

Regional Resource Center Program (RRCPP) Technical Assistance and ESEA Accountability

Introduction/Explanation

The Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) flexibility program initiated in September 2011 holds several implications for special education accountability and, by extension, state education agencies and the technical assistance providers who support them. The U.S. Department of Education has approved ESEA waiver applications for a majority of states, allowing them flexibility in the design of their state accountability systems in exchange for implementation of several key federal reform initiatives—the adoption of college and career ready standards for all students; differentiated recognition, accountability, and support for schools and districts; and evaluation systems for educators and administrators that incorporate measures of student achievement. These shifts in state accountability systems represent particular changes and challenges for special education and students with disabilities.

For example, states applying for ESEA waivers agreed to adopt college and career ready academic content standards in Reading and Mathematics. Most states selected the Common Core State Standards, developed jointly by the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA). Helping stakeholders understand the new standards as well as build teachers' capacity to ensure students with disabilities are able to access them is a major initiative underway in states. Also, beginning in the 2014-15 school year, most states will administer new assessments aligned with college and career ready standards. A key challenge for states in the coming years will be transitioning to the new assessments and assuring that they meaningfully engage and accurately assess the achievement of all students including students with disabilities. Furthermore, states are no longer able to administer alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards. This represents yet another shift for some states.

The new accountability systems designed by states under their waivers are, in many cases, more complex than the systems that existed previously and take into account many more measures of student, school, and district achievement than before. Specific to special education, factoring in the performance of students with disabilities into determinations of school and district progress has changed significantly under some state waivers. For example, several have moved to using fewer and more broadly defined subgroups (sometimes called “super subgroups”) to make major accountability decisions, a definitive change from the previous practice. As a result, public outreach and clear communication strategies are needed to ensure that all education stakeholders, especially families,

understand the new expectations for students, teachers, administrators, and schools, as well as new accountability concepts such as “super subgroups.” It is also important that states’ new accountability systems appropriately assess, monitor, and address the needs of all students, including students with disabilities.

Another shift under the waivers with ramifications for special education is the development of new teacher and administrator evaluation systems that are linked to student achievement. Evaluating teachers based, in part, on their students’ academic performance is a complicated endeavor. Applying such metrics to both general and special educators of students with disabilities may prove even more challenging.

The issues described above represent significant areas of work for state education agencies in the coming months and years that hold important implications for students with disabilities. As a result, it will be critical that the RRCP and other federally funded technical assistance centers offer support to states as they undergo these transitions and implement the redesigned accountability systems described under their waivers.

RRCP Capacity and Role in TA

Many Regional Resource Centers (RRCs) have reviewed and analyzed each of their state’s waivers and plans for implementing ESEA. These analyses initially provided and will continue to provide information to RRCs about needed TA, opportunities for collaboration with other TA providers, and common national and regional needs of their states.

The RRCP has unique capacity to support states in the implementation of many aspects of ESEA waiver and accountability programs such as college and career ready standards, accountability systems, closure of the achievement gap, and educator evaluation. State education agencies have experienced a variety of challenges within the special education context for a number of years. These include lack of involvement of special education in the original planning of state initiatives and in planning overall school improvement activities. Yet students with disabilities have some of the largest achievement gaps, and general education personnel may not feel prepared to address the needs of students with disabilities in the general education environment. More and more state agencies are realizing that to meet the intent of the ESEA flexibility waivers, they must work with all departments within their agency to realize improvement in outcomes for all students. The RRCP can bridge the general and special education systems in our work, helping to identify leverage points to improve results for all students through systematic, collaborative, and sustainable strategies and by identifying key partners for collaborative TA.

State agencies are beginning to recognize that silos have existed among programs but to build systemic change, the silos must be broken down and collaboration must replace them. To accomplish this, RRCs across the country have created and been involved in various collaboratives with other TA providers such as the Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs), the Equity Assistance Centers, and specialty content centers. Joint work by RRCs and RCCs in several states has demonstrated the impact of these types of collaboratives on states’ abilities to make effective change.

There are many areas related to the ESEA waivers where technical assistance by collaborating partners may be most effective, including college and career readiness standards and teacher evaluation systems. As states develop and implement these standards or systems, the combined expertise of general and special education TA providers can support state work. Some states are exploring the idea of coordinated monitoring systems to ensure improved academic achievement results for all students, and again, RRCs have extensive knowledge in monitoring and general supervision.

The RRC Program has developed IDEA fiscal expertise and is now positioned to provide guidance to states when there is discussion of braided funding to support the initiatives and activities of the ESEA waiver requirements. Each RRC has a trained and knowledgeable fiscal staff person while the RRCP Fiscal Improvement Team (FIT) operates efficiently and effectively to answer any questions or develop needed tools.

The RRCP also has knowledge of the needs of students with disabilities relative to accessing and making progress in rigorous standards and assessments. Technical assistance from the RRCP can assist states to develop and refine policies and practices for standards-based IEPs so that all students have access to rigorous standards and the opportunity to progress in the same high quality, general education curriculum as their peers. RRCs can also support the state development of instructional practices and policies that will allow all educators to understand the unique challenges and supports needed by students with disabilities (e.g., universally designed learning). Such support will assist states to work with their lowest performing schools in an effort to close the achievement gap.

The transition to new assessments by most states presents many challenges. One challenge is that most of the assessment consortia are not funded beyond the development phase. The RRCP can explore ways to support regional and national activities in partnership with the RRCs to continue to support state sharing of information and learning with the new general assessments as well as assessments for students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) and those students with disabilities who need alternate assessments.

RRCs can support the states' evaluation of their infrastructure to ensure that states' initiatives are aligned and that special education initiatives are aligned with and integrated into the initiatives of general education and support the overall goals of the state. The RRCP can also support state agencies in ensuring that any new initiative is thoughtfully planned to support successful implementation, scaling-up and sustainability. Staff in each RRC have participated in training on the principles of Implementation Science and have been mentored in their support for this work in the states by the Implementation Core Team, with representatives in each Center.

The following list provides examples of support the RRCP and individual RRCs have already provided to states relative to ESEA waivers.

- The Student Performance and Achievement (SPA) Priority Team developed and conducted a webinar focused on ESEA flexibility in partnership with OSEP to build RRCP staff capacity to support states around ESEA waivers.

- Multiple centers reviewed approved flexibility waivers from states in their region and created a summary overview of each state’s waiver using the template that was created by the SPA Priority Team. This information was used to develop technical assistance for states, to bridge the general and special education systems in our work, to identify leverage points to improve results in more systematic, collaborative, and sustainable strategies and to identify key partners for collaborative TA. One RRC paid particular attention to states that implemented the AA-MAS and are transitioning from this assessment to the general assessment and is using this analysis to identify TA needs and launch conversations with the states to determine what support they will need.
- One RRC Collaborative engaged in a conversation with Comprehensive Centers, Equity Assistance Centers, and the Region P-TAC to identify critical considerations for promoting and ensuring equity as states implement their flex waiver plans. This resulted in a list of questions and a presentation at the OSEP IDEA Conference in August, 2013.
- Through the Building Shared Capacity Collaborative, RRCs are engaged with Comprehensive Centers who serve the same states to develop integrated technical assistance and support for states. ESEA waivers are an anchor and provide a context for this work along with other specific state data and practices.
- One RRC hosted a webinar for state Part B and C staff as well as parent center staff in partnership with the Regional Parent Technical Assistance Center on the topic of ESEA waivers and implications for students with disabilities.
- An RRC reviewed and provided feedback on a state ESEA waiver application with an eye toward plans for supporting students with disabilities and special education issues.
- Several RRCs have provided guidance on how to report data under APR Indicator B-3 for ESEA Waiver states.
- RRCs have worked with individual states as requested to assist with aligning special education efforts of accountability with ESEA accountability efforts.
- Several RRCs offered a cross-regional event for state teams to identify strategies for promoting the inclusion of each student in the conversation around high expectations, specifically to include students with significant cognitive disabilities.
- The topic of ESEA waivers has been a standing item on agendas for meetings of SEA Directors in several RRC regions.
- One RRC is currently assisting several states to develop an aligned, integrated (Title and IDEA) monitoring system, focusing on results.
- An RRC in partnership with the regional Comprehensive Center is supporting a state to provide support to its “focus and priority schools” to improve outcomes for students with disabilities as specified in their ESEA waiver.

RRC Partners and Collaborations

- Existing Collaboratives
- Comprehensive Centers
- Content Comprehensive Centers
- OSEP Specialty Centers

- Equity Assistance Centers
- Parent Technical Assistance Centers (OSEP and ESEA funded)
- NASDSE

Conclusion

It is evident that states are looking to the RRCs for guidance and technical assistance around the implementation of their ESEA waivers as they relate to systems changes that impact students with disabilities. More and more states are bridging the silos between general and special education and the RRCP staff have the capacity to assist states in working across agencies to ensure that each and every student is afforded the opportunity of a quality education. Witness the level of activity, to date, that RRCP staff have been involved in around the ESEA waivers and it is clear that the RRCP staff are not only being included in the conversations around the ESEA waivers in states, but have been active partners in implementation, as well.

Contact information

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