



A Report to the
U.S. Department of Education
On Educational Challenges and Technical Assistance Needs
For the Southwest Region

Prepared by the
Southwest Regional Advisory Committee
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March 31, 2005

Table of Contents

Preface	iii
Executive summary.....	1
Introduction	5
Legislative background.....	5
Outreach efforts and data collection procedures.....	7
Public interest and input.....	8
Regional background	9
School and student demographics.....	9
Special populations.....	10
Standards.....	10
Test alignment with standards.....	11
Teacher demographics and qualifications.....	11
Educational challenges within the region	13
Challenge #1: Closing the academic achievement gap between at-risk and special-needs children and other students.....	13
Technical assistance needs and strategies	14
Challenge #2: District/school capacity-building through enhanced human and fiscal resources, training, and systems and tools that promote educational success for all students	17
Technical assistance needs and strategies	17
Challenge #3: District and state research-based staff development	20
Technical assistance needs and strategies	21
Challenge #4: High expectations for all students and teachers with teacher/student supports.....	22

Technical assistance needs and strategies	23
Challenge # 5: Broader public engagement.....	25
Technical assistance needs and strategies	25
Role and function of the Southwest TA Center.....	29
Clearinghouse role	31
Professional development role.....	32
Regional collaboration role.....	33
Glossary	35
List of tables.....	41

Preface

This report of the Southwest Regional Advisory Committee for Educational Needs Assessment was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED04CO0043/0001 awarded to The CNA Corporation (CNAC). Members of the committee and their professional affiliations are listed below.

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The Southwest Regional Advisory Committee received support in preparing this report from Margaret McNeeley, the Designated Federal Official (DFO) of the U.S. Department of Education, and Jenelle V. Leondard, the Alternate DFO. Support was also received from CNAC

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Executive summary

Over the past several months, the Southwest Regional Advisory Committee¹ (RAC) has met to identify key education challenges and to recommend technical assistance strategies related to the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and other federal educational reform initiatives that could be effectively supported and enhanced by a new Southwest Technical Assistance Center. Central to this task has been a series of public outreach efforts through a series of four public meetings (i.e., an initial meeting in December 2004 in Washington, DC, virtual meetings in January and February 2005; and a final work session and public meeting in March 2005 in Houston, TX). Additional public feedback was received through a website and through e-mail comments from Southwest constituents.

From the earliest meetings, the Southwest RAC members (representing Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) acknowledged some of the challenges facing their states individually and the region collectively to addressing the diverse educational needs and the significant but differing minority populations of African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic students. The RAC recognized the need to provide support for the large number of smaller and more remote schools and school districts with limited access to other state and federal educational support services and resources for meeting NCLB priorities and adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals. As a result of these discussions, RAC committee members identified five high-priority challenge areas for the Southwest region:

- 1) Closing the academic achievement gap between at-risk and special-needs children and other students.

¹ Selected representatives from key education stakeholder groups (state education agencies, local education agencies, local education practitioners, parents, etc.) in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.

- 2) District/school capacity building through enhanced human and fiscal resources, training, and systems and tools that promote educational success for all students
- 3) District and state research-based professional development
- 4) High expectations for all students and teachers with teacher/student supports
- 5) Broader public engagement.

In identifying and discussing these high-priority needs areas, RAC members also identified related NCLB challenges and suggested technical assistance strategies aligned within each of the five needs areas, which are articulated in greater detail in the remainder of this report. As part of this process, RAC members continued to refine the list of TA strategies and services to include the types of activities that could be implemented through the regional TA Center.

Concurrent discussions on the role and function of the Southwest TA Center resulted in a graphic representation of the cohesive role of the center in working with the federal and state education agencies and in communicating directly with district, school, teacher, and parent and community stakeholder groups. Three key roles of the Southwest TA Center envisioned by the RAC members are: *clearinghouse*, *professional development*, and *regional collaboration*. Clearinghouse functions identified by the RAC members focus on the need for a one-stop service center with stakeholder-specific information and communications available through peer expert help desks, searchable archives of regional best practices and products, and contact lists of successful practitioners willing to serve as mentors or to host site visits. Recommendations for professional development services acknowledge the challenge of delivering cost-effective workshops across the broad geographic region through the use of technology and through collaborations with regional educational service providers, such as other federal and state assistance centers, institutes of higher education, and local school districts. The regional

collaboration function recognizes the importance of greater sharing, coordination, and alignment between the five states that comprise the region and the Southwest TA Center's unique position to reach across and within the states and local education agencies and other stakeholder groups. In suggesting these functions, the RAC members also repeatedly stated their concerns about the need for other types of service delivery options besides technology- or web-based media for schools and school districts with limited technology access.

In concluding its work, RAC members recognized the enormity of the challenge of addressing the diverse educational needs of the district, especially in closing the achievement gap for the African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic minority populations, and in spanning the huge geographic area and its many smaller and more remote schools and school districts. Consequently, RAC members included a recommendation in their report that the U.S. Department of Education consider the placement of an additional technical assistance center to help address the regional needs or to focus on a specific educational topical need, such as English Language Learners, shared by the member states and/or a surrounding region.

Introduction

The Southwest Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) is one of ten regional committees appointed by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to conduct an assessment of the technical assistance needs of educators, parents, and students in the region. During the period between December 2004 and March 2005 this committee, which includes members from the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas identified the major regional challenges to improving student achievement and implementing the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The RAC has assessed the types of technical assistance that would enable educators in the region to overcome these challenges.

Legislative background

Section 203 of Title II of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-279) directs the ED to establish 20 comprehensive centers with the following goals:

- Provide training, professional development, and technical assistance on the:
 - ? Implementing NCLB
 - ? Facilitating communication among stakeholders including schools, educators, parents, and policymakers within the region
- Use scientifically valid teaching methods/assessment tools in:
 - ? The core academic subjects of mathematics, science, and reading, or language arts
 - ? English language acquisition
 - ? Education technology

- Disseminate and provide information and publications to:
 - ? Improve academic achievement
 - ? Close the achievement gap
 - ? Encourage sustained school improvement
- Develop teacher and school leader in-service and pre-service training models that illustrate best practices.

In addition, these comprehensive centers are expected to coordinate and collaborate with the regional education laboratories, the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, the Office of the Secretary of Education, state service agencies, and other technical assistance providers in the region.

In advance of the establishment of these comprehensive centers, the law directs the Secretary to appoint advisory committees for each of the 10 education regions² across the country. Each advisory committee consists of members from the following stakeholder groups: state education agencies, local education agencies, practitioners, both education and non-education researchers, parents, and the business community. The SW RAC includes five state agency members, three local agency members, three practitioners, one parent, and one higher education representative.³ According to the organizing legislation, individual RAC members were not regarded as a spokesperson for a particular stakeholder group, but rather as a lead person in soliciting the views of members of those stakeholder groups.

² These regions follow the boundaries of the Regional Education Laboratories.

³ See biographically information in Appendix A.

Outreach efforts and data collection procedures

The approach to public outreach and data collection included both a national and a regional component. At the national level, the RAC Support team at CNAC created a variety of media and documents to inform the public about the RAC process. CNAC distributed this information to national organizations with stakeholder or other interests.⁴ These organizations were asked to pass this information onto constituent members across the country.

During the orientation meeting, the Southwest RAC developed a preliminary prioritized list of critical educational needs that confront states and local school communities in the region and discussed strategies for reaching out to their perspective constituent groups to seek additional feedback on these and other local education issues. Between the orientation and first public meeting, SW RAC members conducted outreach to a wide variety of stakeholders using their established collegial networks as well as through contact lists provided by the state agencies and regional educational organizations.

Examples of the types of outreach described by the two state education agency representatives during the first public meeting included:

- A letter to colleagues and the list of high priority needs, challenges, and technical assistance recommendations was e-mailed to the State Department of Education Divisions with an invitation for comment via the RAC Web site.
- A letter to colleagues and the list of high priority needs, challenges, and technical assistance recommendations was discussed at a December 28, 2004 Cabinet meeting at the State Department of Education and Cabinet members were invited to comment. This letter was shared again at the January 4, 2005 Cabinet meeting.

⁴ A list of these organizations is provided in the Summary Report for all RACs.

- A letter has been mailed to all of those that serve as the Education Policy Advisors to the Governor in each state in the Southwest region
- A letter was sent to the State School Chief in each state.

Public interest and input

The goal of the outreach efforts was to generate public interest and input in the RAC's deliberations. The RAC Web site (www.rac-ed.org) provided the central point for giving the public access to the RAC. Table 1 provides a summary of these interactions. The first line in the table shows the number of enrollees on the RAC Web site from the Southwest. The Web site served as the information center for the RAC. The public was encouraged to provide comments both of a general nature and on specific RAC ideas in a variety of ways. The next section of the table shows the amount of input the Southwest RAC received through direct online comments and through e-mail or regular surface mail from the RAC Support Office. The third section of the table tries to discern public interest in a more indirect way by capturing the number of times the public views comments on the Web site. Another indicator of public interest is attendance at RAC meetings. Each RAC convened four public meetings. At the meetings held in Washington, DC, and Houston, TX, the public was invited to observe the proceedings in person. The other two meetings were online teleconferences. For both the face-to-face meetings and the online teleconferences, the public was invited to observe with a link through the RAC Web site. The next section of the table shows the number of public attendees at RAC meetings either in person or through the Web site.

Table 1: Public inputs for the Southwest RAC

Type of Input	Count
Enrollment on RAC Web site	429
State Agencies	55
Local Agencies	70
School Board Members	0
Principals	29
Teachers	135
Parent	19
Business	4
Higher Education	23
Researcher	20
Other	74
Comments	42
On Web site Forums	35
Through e-mail to the RAC Support Office	7
Through surface mail to the RAC Support Office	0
Views on the RAC Web site	1135
Attendance at RAC Public Meetings	26

* As of February 28, 2005

Regional background

School and student demographics

The Southwest Region consists of the following states: Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Of the five states, Texas has more public schools and students than the other four states combined. With 7,757 schools, Texas has an enrollment of 4.25 million students, one of the largest in the nation. Oklahoma is next in the region with 1,806 schools, followed by Louisiana (1,522), Arkansas (1,129), and New Mexico (801).

Although Louisiana does not have as many schools as Oklahoma, it has more enrolled public school students (730,464 versus 624,548). Arkansas serves 450,985 students, whereas New Mexico has the smallest public school enrollment with 320,234.

Arkansas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma have the highest proportion of rural districts whereas Texas and Louisiana are primarily urban or suburban. In Arkansas, 50 percent of the schools are in rural settings. Rural schools account for 45 percent of all schools in New Mexico

and 41 percent in Oklahoma. By comparison, only 14 percent of Texas schools are rural, with the remainder evenly divided between urban and suburban settings. Louisiana had the greatest share of suburban schools (44 percent) within the region.

Student enrollment by race shows wide disparities among the five states. Whites are a majority only in Arkansas and Oklahoma, whereas Hispanics represent the largest proportion (52 percent) of New Mexico's students. In Louisiana, Whites and African-Americans each account for 48 percent of student enrollment, whereas Texas schools are 43 percent Hispanic and 40 percent White. American Indians represent a significant part of the student population in Oklahoma and New Mexico, with enrollment equal to 18 percent and 11 percent of all students, respectively.

Special populations

New Mexico (20 percent) and Texas (15 percent) have significant numbers of English Language Learners in their student populations. By comparison, the rate is only 6 percent in Oklahoma and 3 percent or fewer in Arkansas and Louisiana. Twenty percent of New Mexico students, which include those in gifted education, have an individual education plan (IEP). The other four states have lower rates of students with IEPs ranging from 12 percent in Texas to 15 percent in Oklahoma. All states are above the national average poverty rate of 40 percent for children in public schools. Using free- and reduced-price lunch data, individual rates vary from a low of 46 percent in Texas to a high of 61 percent in Louisiana.

Standards

All five states in the region have met the requirements of the NCLB Act to create standards in math, reading and science, as illustrated in the chart below.

Table 2: Meeting requirements to establish state standards

State	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Arkansas	Yes	Yes	Yes
Louisiana	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Mexico	Yes	Yes	Yes
Oklahoma	Yes	Yes	Yes
Texas	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Education Commission of the States NCLB database downloaded Nov 2004

Test alignment with standards

Education Week's Quality Counts 2005 report analyzed whether state assessments are aligned with state standards and found mixed progress among Southwest states. Louisiana and Oklahoma were among the 12 states nationwide that have alignment assessments with content standards for every grade span in the four core subjects (i.e., math, science, English, and social studies/history). New Mexico aligned assessments with content standards at all grade spans in English, math, and science but not in social studies and history. Arkansas has not aligned assessments with content standards in science or social studies/history, but it has made the linkages in math and English. In Texas, tests and standards are aligned across all grade spans for English and math; however, such links are missing at the middle school level in science and at the elementary level in social studies/history.

Teacher demographics and qualifications

The number of public school teachers in Southwest states generally matches enrollment of public school students in the region, with Texas hiring the largest number (288,655). Louisiana is next with 50,062 teachers, followed by Oklahoma (40,638), Arkansas (30,330), and New Mexico (21,172). All of these states have a similar student-to-teacher ratio of 15:1.

NCLB also requires a highly qualified teacher in each classroom for core academic subjects by the end of the 2005-06 school year. Oklahoma has the highest percentage reported

of classes taught by highly qualified teachers, at 98 percent, whereas Texas has the lowest reported rate of 76 percent. Data were not available for Louisiana and New Mexico.

No state in the region has two-thirds of its instructors teaching in their field of study, and two states—Louisiana and New Mexico—have rates below 50 percent in this category. Salary data also show that teacher recruitment and retention remains a challenge since all states paid less than the national average teacher salary of \$44,604 in 2001-02. Average salaries ranged from \$35,389 in Arkansas to \$39,293 in Texas.

Table 3: Teacher quality indicators

State	Percent of classes taught by high quality teachers	No. of NBC teachers (SY2004)	NBC teachers as a percentage of all teachers	Percent of high school teachers with college major in the relevant core academic subject
Arkansas	97	179	1	64
Louisiana	NA	337	1	48
New Mexico	NA	121	1	48
Oklahoma	98	856	2	53
Texas	76	145	0	53

NA indicates data were not available for this state.

Sources: Center on Education Policy Year 2 of NCLB Report (2002-2003), Measuring Up: 2004, Education Week's Quality Counts 2005

Educational challenges within the region

The Southwest RAC identified the following five challenges to educational success in the region. The numeration of the challenges does not indicate an order of priority.

Challenge #1: Closing the academic achievement gap between at-risk and special-needs children and other students

There is a distinct disparity in academic achievement between different subgroups of students in the Southwest Region. Variations in academic performance and success can be traced along lines of race/ethnicity, income levels, language background, disability status, and gender. These gaps, which are evidenced in data that includes proficiency test results, enrollment in advanced classes, high school graduation rates, and college participation/success rates, are ultimately detrimental to the Southwest Region's ability to attract new industry, broaden its tax base, maintain the health of its communities, and, above all else, ensure the future success of its youth.

There are many key problems and issues that were identified by the RAC members and the general public that further complicate the larger challenge of closing the gap in academic achievement among Southwest students with different cultural and linguistic experiences. These include but are not limited to:

- High teacher turnover/mobility at high needs schools
- Insufficient number of highly qualified teachers
- Lack of programs to accommodate recent immigrant arrivals in higher grades
- Need for greater use of virtual technology and training and other resources to provide remediation and other supplemental services

- Lack of sufficient early childhood education
- Lack of appropriate and timely performance assessments for severely handicapped students and ELL students.

Closing the student academic performance achievement gaps that exist will not be an easy task for any Southwest school district. It will require the active involvement of parents, teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members.

Technical assistance needs and strategies

In discussions of the focus, role, and benefits of the Southwest Region Technical Assistance (TA) Center one of the major challenges that emerged is related to the demographics of the student populations. As noted in the previous background section, each of the five states that comprise the region has one or more significant minority subgroups that differ slightly from state to state. Consequently, the challenge of closing the gap between majority and minority students are different for Louisiana and Arkansas, where African-Americans are the largest minority population, and New Mexico and Texas, which have large Hispanic populations, many of whom have limited English proficiency. Both Oklahoma and New Mexico also have large American Indian populations in addition to other minority groups. These student population variations must be taken into account when designing and providing TA throughout the region.

Most RAC members see the establishment of a “one-stop clearinghouse” of both national and regional resources as a primary role and organizing structure not only for addressing achievement gap issues but also many of the other challenge areas described below. In performing this role, RAC members recognize that the focus of the Southwest Regional TA Center should be more on gleaning the best research-based resources without conducting the actual research itself. Specific technical assistance strategies identified through the RAC meeting and needs assessment activities include:

1. *Identify model programs/practices (instructional and support) that demonstrate results that close the achievement gap and that are replicable at a reasonable cost for districts/schools.*

Proven instructional programs and practices, especially those that work with diverse minority populations, are necessary and basic tools for closing the achievement gap.

Furthermore, any recommended instructional materials, including locally or regionally developed products, must be aligned with the five different state standards and include evaluations of effectiveness as prerequisites for being listed in the clearinghouse.

2. *Identify state and federal regulations that promote (or hamper) school flexibility to improve student achievement.*

Staying abreast of the myriad of state and federal regulations that impact student achievement has proven to be especially challenging for many of the smaller (and frequently more rural) schools and school districts in the Southwest Region. Through regular workshops and outreach communications, the regional TA Center can help ensure that local schools and school districts clearly understand and take full advantage of the flexibility built into NCLB and related federal and state guidelines.

3. *Identify appropriate and timely student performance assessments aligned to state and federal standards.*

The identification and effective use of standards-based performance assessments, especially those that target diverse student populations, is one of the most critical technical assistance needs of Southwest school districts. Again, the regional center's role should be to collect and share information on validated assessments and to provide assistance with building local capacity in effectively using these assessments with varied student populations.

4. *Identify and share successful alternative certification programs that train prospective new teachers on effective teaching and learning methodologies.*

The teacher quality requirements of NCLB and the increased mobility of the teacher workforce have placed added pressure on many Southwest school districts to seek alternative

certification programs and other related strategies to increase the number of certified teachers. Some RAC members expressed concerns about the adequacy of the preparation of alternative certification programs, especially in terms of teaching and classroom management skills, but the larger majority felt that their local alternative programs were successfully addressing teacher shortages and should be shared throughout the Southwest region.

5. *Identify organizational/leadership strategies that allow timely, appropriate support for teachers as they work to meet the needs of all students.*

This strategy focuses on the growing need for providing ongoing support for teachers as they develop new strategies for meeting the instructional needs of all students. Again, the center's role would be to collect and share promising practices used throughout the region to provide more site-based professional development and support opportunities.

6. *Identify effective strategies that assure that languages and cultures are incorporated and maintained in the curriculums of districts/schools.*

The importance of incorporating more cultural and linguistic awareness and sensitivity in the content, design, and delivery of instructional materials and resources was a major concern raised by the RAC members because of the diverse needs of students populations—American Indian, Hispanic, and African-American—within the individual states and across the Southwest region. This is especially important as it relates to closing the achievement gap where a variety of instructional strategies may be necessary to help students surmount learning challenges caused by language or cultural differences. The TA Center can provide both a regional leadership and resource-sharing role in addressing this challenge.

7. *Identify effective strategies and collaborative training efforts with other entities in the use of technology in improving student achievement.*

The inadequate and ineffective use of technology to improve student achievement was a constant theme throughout the RAC information gathering and deliberations. Because of the

differing sizes and locations of many of the Southwest districts, technology integration solutions must incorporate varying degrees of technology sophistication and capacity. In short, solutions that require “state of the art” hardware and software may be of little use to many of the schools and school districts throughout the Southwest region.

Challenge #2: District/school capacity-building through enhanced human and fiscal resources, training, and systems and tools that promote educational success for all students

The identification of district and school capacity building as a high-priority challenge is a recognition of the important institutional role that schools and school districts must play in guiding, monitoring, and supporting local school improvement efforts leading to improved student achievement. It also recognizes a systemic focus for empowering these institutions as well as the individuals who work in them, and on the importance of establishing and maintaining the necessary infrastructures at all institutional levels.

Some of the key problems and issues in the Southwest region related to the challenge of building district and school capacity to promote educational success for all students include:

- Insufficient number of qualified school leaders
- Lack of training in interpreting NCLB for facilitators at state and local level
- Lack of understanding of fiscal and program flexibility under NCLB
- Lack of validated research-based strategies/programs/practices
- Lack of ability to interpret and use data to focus on student learning.

Technical assistance needs and strategies

Discussions of the capacity building role of the Southwest Regional TA Center provide additional support for the potential unifying role of the center in promoting regional collaborations and in serving as a one-stop service center for distributing NCLB information.

Specific strategies for addressing the types of capacity building challenges described above that were recommended by the Southwest RAC members include:

1. *Identify and maintain a contact list of regional school leaders who would be available and willing to serve as coaches and mentors, to share information, and to provide access to their schools/districts.*
2. *Provide annual leadership institutes in collaboration with state departments of education and institutions of higher education and where new and experienced leaders share best practices, network, and learn from NCLB information experts.*

These proposed technical assistance strategies reflect both the coordination and information-sharing roles of the Southwest TA Center and the need for both content and hands-on approaches in promoting leadership development and institutional capacity building.

Southwest RAC members were very enthusiastic and supportive of the establishment of contact lists of regional school leaders who would be willing to serve as mentors and/or provide access to other regional leaders and leaders in training. The addition of regional leadership institutes also provides a more structured approach for promoting collegiality and sharing within each state and across the entire Southwest region. The Southwest Center's central role in this process will provide valuable insights on critical leadership development issues and promising practices, which then can be shared with higher education programs to help them improve their leadership development programs. As a result of these strategies, new and inexperienced leaders will have access to experienced school leaders and opportunities to visit sites/districts to learn and observe best practices. It will also provide formal opportunities and a structure for new and experienced leaders to share insights and best practices that will assist in the effective implementation of NCLB.

3. *Provide curriculum walkthrough training for state and district facilitators with particular emphasis on reading and math instruction aligned to state standards.*
4. *Identify and provide training for state facilitators on effective models of collaboration that result in improved student achievement, specifically for American Indian, Hispanic, and African-American populations.*

These technical assistance strategies recognize the important instructional leadership role required of both district and school leaders in the era of standards-based curriculum reform and instructional accountability. Through these types of “cutting edge” instructional leadership training initiatives provided through the regional TA Center, Southwest district and school leaders will deepen their knowledge of effective curriculum implementation, which is key to assisting and supporting teachers’ efforts in providing effective instruction for students.

5. *Provide information on NCLB and assist with the definition of related funding parameters, with a special focus on regional implication and impact, through various forums, including: a) Web site that would provide FAQs on NCLB, b) Web-based and live “Ask the expert” help desks (of former superintendents, central staff, principals, etc.), c) regional workshops and seminars; d) multimedia presentations (video and audio tapes, PowerPoint presentations, etc.), and e) written and electronic newsletters and other periodic communications.*

A lack of thorough understanding of NCLB regulations and their impact on schools and school districts is a major challenge in some of the more remote areas of the Southwest region as well as within many of the urban districts. This strategy focuses on developing a variety of information dissemination mechanisms that focus on state, district, and school personnel as the primary audiences and ensure adequate and accurate understanding of NCLB, especially as it relates to Southwest issues such as ELL and bilingual education, rural education, and distance learning, cultural diversity and sensitivity, and migrant and recent immigrant support programs.

6. *Provide access to scientifically based research (SBR) evaluations of all regional education programs on the Internet, starting with literacy*
7. *Provide workshops and access to teams of research experts that can provide guidance on how to meet SBR standards.*
8. *Establish a national network (i.e., designated centers) that can help determine and define SBR practices in focus areas, such as special education, ELL, mathematics, and reading for specific subgroups.*

The focus of these technical assistance strategies is on building school and district expertise in conducting scientifically based research and evaluation practices and in providing

one-stop access to SBR-validated instructional practices in key focus areas that are important to Southwest schools and school districts.

9. *Provide assistance with the effective use of data to determine teacher and student learning needs through: a) regional workshops and seminars for teachers and administrators, b) online toolkits and other low-tech instructional resources to provide targeted assistance in effectively using disaggregated data to inform instruction, and c) establishing a clearinghouse for regional sharing of data analysis and use of disaggregated data for specific professional development and curriculum alignment.*

The focus on accountability over the past decade that has culminated in NCLB has increased the level of importance of data-informed decisionmaking for instructional planning as well as for evaluation. The Southwest TA Center should play a central role in promoting the appropriate collection and use of data by schools and school districts not only through workshops and information sharing but also through the development and sharing of high- and low-tech tool kits that are aligned with the state assessments that are used throughout the region.

Challenge #3: District and state research-based staff development

A cornerstone of effective educational reform involves providing adequate and timely professional development that is delivered in a variety of formats and through content that is targeted to the various participants. A benefit of the standards-based movement has been the introduction of professional development standards and research-based practices that increase the impact and benefits of professional development resources.

The professional development challenges identified by the Southwest RAC include:

- Lack of awareness of research-based staff development
- Lack of validated research-based strategies/programs/practices
- Lack of understanding of instructional teaming/collaboration
- Greater diversity of access to online staff development opportunities
- Lack of targeted interventions based upon needs of students

- Classroom management (including IDEIA).

Technical assistance needs and strategies

A corollary to building the institutional capacity of schools and school districts is focusing on promoting research-based professional development for teachers and administrators that enhances their individual skills and knowledge about their content areas, promotes effective teaching strategies for diverse student populations, and supports a greater understanding of NCLB. Critical technical assistance strategies recommended by the Southwest RAC to promote district and state professional development include:

1. *Identify and share results on scientifically based rigorous evaluation and research on staff development.*
2. *Provide online staff development opportunities and other resources that would provide targeted interventions in high needs areas (e.g., ELL, special ed).*

These two strategies reinforce the dual roles of the Southwest Region TA Center as a one-stop clearinghouse for research-based practices that are gleaned from national and regional sources as well as an online service provider that targets topical areas that are critical for Southwest teachers and administrators. It provides practicing educators with a broad spectrum of online and onsite research-based staff development opportunities that address the learning needs of the diverse student population in the Southwest region. It also provides advice and guidance on effective evaluation and implementation of the best research-based practices to staff development coordinators at the school, district, and state levels.

3. *Promote internship opportunities at schools for college students who want to become teachers.*

The regional TA Center is ideally situated to bridge the gap between higher education teacher preparation programs and school districts seeking new teachers who are trained in standards-based instruction and working with diverse student populations. Specifically, the center would advise and assist colleges of education in developing internship programs through

which pre-service teachers gain valuable field experience and provide relevant training in best practices to pre-service teachers in partnership with educational internships in actual school settings.

4. *Assist in the interpretation of federal laws (NCLB, IDEIA, Title I, e-rate, etc.) and provide policy briefs that explain changes to NCLB and other federal programs (IDEIA, Title I, e-rate, etc.).*

Both teachers and administrators are regularly impacted by federal and state regulations and guidelines that define specific roles and responsibilities related to certain student populations such as English language learners, special need students, etc. In some cases, these programs provide additional resources or include opportunities for flexibility in implementation that may go untapped because teachers and district staffs lack adequate understanding of the programs and the laws that created them. This strategy recognizes the role of the Southwest TA Center in providing initial training and periodic updates of the various federal and state laws that impact district schools that will better facilitate the allocation of resources and recommend appropriate staff development opportunities to address NCLB and other federal laws.

Challenge #4: High expectations for all students and teachers with teacher/student supports

Although the first challenge focuses on eliminating short-term deficits between the achievement levels of minority and other students, this challenge addresses the long-term goal of maintaining high expectations and sustaining high levels of achievement for all students and teachers regardless of their backgrounds. The key issues and problems related to this challenge that were identified by the Southwest RAC members include:

- Lack of belief that all children can learn at high levels
- Lower expectations across diverse populations within the region

- Lack of access to student support services and differing school and district capacities to provide these services
- Need for instructional strategies that work with diverse populations and learning styles
- Lack of adequate high-level instruction and course options, especially in rural and smaller school districts
- Differing standards and benchmarks among states within the Southwest region.

Technical assistance needs and strategies

The challenge of promoting high expectations for all students requires that the Southwest Region TA Center address three separate and distinct areas: belief structures of teachers and other school staff as well as parents; instructional, and student support strategies that are effective with diverse populations; and more challenging course options. Nevertheless, the role of the center envisioned for this challenge area remains similar to those previously identified: serving as a clearinghouse for research-based best practices that target Southwest needs and diverse student populations; providing online and other toolkits that can be used by schools and school districts; providing special workshops and seminars; and augmenting the types of resources that are available for rural and smaller districts within the region.

The following technical assistance strategies were identified by the Southwest RAC members to promote and support high expectations for all students:

1. *Identify and share strategies for working with diverse populations and learning styles and for establishing and maintaining student and teacher support structures that promote equity and sustainability of student achievement successes.*
2. *Identify and share online toolkits and other low-tech instructional resources to provide targeted interventions for diverse populations.*
3. *Identify and share information on schools where diverse learners are achieving successfully.*

Although closely related, these strategies differ somewhat in their priorities. The first strategy focuses more closely on promoting equity and sustaining success among all students, as reflected in the belief structures of teachers and other school educators (and parents) that all children can and will achieve at the highest levels when held to high standards and when provided with the appropriate support structures to achieve these standards. It also requires promoting and using differentiated teaching styles to accommodate the diverse learning styles of students without sacrificing these high expectations. The TA Center's role envisioned by the RAC members is to help identify research-based practices that promote high-expectation value systems and equity and, as necessary, provide regional workshops, seminars, and supporting materials to help achieve these goals.

The second strategy focuses on the clearinghouse and development role of the TA Center in providing access to online and low-tech instructional materials and student support resources that can address specific instructional deficiencies and other related needs of students. Finally, the last strategy takes advantage of the center's unique position to maintain and share vetted lists of schools within each state and across the Southwest region that have validated evidence of their success in working with diverse learners.

4. *Provide strategies for integrating technology throughout the entire curriculum.*
5. *Technical assistance for expanding high-level online learning opportunities and/or provide Web-based courses (AP, math/science, etc.).*

These strategies acknowledge the important role that technology can play in providing differentiated learning opportunities at all levels and expanding the access to high-level courses in smaller and/or more rural districts or those without a critical mass of students interested in taking the various courses. Again, the TA Center is envisioned as a clearinghouse of researched-based technology and online programs for diverse learners, a professional development provider

on how to effectively integrate technology for teachers and principals, and an organizer and possible provider of online courses for students.

6. *Align student achievement standards/benchmarks across states within the region to address mobile student populations*

With the high degree of mobility within the Southwest region, the TA Center can play a pivotal role in aligning the various state standards, benchmarks, and assessments within the region and promoting greater consistency in both the content and rigor of the various curricula.

Challenge # 5: Broader public engagement

This challenge area addresses the serious problem caused by the lack of knowledge by many parents and other community members about NCLB and other federally funded programs that impact their local schools and students. Specific problems and issues identified by the Southwest RAC members in the area of public engagement include:

- Lack of training for school board members and the general public to understand NCLB/AYP and other federal programs (IDEIA, Title I, e-rate, etc.)
- Need to disseminate information to various stakeholder populations on NCLB and other federal programs (IDEIA, Title I, e-rate, etc.) through the use of technology as well as other low-tech strategies (newsletters, etc.)
- Need to promote higher expectations among parents
- Need to find appropriate and effective strategies for parental involvement among diverse populations.

Technical assistance needs and strategies

The goal of broadening public engagement involves much more than just ramping up efforts to “spread the word” and, at the very least, must take into account the need for

developing different messages for different audiences. As a starting point, this means translating information into multiple languages, removing or restating educational rhetoric in lay terms, using multiple types of media approaches, and acknowledging and accommodating cultural differences. More importantly, it means shifting the focus from *public awareness* to *public engagement*, which requires two-way dialogues and more creative approaches that break down barriers that inhibit greater parent involvement. In some cases, it also means overcoming the negative educational experiences of some parents and building their capacity to help their children succeed academically. It also requires increasing accessibility and opportunities for social interactions, such as family dinners, Saturday sessions, and community-based meetings.

The role envisioned for the Southwest Region TA Center in promoting broader public engagement involves building local capacity of state, district, and school staffs as well as generating and disseminating information directly to the public. It also involves serving as a developer of public-oriented information documents, in a variety of media formats that specifically target Southwest parents and other community stakeholders. Specific strategies recommended by the Southwest RAC include:

1. *Collaborate with state and district organizations to provide training and explore multiple ways to gather and disseminate information, targeted to various stakeholders, including parents, school board members and the general public, on NCLB and other federal programs (NCLB, IDEIA, Title I, e-rate, etc.).*

These strategies encompass a central role of the Southwest TA Center in developing new materials and new approaches and in collecting and sharing successful strategies and products from throughout the region. It also involves collaborative efforts to provide regional workshops and seminars for district and school personnel (and board members) to better help them communicate with their various constituents and share information about NCLB and other federal programs in their respective districts. Although the use of technology can be a positive tool in both gathering and disseminating information on various federal programs (much of

which is available through Web sites sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education), RAC members were very cautious about placing too much emphasis on technology for sharing information because of the significant number of parents and community members who may not have direct access to the Internet.

The RAC also considered the importance of making available resource materials that would be easily utilized by members of the public with varied degrees of educational knowledge. Stakeholders with different backgrounds might require different levels of clarification of topics and terms in order to insure that material is appropriate and user friendly.

In the spirit of collaboration, members of the committee also suggest collaboration with parent organizations and the establishment of a network of parent liaisons able to serve as a resource. This would allow the public and educators to access and share the wealth of information available through these parent liaisons and parent organizations.

2. Promote regional workshops for staff to understand how to work with culturally diverse parents.

The need to shift from public awareness to public engagement requires more than the sharing of successful techniques and documents and for replicating best practices. Promoting cultural, ethnic, and linguistic sensitivity are important foundations for any public engagement efforts intended to create the types of two-way communications envisioned by the Southwest RAC members. The proposed TA Center is ideally situated to provide the type of leadership and resources to support this effort across the varied populations of the Southwest region.

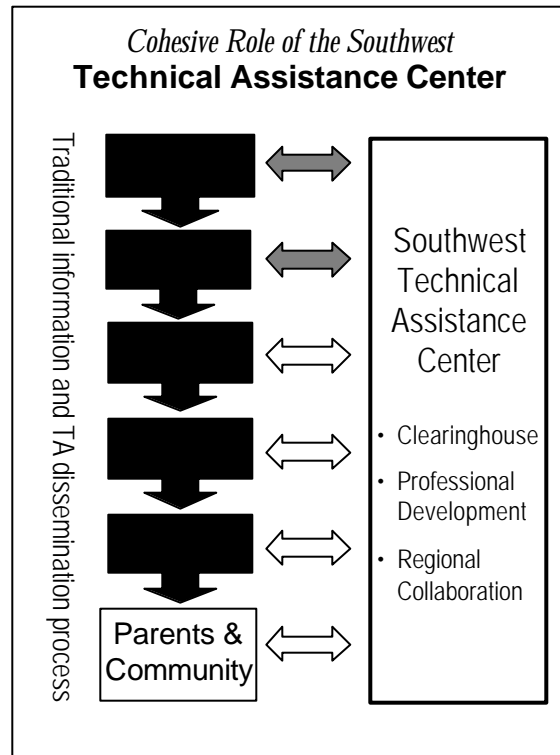
3. Assist with increasing parental use of SES services and selecting and assessing quality of providers.

The limited use by many parents of the supplemental education services (SES), such as tutoring and school choice, provides an indicator of lack of parental awareness regarding these opportunities. In addition to promoting the sharing of information, using some of the approaches described in the previous strategies, this strategy also recommends that the

Southwest TA Center develop tools and techniques for helping parents assess the quality and effectiveness of SES providers, such as utilizing local tutors, so that they can maximize the benefits to their children and other students.

Role and function of the Southwest TA Center

As part of the identification of the critical challenges and recommended technical assistance strategies for the new Southwest Technical Assistance Center, SW RAC members also discussed potential roles and functions of the center that would facilitate the implementation of these strategies. The challenge of balancing the extensive and diverse educational and NCLB support needs throughout the region with the limited funding levels proposed by the authorizing legislation resulted in significant discussions about



“appropriate” types of services that could be provided across the broad geographic region. During the final meeting of the RAC, these discussions led to the development of the accompanying graphic and further articulation of the three main center functions that are described in greater detail in the remainder of this section: *clearinghouse*, *professional development*, and *regional collaboration*.

The series of boxes on the left side of the graphic represent the traditional, top-down flow of information on NCLB and other related federal education programs. Too frequently, misinterpretations of the original content and focus of the information increase as it reaches each of the various levels. Consequently, the Southwest TA Center can provide an invaluable

service by establishing direct, two-way lines of communication and collaboration with each of these various stakeholder groups (as noted by the series of horizontal arrows). In doing so, the Southwest TA Center must establish and maintain its strongest lines of communication and collaboration (as noted by the darker arrows in the graphic) with the various units within the U.S. Department of Education and the state departments of education of the five member states that comprise the Southwest region. This is a critical function to ensure that the information and technical assistance being provided at all stakeholder levels accurately reflects the originating sources and policies related to NCLB implementation at the federal and state levels.

One of the major challenges facing Southwest TA Center repeatedly noted by the RAC members is the differing educational priorities and needs of the member states and their respective schools and school districts resulting from their diverse minority populations of African-Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics, and the broad geographic and cultural expanse between the eastern and western parts of the region. For example, issues related to English Language Learners and recent immigrant education, which are significant challenges for both New Mexico and Texas, have substantially lower priorities in Arkansas and Louisiana where African-Americans are the largest minority populations. As a result, strategies implemented by the Southwest TA Center for addressing the five high-priority challenges in these states must take these differences into account in providing technical assistance and information sharing services throughout the region.

Although RAC members see an important cohesive function for the Southwest TA Center in serving the unique needs of member states, they also recognize that the limited resources of the Southwest TA Center may hamper its abilities to serve the broad southwest geographic region. Consequently, RAC members urge the U.S. Department of Education to consider the placement within the Southwest region of either an additional regional center or a

topical center that addresses a strong regional need that the Southwest region shares with other regions, like ELL and bilingual education.

Clearinghouse role

The major function of the Southwest TA Center as clearinghouse and “one stop center” was a recurring theme throughout the SW RAC meetings and public outreach activities. RAC members repeatedly discussed examples of the lack awareness and understanding of NCLB and related federal programs among the various stakeholder groups and limited venues within the states and across the region for gathering and sharing promising practices and educational tools that have proven successful in meeting state and federal student achievement standards and benchmarks. While important for all schools and schools districts, the Southwest RAC’s “one stop” role is a vital service for smaller and more remote districts and schools that may not have the necessary resources or capacities to independently seek the types of information that can be provided through the Center.

Examples of the types of clearinghouse functions that were identified by the SW RAC members are:

- Policy Briefs/Newsletters—both electronic and hardcopy versions that explain critical NCLB and education reform issues in language appropriate for the stakeholder audiences
- Education Research Services—reference and referral services to promote research-based practices
- “Best” Products/Practices/Templates—a database and archival storage area of a wide range of successful instructional programs, techniques for addressing the high-

- priority challenges, and tools and templates for communicating and sharing information
- Search Engine/ Archive (electronic and hard copy)—web-based search services similar to those provided by Google[®] and Yahoo[®] with links to both national and regional resources and with hardcopy options for sharing information with stakeholders with limited online access
 - Glossary/FAQs—that can help explain educational jargon and acronyms to various stakeholders
 - Consultative Role (compliance, flexibility)—advice and feedback on NCLB compliance and flexibility requirements that can help stakeholders understand and “think through” their options
 - Central Linkage/Portal—a single window to national and regional online resources that support NCLB and other educational reform priorities
 - Expert Help Desk/“Ask the Expert”—peer stakeholders who can share important information and experience with a regional flavor
 - Regional Resources Rosters—contact lists of regional practitioners and stakeholders who are willing to serve as mentors or to host site visits to share their best practices
 - State Alignment/Access/Sharing—source for aligning, comparing, and contrasting state-specific variations in areas such as standards, assessments, policies, guidelines, and practices to address common NCLB and other federal and state reform priorities

Professional development role

The important role and function of professional development throughout the region envisioned by the SW RAC members is evidenced by the fact that two of the high-priority

challenges focus on leadership capacity building and research-based professional development. RAC members spoke repeatedly of the need for a variety of workshops presented in a variety of formats (online, regional, etc.) to a variety of stakeholder (state and district administrators, principals, teachers, etc.). Acknowledging the prohibitive costs of scheduling and conducting these local workshops throughout the broad geographic region, RAC members encourage the Southwest TA Center to explore and seek collaborations with a variety of local and regional partners, including other federal and state comprehensive centers, institutions for higher education, and local school districts to help provide these important professional development services through online courses and other technologies as well as face-to-face regional meetings.

Regional collaboration role

The third major role of the Southwest TA Center envisioned by RAC members results from its unique ability to work within and across the member states that comprise the region to facilitate interactions among the various stakeholder groups listed in the previous graphic and to promote collaborations that address the five high-priority challenges identified by the RAC.

Examples of the types of regional collaboration activities cited by RAC include:

- Advisory groups—representatives of the various stakeholder groups to help set TA Center priorities and to provide feedback to Center staff on local NCLB implementation issues
- Vetted information (federal/state)—sharing information validated by federal and state authorities that strongly impacts the Southwest region
- State/federal/local collaborations—ad hoc and long-term interactions with federal, state, and local education agencies and staff members that promote educational

reform, address regional education issues and challenges, and support NCLB priorities throughout the Southwest region

- State “cc”s in district communications—ensuring that state education agencies are regularly informed of both formal and informal interactions between the center and local schools and school districts (i.e., “kept in the loop”)

Glossary

AYP—Adequate Yearly Progress, defined in the NCLB Act as a way to measure the academic achievement of elementary and secondary school students in relation to individual state student academic achievement standards.

CHARTER SCHOOLS—public schools that are largely free to innovate, and often provide more effective programs and choice to underserved groups of students. Charter schools are subject to the “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) and other accountability requirements of the NCLB Act.

COMPREHENSIVE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTERS—centers authorized by Section 203 of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-279). Appropriations for the centers in Fiscal Year for 2005 would enable the U.S. Department of Education to support 20 centers, 10 of which must remain in their current regions.

COMMON CORE OF DATA—the National Center for Education Statistics’ comprehensive, annual, national statistical database of information concerning all public elementary and secondary schools and local education agencies.

CONSOLIDATED STATE PLAN FOR NCLB—the plan from each state that demonstrates the state has adopted challenging academic content and student achievement standards that will be used by the state, its local educational agencies, and its schools.

CORE SUBJECTS—English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography [Section 9101(11)].

While the federal statute includes the arts in the core academic subjects, it does not specify which of the arts are core academic subjects; therefore, states must make this determination.

DFO—Designated Federal Official. A DFO acts as a liaison between a federal advisory committee and federal agency and must be present at all committee meetings.

ELL—English Language Learners

E-RATE— the E-rate program provides discounted access to telecommunications and Internet services for all eligible schools and libraries in the United States.

FACA—the Federal Advisory Committee Act was created in 1972 (Public Law 92-463) by the U.S. Congress to seek the advice and assistance of our nation’s citizens. Advisory committees: provide advice that is relevant, objective, and open to the public.

FAQs— a list of frequently asked questions and their answers.

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS—States must define a “highly qualified” teacher. The requirement that teachers be highly qualified applies to all public elementary or secondary school teachers employed by a local educational agency who teach a core academic subject. “Highly qualified” means that the teacher: has obtained full state certification as a teacher or passed the state teacher licensing examination and holds a license to teach in the state, and does not have certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis; holds a minimum of a bachelor’s degree; and has demonstrated subject matter competency in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches, in a manner determined by the State and in compliance with Section 9101(23) of ESEA.

IDEA—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was enacted by Congress in 1975 to guarantee free and appropriate public education for children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment possible.

IDEIA—Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, was enacted on December 3, 2004. Although the Board of Education has not yet revised special education regulations, the new federal statute will supersede existing regulations in any areas of inconsistency.

IEP—Individualized educational plan required by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IES—Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education that was established by the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002

IHE—Institute of Higher Education

LEA—Local Education Agency

LEP—Limited English Proficiency

NCLB—The No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in 2002, has expanded the federal role in education and set requirements in place that affect every public school in America.

OESE—Office of Elementary and Secondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education

RACs—Regional Advisory Committees that are authorized by Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-279)

RAC QUORUM—is a majority of appointed members. A RAC must have a quorum to meet or hold an official meeting.

REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES—federally-supported regional institutions that have operated since 1966 and reauthorized by Section 174 of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002

SCIENTIFICALLY BASED RESEARCH—Section 9101(37) of ESEA, as amended by NCLB, defines scientifically based research as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs.” (P.L. 107-279)

SEA—State Education Agency

STATE—references to “states” include the 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the freely associated states, and the outlying areas.

SUPPLEMENTAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICES—additional academic instruction designed to increase the academic achievement of students in schools that have not met state targets for increasing student achievement (AYP) for three or more years. Services may include tutoring and after-school services by public or private providers approved by the state.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE—assistance in identifying, selecting, or designing solutions based on research, including professional development and high-quality training to

implement solutions leading to improved educational and other practices and classroom instruction based on scientifically valid research; and improved planning, design, and administration of programs; assistance in interpreting, analyzing, and utilizing statistics and evaluations; and other assistance necessary to encourage the improvement of teaching and learning through the applications of techniques supported by scientifically valid research (P.L. 107-279)

WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE (WWC)—clearinghouse established in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences to provide educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education.

List of tables

Table 1: Public inputs for the Southwest RAC	9
Table 2: Meeting requirements to establish state standards.....	10
Table 3: Teacher quality indicators	12