
VII. Implementation of MSAP Projects: Enabled Activities and ED Role

In this chapter, we examine the ways in which the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) districts have planned and implemented MSAP projects in 1998–99 and 1999–2000, as well as their plans for continuing projects after MSAP funding ends. Next, we examine how MSAP projects have budgeted and spent project funds and the extent to which they have been able to access other sources of support. Finally, we turn to the role of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in the MSAP program, focusing on the processes used to award MSAP grants and the technical assistance provided by ED’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), Office for Civil Rights (OCR), and Equity Assistance Centers.

Planning and Implementation Activities in MSAP Districts

Of the 57 MSAP projects, 20 (35 percent) included a planning year (1998-99) for one or more of their schools.¹ Because many of the grant awards were not made until summer 1998, some of the school programs could not be implemented for the 1998–99 school year. For example, several Project Directors reported that they were not hired until well into the 1998–99 school year. Others said that although their project had not intended to have a planning period, the late start created delays, and planning occurred while equipment was being ordered and staff hired. Typically this planning involved teachers (in 70 percent of the projects with planning years) and parents (in 60 percent) as well as the MSAP Project Director and/or other administrators.² The Project Directors named 15 types of activities that occurred during the planning time. The most common are:

- providing professional development for staff—reported for 11 projects, or 55 percent of those with a planning year
- designing curriculum—reported by 9 projects
- learning from outsiders—(e.g., through visits to schools featuring the theme planned for the project’s school)—reported by 6 projects
- planning and conducting recruitment activities—reported by 4 projects
- recruiting, hiring, and organizing staff—also reported by 4 projects

In addition to planning, the 57 projects began implementing their MSAP programs: incorporating themes into instruction, providing staff development related to those themes, installing new equipment, adding special staff to assist MSAP-supported schools, developing links with parent and community members, and other activities that are necessary to provide and support special curricula in magnet schools.

¹ See Table A-VII-1 in Appendix VII.

² See Table A-VII-2 in Appendix VII.

Project Directors described a variety of implementation activities, as the examples below indicate.

MSAP Project Directors told us:

- An MSAP middle school has created a CD with the help of the local Botanical Garden, and it is being showcased at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. Another school in the same district has developed a Distance Learning curriculum with the help of a local college, and it is being shared with a number of non-MSAP schools in the district and city.
- An MSAP project developed handbooks that are unique to each MSAP school and include general information (e.g., “Learning the Ropes,” the school calendar, district policies, and a map of the school) and specific information about what students in each grade will learn. The information on the curriculum is backed up with a one-page syllabus that MSAP teachers developed during the summer, giving the curriculum new coherence and specificity. These handbooks have proven to be useful not only in helping teachers plan lessons but also in answering parents’ questions about what they can expect if their children attend this school.
- Implementation of a school improvement model in an MSAP school has encouraged many community groups to come to the school, observe the program in operation, and learn how it operates. The Project Director sees this as an important step in facilitating communication and building support for schools in the community.
- An MSAP school with a global studies and technology curriculum reports that students not only work diligently on their laptops and read more of the information found on their computers, but they are increasingly aware of political, social, and economic factors facing the world.
- Community outreach in one MSAP project includes an Intergenerational Club with students and seniors. Together they put together a penny harvest, collecting coins for food.

Plans for Continuing Projects after MSAP Funding Ends

The MSAP is designed to help school districts develop and begin implementing magnet schools but is not intended as a way to sustain those projects over time. As part of their applications, districts are to describe the ways in which they will continue the magnet school project after grant funds are no longer available. In our interviews with Project Directors in 1999, we asked what the district’s strategies are for continuing the magnet project after the current grant period. The 57 projects are using six main strategies.^{3, 4}

- District support, committed and sought—53 percent of the projects are looking to their districts for support. In 32 percent, the district is committed to continuing the project; in 21 percent, MSAP projects are seeking district support but it is not yet committed.

³ See Table A-VII-4 in Appendix VII.

⁴ Thirty-three projects (58 percent) cited only one strategy; the remaining 24 projects cited from 2–4 strategies, for an average overall of 1.6 strategies. Four projects (7 percent) either did not respond or provided ambiguous responses.

- MSAP reapplication—18 percent of the projects intend to apply for a 2001 MSAP grant; however, all but one of these projects are using other strategies as well.
- Other state, federal grants—26 percent are seeking other federal (i.e., besides MSAP) and state grants.
- Self-sustaining schools—18 percent of the projects are developing magnet schools that can be self-sustaining, with no further outside support needed.
- Business support—12 percent are looking to businesses for support.
- School reputation—4 percent are counting on the good reputation of their magnet schools to create public and district support for continuation.

Enabled Activities—How MSAP Projects Budget and Spend Their Funds

Funds from the MSAP enable projects to support planning and promotional activities related to their academic programs and services, add specially hired staff to support and enhance school instruction; provide focused training in program areas or educational methods for teachers and other staff; and purchase equipment such as computers, video broadcasting equipment, or science centers; and supplies like supplementary reading texts and math manipulatives.⁵ When districts submit their applications for MSAP grants, they include budgets that detail the amount of funds requested to support the proposed projects. When grants are made by the Department, the funds are virtually always less than the districts requested, so grantees adjust their plans and submit revised budgets that reflect the actual amounts, not the hoped-for ones.

During our fall and winter 1999 interviews, we asked the 57 MSAP Project Directors what changes were made in their programs as a result of the reduced budget amounts. Responses indicated that slightly more than one fourth of the projects made no major changes. For the remainder of the projects, the most common change (made by 47 percent of the 57 projects) was to eliminate staff positions (e.g., a technology specialist or parent coordinator) or to reduce positions from full time to part time. The next most common change (made by 35 percent of the 57 projects) was to reduce purchases of equipment and materials. Fifteen projects (26 percent) either delayed implementation of programs or activities or reduced their scope (with relatively small changes). Overall, despite the reduction from requested amounts, the Project Directors reported that their programs were implemented with few major changes from the plans on which their application budgets were based.⁶

⁵ Allowable costs are described in 20 U.S.C. 7201–7213, Section 280.40. Costs not allowable (described in Section 280.41) are planning costs that exceed more than 50 percent in the first year of an MSAP grant, 15 percent in the second year, 10 percent in the third year, and any amount after the third year; transportation funds; and any activity that does not augment academic improvement.

⁶ See Table A-VII-5 in Appendix VII.

MSAP Project Directors told us:

- Like many other MSAP grantees, one district is trying to attract students to areas of a large city that are commonly seen as unsafe. To alleviate parents' fears, the project hired assistants (informally called "hand-holders") for elementary school students from outside the school neighborhood. These assistants check on every student each day and have cell phones with immediate access to and by parents. This has proven to be a popular service that increases parents' sense of security about their children.
- Districts with old school buildings and new MSAP-funded computer equipment have found that wiring and security are sometimes inadequate. Project Directors point out the importance of taking wiring costs and time demands into consideration in implementing programs. One Project Director found that Board policies would not provide a security system to annexes and portables, where computers were needed, so his solution was to place the equipment on carts, moving them into secure areas at the end of the day.

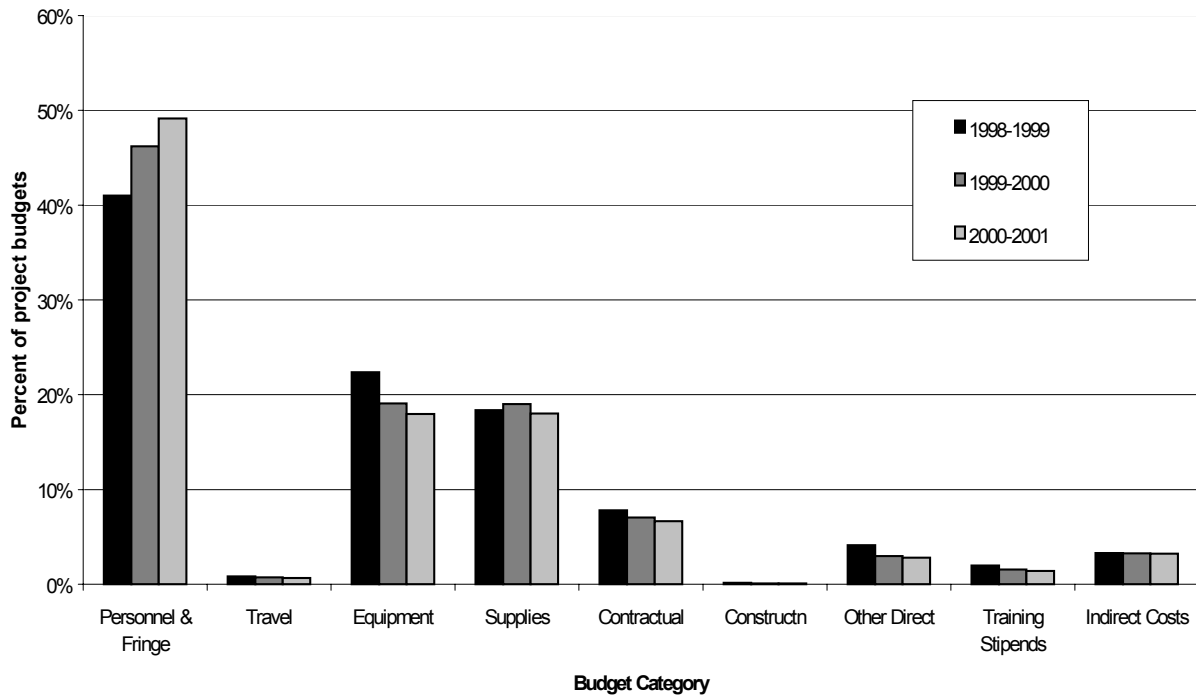
Differences in Grant Amounts and in Grantees' Distribution of Funds

Grant amounts may vary from year to year according to a project's implementation plan. Differences between first and second year funds are most often attributable to provision of a planning year and the opening of an MSAP school in the second year of the grant cycle. The final, three-year budgets that projects submit to ED provide information about the major categories and amounts, and they are summarized in Figure VII-1. It reports on the budgets for only 50 of the 57 projects and provides the average amounts budgeted for each year of the grant period, by category.

As seen in Figure VII-1, projects spend about 45 percent of their budgets on staff (personnel and fringe benefits), with increases each year.⁷ Equipment and supplies each account for about 20 percent of the budget overall, leaving about 15 percent for the remaining budget items: travel (e.g., to attend conferences, observe other magnet programs), contractual (e.g., for local program evaluations or assistance from outside experts), construction, and other direct costs. As the figure also indicates, equipment budgets are largest during the first and second years, as projects begin to implement programs, and they taper off somewhat in the third year.

⁷ See Table A-VII-6 in Appendix VII.

Figure VII-1
Percentage of Direct Costs by Budget Category and Year for 50 MSAP Projects

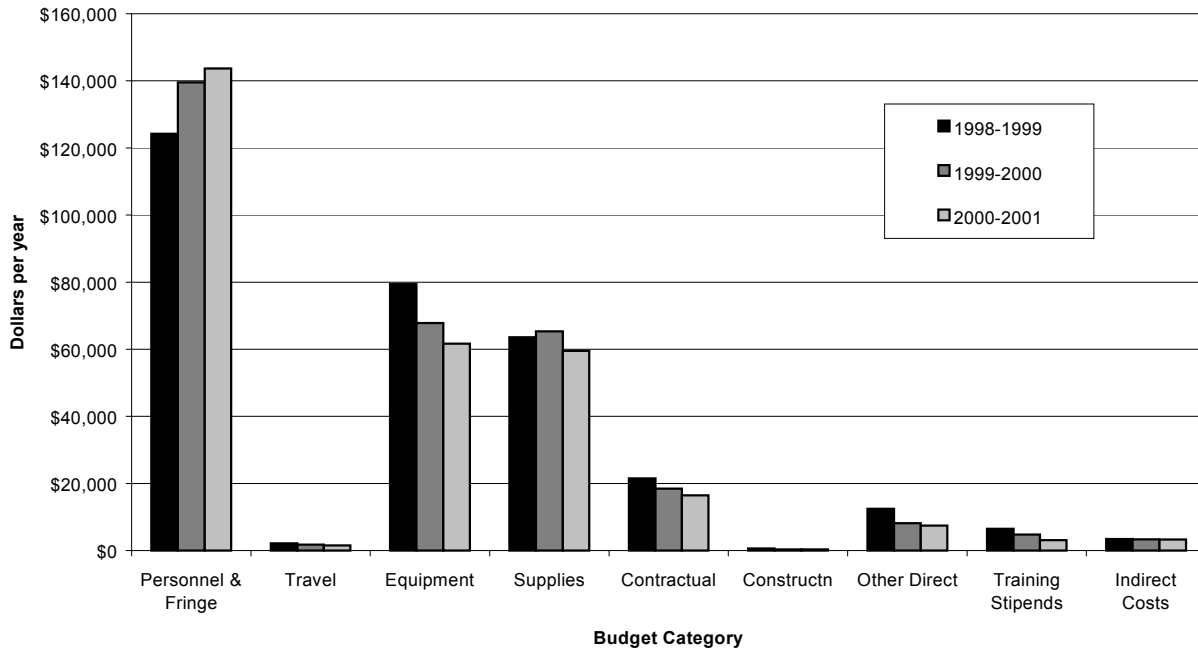


n=50 projects
 Source: U.S. Department of Education

To provide an indication of what grants mean at the school level, Figure VII-2 focuses on school-level budgets for the 233 MSAP-supported schools (about 80 percent of all MSAP-supported schools) for which such budgets are available. As it indicates, on average, MSAP-supported schools spend about \$135,000 on personnel (staff and fringe), about \$70,000 on equipment, and about \$60,000 on supplies per year.⁸ For these schools, grants average about \$307,000 per school year, but the range is considerable across the projects. For example, in 1998–99, the school budgets ranged from \$11,000 (for a school with a planning year) to \$844,000 (for a school establishing a technology-based program).

⁸ See Table A-VII-7 in Appendix VII.

Figure VII-2
Mean Budget Amounts for 233 MSAP-supported Schools in 50 MSAP Projects, by Year



n=233 schools
 Source: U.S. Department of Education

Other Sources of Support Obtained by MSAP Projects and Schools

To augment their MSAP grants, districts seek funds from other sources, such as other federal programs (e.g., Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration, National Science Foundation), state and district programs, local businesses and foundations, and in-kind donations. We asked MSAP Project Directors whether their districts have been successful in obtaining additional funds specifically for their MSAP-supported schools, that is, in addition to federal, state, and local funds available for all schools in their districts. Of the 56 projects responding, 25 (45 percent) projects report that they have obtained additional support from other sources:⁹

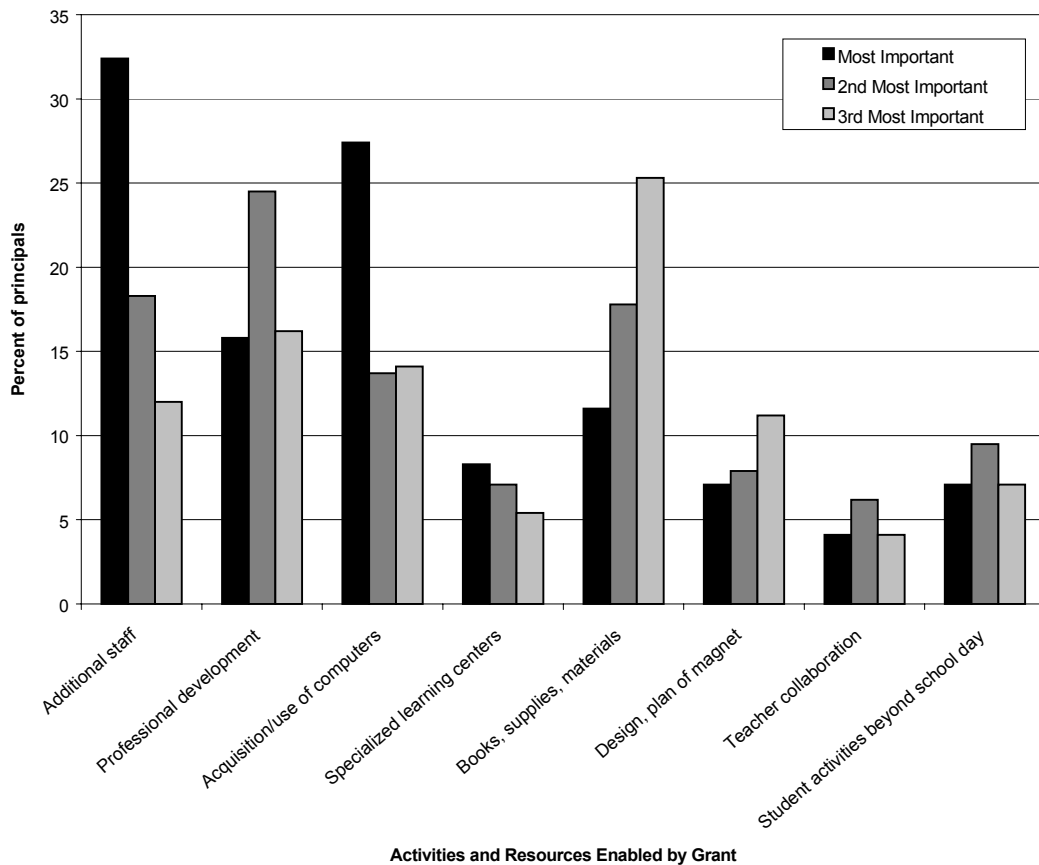
- Federal programs other than MSAP—Five districts report receiving a total of \$3,360,000, with a range of \$5,000 to \$3 million and an average of \$672,000.
- State programs—Five districts report receiving a total of \$6,646,231, with a range from \$47,626 to \$6 million and an average of \$1,329,246.
- District programs—One district reports receiving \$2,120,000.
- Businesses and foundations—Twelve districts report receiving a total of \$1,177,565, with a range from \$6,000 to \$403,200 and an average of \$98,130.
- In-kind and other types—Five districts report receiving other assistance but did not specify amounts.

⁹ See Table A-VII-8 in Appendix VII.

What Federal Funds Enable Projects To Do

What do these funds enable projects and schools to do that they could not do otherwise? We asked principals to identify the three most important activities and resources that MSAP grants enabled their schools to provide. As presented in Figure VII-3, almost one third of the principals of MSAP schools consider the addition of staff (e.g., content area specialists, technical support, classroom aides, and school program coordinators) to be the most important thing that MSAP funds make possible.¹⁰ About 27 percent of the principals consider support for the acquisition of computers most important. When we combined principals' choices for the three most important enabled activities, 63 percent of the principals cite the addition of staff, and about 55 percent indicate professional development, the acquisition and use of computers, and books, supplies, and materials.

Figure VII-3
Most Important Activities and Resources Enabled by MSAP Grant from the Viewpoint of Principals



n=241 principals
Source: Principal Survey, 1999–2000, Item 33

¹⁰ See Table A-VII-9 in Appendix VII.

How MSAP Grants Are Awarded¹¹

We describe the process of reviewing MSAP applications and awarding grants in full in the appendix for this chapter and summarize it briefly below.¹²

Announcements and Awarding of Grants

Announcements of the MSAP grant application period are made in the Federal Register, along with information on how and where to apply. Following that announcement, a three-part review process is implemented:

1. ED staff identify and recruit members of a review panel and screen applications to ensure compliance with regulations (e.g., inclusion of a desegregation plan).
2. Each selected panelist receives and reads about eight or nine MSAP applications and makes preliminary evaluations of their merit. Each application is reviewed by three panelists.
3. Panelists meet in groups to identify the strengths and weaknesses of applications and assign scores of up to 100 points for each one: for Plan of Operation (25 points), Quality of Personnel (10 points), Quality of Project Design (35 points), Budget and Resources (5 points), Evaluation Plan (15 points), and Commitment and Capacity (10 points), with up to 45 additional points for applications meeting specified priorities (e.g., Need for Assistance, 5 points; New or Revised Magnet Schools, 10 points).

We examined a limited sample of reviewer comments, and it suggests that identified strengths and weaknesses tend to focus on definition of roles, extensiveness of staff development plans, realistic benchmarks for measuring the effectiveness of a plan, and realistic and attainable objectives. Comments did not reflect substantive concerns regarding a plan's interpretation of the MSAP statute and regulations. At least for this sample, reviewers seemed to be most interested in whether applicants provide a thoroughly developed, defensible plan for their MSAP project, with sufficiently high levels of detail.

Applications with at least 115 points are considered for funding, and awards are determined from a ranking list created for each review panel.

Before award announcements are made, ED program staff check the panel comments for accuracy, and the Office for Civil Rights conducts a review to certify that civil rights assurances are met and that the desegregation plan meets MSAP regulations and eligibility standards. Grants are then awarded.

¹¹ The information in this section was obtained from interviews with ED staff who organize and oversee the reviews of applications and award determinations.

¹² See the section on How MSAP Grants Are Awarded at the end of Appendix VII.

Determination of Grant Amounts

Exact grant awards are determined by two-person teams of ED staff members and depend on the amounts that the applicants request, the size and scope of their project, and the extent to which the activities planned can justify the budget items. Other factors include the allowability of specific costs, OMB guidelines, and statutes limiting individual magnet grants to no more than \$4 million per year.

Technical Assistance Provided by ED to MSAP Projects¹³

ED provides technical assistance to MSAP applicants and grantees by offering technical assistance conferences and workshops, responding to individual calls, and maintaining a supply of successful high scoring proposals for interested applicants to review. In 1997, ED provided workshops on magnet projects at the three regional Improving America's Schools conferences. Because districts were then developing their 1998 MSAP applications and changes had been made in the ways that districts with voluntary plans can select students, those sessions mainly focused on application requirements and the narrow tailoring of race criteria. In February and March of 1998, three additional technical assistance workshops were held in Atlanta, San Francisco, and Dallas for the MSAP, and they involved staff from OESE, OCR, and OGC. In January 1999, ED provided a two-day workshop for MSAP Project Directors that focused on project evaluation, performance indicators, and project implementation. Sessions included a review of ED services and information on issues affecting MSAP projects, such as program implementation requirements and the continuation review process; plans for the MSAP evaluation; performance report data and formats; assessment of MSAP project evaluation plans; legal updates on recent court decisions; student selection procedures; strategies for student recruitment and selection; and project management issues.

Primary Source of Technical Assistance

The primary sources of technical assistance are ED staff from the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) and other ED agencies (e.g., the Office for Civil Rights [OCR], which helps districts understand requirements related to desegregation plans and legal requirements connected with selection procedures for MSAP schools). Assistance is also available from 10 regional Equity Assistance Centers (EACs, ED-funded agencies that provide assistance to public school districts in promoting equal educational opportunities) and Magnet Schools of America (a non-government organization that provides conferences and workshops to assist and promote magnet school personnel).

Technical Assistance from the Perspective of Grantees

To gain insights into technical assistance from the standpoint of MSAP grantees, we asked Project Directors about the frequency and usefulness of assistance from the MSAP office in OESE, OCR, EACs, other ED agencies, and Magnet Schools of America. The responses indicate that the most frequently sought sources of assistance are:

- OESE—35 percent of the Project Directors often request assistance; another 58 percent sometimes request assistance
- OCR—17 percent often request assistance; 29 percent sometimes request it

¹³ This section is also based on interviews conducted with ED staff.

- Equity Assistance Centers—19 percent sometimes request assistance

Other sources are less frequently used.¹⁴

Purpose and Usefulness of Technical Assistance

We asked MSAP Project Directors to indicate the purpose of the technical assistance they request—the tasks on which they need help. For OESE, the great majority of the requests center on preparing an MSAP application, completing MSAP reports, and dealing with implementation problems. For OCR, the requests focus on developing a desegregation plan and designing a student selection process.

Project Directors report that the technical assistance provided is generally useful. Of those who request assistance from OESE, 92 percent find it very useful. Assistance from the OCR and Equity Assistance Centers is less frequently requested but about 80 percent of the Project Directors requesting it find it very useful.

As a final aspect of technical assistance, Project Directors were asked if they had requested any technical assistance that was not provided. Ninety-three percent (93 percent) of the respondents responded “No.”

What We Learned

- About one third of the MSAP projects devoted the first grant year to planning for one or more of their schools.
- Although 1998 grant amounts were less than projects requested in their applications, Project Directors report that in general, they were able to implement their programs as proposed.
- Projects are relying on several strategies for continuing their magnet programs after the MSAP grant period. More than half (53 percent) are looking to their districts for continued support.
- Projects spend about 45 percent of their budgets on staff salaries and fringe benefits, about 20 percent on equipment, and about 20 percent on supplies. The remainder is spent on a combination of travel, contractual, construction, and stipends.
- When budgets are analyzed by school, grants average about \$307,000 per school per year. Responses from principals echoed the importance of those funds in providing their schools with specialized staff, professional development for teachers, opportunities for the acquisition and use of computers, and the purchase of books, supplies, and equipment.
- ED staff in the Office and Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) provide the most technical assistance to grantees, mainly in developing MSAP applications, preparing MSAP reports, and solving implementation problems. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) helps grantees develop desegregation plans and student selection processes. Project Directors who request this assistance indicate that it is either very useful or useful.

¹⁴ See Tables A-VII-10 and 11 for complete data.

What We Hope to Learn

- Our spring 2000 Case Study visits provided us with insights into projects' planning and implementation activities. These insights, along with those gained during our second round of visits, in spring 2001, will be reflected in future reports.
- A critical part of planning an MSAP project is developing the MSAP application and determining how it will be evaluated and reported. Our Project Director interviews and reviews of MSAP applications and performance reports suggest that the role of performance indicators in the MSAP is not clear. Required by the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, performance indicators for MSAP were in place when 1998 applications were submitted. Project Directors have asked us how much attention they should pay to the performance indicators in their performance reports and in the next round of MSAP applications. Some have expressed regret at having devoted considerable attention to them in their 1998 applications when they saw that other proposals, also funded, did not. We have referred them to ED for guidance.
- Magnet school practitioners on our Technical Work Group suggest that the data on outside funds accessed by MSAP projects may be under-reported; for example, no projects reported on transportation costs that are covered by state funds. (MSAP funds cannot be used for transportation costs.) We will investigate this further in our Case Study projects.