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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

# National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers

Interim Report

Executive Summary

ies NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION EVALUATION AND REGIONAL ASSISTANCE
Institute of Education Sciences

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**JULY 2010**

**Brenda J. Turnbull**
**Richard N. White**
**Elizabeth Sinclair**
**Derek Riley**
Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

**Cynthia L. Sipe**
Branch Associates, Inc.

**Carol Pistorino**
Decision Information Resources, Inc.

**Yumiko Sekino**
*Project Officer*
Institute of Education Sciences

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**U.S. Department of Education**
Arne Duncan
*Secretary*

**Institute of Education Sciences**
John Q. Easton
*Director*

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# Acknowledgments

This report benefited from the work of a colleague whose loss we have felt keenly: Cynthia Sipe passed away, much too young, in March 2010. Her professionalism and good humor were priceless assets to Branch Associates, Inc., and to this study.

We very gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of the Comprehensive Centers as well as the many other respondents to our data collection. Center leaders and staff graciously hosted site visits, compiled inventories of their projects, and assembled hefty collections of their materials for expert review. Senior managers in state education agencies were kind enough to respond to the study's survey regarding their experiences with Comprehensive Center technical assistance, as were the many technical assistance participants housed in state, intermediate, and local agencies and other organizations. Expert panel members brought knowledge and care to their task of reviewing and rating project materials.

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In addition to the authors, other members of the participating organizations played important roles in study design, data collection, and analysis. Alvia Branch of Branch Associates, Inc. (BAI), provided steady leadership for the study team. Lynda Bell, Matthew Coll, Barbara Fink, Jennifer Gross, Ceane Rabada, Virginia Smith, and Jennifer Thompson were valued team members at BAI. Russell Jackson of Decision Information Resources, Inc. (DIR), was a source of wise counsel. Also at DIR, Nancy Dawson, Val Sheppard, Stella Weathersby, Frenetta Tate, and Pia White were stalwart contributors. At Policy Studies Associates (PSA), team members who made valuable contributions in data collection or coding included Erikson Arcaira, Tiffany Miller, Tandra Turner, and Yvonne Woods. Ben Lagueruela provided essential help in document production. Katrina Laguarda, formerly of PSA, made tremendous contributions to the study design and early activities.

The study and this report reflect the careful attention of many professionals in the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education.

# Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

The research team for this evaluation consists of a prime contractor, Branch Associates, Inc. and two subcontractors, Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA), and Decision Information Resources, Inc. (DIR). None of these organizations or their key staff members has a financial interest that could be affected by findings from the evaluation of the Comprehensive Center program considered in this report. Additionally, no one on the Technical Working Group, convened by the research team to provide advice and guidance, has financial interests that could be affected by findings from the evaluation.

# Contents

# Executive Summary

This first of two reports presents early findings from the National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers (Comprehensive Centers), a federally funded program that provides technical assistance to states in connection with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The law authorizing the Comprehensive Centers, the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002, mandated that a national evaluation of the program be conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The legislation indicated that the evaluation should "include an analysis of the services provided…[and] the extent to which each of the comprehensive centers meets the objectives of its respective plan, and whether such services meet the educational needs of State educational agencies, local educational agencies, and schools in the region." The program evaluation is conducted by Branch Associates, Inc., Decision Information Resources, Inc., and Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

This report addresses the first of the evaluation's three rounds of data collection, pertaining to the Centers' work of July 2006 through June 2007. It describes the program design and, drawing upon data provided by the Centers and their clients, program operations. It also describes assessments of Center activities and resources, reporting on quality as judged by panels of subject-matter experts, and on relevance, usefulness, and contributions to capacity as judged by practitioners (namely, state-level managers and also clients who participated directly in Center activities or received Center products). A final report will provide parallel findings for 2007-08 and 2008-09. In addition, it will present findings from case studies of capacity building at the state level and any changes in findings over time.

The main findings from the evaluation so far are:

- **The Comprehensive Centers reported planning their work in coordination and consultation with their clients with the work evolving during the year.** All 16 Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs) reported obtaining state input into their initial plans and engaging states in refinements to the plans through ongoing interaction and negotiation. Similarly, all five Content Centers (CCs) reported forming their work plans incorporating RCC input acquired through either RCC staff surveys or direct communication. In addition, all five CCs described working with the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to learn of specific topics and tasks needed to advance ED priorities. A review of projects conducted indicates that both RCCs and CCs adjusted their work plans during the year.

- **The technical assistance activities were varied and consisted of ongoing consultation, research syntheses, planning of technical assistance with participants, training events, conferences, and support for task forces or for development of formal plans.** Consistent with the mission of "front-line" assistance, the majority of sampled RCC projects involved ongoing consultation and follow-up (82 percent). CC assistance most often focused on the delivery of research information, consistent with the CCs' prescribed focus on synthesizing, translating, and delivering knowledge on a particular topic. The delivery of research collections and syntheses occurred in 74 percent of the CC sampled projects.

- **The Comprehensive Centers program delivered technical assistance that, according to state managers: (1) served state education agencies' (SEAs') purposes in seeking technical assistance, (2) was aligned with SEAs' priorities for NCLB-related technical assistance, and (3) was perceived to expand SEA capacity.** Eighty-eight percent of state managers rated the technical assistance they received from Centers as at least "a good start" in serving their purposes, and 36 percent overall reported that it "served the state's purposes completely." For each of the four areas of NCLB implementation most widely identified as state priorities for technical assistance, at least 90 percent of those state managers who had identified the area as a priority had received assistance with it from the Centers. Overall, more than two-thirds of state managers (68 percent) reported a perception that assistance from the Comprehensive Centers had greatly expanded their state's capacity to carry out its responsibilities in at least one NCLB area.

- **Center projects in the evaluation sample were judged by clients to be on average in the "moderate" to "high" range of relevance and usefulness; panels of experts judged their quality to be in the "moderate" range on average.** On a scale of 1 to 5 with a 3 representing "moderate" and a 4 representing "high," the programwide average ratings for the sampled projects were 3.34 for technical quality (scored by panels of content experts), and 3.94 for relevance and 3.70 for usefulness (scored by participants).[1] The average quality rating was higher among CCs than RCCs by more than one-half of a standard deviation; the average relevance rating was higher among RCCs than CCs by at least one-half of a standard deviation; usefulness ratings were similar between the two Center types (i.e., did not differ by at least one-half of a standard deviation).[2]

[1] This averaging procedure across Centers and across projects was designed so that each Center contributed equally to the overall mean for the program (or for its type of Center, where RCC means were compared with CC means), and each project sampled from a Center contributed equally to the Center mean.

[2] Using Cohen (1988) as a conceptual framework, we estimated Cohen's d (an estimate of the effect size defined as the difference in means divided by the pooled standard deviation) and adopted the logic of Cohen for what is a moderate difference. Specifically, we adopted a difference in the means of one-half of one standard deviation (analogous to an effect size of .5) as our minimum threshold for highlighting differences. The "pooled standard deviation" for each computation varied with the unit of analysis. For analyses conducted at the Center level, the pooled standard deviation was computed as the standard deviation of the variable of interest (e.g., relevance) computed at the Center level. For analyses using the project as the unit of analysis, the pooled standard deviation was computed at the project level.

## The Comprehensive Centers Program

In its authorization, the Comprehensive Centers program was given an overall charge of supporting state and local NCLB implementation. ED, using discretion provided in the legislation, established two major program features that differed from past Comprehensive Centers programs:[3]

- First, the primary focus would be on assisting states to expand and strengthen states' capacity to deliver assistance to schools and districts; ED specified that Centers could only work directly with districts or schools under special circumstances.

- Second, awards would be made in two tiers, to 16 RCCs and 5 CCs. They were instructed to work as follows:

  - Each RCC was charged with providing "frontline assistance" either to one large state or to a group of two to eight states and other jurisdictions.[4] The RCCs were also expected to deliver technical assistance to their assigned states, addressing the needs and building capacity of the states to assist their districts and schools.

  - Meanwhile, each CC would work on a nationwide basis within a particular substantive area: Assessment and Accountability, Instruction, Teacher Quality, Innovation and Improvement, or High Schools. CCs would facilitate access to, and use of, existing research and practices.

  - The absolute priorities for the two types of Centers indicated that they should work together: Regional Centers should draw information and resources from Content Centers as well as other sources; and Content Centers should both supply knowledge to Regional Centers and "work closely with Regional Centers to provide technical assistance to States."

## Evaluation Topics and Methods

The research priorities for the evaluation were primarily driven by the statute and focused on the following key research questions:

- What are the objectives of the Comprehensive Center network and of each Center?

[3] Notice Inviting Applications for New Awards for Fiscal Year 2005. *Federal Register.* (2005, June 3). *70*(106), 32583-94.

[4] The nonstate jurisdictions that the Centers were to serve were the following: the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia [Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Yap], Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. Throughout this report, the term "state" will be defined to include the 50 states as well as these other jurisdictions.

- What kinds of products and services are provided by the Comprehensive Center network and by each Center?

- How do Centers develop, refine, and carry out their plans for technical assistance? How do they define their clients' educational needs and priorities? How do Center clients (states or Regional Centers) define their needs and priorities?

- To what extent is the work of each Comprehensive Center of high quality, high relevance, and high usefulness?

- To what extent do states report that Center projects have expanded state capacity to address underlying needs and priorities and meet the goals of NCLB?

- To what extent have states relied on other sources of technical assistance besides the Comprehensive Centers? What other sources? How does the usefulness of Center projects compare with the usefulness of projects from other sources?

The evaluation gathered annual information from six data sources in order to address the research questions above. Data collection included:

- **Management plans**. The evaluation reviewed these as a data source for each Center's intended focus at the beginning of the year, drawing from the plans a list of topics as foci of Center objectives.

- **Center staff interviews.** Using structured response categories, Center staff were asked about how they planned their programs of work; how their plans evolved during the program year; and what they offered to clients with respect to the topics addressed, the delivery modes used, and their sources for content expertise. (See appendix C for the protocols and other structured response materials used during the interviews).

- **Survey of senior state managers.** SEA managers were surveyed about their state's technical-assistance needs and what the Centers (including their RCC and the CCs) had provided.

- **Project inventory forms.** The evaluation team assisted each Center in grouping related activities and deliverables into "projects," with the project defined as *a group of closely related activities and/or deliverables designed to achieve a specific outcome for a specific audience*. Projects were in turn classified by the Centers into major, moderate, and minor projects on the basis of the relative level of effort they reflected. The Centers and the evaluation team also classified the projects, according to the topics addressed, into 22 topical categories.[5]

[5] The 22 topics were: components of effective systems of support for states, districts, and schools; data use or data-driven decision making; formative assessment; reading; adolescent literacy; mathematics; dropout prevention; high school redesign or reform; transition to high school; special education curriculum, instruction and professional development; special education assessment; English language learners;" highly qualified teacher" provisions of NCLB; teacher preparation and induction; teacher professional development; supplemental educational services; Response to Intervention; migrant education; Indian or Native American education; data management and

- **Survey of project participants.** A representative sample of clients who had participated directly in the evaluation's purposive sample of major and moderate Center projects furnished descriptive information, through surveys, on the technical-assistance needs of their offices and on the activities and resources that the project had delivered to them. These clients included individuals working at the state level who had participated in RCC or CC projects and RCC employees who were among the clients of CC projects. They also rated the *relevance* and *usefulness* of the sampled projects.

- **Expert panel review.** The same sample of major and moderate projects was reviewed for quality by a panel of experts. Content experts were recruited and trained to use standard criteria to rate the *technical quality* of the sampled Center projects on the basis of a review of all project materials.

## Operation of Centers

Before the beginning of the 2006-07 program year, each Center was required to submit a management plan, setting out objectives and planned activities for the coming year, for ED review and approval. Almost all Centers (20 of 21) reported that client input was used in writing the plan. The same number reported conducting needs assessment through meetings or other communication with clients.

In addition to initial needs assessments, to ultimately meet client needs Centers used planning and ongoing interactions with each other and with the SEAs to refine their needs assessments as indicated in exhibit ES.1. Fifteen of 16 RCCs reported forming work groups within state organizations that brought together staff from multiple departments to discuss service needs and delivery; the remaining RCC was 1 of 14 that reported working directly with the chief state school officer in their initial planning. Half of the RCCs (8) formed cross-agency work groups to discuss SEA service needs and delivery. All five CCs identified needs of their client RCCs primarily by conducting conference calls with designated RCC representatives, and three of the five CCs maintained communication about needs by forming workgroups that included RCC representatives. In addition, all CCs reported providing either large-group events or support of existing RCC programs and projects as additional ways to learn about and meet client needs.

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compliance; assessment design; and parent involvement. In addition, projects that addressed none of these 22 topics were categorized as "other."

**Exhibit ES.1. Center strategies for planning and ongoing interactions with clients**

| Center strategy | RCCs (N=16) | CCs (N=5) | All (N=21) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Assess RCC needs through meetings or other communication with RCC staff | | 5 | - |
| Included SEA input when writing annual management plans | 16 | - | - |
| Sponsor large events to make contact with many clients | 13 | 4 | 17 |
| Form work groups within client organizations that bring together staff from multiple departments/divisions to discuss service needs and delivery | 15 | 1 | 16 |
| Offer service to support existing client programs/ projects/ policies | 9 | 4 | 13 |
| Form work groups across client organizations to discuss service needs and delivery (e.g., different SEAs and/or RCCs) | 8 | 3 | 11 |

EXHIBIT READS: All five CCs assessed RCC needs through meetings or other communication with RCC staff.

SOURCE: Verbatim summaries of Center interviews conducted during 2007 site visits, coded by evaluation team, with Center review of coding results

Although Centers reported providing technical assistance in a majority (80 percent) of the instances where identified topic areas were included in their management plans, Centers commonly adjusted the topic areas in which they conducted work, adding work in some areas and shifting away from work in other areas. Based on a review of each Center's inventory of projects against the topics that had been included in that Center's management-plan objectives, there were instances of the Center carrying out work on a topic not initially cited in its objectives. That is, in 19 of 22 topic areas Centers reported delivering technical assistance that was not in their original management plan. The most common shift toward topics were in the areas of Response to Intervention (seven Centers conducted work in this area that was not planned), English language learner issues (five Centers), highly qualified teacher provisions of NCLB (five Centers) and supplemental educational services (five Centers). By the same token, Centers appeared to delete work in particular topic areas such as special education curriculum, instruction, and professional development (five Centers appeared to delete planned work); and data use or data-driven decisionmaking (four Centers appeared to delete planned work). Centers that set an objective in a topic did not report a project on the topic in their inventory for 10 of the 22 topic areas. The most common topic area for projects was that of statewide systems of support for educational improvement.

Regardless of whether they were originally specified in work plans or added later, an analysis of the projects that the evaluation team sampled for closer study across all Centers provides more in-depth information about the nature of Center technical assistance activities or resources. Although the sample of projects is not statistically representative of the Centers' work, the process of sample selection favored each Center's most dominant projects and included over half (56 percent) of that year's designated major or moderate projects. Most projects (84 percent) used more than one mode of delivery from a list that included conferences, training, delivery of research collections or syntheses, support for a task force, support for development of a plan or

policy, engagement of clients in project planning, and ongoing consultation and follow-up. Across all the sampled projects and also across the Regional Centers' sampled projects, the most frequent modes of delivery as shown in exhibit ES.2 were ongoing consultation and follow-up (84 of 122, or 69 percent of all projects and 79 of 96, or 82 percent of Regional Center projects) or delivery of a research collection or synthesis (71 of 122, or 58 percent of all projects and 52 of 96, or 54 percent of Regional Center projects). The Content Centers' projects most often included delivery of a research collection or synthesis (20 of 27, or 74 percent of their projects) or a conference (17 of 27, or 63 percent).

While some projects were worked on by both the RCCs and the CCs, coordination between CCs and RCCs when it did occur was asymmetrical. In providing assistance to states, RCCs used CC input more than CCs used substantive RCC input. Almost half of the sampled RCC projects had a substantive CC contribution (such as a product or a presentation by a CC staff member); in contrast, in 11 percent of the sampled CC projects an RCC contributed content or delivered assistance. More often (in 37 percent of the sampled CC projects), the CC enlisted the help of one or more RCCs to identify and recruit participants.

## Exhibit ES.2. Sampled Center projects by types of participant activities and products

| **Activities and products** ***(with clarifying definitions used by coders)*** | **RCC projects** *(n=96)* | **CC projects** *(n=27)* | **All projects** *(n=122)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ongoing consultation and follow-up *(multiple contacts to same participants, that were part of a coherent and purposeful whole)* | 79 | 6 | 84 |
| Research collections and syntheses | 52 | 20 | 71 |
| Engagement of participants in project planning *(more than needs assessment or identifying participants)* | 43 | 8 | 50 |
| Training events *(focused on implementing a specific program or strategy)* | 41 | 10 | 50 |
| Task force meetings and work *(focused on addressing a specific problem, program, or policy)* | 48 | 2 | 50 |
| Conferences *(symposium, forum, institute; highlights a range of perspectives, strategies, or programs)* | 26 | 17 | 43 |
| Support development of a formal plan to implement a program or policy | 18 | 2 | 20 |

EXHIBIT READS: Seventy-nine RCC projects included ongoing consultation and follow-up.

SOURCE: Project cover sheets prepared by Centers for the expert review of project materials; cover sheets coded by evaluation team. The total number of projects was 122. One project collaboratively conducted by an RCC and a CC was counted among both RCC projects and CC projects but was only counted once among the projects of all Centers.

The types of work emphasized in the RCC and CC sampled projects were consistent with their different charges. RCC assistance more often incorporated sustained interaction with participants: again, the majority of RCC projects in the sample involved ongoing consultation and follow-up (82 percent), whereas this was less so for the work of the CCs (22 percent of projects in the sample). Thus, this pattern of RCC activities was consistent with the mission of "front-line" assistance that would take clients' purposes and circumstances into account and provide ongoing support for their implementation of NCLB. For the CCs, the assistance more often focused on the delivery of research information, consistent with the CCs' prescribed focus on synthesizing, translating, and delivering knowledge on a particular topic. The delivery of research collections and syntheses occurred in 74 percent of the CC projects but 54 percent of the RCC projects. The sampled CC projects more often delivered technical assistance through conferences (63 percent of the CC projects but 27 percent of the RCC projects).

## Ratings of Center Assistance

The sampled projects, all identified by the Centers as "major" and "moderate," were rated in order to assess the services provided by the Comprehensive Centers program. Each project was evaluated for relevance and usefulness by a sample of participants—state staff, intermediate agency staff, local educators working on behalf of the state, and RCC staff—who were the intended beneficiaries of the project and who had received at least some of the technical assistance it provided. Ratings of project quality were gathered from panels of experts with strong knowledge of the content or substantive focus of the specific projects they reviewed. Relevance was assessed with eight survey items and usefulness with 11 items; quality was judged on three items called dimensions (exhibit ES.3). Each overall measure (relevance, usefulness, or quality) was calculated as the mean of ratings assigned to each item. The item-level ratings themselves were based on 5-point rating scales.[6]

[6] Efforts were made to develop parallel wording and rubrics that would result in similar gradations between rating levels (e.g., very high vs. high vs. moderate) across the three measures. However, given the different content of each set of items within the three measures and the different contexts for the ratings (experts who underwent training for the rating process and reviewed identical packages of materials vs. survey respondents who typically participated in different subsets of project activities), the ratings across the three measures are not directly comparable.

## Exhibit ES.3. Relevance, usefulness, and quality items

| From expert panel scoring | From project participant surveys | |
|---|---|---|
| **Technical quality** | **Relevance** | **Usefulness** |
| Reviewers were directed to assign a score to each dimension and to include the basis for their ratings on the rating form, including the specific artifacts on which their score was based. The three dimensions are:<br><br>a. Demonstrated use of the appropriate documented knowledge base – to include an accurate portrayal of the current state of information with prominence to those with the most accurate/rigorous evidence<br>b. Fidelity of application of the knowledge base to the products and services provided – materials are consistent with the best/accurate information available and the presentation adequately conveys the confidence of the information<br>c. Clear and effective delivery – information is well organized and written and accessible to the intended audience for easy use | Based on *your* experience, to what degree was this set of activities and resources ***relevant*** to your work, in each of the following respects?<br><br>a. Addressed a need or problem that my organization faces<br>b. Addressed an important priority of my organization<br>c. Addressed a challenge that my organization faces related to the implementation of NCLB<br>d. Provided information, advice, and/or resources that could be directly applied to my organization's work<br>e. Addressed our particular state context<br>f. Addressed my organization's specific challenges (e.g., policy environment, leadership capacity, budget pressures, local politics)<br>g. Provided information, advice, and/or resources that could be used to guide decisions about policies, programs, or practices<br>h. Highlighted the implications of research findings (or information about best practice) for policies, programs, or practices | Based on *your* experience, to what degree was this set of activities and resources ***useful*** to you, in each of the following respects?<br><br>a. Provided resources that were easy to understand and easy to use<br>b. Employed an appropriate format (e.g., a work group, a conference, individual consultation, written products)<br>c. Provided adequate opportunity to learn from colleagues in other states<br>d. Included adequate follow-up to support the use of new information and resources<br>e. Were timely<br>f. Helped my organization solve a problem<br>g. Helped my organization maintain or change a policy or practice<br>h. Helped my organization take the next step in a longer-term improvement effort<br>i. Provided my organization with information or resources that we will use again<br>j. Helped my organization develop a shared expertise or knowledge-base<br>k. Helped individuals in my organization to develop skills that they will use again |

Based on the ratings, Center technical assistance was judged to be in the "moderate" to "high" range of quality, relevance, and usefulness. On a scale of 1 to 5 with a 3 representing "moderate" and a 4 representing "high," the programwide average ratings for the sampled projects were 3.34 for technical quality (scored by panels of content experts), and 3.94 for relevance and 3.70 for usefulness (scored by participants) as indicated in exhibit ES.4.[7]

[7] This averaging procedure across Centers and across projects was designed so that each Center contributed equally to the overall mean for the program (or for its type of Center, where RCC means were compared with CC means), and each project sampled from a Center contributed equally to the Center mean.

## Exhibit ES.4. Center Level Mean ratings of technical quality, relevance, and usefulness

| | Technical quality | Relevance | Usefulness |
|---|---|---|---|
| **All Comprehensive Centers** *(N=21)* | 3.34 | 3.94 | 3.70 |
| **All RCCs** *(N=16)* | 3.21 | 3.99 | 3.71 |
| **All CCs** *(N=5)* | 3.73 | 3.78 | 3.65 |
| **Difference of RCC and CC means** | -0.52† | 0.21† | 0.06 |
| *Pooled standard deviation (all Comprehensive Centers)* | *0.41* | *0.34* | *0.34* |
| *Ratio of difference in means to pooled standard deviation* | *-1.28* | *0.60* | *0.18* |

NOTE: All ratings were on a 5-point scale, with 5 as the high value. The "technical quality" rating is the mean of the ratings for the three quality dimensions. A notation of † indicates that the difference in the mean ratings between the CCs and RCCs is at least one-half of one pooled standard deviation in the rating.

EXHIBIT READS: Among the 21 Centers, the mean technical quality rating was 3.34.

SOURCE: Expert panel ratings of sampled projects for technical quality and surveys of project participants for relevance and usefulness. Responses weighted so that each panelist or participant contributed equally to project ratings; each project contributed equally to Center ratings; and each Center contributed equally to cross-Center ratings.

Given that the RCC and CC roles and activity emphasis differed, the evaluation looked at variation across Center types and projects that might provide information for program improvement. The average quality rating was higher among CCs than RCCs by more than one-half of a standard deviation[8]; the average relevance rating was higher among RCCs than CCs by at least one-half of a standard deviation; usefulness ratings were similar between the two Center types (differing by less than one-half of a standard deviation). The Content Centers received Center-level mean scores for technical quality that averaged 3.73, compared with 3.21 for the Regional Centers; the difference of 0.52 points exceeded one-half of one pooled standard deviation. The mean scores for relevance were 3.99 for the Regional Centers and 3.78 for the Content Centers. On usefulness, the mean score of 3.71 for the RCCs and 3.65 for the CCs were within one-half of a standard deviation of each other.

There was variation in the ratings across and within individual Centers. On each measure, at least 11 Centers had a mean rating that was at least one-half of a standard deviation above or below the overall mean for its type of Center (RCC or CC) for that measure[9] (i.e., 11 of 21 Centers were this far above or below the mean for quality, 11 for relevance, and 14 for

[8] For analyses conducted at the Center level, the pooled standard deviation was computed as the standard deviation of the variable of interest (e.g., relevance) computed at the Center level.

[9] For analyses using the project as the unit of analysis, the pooled standard deviation was computed at the project level.

usefulness). One RCC was rated higher than others by at least one-half of a standard deviation on all three measures, and one CC and one RCC were rated lower than others on all three measures. Aside from these Centers, the other 18 Centers' ratings were not consistently higher or lower than the mean but varied across measures (Exhibit ES-5).

**Exhibit ES.5. Mean ratings of technical quality, relevance, and usefulness, by Center**

| Center type | Technical quality | Relevance | Usefulness |
|---|---|---|---|
| **RCCs** *(N=16)* | 3.78↑ | 3.78↓ | 3.42↓ |
| | 3.63↑ | 3.22↓ | 3.00↓ |
| | 3.46↑ | 4.18↑ | 3.94↑ |
| | 3.44↑ | 3.90 | 3.63 |
| | 3.36 | 3.97 | 3.63 |
| | 3.35 | 3.97 | 3.57 |
| | 3.35 | 3.93 | 3.51↓ |
| | 3.31 | 4.15 | 3.69 |
| | 3.21 | 4.08 | 3.82 |
| | 3.17 | 4.31↑ | 4.05↑ |
| | 3.15 | 4.12 | 3.93↑ |
| | 3.11 | 4.70↑ | 4.46↑ |
| | 2.98↓ | 4.07 | 3.92↑ |
| | 2.74↓ | 3.20↓ | 3.05↓ |
| | 2.74↓ | 4.01 | 3.54 |
| | 2.63↓ | 4.18↑ | 4.17↑ |
| **Average RCC rating** | 3.21 | 3.99 | 3.71 |
| *Pooled standard deviation (RCCs)* | *0.32* | *0.37* | *0.38* |
| **CCs** *(N=5)* | 4.24↑ | 3.76 | 3.54↓ |
| | 3.94 | 3.90↑ | 3.86↑ |
| | 3.88 | 3.99↑ | 3.84↑ |
| | 3.44↓ | 3.58↓ | 3.44↓ |
| | 3.14↓ | 3.68↓ | 3.56 |
| **Average CC rating** | 3.73 | 3.78 | 3.65 |
| *Pooled standard deviation (CCs)* | *0.43* | *0.16* | *0.19* |

NOTE: The arrow pointing upward indicates the accompanying value is at least one-half of one standard deviation above the group mean (e.g., 3.78 is at least one-half of one standard deviation above the mean for the RCCs). The arrow pointing downward indicates the accompanying value is at least one-half of one standard deviation below the group mean.

EXHIBIT READS: One of the RCCs had a mean rating for technical quality of 3.78, a mean rating for relevance of 3.78, and a mean rating for usefulness of 3.42, across the projects sampled from that Center.

SOURCE: Expert panel ratings of sampled projects for technical quality and surveys of project participants for relevance and usefulness. Responses weighted so that each panelist or participant contributed equally to project ratings, and each project contributed equally to Center ratings

The evaluation also looked at the relationship between the three measures: quality, relevance, and usefulness. It was reasoned that the content experts rating quality and the participants rating relevance and usefulness might value and be better able to judge different qualities in a Center project, which is why we did not have content experts evaluate the projects for their utility or the participants assess the technical quality. An examination of the associations among the three dimensions was conducted by calculating correlation coefficients.[10] Such a statistic indicates the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two factors. A correlation coefficient can vary from positive one (indicating a perfect positive relationship), through zero (indicating the absence of a relationship), to negative one (indicating a perfect negative relationship). If the correlation is statistically significant ($p < .05$), we can have strong (95 percent) confidence that what we calculated is not due to chance.

Ratings of quality were unrelated to ratings of relevance and usefulness, although relevance and usefulness ratings were highly correlated with each other. The correlation coefficient for relevance and usefulness was +0.84, while the coefficient of relevance with quality was -0.12, and the coefficient of usefulness and quality was -0.04. In other words, the extent to which a project faithfully reflected the knowledge base on a topic and provided appropriate caveats about the quality of its evidence was unrelated to the extent to which participants deemed that project relevant or useful to their agency.

Given the variation in ratings across projects, additional analyses of project characteristics were conducted to explore whether there were any consistent patterns between ratings and the particular features of the projects. Such information may provide suggestions for possible program improvement. Specifically, if there is a consistent relationship between scale of the undertaking and the ratings, perhaps signaling more ambitious projects or projects that allow a greater focus of Center resources on the effort, then this might be suggestive of productive uses of Center resources for future emphasis. In fact, projects identified by the Centers as "major" were rated higher by at least one-half a standard deviation on the measures of relevance and usefulness but not on the measure of quality.

Projects with particular types of activities may be easier to carry out, may play to Center strengths, or may be seen as more productive to the ultimate clients. In addition, those RCC projects that included CC contributions might be expected to have higher quality ratings than other RCC projects, given the expected content and research focus of the CCs. Thus, the evaluation compared ratings of subgroups of projects (e.g., those with and without particular activities such as conferences, training, or research syntheses; RCC projects with and without CC involvement) to see if there were any consistent relationships between the ratings and particular Center activities or the incorporation of CC work. Across five of the seven project activities identified, comparisons of projects with and without the activities showed no differences in quality, relevance, or usefulness greater than one-half of a standard deviation. Ratings of RCC projects with CC contributions did not differ by more than one-half of a standard deviation on any measures, compared with those without CC contributions. Thus, these analyses do not suggest differences in ratings related to CC contributions or particular activities.

[10] For this analysis, the evaluation team used Spearman's rank order correlation, as this non-parametric rating is the appropriate statistical function to describe correlations between two variables where the values of the variables are not normally distributed and are on a scale (such as ratings).

It is also possible that Center technical assistance is viewed as more beneficial by some types of participants or that the extent to which participants are engaged in a project affects how they regard it. Therefore, the ratings of subgroups of individuals were examined for the relevance and usefulness measures. Involvement with the project design and time spent in project activities were both associated with statistically higher relevance and usefulness ratings. There was also evidence of statistically higher ratings among respondents whose job had a focus on NCLB-related responsibilities (defined as respondents who spent at least 25 percent of their time on the job on NCLB). This suggests that those who worked on the projects and were most likely to benefit from the work rated the projects higher.

## State Capacity Building and the Use of Different Sources of Technical Assistance

Capacity building was prominent as a goal for the Comprehensive Centers program. The first priority for all Centers, articulated by ED in the Notice Inviting Applications, included "helping states build the capacity to help school districts and schools implement NCLB provisions and programs."[11]

Fifty-three percent of state managers reported that technical assistance from the program, including both their Regional Center and any Content Centers with which they had experience, had expanded state capacity to a "great extent" or "very great extent" for building or managing a statewide system of support. This was the area of NCLB responsibility in which extensive capacity building was most widely reported. In addition, the Centers were the top source used for help "to plan the initial steps in solving a problem," reported by 66 percent of state managers, and "to develop the skills of SEA or intermediate education agency staff," reported by 61 percent of state managers. A case study component of the evaluation will examine further the contribution of the Comprehensive Centers to building state capacity.

The Comprehensive Centers were one resource among several available to, and used by, state managers. On average, state managers ranked the Centers as one of the top three sources of technical assistance that they relied upon, along with professional associations and the ED-funded Regional Educational Laboratories. The Centers were not the resource used most widely for "working with districts and schools," a purpose that ED de-emphasized in the Centers' charge: colleges and universities were used for this purpose by 37 percent of state managers, and consulting firms by the same percentage; the Centers were used for this purpose by 22 percent of state managers.

## Summary and Next Steps

This evaluation addresses questions about the technical assistance provided by the two types of Comprehensive Centers; how the Centers work with their clients; the match between client purposes and assistance delivered; and assessments of the quality, relevance, and usefulness of a sample of technical assistance projects. This interim report presents findings from

[11] *Notice Inviting Applications*, 32585.

2006-07, the Centers' second year of operation under a new design that ED established in 2005. The findings suggest that Centers attempted to strike a balance between adhering to their management plans for the year and accommodating client requests, and that state clients generally viewed Center technical assistance as serving state purposes. In addition, the study found that RCCs and CCs worked in the different ways that had been mandated in the design of the two types of Centers.

In this first round of project ratings, mean ratings across sampled projects and all Centers fell in the "moderate" to "high" range for quality (rated by expert panels) and relevance and usefulness (rated by participating clients). The CCs had higher mean ratings of technical quality for their sampled projects than did RCCs, while the RCCs had higher mean ratings of relevance than did CCs. There was no statistically significant relationship between ratings of quality on the one hand and relevance or usefulness on the other. These findings suggest that at least in the 2006-07 program year, achieving high technical quality was unrelated to delivering assistance that clients found highly relevant or useful.

The evaluation team is continuing to study Center operations, outputs, and outcomes for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 program years. By repeating the processes of expert panel reviews and surveys, the evaluation team will be able to report on changes over time in the quality, relevance, and usefulness of Center projects as well as on trends in state managers' perspectives on Center technical assistance and contributions to capacity building in SEAs.