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National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Centers Program

Final Report

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Between 2012 and 2018, the U.S. Department of Education invested nearly \$350 million in 22 Comprehensive Technical Assistance (TA) Centers operating across the nation. These Centers were charged with delivering TA that builds the capacity of state education agencies (SEAs) to support local educational agencies (LEAs) in improving student outcomes. Centers were given broad discretion in interpreting and enacting this mandate. This evaluation sought to address the open questions about how the Centers designed and implemented the TA, what challenges they encountered, and what outcomes they achieved. With thorough documentation of how this process played out, stakeholders will be in a better position to inform future program improvement. Key takeaways from the study include:

- Overall, Centers and their TA recipients reported that the Centers' TA improved the capacity of SEAs to meet their goals.
- Centers shared similar approaches to the design and implementation of their TA. Those Center practices perceived to be instrumental to building capacity included: engaging a broad array of stakeholders to provide input on policy; providing products and tools for SEA staff to use as they took greater ownership of policy design and implementation; imparting organizational practices and structures resilient to SEA turnover and policy shifts; and flexibly adapting TA in response to changing priorities and needs.
- Centers and their TA recipients pointed to a few areas for program improvement, including clarification of the Centers' role and expected outcomes related to their work with LEAs, and further guidance for SEAs about how best to use the Centers.

Since the 1990s, state education agencies (SEAs) have faced pressure to take on expanded roles and responsibilities in carrying out educational reforms. SEAs, however, often have limited resources to meet the new challenges they previously faced under No Child Left Behind and now face under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Title II of the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002 (Section 203)¹ authorized the Comprehensive Centers program. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education awarded five-year grants, later extended to seven years, to 15 Regional Centers and 7 Content Centers under the program. These grants were awarded with the goal to “provide technical assistance to SEAs that builds their capacity to support local educational agencies (LEAs or districts) and schools, especially low-performing districts and schools; improve educational outcomes for all students; close achievement gaps; and improve the quality of instruction.”²

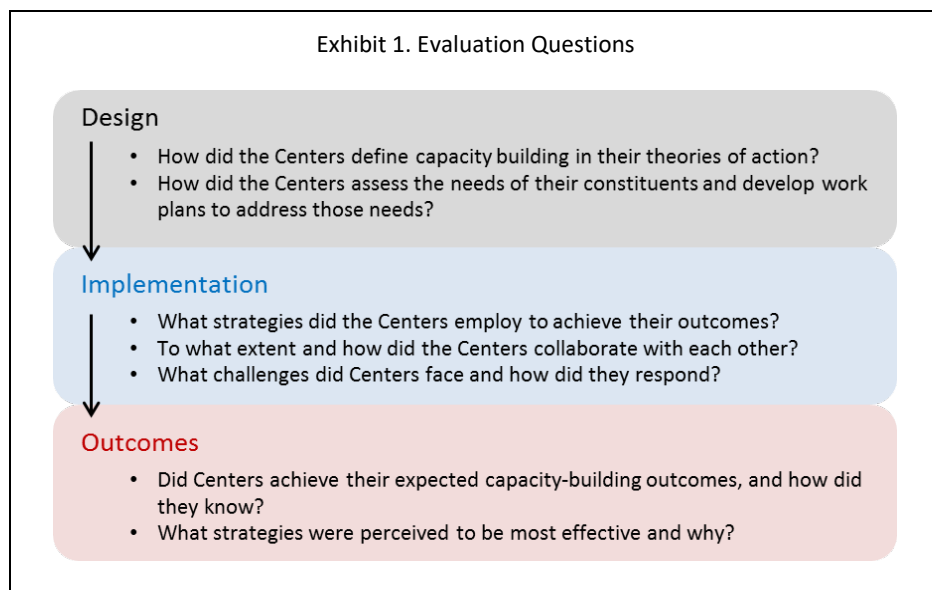
Regional Centers were required to build SEA capacity across seven federal priority areas, focusing on those priorities that addressed each state's needs. The seven federal priority areas included: implementing college- and career-ready standards, developing highly effective teachers and leaders, turning around low-performing schools, ensuring school readiness and transitions to kindergarten of preschool children, building rigorous pathways from secondary school to college, identifying and scaling up innovative approaches to learning, and using data-based decision-making to improve instruction and outcomes.³ In 2016, assistance with ESSA implementation was added as a priority area for the Centers' work. Regional Centers each served between one and seven U.S. states (or territories and freely associated states in the Pacific Region). For example, the Texas and California Comprehensive Centers each served one state, while the Northeast Comprehensive Center served Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Each of the seven Content Centers was required to deliver technical assistance (TA) nationally in one of the federal priority areas, using content expertise to build capacity of both the SEAs and the Regional Centers. (See Appendix A for the full list of Centers, along with the states and entities served by each Regional Center.)

The Comprehensive Centers Program gave Centers considerable discretion in designing and implementing TA projects within the designated federal priority areas. While Centers were expected to build SEA capacity to lead or support LEAs in improving educational outcomes, the program recognized the wide variation in the priorities and existing capacity of SEAs, and urged Centers to develop TA plans based on “in-depth knowledge and understanding” of state needs and contexts. Content Centers

were required to draw on “research-based practices and emerging promising practices” in their specialized content areas,⁴ but in general, Centers were not required to adopt specific designs of TA or capacity-building services.⁵ (For two detailed examples of Centers’ TA projects, see Appendix E.)

Given the many possible definitions of capacity building that could drive this work, this national evaluation sought to answer questions as to how Centers actually interpreted and enacted their broad mandate and whether they did so in similar ways. The evaluation approached these questions by examining Centers’ design and implementation processes, as well as their outcomes and challenges. Such a nuanced look will help the program better understand whether guidance to the Centers was sufficient to produce intended outcomes. The results of this evaluation will also help the program to identify areas where outcomes are not as intended and how program design might be modified to help address documented challenges.

More specifically, there are three main “black boxes” that this evaluation sought to unpack (see Exhibit 1): (1) Design (how did Centers interpret and plan their work); (2) Implementation (how did Centers actually carry out their work); and (3) Outcomes (what results were achieved). Within each box, the evaluation addressed a narrower set of questions that are expected to be of interest given the broad program requirements, such as how Centers define capacity building and set goals, assess SEA needs, deliver TA, address challenges, and produce outcomes. To cover the full breadth of how Centers designed their work, the design component of the evaluation factored in the Centers’ work in all seven federal priority areas. The implementation and outcomes components, in contrast, focused only on Centers’ work in the early learning and teacher/leader effectiveness priority areas, to provide a more in-depth look while limiting burden on respondents. The implementation and outcomes components are thus skewed towards those Centers that had more work in those areas, although all Centers had projects in at least one of the two priority areas each year.



The bulk of this report will focus on presenting findings for the questions within each of the boxes in Exhibit 1. At the end of the report, we return to Exhibit 1 and fill it in with the specific findings, along with a set of lessons learned and recommendations that are synthesized from the findings. Exhibit 2 provides an overview of the data used to address the evaluation questions. It is important to emphasize that this evaluation is not able to measure the causal impacts of the Centers’ work and that much of the findings are based on the perceptions of Center staff and TA recipients identified by the Centers. The findings should therefore not be used to make summative judgments about the Comprehensive Centers program but rather as insights into how the program is playing out in practice and possible avenues to help it better meet program objectives in the future.

Exhibit 2. Data Sources

The study results are based on a variety of data sources summarized below. Additional details about the data and study design can be found in Appendices B-C, with more information about the selection of the two priority areas on page B-2. Two detailed project profiles are provided in Appendix E.

Surveys. A survey for Center staff and another for TA recipients were conducted in spring of 2015, 2016, and 2017. All Center staff who worked on projects in the two priority areas and key TA recipients identified by Centers (using guidelines provided by the evaluation team) were sampled. Center staff answered the same set of survey questions *separately for each* project in the two priority areas on which they had worked, while TA recipients answered a single, longer set of questions that combined *all* projects relevant to them in the two priority areas. As a result, the Center staff survey was analyzed at the project level, and the TA recipient survey was analyzed at the respondent level. Final Center staff samples were 166 to 194 per year (response rates: 79% to 86%) and covered 123 to 149 projects per year. TA recipient samples were 232 to 246 (response rates: 67% to 68%) and covered 119 to 143 projects per year.

Interviews. Annual interviews with Center staff and TA recipients featured protocols for design topics, implementation, and outcomes. Centers' TA design across all priority areas were addressed in one group interview with each Center in 2015; participants included Center directors and lead TA providers. Implementation (2015 and 2016) and outcomes (2017) were addressed in project-focused interviews with Center staff and TA recipients. Centers selected 1-2 key projects in each of the two priority areas that provided in-depth illustrations of capacity building; identified staff working on these projects to participate in group interviews; and identified 1-2 TA recipients per project to be contacted for separate, individual telephone interviews. Overall, 55 projects were discussed in Center staff implementation interviews, of which 44 were also discussed in TA recipient interviews; 36 projects were discussed in Center staff outcomes interviews, of which 31 were also discussed in TA recipient interviews.

Activity Reports. These reports provided a full account of projects that Centers conducted in the two priority areas. Collected every six months from October 2014 to 2017, the data included types of TA activities or products, service dates, and constituents. A total of 333 projects were represented over three reporting years.

Documents. The evaluation team reviewed overview documents from each Center, including theories of action or logic models. Annual management plans and project documents relevant to interviews were collected each year. We also collected year 4 Center evaluation reports prepared by the Center staff or their evaluators.

1. HOW CENTERS DESIGNED THEIR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Capacity building is a broad concept, and federal policy provided some flexibility to Centers on how they interpreted it. It is therefore valuable to understand how Centers defined capacity building (and whether they did so in similar ways), particularly since their approach could shape subsequent behaviors related to TA planning, strategies, activities, and expected outcomes. To do so, the evaluation team primarily relied on interviews conducted in 2015. (More details on the literature about capacity building and specific findings can be found in Appendices A and D.)

Centers had a similar view of capacity building, broadly defining it as strengthening the long-term ability of SEA staff and organizations to work with LEAs and improve educational outcomes. In interviews conducted in 2015 about the design of Centers' TA, all 22 Centers identified SEA staff knowledge and skills as targets for capacity building, and all but one Center also identified organizational capacity building, policy development capacity, and/or policy implementation capacity. (See Appendix Exhibit D-1 for detailed interview results.)

- **Knowledge and skills or human capacity building.** Centers defined this type of capacity building as contributions to the TA recipients' acquisition of new knowledge and more advanced skills, including management and leadership skills, content knowledge, or technical skills in areas such as policy design or data analysis. For example, one Center reported providing research and policy scans that enhanced SEA staff knowledge of principal training and pipeline development.

- **Organizational capacity building.** Centers defined this type of capacity building as the creation of SEA organizational improvements through restructuring; through improved communication and coordination across staff and divisions or with other agencies; or through improvements in other processes, procedures, or use of resources. For example, one Center described assisting an SEA in developing the practice of conducting cross-divisional meetings whenever it developed strategic plans, bringing together staff who had not worked together previously.
- **Building capacity for policy development or design.** Centers defined this type of capacity as the enhancement of SEAs' ability to develop state policy, including recommendations and advice to boards of education and the legislature. For example, one Center described an SEA's development of new teacher standards using tools provided by the Center, including a framework and step-by-step guide to standards development.
- **Building capacity for policy implementation.** Centers also described capacity building that focused on enhancing SEAs' ability to roll out or disseminate a policy reform or practice throughout the state, with improved outreach to LEAs and better ability to provide support, guidance, or training to LEAs implementing new policies. For example, one Center reported preparing SEA staff to lead training for LEA staff on the administration of new teacher evaluations to be used for instructional improvement.

To strengthen these areas of SEA capacity, all but one Center reported in 2015 interviews that they sought to incorporate principles of capacity building into their TA, including fostering ownership, long-term change, and/or organizational process changes. (See Appendix Exhibit D-2 for detailed interview results.)

- **Fostering ownership.** Centers aimed to “gradually release,” or reduce their roles over time, encouraging SEAs to fully take over new practices.
- **Fostering long-term change.** Centers aimed to promote changes that were likely to be sustained by the SEA after the Centers' work with the SEA ended and that could survive staff turnover and changing priorities.
- **Fostering organizational process changes.** Centers aimed to produce improvements in procedures, practices, and processes affecting multiple areas of SEA work.

In addition to their capacity-building goals, Centers' understanding of states' specific needs for assistance in addressing the federal priorities was expected to shape their TA design and planning. The evaluation therefore examined how the Centers assessed SEA needs and developed work plans:

Centers' needs assessment and planning involved multiple methods but universally focused on interactive discussions with state education leaders and SEA staff. In design-focused interviews conducted in 2015, the Centers reported working closely with SEAs to jointly identify states' needs and to co-develop work plans to help SEAs meet their goals.⁶ All but one Center reported that meetings with SEA staff and chief state school officers were a primary means of needs assessment. Needs were also identified in some Centers through, for example, SEA requests (14 Centers), Centers' own knowledge of existing needs (12 Centers), review of educational data (9 Centers), needs assessment surveys (4 Centers), and embedding of Center staff in SEAs (4 Centers). All but two Centers used multiple forms of needs assessment, with processes continuing even after completing their work plans (see Appendix Exhibit D-3).

Although 95% of Center projects served SEAs, they served other constituents as well, with more than one-third serving LEAs and 26% serving Regional Centers. LEAs were the most frequently served project constituents other than SEAs (see Exhibit 3), and frequency of service to LEAs increased over time, according to Centers' activity reports (see Appendix Exhibit D-4). While the U.S. Department of Education's initial guidance for Centers directed them to provide TA directly to SEAs, guidance changed in 2016 to encourage more direct TA to LEAs. In interviews, Center staff and TA recipients reported that, as part of building SEA capacity to implement policy at the local level, Center staff sometimes led or co-led LEA meetings or training sessions. With SEA staff present, Center staff modeled outreach and communication practices for SEAs while also providing direct services to LEAs.

As stated in the legislation, the Content Centers were required to build the capacity of Regional Centers as well as SEAs. Based on Centers’ activity reports, Content Centers sometimes served Regional Centers through TA calls or training sessions and provision of resources.

Exhibit 3. Affiliations of TA Recipients of Center Projects

Recipient Type	Percentage of Projects of Each Center Type		
	Total	Regional Centers	Content Centers
	N= 333	N= 188	N= 145
SEA	95%	99%	90%
LEA	36%	43%	26%
Regional Center	26%	18%	37%
State level, non-SEA	12%	16%	6%
Content Center	6%	6%	7%
Other	29%	27%	32%

*Source: Center activity reports, 2015-2017.
Percentages of projects serving these TA recipients in any project activities.
Percentages can add up to more than 100% because projects could serve more than one constituent group.
“Other” recipients include institutions of higher education, research centers, and professional associations.*

2. HOW CENTERS IMPLEMENTED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

To understand how the Centers carried out their capacity-building plans, the evaluation focused on TA strategies (and types of activities or service modes used to deliver the strategies) in two of the original seven federal priority areas – early learning and teacher/leader effectiveness. This approach allowed a more in-depth look at implementation while limiting burden on respondents. The evaluation also looked at the types and nature of Centers’ collaborations to understand how they were leveraging the broader network of federally funded TA in education to make efficient use of federal resources and to avoid duplication of efforts. Finally, the evaluation documented implementation challenges and how Centers addressed the challenges. (See Appendix D for further details on each of the implementation findings.)

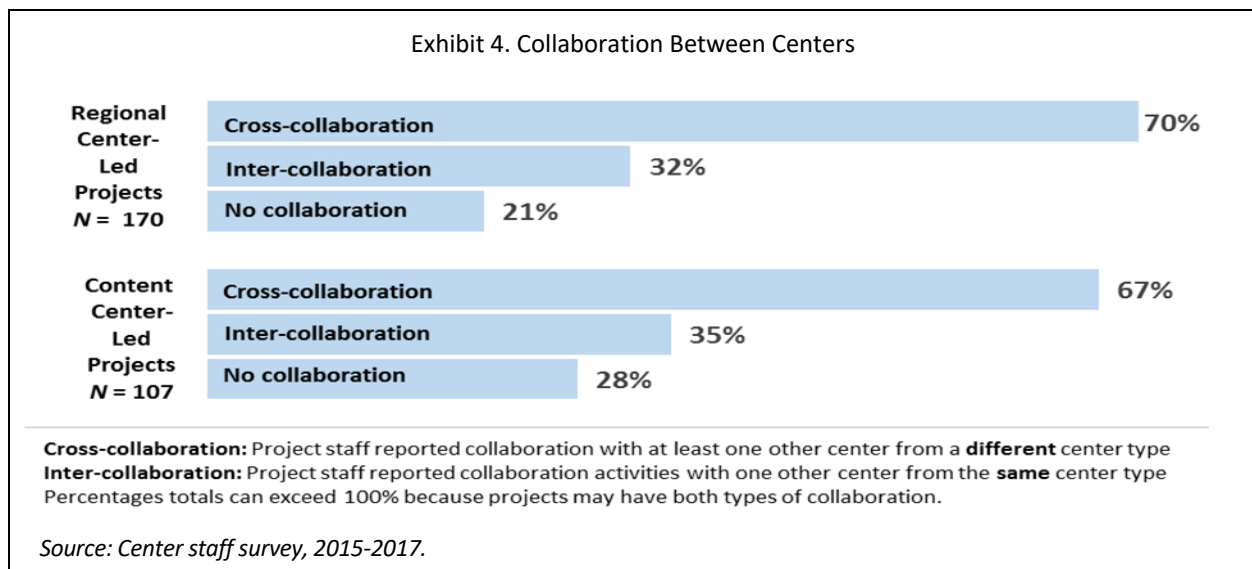
To implement projects in the two priority areas, Centers and TA recipients reported in interviews that Centers drew from a common set of TA strategies, which included thought partnering, cross-state sharing, coordination across divisions and agencies, stakeholder engagement, and modeling new practices. According to their activity reports, Centers then enacted these strategies through an array of TA activities that included consultations, meeting facilitation, provision of products or resources, and workshops. (See Appendix Exhibits D-5 and D-6 for interview data on Center strategies and activity report data on TA activities; see Appendix E for detailed examples of how these strategies are used within projects.)

- **Thought partnering.** Centers and TA recipients reported that Centers served as a “critical friend” regularly available to SEA staff for brainstorming and problem solving, especially to broaden or shift SEA perspectives. For example, a TA recipient on a project focusing on the state teacher evaluation system described how a Center helped the SEA define the problems of practice that the SEA could address in the near term to further their ultimate goal of creating a culture of improvement.
- **Cross-state knowledge building.** Respondents reported that Centers shared common concerns and promising practices among SEAs. For example, one Center brought SEA staff of several states together for peer networking and problem solving. They also produced policy briefs based on scans of various state policies that addressed common problems or goals.

- **Cross-policy coordination.** Respondents reported that Centers coordinated planning across different divisions or agencies, helping the SEA understand how policy areas intersect. For example, one Center helped bring together staff of the SEA’s early learning, educator effectiveness, and school improvement divisions to develop teacher evaluation methods. The Center helped SEA staff develop teacher performance measures appropriate to early learning.
- **Facilitation of stakeholder engagement.** Respondents described Centers facilitating various SEA communications, including meetings and workshops aimed at engaging stakeholders such as state and local education leaders, educator associations, and unions. For example, one Center assisted SEAs in developing outreach skills and materials, conducting web dialogues, and using surveys and listening sessions to obtain input and feedback on policy.
- **Modeling.** Respondents reported that Centers often delivered a service with the expectation that the SEA would learn the process and ultimately replicate it. For example, one Center facilitated a task force meeting series and LEA outreach meetings for several months before turning them over to the SEA staff.

Most Center projects implemented multiple TA activities to operationalize the key TA strategies above. The activities most frequently included in projects were consultations (68% of projects), meeting facilitation (50%), and provision of products and resources such as guidance documents, policy briefs, report templates, or policy scans (35%), workshops (29%), and brokering stakeholder connections (26%). Over the three years examined, 75% of projects (81% of Regional Center projects and 68% of Content Center projects) included at least two types of activities. (See Appendix Exhibits D-6 and D-7 for additional data on Centers’ TA activities and number of activities per project.)

Most Center projects included at least one collaboration with another Center. Since the Comprehensive Centers were designed to work together and to expand the expertise available to SEAs, the evaluation examined the frequency and types of Center collaborations with each other and with other organizations. Survey respondents reported that most projects (79% of Regional Center projects and 72% of Content Center projects) included at least one collaboration with another Center. Collaborations occurred most often between Regional and Content Centers. As shown in Exhibit 4, among Regional Center projects, 70% included a collaboration with one or more Content Centers. Among Content Center projects, 67% included a collaboration with one or more Regional Centers.



In cross-collaborations, a Regional Center might provide state-specific knowledge, while a Content Center provides content expertise and experience with other states. For example, in discussing a project on educator equity planning in two states, staff of a Regional Center described a collaboration with a Content Center. The collaboration involved co-facilitation of stakeholder engagement meetings to lead stakeholders through a structured process to identify causes of disparities in teacher quality. A Regional Center staff member reported:

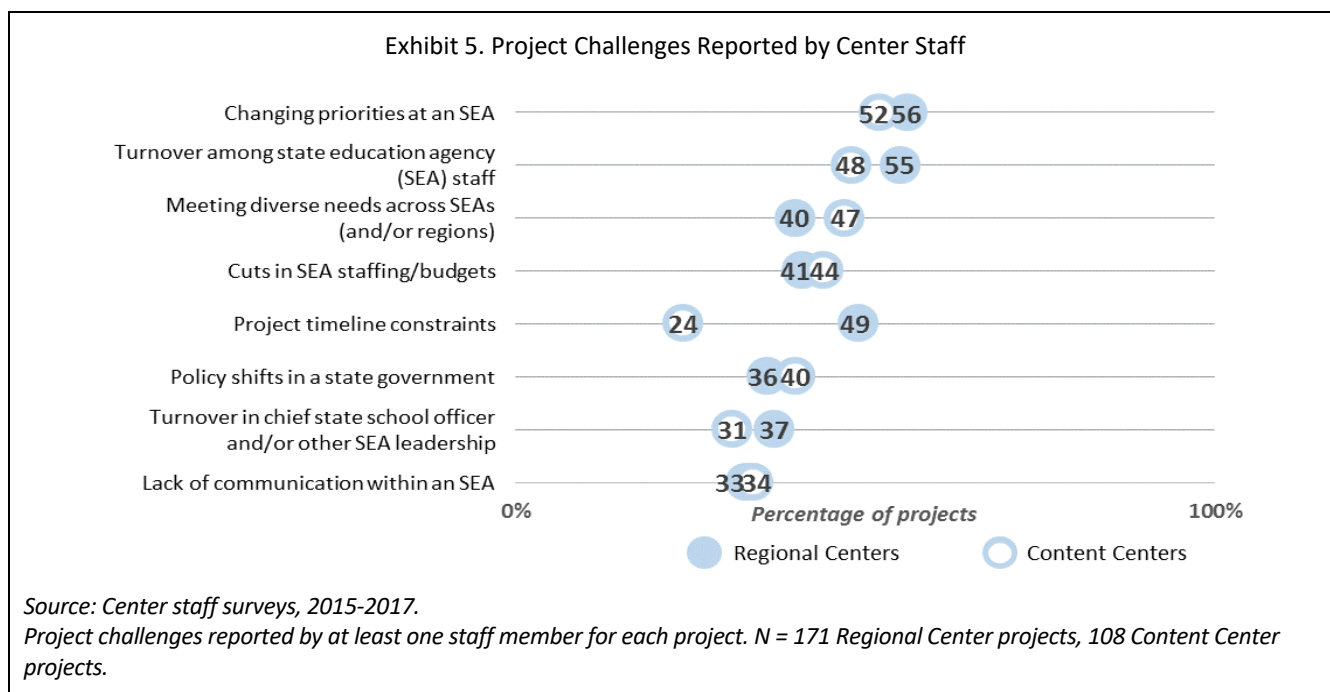
I've been working with the [Content Center] on resources and communicating about how I can adapt them to meet the need of [the states] as the stakeholder engagement meetings have progressed. [Content Center and Regional Center staff] co-facilitated the analysis process ... [Content Center staff] had done it at that point with several states, and I hadn't done it with any of the states I've worked with so far.

In another example, a Content Center staff member commented that the Regional Center collaborator on an early learning project helped them to understand state needs and the state policy landscape, as well as the necessary connections to key stakeholders: “because [the Regional Center lead] is so grounded in the state and the department.”

Inter-collaborations between Content Centers occurred when multiple areas of content expertise were required on a single project. For example, one project focused on early learning practices within turnaround schools. Regional Centers collaborated with each other to maximize their resources when addressing a common need experienced across several regions. For example, two Regional Centers collaborated on planning a webinar on teachers’ data use delivered to their two regions.

The Centers also reported in surveys that they collaborated with other types of organizations, including Regional Educational Laboratories (22% of projects), institutions of higher education (20%), and other TA providers (29%). TA recipients reported in surveys that a particularly helpful service of the Centers was provision of access to experts from these various sources.

Changing priorities at SEAs and turnover of SEA staff were the project challenges most frequently reported by Center staff. These were followed in order of frequency by the challenges of meeting diverse needs across SEAs, cuts in SEA staffing and budgets, project timeline constraints, and policy shifts in state government (see Exhibit 5). Center staff reported similar project challenges across the two types of Centers; however, Regional Center staff were more likely to report timeline constraints as a challenge than Content Center staff. This may be because, as reported in interviews, Regional Centers frequently described assisting SEAs in responding to legislation, and this work could be particularly rushed due to state political or fiscal pressures.



Most TA recipients did not report any challenges in working with Centers, but those that did most often identified scheduling difficulties (14%), staff turnover (9%), and an unclear understanding of the Center’s role (8%). TA recipients of the two Center types reported similar challenges (see Exhibit 6). In interviews, TA recipients agreed with the Centers that turnover and priority shifts could cause disruption and delays. For example, one said:

I worry because [the SEA] is so lean ... nothing's more important than some of the big levers that we've developed to support educator effectiveness. But once it's passed, and once something else comes along as a priority, we lose the capacity to do these things well to sustain them, and I worry about that lost opportunity.

Two other TA recipients each elaborated in interviews on the challenge of learning how to use the Centers:

I have a lot of TA providers ... that want us to come up with work for them to do, and I just don't have time ... [I'm] just trying to figure out what their roles are.

It takes time to realize what their strengths are and to use them in ways that benefit.

Exhibit 6. Challenges in Working with Centers Reported by TA Recipients			
Challenges Reported by TA Recipients in 2017	Percentages Reporting Challenge		
	Total N=231	TA Recipients of Regional Centers N=115	TA Recipients of Content Centers N=116
Difficulty scheduling time for our staff to participate	14%	14%	14%
Staff turnover at our organization	9%	11%	6%
Unclear understanding of role of the Center	8%	10%	6%
Misalignment between our needs and Center priorities	5%	3%	7%

*Source: TA recipient survey, 2017.
See Appendix Exhibit D-11 for full 2017 results as well as 2015 and 2016 results.*

To address the challenges of turnover and priority shifts, the Centers emphasized in interviews being persistent, building broad buy-in, and maintaining flexibility.

- **Being persistent.** The Centers followed up in a timely manner to maintain constituents' focus while accommodating their schedules. Given tight budgets and understaffing, exacerbated by turnover and competing priorities, SEA staff reported that they sometimes had difficulty sustaining focus on their ongoing work with Centers. Centers reported addressing this challenge by maintaining communication with the SEAs throughout slow periods, including regular check-ins, while flexibly accommodating SEAs' need to shift project timetables and priorities.
- **Building broad buy-in.** The Centers built broad stakeholder buy-in to project goals, within and beyond the SEA to include LEAs and other state and local agencies. Center respondents said that their success depended on commitment at multiple levels of SEA staff, as well as from LEA leaders and other stakeholders across the states. They described how, in helping SEAs build broad stakeholder support for projects, Centers fostered long-term investment in project goals and ongoing implementation. They further noted that relationships with mid-level staff were particularly valuable given frequent turnover at the leadership level. Relationships beyond the SEA, with additional state and local agencies, added stability as well. As one Center staffer said:

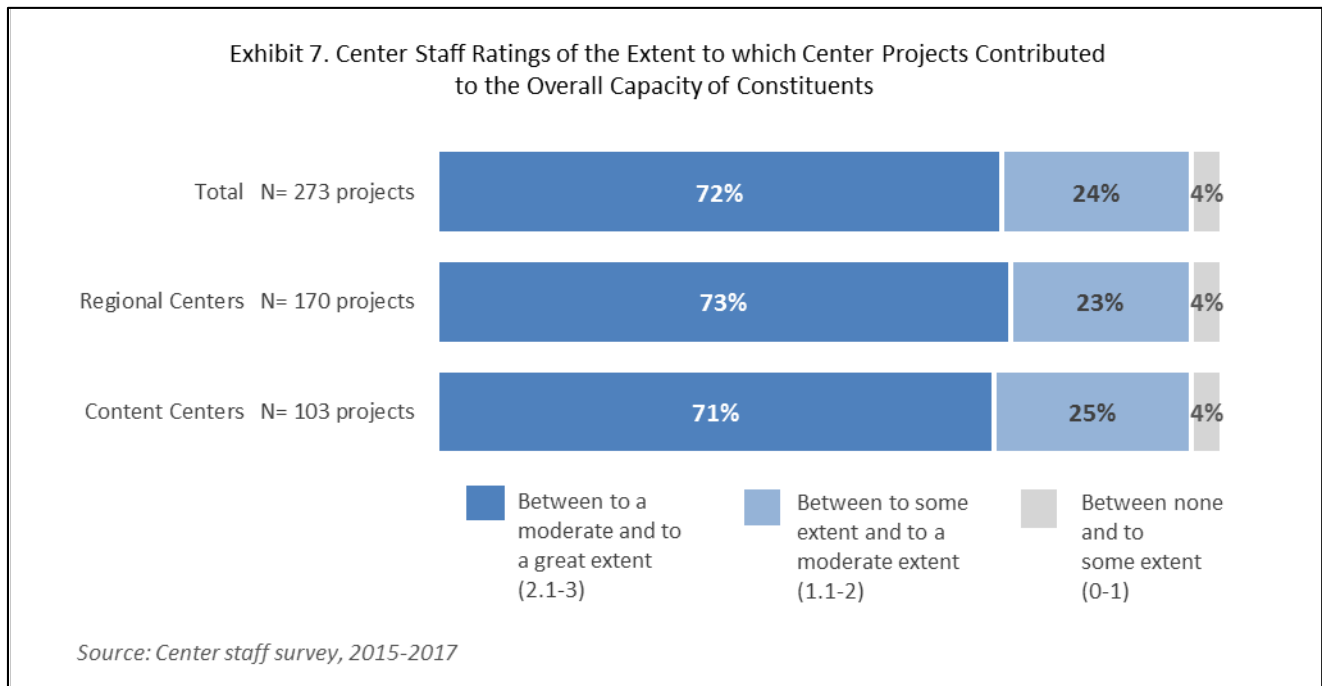
When we think about building capacity, we're always kind of expanding the conversation away from just the agency itself to the broader network, because we know there will be turnover.

- **Maintaining flexibility.** Many Centers responded to challenges with flexibility, modifying projects in response to shifts in policy focus, funding, and the needs of constituents. In interviews, Centers reported modifications in project plans in response to new SEA priorities, new federal legislation such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, or emerging stakeholder input. For example, a TA recipient of one project indicated the value of the Center's flexibility:

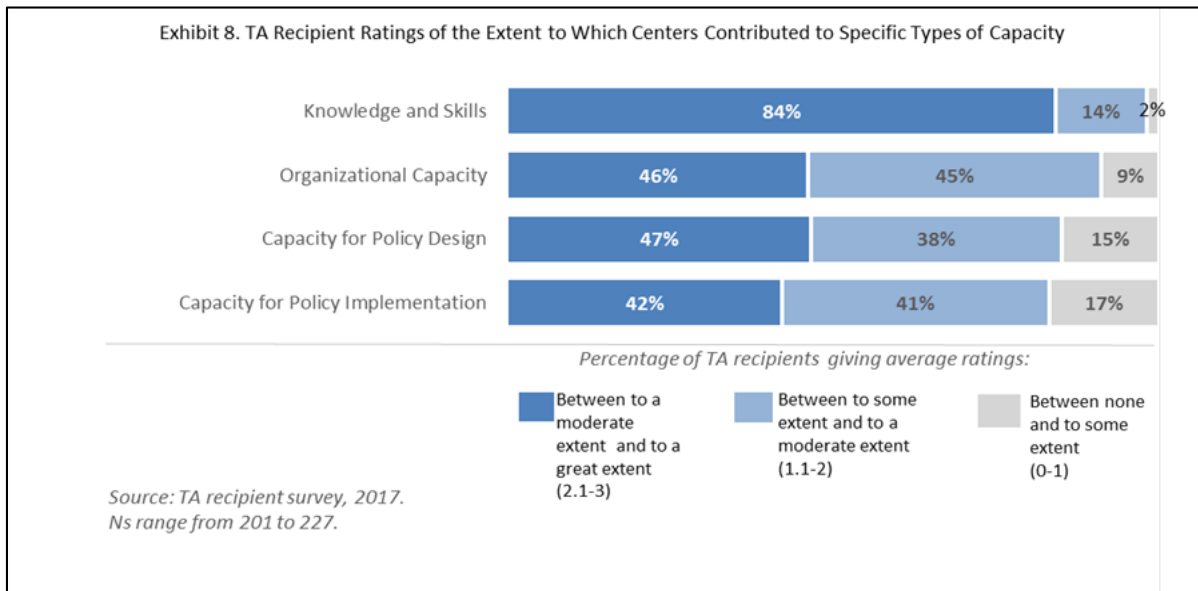
We got a new Commissioner ... the goals of the agency have probably changed because of that change in leadership. And the Comprehensive Center has been able to work with us to adjust and do things that we needed to do to address those goals.

3. WHAT OUTCOMES CENTERS ACHIEVED

Overall, Centers and TA recipients positively rated Centers’ contributions to capacity, with the highest ratings given for knowledge and skills. Center staff rated the contribution of most projects (72%) to constituents’ capacity between “to a moderate extent” and “to a great extent,” as illustrated in Exhibit 7. (See Appendix D for more details on each of the findings related to Center project outcomes.)



TA recipients also rated Centers’ overall contributions to capacity. The distribution of ratings on the 2017 survey is presented in Exhibit 8 for each of the four types of capacity that Centers identified. (See Appendix Exhibit D-12 for 2015 and 2016 results.) TA recipients gave generally positive ratings for Centers’ contributions to capacity. For example, 98 percent reported that on average, Centers built their knowledge and skills capacity to at least some extent, and 91 percent reported that result for organizational capacity. A minority of TA recipients had less favorable views, with 15 percent reporting that on average, Centers did not build their capacity for policy design at all or at most only to some extent, and 17 percent reported that result for policy implementation capacity. Overall, respondents rated contributions to knowledge and skills, on average, a score of 2.5 on a scale from 0-3: at the mid-point between “to a moderate extent” and “to a great extent.” They rated contributions to organizational, policy design and implementation capacity, on average, a score of 2.1, approximately “to a moderate extent.”



In interviews, TA recipients attributed the following specific capacity changes to the Centers:

- Knowledge and Skills.** A TA recipient of an early learning project said the Center presented research that enhanced “knowledge of staff [of SEAs and other agencies on a task force] on strategies that can be employed to alleviate the need for an expulsion or suspension” in prekindergarten classrooms.
- Organizational Capacity.** A TA recipient of a teacher/leader project said that the Center brought together divisions including school improvement, special education, and English language learners: “[The Center] has been instrumental ... We have been able to slide the scale a little bit away from being siloed and more towards being a collaborative agency. We rewrote our ... interactive action plan process for ESSA this year as a collaborative group.”
- Capacity for Policy Design.** A TA recipient reported that the SEA increased its capacity to help form policies on educator certification, working with the Board of Education: “We brought in studies that [the Center staff] had put together ... We had assistance from Center staff in developing the presentations and the activities. The result was a very fruitful board meeting where the Board adopted significant changes to the rules related to teacher preparation.”
- Capacity for Policy Implementation.** On one early learning project aiming to encourage statewide administration of a kindergarten readiness assessment, a TA recipient commented that the Center provided SEA staff with a “data-driven dialogue” method that they now use: “We have taken it out to the [kindergarten entry inventory] implementing folks and have done the trainings on the ground. We’ve actually used it here at the state level as well in some of our own data-driven capacity.”

More than half of TA recipients in 2017 reported using the information provided by the Centers to make recommendations (64%), develop new processes or programs (63%), and draft internal memos or reports (57%). Slightly less than half of TA recipients (46%) reported using the information to overcome a barrier or challenge (see Exhibit 9). Most TA recipients (between 86% and 88% each year) reported taking at least one of these actions using materials provided by the Centers (see Appendix Exhibit D-18).

TA Recipient Actions Using Materials Provided by the Centers, 2017	Percentage of TA Recipients		
	Total	Regional Centers	Content Centers
	N= 231	N= 115	N= 116
Made recommendations to SEA leadership or staff	64%	61%	66%
Used the information in developing new processes/projects/programs	63%	69%	58%
Used the information in drafting internal memos/plans/reports	57%	64%	50%
Used the information to overcome a barrier or challenge	46%	50%	42%
Reported at least one of the above actions	86%	89%	84%

Source: TA recipient survey, 2017.
See Appendix D for 2015 and 2016 TA recipient survey results.

Center staff and TA recipients reported in interviews that Center projects either achieved goals, exceeded goals or, for projects that had not yet concluded, were on track to achieving goals. Of 27 projects for which questions about goal achievement were addressed by both Center staff and TA recipients, both types of respondents agreed that goals had been achieved for 18 projects, and both agreed that the project was on track towards achieving its goals for 7 projects. In discussing project achievements, Center staff focused on outcomes related to building constituents’ capacity. TA recipients often focused on the Centers’ role in helping them achieve broad state policy or reform goals, for example:

Based on the expert feedback [from the Center], I made adjustments to a proposal for future direction of the teacher evaluation model. The feedback ensured a much higher quality product to submit to leadership.

Updating the Child Development Permit structure has been very challenging. I don't believe we could have achieved its results without the assistance of the [Center].

Most TA recipients (85% or more each year) reported in surveys that the Centers enabled them to accomplish something they might not otherwise have been able to do (see Exhibit 10).

Survey Year	Percent of TA recipients reporting the Center’s TA enabled them to accomplish what they may have not otherwise accomplished
2015 (N = 207)	86%
2016 (N = 210)	91%
2017 (N = 230)	85%

Source: TA recipient survey, 2015-2017.

Center evaluation reports indicate that all Centers included at least a few questions about capacity building in the surveys and/or interviews administered by Center evaluators for annual reporting. Centers or their evaluators usually administered surveys and conducted interviews annually or as a follow-up to events. To meet federal reporting requirements, Centers focused these instruments on questions about their TA quality, relevance, and usefulness, but they often included questions focused on capacity-building outcomes as well. In interviews, Centers also reported using informal methods, such as ad hoc observations and conversations with constituents, to identify and describe project capacity-building outcomes.

TA strategies and activities reported to be effective were those that reflected capacity-building principles: imparting skills, practices, or tools that fostered ownership, process change, and/or long-term, sustainable change. In interviews, TA recipients identified Centers' products and tools, thought partnering, facilitation, and cross-state knowledge building as particularly effective in producing project capacity-building outcomes. TA recipient survey results also identified Centers' products and tools, as well as access to experts, among particularly helpful services.

As an illustration of how a TA strategy worked effectively to build capacity, both Center staff and TA recipients described how Center products and tools contributed to a sense of ownership among SEAs, process change, and long-term change. Products and tools identified as effective included those that served as models or templates adaptable to different scenarios and could be used by SEA staff to improve agency processes, including internal performance and external communication with LEAs and other stakeholders. For example, a Center staff member of one early learning project explained that the Center developed model papers on school readiness indicators, detailing how the indicators could guide instructional strategies. SEA staff used these as templates for writing papers on additional indicators and disseminating them to LEAs. A TA recipient of a teacher/leader project reported that the Regional Center working with her had provided performance rubrics that helped to build organizational capacity. The rubrics were used for agency restructuring "and will affect every single program in the agency."

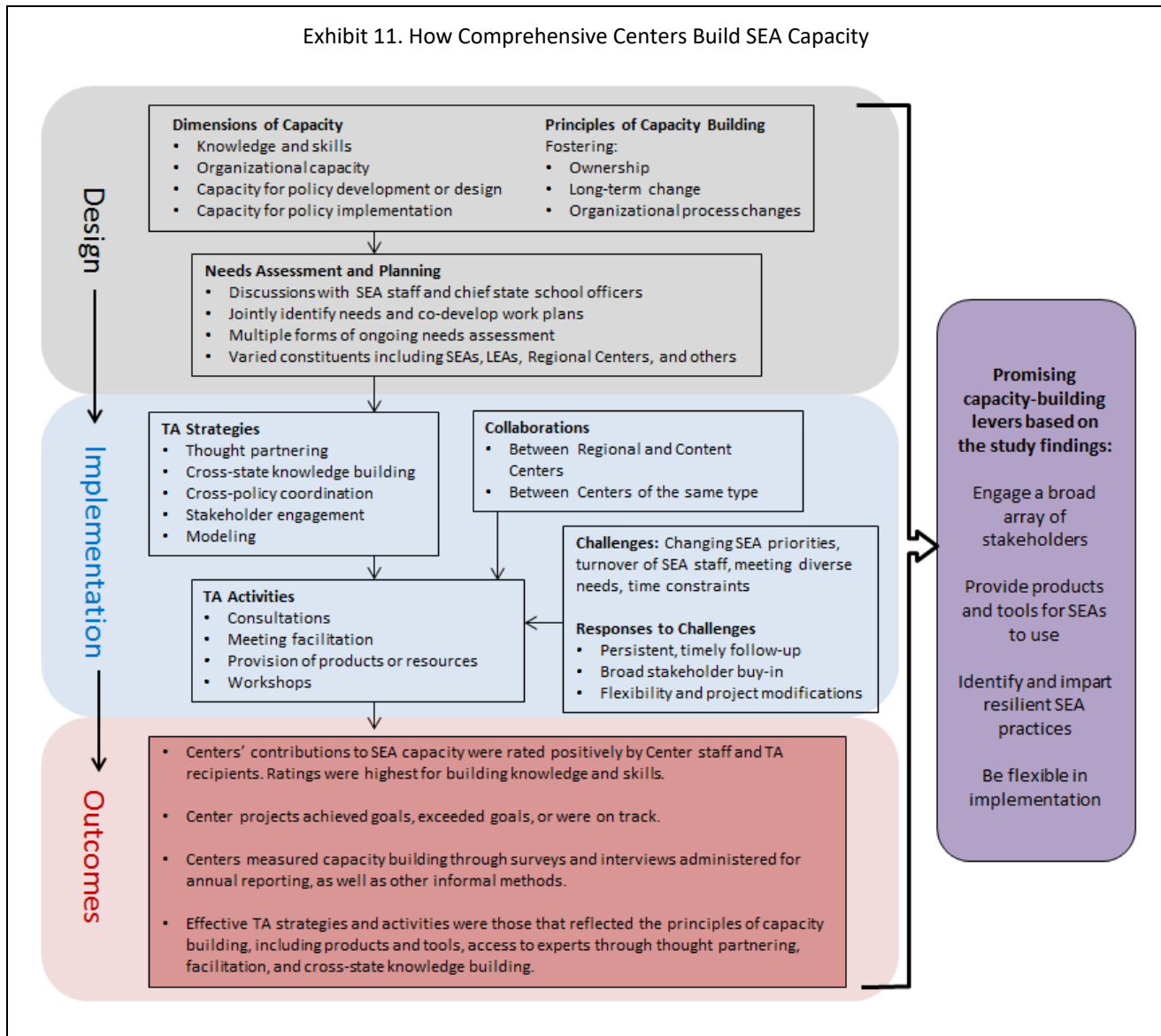
In surveys, Center staff identified their content expertise and knowledge of state context (75-87% of projects), as well as their strong relationships with SEAs and state educational leaders (58-62%), as among the most significant supports for their projects' success. Other important supports reported by Center staff were SEA and Center leadership commitment (48-49%) and Center collaborations (33-39%).

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE CENTERS PROGRAM

Overall, the evaluation found that Centers shared similarities in their approaches to the design and implementation of their work, and Centers and key TA recipients reported that the work generally helped build SEA capacity. Profiles of two Center projects are provided in Appendix E as a supplement to this report. These two projects are not necessarily representative of all Center projects, but were selected to bring the overall findings in this report more to life while also recognizing the unique combinations of needs, strategies, challenges, and outcomes that may make up each project.

This evaluation's findings are consistent with the findings of the prior national evaluation of the Centers, published in 2011. The factors that respondents highlighted as instrumental to achieving desired outcomes are worth documenting for guidance to future Centers. The evaluation also uncovered some common challenges to the Centers' work and points to possible ways to address these challenges moving forward. In this concluding section, we fill in the "black boxes" in Exhibit 1 with our main findings on how Centers design and implement their work and how they achieve their outcomes (see Exhibit 11).

Exhibit 11. How Comprehensive Centers Build SEA Capacity



From these findings emerge a number of capacity-building levers that are potentially important in enabling Centers to overcome challenges and produce longer-term capacity changes. Future Center operators and Department of Education program staff may wish to adopt and encourage these practices that offer potentially important levers for capacity building. These promising capacity-building levers are presented in Exhibit 11 and include:

- **Engaging a broad array of stakeholders.** Throughout the evaluation, respondents emphasized that the Centers played a particularly important role in reaching out to, bringing together, and gathering input from multiple stakeholders both within and beyond SEAs, and in guiding SEA staff to learn and take over this role. Centers also found that engaging diverse stakeholders, at multiple levels within SEAs and other agencies, helped build continuity in new practices throughout SEA staff and leadership turnover.
- **Providing products and tools that SEAs could use on their own.** TA recipients emphasized the usefulness of Centers' products and tools that SEAs could use or adapt for internal and external communication and guidance, increasing their capacity to lead and implement organizational and policy changes.
- **Identifying and imparting resilient practices.** Centers and TA providers noted that despite the continuing challenges of staff and leadership turnover and shifting priorities, Centers could build long-term capacity by helping SEAs identify and use

practices that could endure through turnover and policy shifts. These practices include improving coordination and communication across divisions and agencies, connecting with other states, and engaging stakeholders.

- ***Being flexible in implementation of plans.*** The greatest challenges to the Centers' work came from turnover and changes in state leadership, staffing, and policy. Center staff and TA recipients noted that Centers were able to continue to work towards long-term SEA capacity change by adjusting their plans, schedules, and strategies in response to continually changing priorities and needs.

While respondents reported generally positive experiences with the Centers, a few areas for program improvement emerged that program staff may wish to consider:

- ***Further clarify the Centers' role and expected outcomes at the local level.*** Although Centers' charge was focused on SEAs, the ultimate goal of the SEAs is to improve outcomes at the local level. Centers worked directly with LEA and school staff on some projects, often as part of modeling and guiding the SEAs to work with LEAs themselves. Over the course of the grant period, Center projects were increasingly likely to involve LEAs directly. The U.S. Department of Education guidance to Centers shifted in 2016 towards encouragement of work with LEAs. It may be helpful to further develop the concept of Center capacity building to include more specific goals and expected outcomes at this level.
- ***Provide additional guidance for SEAs on how to make the best use of Centers.*** Although some SEA staff had a history of working with the Centers and a thorough understanding of the Centers' role, a few reported that they would benefit from receiving more detailed information about what services Centers do and do not provide, and how the scope of their TA is distinct from that of other federal TA providers.

Finally, SEAs expressed concern during interviews about the sustainability of their initiatives without continuing support from the Centers. Center staff and TA recipients often noted that time pressures and limited SEA staffing levels impeded progress toward their policy goals, leading them to rely heavily on Center support. TA recipients commented that when responding to urgent requests, the Centers were able to quickly provide resources (such as research supporting a policy proposal) that SEA staff did not have time or sufficient expertise to access on their own. Even with their capacity bolstered as intended, SEAs may be limited by insufficient resources and staff, and may thus require continued Center support.

Looking Ahead

It is important to emphasize that this evaluation is not able to measure the causal impacts of the Centers' work and that much of the findings are based on the perceptions of Center staff and TA recipients identified by the Centers. The findings should therefore not be used to make summative judgments about the Comprehensive Centers program but rather as insights into how the program is playing out in practice and possible avenues to help it better meet program objectives in the future.

Evaluating the Centers' TA was challenging because it is difficult to isolate the effects of their TA from other influences on the actions and capacity of SEAs and to clearly link the Centers' work to student, teacher, and school outcomes. TA is not a specific intervention but a set of strategies and services that are customized and responsive to each constituent's needs. Further specification of high-impact capacity-building outcomes is needed, as are measures of SEA capacity for working effectively with LEAs. Validated measures based on the capacity-building definitions and indicators examined in this evaluation would improve future evaluations and support a range of stakeholders in program improvement efforts.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/newccp/legislation.html>

² 77 FR 33563. <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2012/06/06/2012-13735/applications-for-new-awards-comprehensive-centers-program#h-4>

³ The seven priority areas in more detail are (1) implementing college and career-ready standards and aligned, high-quality assessments for all students; (2) identifying, recruiting, developing, and retaining highly effective teachers and leaders; (3) turning around the lowest-performing schools; (4) ensuring the school readiness and success of preschool-age children and their successful transition to kindergarten; (5) building rigorous instructional pathways that support the successful transition of all students from secondary education to college without the need for remediation, and careers; (6) identifying and scaling up innovative approaches to teaching and learning that significantly improve student outcomes; and (7) using data-based decision-making to improve instructional practices, policies, and student outcomes. Some Centers also addressed Native American Education and special needs.

⁴ 77 FR 33563. <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2012/06/06/2012-13735/applications-for-new-awards-comprehensive-centers-program#h-4>

⁵ Program performance requirements directed Centers to produce high quality, relevant, and useful services, based on constituent ratings. Centers' performance reporting and internal evaluations drew on surveys of constituent satisfaction with these aspects of Centers' TA.

⁶ See appendix pages A-4 to A-7 for context and background on SEA needs for TA.

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DISCLOSURE OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Neither the prime contractor for this evaluation, IMPAQ International, nor its subcontractor, The Millennium Group International, nor any of the individual evaluation team members or technical working group members, have financial interests that could be affected by the findings of this evaluation.

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