprehensive Center network is currently conducting an extensive evaluation of the Reading Success Network (an intensive professional development initiative focused on the diagnosis of and interventions for reading difficulties in young children) across the 15 Comprehensive Center regions that includes an examination of student outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

By the spring of 1999, the end of their third full year of operation, the Comprehensive Centers had achieved at least two important milestones. First, they had developed a fairly coherent portfolio of services that responded to the broad charge set out in their authorizing legislation. Second, the centers had succeeded, in a relatively short period of time, in cultivating a base of satisfied customers. A close examination of the effects of Comprehensive Center assistance, as they are reported by customers, confirms much of what we already know about high-quality technical assistance and professional development:

- Comprehensive Center technical assistance is more useful to customers if it is intensive and if it extends over time.

- Comprehensive Center technical assistance is more useful to customers if it is tailored to address their needs and interests.
- The effects of Comprehensive Center services are most apparent when services are intensive and targeted directly at the individuals and organizations expected to change.

The Comprehensive Centers face continuing challenges, however. The centers' broad mandate and limited resources have forced them to make choices about whom they will serve and the breadth and depth of services they will provide. Comprehensive Center services, at their present level of intensity, do not produce radical changes in the behavior of organizations and individuals in any but a few instances. Changes in teaching and learning are particularly limited. This dilemma is not unique to the Comprehensive Centers program. Instead, it reflects the great level of effort required to achieve ED's goals for its technical assistance systems.

The key findings of this evaluation suggest that the operations of the Comprehensive Centers could be modified to build on their early work:

- **The Comprehensive Centers could focus attention on developing their capacity to respond to customers' particular local conditions and customer needs and interests.** Although customers are generally satisfied with the content and format of Comprehensive Center assistance, survey results suggest that services could be even more closely tailored to address their particular questions, needs, and interests and local conditions. The Comprehensive Centers could place special emphasis on learning even more about particular customers' needs and interests and fine-tuning their services to supply the support and expertise their customers require.
- **The Comprehensive Centers could consider targeting their services even more carefully on organizations that can benefit most from their assistance.** Surveys of potential customers suggest that there is a sizable market for Comprehensive Center services. By stepping up their marketing activities, the centers may be able to locate schools and districts that are best able to benefit from their particular expertise, achieving the best fit between their particular portfolio of services and expertise and the needs and interests of the customers they serve. This strategy would require that the centers turn down requests for assistance in some cases.
- **The Comprehensive Centers could develop further strategies for capacity building in states and districts.** Most Comprehensive Center services to states and districts aim to build their capacity to improve education programs in high-priority schools. In many cases, however, this capacity building consists of supplying additional staff to extend the state's or district's reach among schools, rather than adding knowledge or expertise not readily available within the organization. The Comprehensive Centers also need to consider ways that they can increase the knowledge and skills of SEA and LEA staff to enable them to serve schools more effectively.

- **The Comprehensive Centers could build on opportunities to collaborate across the network on key initiatives like the Reading Success Network.** When collaboration among technical assistance providers is successful, Comprehensive Center staff members report that it enhances the quality of their services to the field. The RSN is a good example of a case where collaboration on a joint effort has allowed the entire network to benefit from products and expertise developed by individual centers. The Comprehensive Centers should continue to pursue similar opportunities in the future, especially with regard to current efforts to develop strategies for assisting low-performing schools.

ED can also take steps to strengthen its oversight of the Comprehensive Center program:

- **ED should continue to explore ways to build its capacity to provide effective assistance and support to the Comprehensive Centers.** In the past year, ED program managers of the Comprehensive Center program have taken steps to improve communications between the centers and various ED program offices by hosting meetings at ED on various high-priority topics. ED should continue to seek ways to provide the centers with the information and access to program managers that they need to be responsive to ED's needs and purposes.
- **ED should continue to work with the Comprehensive Centers to develop standard annual procedures for monitoring their work and for evaluating its effects.** The adoption of some standard annual evaluation procedures would allow the Comprehensive Centers to collect much better and more systematic data on the effects of their services on customers. ED should continue to work with the centers on refining and improving the uniform reporting format that they use in their semi-annual progress reports to ED. In addition, ED could work with the centers to develop standard instruments and data collection procedures for each of the 15 centers to use in assessing the impact of services on customers.

Although there are steps that the Comprehensive Centers and ED can both take to strengthen existing services, the findings of this evaluation indicate that, to have major effects on education change and improvement, the Comprehensive Centers would have to work on a much more intensive and costly scale. For the sake of refining the goals and objectives of the Comprehensive Centers program so that the centers can organize their work around objectives that are both important *and* feasible, we make the following recommendations:

- **ED and the Comprehensive Centers should continue to work together to clarify and refine the mission and goals of the program, especially with regard to the content and purposes of services provided.** As a new entity, each center has developed its own set of priorities and strategies for organizing services to its region. Now may be a good time for Comprehensive Center staff and ED managers to review those strategies with the aim of clarifying the nature and goals of “comprehensive” assistance.
- **The Comprehensive Centers and ED should discuss goals for extending the centers’ reach among district and school customers, as well as reasonable goals for the**

effects expected as a result of this effort. There is a clear trade-off between the intensity and effectiveness of services and the extent of the centers' reach.

- **ED and the Comprehensive Centers should consider even stronger targeting of high-priority customers as a way of addressing the problem of reach.** Now that the centers have succeeded in establishing themselves as a valuable source of assistance in the regions they serve, it may be time to consider targeting services even more closely on their highest priority customers--schoolwide programs, high-poverty schools and districts, or low-performing schools and districts.