How Comprehensive Centers Design Technical Assistance

National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers Interim Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 1990s, state education agencies (SEAs) have faced pressure to take on expanded roles and responsibilities in carrying out educational reforms. This pressure has challenged SEAs to develop new capacities, often in the face of limited resources. The Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers are charged with assisting SEAs in meeting these challenges. Centers are expected to assist SEAs by building their capacity to implement educational reforms that lead to higher student achievement.¹ Despite the importance of the Centers’ charge, the process by which Centers build SEA capacity is not well understood. The National Evaluation of Comprehensive Centers analyzes how Centers design, implement, and produce outcomes of their technical assistance (TA). This evaluation examines the 22 Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education for the years 2012–2017. These Centers include 15 Regional Centers, each of which serves between one and seven states, and seven Content Centers, each of which focuses on one of the seven federal priority areas.² Using surveys, interviews, Center documents, and data on Center activities collected from 2015–2017, the evaluation is designed to document and analyze how the Centers define capacity building, design and implement TA to build SEA capacity, and produce capacity-building outcomes. This interim report focuses on how the Centers design their work.

Key Findings

The Centers’ capacity-building principles focus on fostering SEA ownership, long-term change, and systems change. Center staff also identified as part of their definitions of capacity building specific types of SEA capacity that Centers sought to change, including staff knowledge and skills, organizational development, policy design, and policy implementation. In 2015 interviews, Center staff reported that Centers’ fundamental definitions of capacity building had not changed since their inception in 2012.

Although all Centers’ theories of action focused on capacity-building processes, Content Centers targeted more specific outcomes within their priority area. All Centers’ theories of action represented the key processes, relationships, and strategies the Centers emphasized to produce their desired outcomes. Centers’ fundamental theories of action did not change during their first two years of funding, but Centers adjusted and operationalized their theories of action differently in different contexts. The Regional Centers focused on capacity building across a range

² The seven priority areas 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. Three new priority areas were added in 2016: the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Indian education, and special education.
Center staff reported working closely with SEAs in a process of jointly identifying states’ needs and co-developing work plans to help SEAs meet their goals. The Centers’ assessment of needs began with an understanding of state educational goals, framed within the seven priority areas that the federal government assigned to the Centers. Center staff reported that meetings with SEAs and chief state school officers were a primary means of needs assessment, although most Centers used multiple methods. Staff members reported developing work plans through an iterative and interactive planning process with SEAs, beginning with the top leaders.

Centers’ theories of action incorporated key TA strategies for producing SEA capacity change; among these were Center collaboration, scaffolding, thought partnering, and cross-state sharing and support. Center staff noted that collaboration across Regional and Content Centers built on the complementary specialties of the Centers: Regional Centers facilitated state relationships and provided knowledge of state context, while Content Centers provided expertise in both the content and policy related to their priority area.

Center staff identified relationship building as critical to achieving their Centers’ capacity-building goals. Center staff reported that relationships with SEA staff and chief state school officers were an important foundation for designing their work, supporting ongoing communication, assessing needs, planning TA, and selecting appropriate TA strategies.

Centers planned multiple sources of evidence to monitor SEA capacity-building progress and outcomes, but these ranged widely in rigor. Center staff reported challenges in designing outcomes measures, including the complexity of capacity change, the difficulty of isolating the Center’s specific impact, and the limited resources available for evaluation.

Evaluation Research Questions and Conceptual Framework

The national evaluation is designed to address questions about how Centers design their work across all priority areas and about the implementation and outcomes of projects in two specific priority areas. The two priority areas are identifying, recruiting, developing, and retaining highly effective teachers and leaders (great teachers and leaders) and ensuring the school readiness and success of preschool-age children and their successful transition to kindergarten (early learning). This narrowed focus limits the data collection burden on Centers while allowing for greater depth of investigation on whether and how different capacity-building strategies and outcomes emerge in response to different policy needs.

A national evaluation of the Comprehensive Centers from the previous round of funding (2005–2011) addressed Centers’ performance across all state priorities. It analyzed the extent of SEA capacity change and the quality, relevance, and usefulness of Center services.\(^3\) This study builds

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on that evaluation by examining the processes by which Centers produce changes in SEA capacity. In addition, the current evaluation seeks to provide more nuanced information through a close study of two priority areas.

The evaluation addresses the following research questions about the Comprehensive Centers’ design, implementation, and outcomes. The questions about the design of the Centers’ work (questions 1–3) are the focus of this interim report.

**Design of the Centers’ Work**

1. How did the Centers define capacity building? Did their definitions change over time? If so, how?
2. What theories of action did the Centers use to guide their general capacity-building work? Did the theories change over time? If so, how?
   a. What theories of action did the Centers use to guide their capacity building within a particular priority area? Did the theories change over time? If so, how?
   b. What short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes were the Centers aiming for?
   c. What sources of evidence did the Centers anticipate using to determine whether outcomes were achieved?
   d. What strategies did the Centers include in their theories of action to achieve outcomes?
   e. To what extent did the Centers’ theories of action vary by type of Center (Regional or Content), priority area, or state?
3. How did the Centers address the needs of their constituencies?
   a. How did they assess constituents’ needs?
   b. How did they develop work plans to address those needs?

**Implementation of the Centers’ Work**

4. What strategies did Centers employ to achieve their outcomes?
   a. How did strategies vary for Regional vs. Content Centers and by priority area?
   b. What were the characteristics of the strategies Centers implemented?
   c. To what extent and how did Centers collaborate with each other, for example, by sharing or building on other Centers’ resources and expertise?
5. To what extent did Centers implement technical assistance to their constituents as planned?
   a. What challenges or barriers did Centers face in providing technical assistance to their constituents?
   b. What helped them to overcome barriers and challenges?

Outcomes of the Centers’ Work

6. To what extent did Centers achieve their goals and objectives?
   a. To what extent and in what ways did the Centers contribute to their constituents’ capacity?
   b. What (if any) were the unanticipated outcomes of the Centers’ work?
   c. What sources of evidence did Centers use to determine whether outcomes were achieved?
   d. If Centers did not achieve expected outcomes, what factors contributed to this? How did Centers respond?
   e. What strategies were perceived by Center staff and their constituents to be most effective and why?
   f. Did different strategies produce different types of capacity outcomes?
   g. Did the actual outcomes align with and support the Centers’ theories of action? Did different theories have different outcomes?

The research team initially developed a broad conceptual framework to guide the evaluation design and analysis and to inform the development of interview protocols and coding. This framework (see Exhibit ES-1) illustrates the broad elements of the Centers’ design, implementation, and outcomes. These elements will be the subject of examination throughout the evaluation. The conceptual framework was based on a document review and on meetings with Center staff conducted in the first year of the evaluation. To further inform the conceptualization of SEA capacity building, the research team reviewed literature that described or defined the process and goals of capacity building in public agencies or systems, particularly in education. The literature was used to identify possible themes in the Centers’ approach to capacity building and to develop interview questions and constructs for coding.

The box in the upper left side of this framework indicates the federal requirements and scope that guide the seven Content Centers and the 15 Regional Centers, including the seven federal priority areas. The two focal areas of this evaluation are Priority #2, Great Teachers and Leaders, and Priority #4, Early Learning.

The design component in the center of the framework (in blue) presents the constructs that were examined in depth for this interim report. The design incorporates the Centers’ definitions of capacity building, types of capacity building, and theories of action, which in turn shaped how the Centers assessed needs, set goals, developed work plans, identified TA strategies, and chose outcome indicators.
The implementation component of the conceptual framework illustrates how Centers operationalize their work plans by developing and facilitating partnerships, initiating TA projects and initiatives to address needs, monitoring and evaluating project success over time using data, and addressing ongoing challenges that emerge during implementation. The long curved arrow leads to the expected outcomes of the Centers’ work. The outcome of focus in this evaluation is capacity change among SEAs and, if relevant, capacity change in the Regional Centers. The framework indicates that the ultimate outcome of the Comprehensive Centers program is improvement in student achievement.

The bottom box identifies national and state contextual factors that can influence any of the other components of the conceptual framework. Emerging national and state policies, new leadership, and changing educational priorities or needs all affect states’ TA needs. In addition, each state has its own cultural, financial, and political context that may influence how its SEA works with the Centers.
Evaluation Methods

The research team is using a mixed-methods approach to answer the research questions, drawing on Center documents, Center TA activity reports, and surveys and interviews with both Center staff and TA recipients. While the final evaluation report will draw from all of these sources, this interim report is based primarily on interviews conducted in 2015 with Center staff and on Center documents collected in 2014 and 2015. Interviews with Center staff directly addressed the research questions in the design domain (questions 1–3). In addition, questions about needs assessment and work plan development relevant to the Centers’ design were asked in separate interviews conducted with staff and with several TA recipients for each Center.

Center Interviews

In spring 2015, researchers from the evaluation team made site visits to each of the 22 Centers. At each Center, the site visit team conducted two or three 1-hour group interviews with Center leaders and key staff. At the time of the interviews, the Centers were in year 3 of their five-year Department of Education grant.

The first group interview focused on the research questions in the design domain. Researchers asked about Center definitions of capacity building, theories of action, and approaches to needs assessment and planning. On the same day, researchers conducted one or two additional group interviews that focused on questions in the implementation domain, specifically, the Center’s implementation of projects in one or both of the evaluation’s two focal priority areas (teacher/leader effectiveness and early learning). Each Center selected the specific projects that were discussed. During these interviews, researchers asked Center staff about project goals, partnerships, and TA activities; project progress; and challenges to implementation.

Both sets of group interviews included some combination of the following Center staff members: director, deputy directors, evaluators, project leads, content leads, and TA providers. As the site visits were planned, each Center director was given the flexibility to determine which of his or her colleagues (up to five individuals) would be present for each interview. Each site visit team consisted of the site liaison (a research expert) and a TA expert.

Technical Assistance Recipient Interviews

Within each priority area, the Center provided the names of one or two individuals who received TA. Therefore, up to four TA recipients (two per priority area) were interviewed per Center. A total of 51 TA recipients provided their perspectives in telephone interviews that lasted 45–60

4 All 22 Centers participated in an interview that focused on the research questions in the design domain. All Centers also participated in an interview that focused on implementation of technical assistance in the priority area of teacher/leader effectiveness. Fifteen Centers had work in the early learning priority area. These 15 Centers participated in a third interview that focused on implementation in the early learning priority area.
minutes each. The TA recipient interview included several questions that correspond to those asked of Center staff related to the design domain.

**Document Review**

The research team gathered Center documents that were relevant to the design questions, including theory of action diagrams (sometimes called “logic models”) and capacity-building models or definitions that the Centers produced in document form. To understand the theories of action and the definitions of capacity building that informed the Centers’ work, the research team focused on how Center staff described these concepts in interviews. The team reviewed the documents for illustration and clarification of the concepts described in the interviews.

**Detailed Findings**

Analysis of data gathered for this report has provided a deeper understanding of the design portion of the preliminary conceptual framework shown in Exhibit ES-1. Exhibit ES-2 illustrates the key findings of this report about how Centers design their work, including how the Centers’ definitions of capacity building and the elements of their theories of action interact.
Exhibit ES-2. How the Comprehensive Centers Design Their Work

**CAPACITY-BUILDING PRINCIPLES**
Fostering Ownership, Fostering Long-Term Change, Fostering Systems Change

**FEDERAL PRIORITIES**

**STATE EDUCATION GOALS**

**Ongoing Needs Assessment**
- Meetings with State Education Agencies and Chiefs
- Requests Initiated by State Education Agencies
- Center Expertise in Needs in Field

**Planning Center Strategies**
- Interactive Planning with State Education Agencies and Chiefs
- Planning for Maximum Yield Relative to Resource Use

**Key TA Strategies**
- Collaboration
- Scaffolding & Shifting of Ownership
- Engagement as Thought Partner
- Cross-State Sharing

**Targeted Capacity-Building Outcomes**
- Skills and Knowledge
- Organizational Development
- Policy Implementation
- Policy Design

**Sources of Evidence of Capacity-Building Outcomes**
- Surveys
- Anecdotal Information
- Interviews and Case Studies
- Capacity-Building Rubric

**FEDERAL AND STATE CONTEXT**
Policies, Plans and Priorities, Funding, Existing Organizational Structure and Processes, Politics and Culture, Leadership and Staff Turnover/Changes, SEA Baseline Capacity
As illustrated in Exhibit ES-2, Centers design their work with SEAs based on what they learn from ongoing needs assessment, including conversations with the SEAs and existing research in their fields of expertise (especially among Content Centers). Ongoing needs assessment is directly influenced by both federal priorities (including laws such as the Every Student Succeeds Act) and SEA goals (for example, implementing new teacher evaluation protocols). Centers’ ability to assess the needs of SEAs and the field is supported by the relationships that the Centers cultivate with SEAs. These relationships also inform the process of planning the Centers’ work. The Centers’ TA planning process is usually interactive, involving ongoing communication among Center staff, key decision makers such as chief state school officers, and other SEA staff. Centers focus their work using key TA strategies designed to achieve targeted outcomes for the SEAs. Dashed arrows in the exhibit indicate the bi-directional influence of strategies and targeted outcomes. The dashed arrows also illustrate an iterative loop of planning, selecting strategies, targeting capacity-building outcomes, and incorporating sources of evidence to measure those outcomes. This loop accommodates SEAs as their capacity-building outcomes expand, for example, from individual skills and knowledge to organizational development. Centers use a variety of sources of evidence to inform the iterative loop. All of the Centers’ design work happens against the backdrop of the Centers’ capacity-building principles and the federal and state context.

Centers’ Definitions of Capacity Building and Targeted Capacity Outcomes

Centers’ capacity-building principles focus on fostering SEA ownership, long-term change, and systems change. In providing definitions of capacity building, Center staff described both the broad principles underlying their capacity-building approach and the specific categories of SEA capacity they sought to change. Key principles of capacity building included fostering SEAs’ ownership of practices and processes co-developed by the Centers and the SEAs (reported by 17 Centers), fostering long-term change in how SEAs function (15 Centers), and fostering systems change (11 Centers). These principles implied working with SEAs to gradually reduce their reliance on the Centers, and to focus beyond their many pressing short-term needs to build capacities that would endure beyond the life of any single project or initiative.

In identifying their desired capacity-building outcomes, Centers most frequently targeted SEA staff knowledge and skills, organizational development, policy implementation, and policy design:

- All Centers highlighted the development of individual SEA staff members’ knowledge and skills as an important category of capacity-building activities and targeted outcomes. Center staff described the building of knowledge and skills as “foundational” or as a short-term outcome that they sought as a means of equipping SEA staff to work effectively on designing policies and implementing those policies in their districts.
- Staff in 18 Centers identified SEA organizational development as a key capacity-building outcome. Center staff viewed change in SEA organizational capacity as leading to greater sustainability than the development of individuals’ knowledge and skills, although organizational change requires more time and effort. Within this dimension of capacity
building, staff reported that they targeted specific areas of organizational development including organizational restructuring, communication and coordination, and continuous learning and improvement.

- Staff of 16 Centers identified SEAs’ ability to implement policy reforms, including their ability to effectively support local education agencies in adopting these reforms, as a type of capacity they sought to build. Staff identified the SEAs’ capacity to roll out new policies or reforms statewide as an important focus and an expected long-term outcome of capacity-building efforts. Rolling out a policy might entail developing a statewide communication strategy; eliciting questions, concerns, and suggestions from local agencies; and disseminating guidance materials.

- Staff of eight Centers cited SEAs’ role in policy change or policy design as a target of capacity building (sometimes called “structural” or “educational systems” change). Although these Centers may view new policies as emanating from legislatures rather than SEAs, they aimed to build the SEAs’ capacity to inform policy regarding educational systems or structures in their states. Examples reported in interviews included the SEAs’ role in designing and selecting systems of integrated standards and assessment and in designing professional learning standards for teachers and principals.

Centers’ definitions of capacity building remained consistent over time. Center staff did not report changes in their fundamental definitions of capacity building from the start of the current funding period (2012) to the 2015 interviews. However, staff of five Centers reported that team reflection had led to modest adjustments to and clarifications of these definitions.

Centers’ Theories of Action

Although the theories of action of all Centers focused on capacity-building processes, Regional Centers and Content Centers emphasized different outcomes. For all Centers, the theory of action represented the key processes, relationships, and strategies they emphasized to produce their desired outcomes. The Regional Centers focused on increasing broad categories of SEA capacity, such as knowledge, skills, and organizational structure, while the Content Centers focused on policy change and educational outcomes within their focal area. The Regional Centers, each of which may work in up to seven priority areas, specified outcomes primarily in terms of the categories of SEA capacity change that they sought to create (such as staff knowledge and skills, organizational capacity, and policy implementation). The Content Centers, which also targeted SEA capacity change, gave greater emphasis to state policy changes and specific district, school, teacher, or student outcomes in their focal priority areas. Depending on the particular Content Center, these outcomes might entail specific changes in standards and assessment implementation, instructional practices, school improvement plans, teacher quality, early learning systems, or other practice areas related to the Center’s content focus.

Centers reported that their broad theories of action had not changed over time. Center staff reported that they had refined but not fundamentally changed their theories of action between the start of the grant (2012) and the time of the interviews (2015). Staff from 16 Centers (11
Regional and five Content) reported that as their work had progressed, they had reflected on and slightly refined their key TA strategies or expectations. Their focal strategies had shifted as they responded to changing needs and priorities, but they had not changed the essential principles and practices. For example, staff at one Center explained that over time, they improved their understanding of the SEAs’ needs and existing capacities. The Center built on this understanding to better target their strategies and goals to meet SEAs’ needs. This re-focusing fulfilled essential components of their theory of action, including responsiveness and targeting of services to achieve capacity change.

**Although Centers did not develop separate theories of action for each state, they reported that their design approaches included attention to each state’s specific context.** Center staff reported that their needs assessment, planning, and TA strategies took a wide variety of contextual factors into account. Among these factors were the SEA’s existing capacity levels in each policy area; the changing priorities of state educational leaders; the SEA’s relationships with the districts in the state; and a variety of political, cultural, and fiscal factors that influenced the SEA’s TA needs.

**Centers focused on different elements of their theories of action when working in different priority areas.** Center staff noted that in designing their work across different priority areas, they took into account the differing structures, systems, and policy agendas that defined each priority area in each state (14 Centers). For example, staff from one Regional Center noticed that, although the Center’s fundamental theory of action did not change, they incorporated a state’s own logic model and terminology into the Center’s plans for working in that priority area with that state.

**Needs Assessments and Planning in Centers’ Theories of Action**

**Centers worked closely with SEAs in a process of jointly identifying states’ needs and co-developing work plans to help SEAs meet their goals.** Staff from all but one Center (21 Centers) reported that meetings with SEA staff and chief state school officers were a primary means of needs assessment. The descriptions of the needs assessment process revealed an ongoing effort informed by multiple sources of information, especially the intentionally structured communications that Centers maintained with SEAs to elicit needs.

Beyond these structured conversations, Center staff reported that they identified needs through SEA-initiated requests (14 Centers), Centers’ expertise in the field (12 Centers), review of state educational data (nine Centers), tracking of requests to identify patterns of needs (five Centers), needs assessment surveys (four Centers), and embedding of Center staff in SEA offices (four Centers).

The Regional and Content Centers were similar in their approaches to needs assessments, but there were a few key differences. While the Regional and Content Centers both (18 Centers) emphasized the process of working closely with SEA leaders or staff to identify needs, the Regional Centers were more likely to use “embedded” staff in SEA offices as a needs assessment
strategy (four Regional Centers compared to no Content Centers). The Content Centers were instead more likely than the Regional Centers to draw on their own expertise: Staff members of six of the seven Content Centers, compared to six of the 15 Regional Centers, described needs identification that emerged from their ongoing immersion “out in the field” in their content areas of focus.

Center staff consistently explained that SEAs’ needs vary considerably. To meet these varied needs, staff of 18 Centers reported developing work plans through an iterative and interactive planning process with SEAs, beginning with the top leaders. Staff from 16 Centers said that efficiently targeting resources to high-impact activities was a major consideration in their work plans.

Some Centers engaged in cross-Center partnerships in the needs assessment process. In the design interviews, staff from three Regional Centers and five Content Centers described partnering with other Centers to identify, prioritize, or understand SEAs’ TA needs. Content Center staff described monthly or quarterly calls in which Regional Center staff identified specific SEA needs. One Regional Center staff member reported bringing the director of a Content Center to a meeting with the chief state school officer to “hone in” on the SEA’s needs and options.

Relationship Building as a Strategy in Centers’ Theories of Action

Centers identified relationship building as critical to achieving their capacity-building goals. Staff from 16 Centers reported that relationships with SEA staff and chief state school officers were an important foundation for designing their work, supporting ongoing communication, assessing needs, planning TA, and selecting appropriate TA strategies. Responsiveness was particularly important to Regional Center staff. Staff of 10 Regional Centers, compared to just one Content Center, emphasized that they were flexible in their ongoing work with SEAs and that trusting relationships, focused on what several respondents called “customer service,” made this responsiveness possible. Staff of nine Centers reported that the SEAs valued the continuity the Centers provided through changes in state leadership and policy.

Key Technical Assistance Strategies in Centers’ Theories of Action

Centers’ theories of action incorporated key TA strategies for producing SEA capacity change; among these were collaboration, scaffolding, thought partnering, and cross-state sharing and support. Key strategies included collaboration with other Centers and other TA providers (17 Centers), scaffolding of SEA knowledge and organizational capacity so SEAs could gradually acquire more ownership of projects (12 Centers), serving as a “thought partner” or “critical friend” available for consultation on an ongoing basis (12 Centers), and building on common concerns and experiences among SEAs through cross-state sharing of information and best practices (11 Centers). Methods used to implement these strategies included peer-to-peer learning, regional collaboratives, production of state policy scans, and presentations on successful practices.
Regional and Content Centers complemented each other’s work through their different specialties. Staff of the six Content Centers that highlighted collaboration as a strategy reported that they connected with the Regional Centers for help with contextual knowledge and customization of TA to a state or region or in order to tap into SEA contacts or regional networks of educators. The staff of 11 Regional Centers who discussed collaboration reported seeking expertise from Content Centers for support of the design and delivery of TA in those Centers’ priority areas. Interviewees from the Regional Centers also reported that they collaborated with other Regional Centers on designing cross-regional projects. Center staff said that they collaborated with TA providers and experts outside of the Comprehensive Centers system as well.

Sources of Evidence for Outcomes

Centers developed multiple sources of evidence to monitor SEA capacity-building progress over time. For almost all Centers (21), measurement of capacity-building outcomes was part of their project planning, with measures ranging in rigor from anecdotal reports (14 Centers) to the use of a structured capacity-building rubric (four Centers). Staff of 14 Centers reported using at least two different methods. Two reported using four methods, and one reported using five methods: surveys, interviews, case studies, anecdotal reports, and a capacity-building rubric.

Centers experienced challenges in designing outcome measures. Interviewees from 11 Centers reported experiencing one or more of the following challenges in designing outcome measures:

- Due to the complexity of capacity-building outcomes, which may involve changes in organizational and cross-organizational processes, indicators were difficult to design, validate, and administer.
- Attributing a causal role to the Centers’ TA was difficult. Even when Center staff observed positive changes in SEA outcomes, it was generally not possible to measure empirically the extent to which the change was directly attributable to the Center’s work.
- Center resources were insufficient to support rigorous outcome evaluations.

Conclusions and Upcoming Evaluation Focus

The findings of this interim report indicate that the Comprehensive Centers share similar fundamental goals for SEA capacity building, which include shifting ownership of Center-supported projects and initiatives to the SEAs. However, the Centers have found that states vary in their needs and priorities for TA. The Centers work to understand each state’s educational leadership and its fiscal, political, and institutional context as a means of building the types and levels of capacity that fit the SEA’s needs.

Centers design and plan their services for SEAs through an iterative process, informed by ongoing relationships and interactive discussions with SEA staff members and chief state school officers.
This understanding of how Centers designed their TA will provide a foundation for the next phase of the evaluation. The upcoming focus on project implementation and outcomes in the priority areas of teacher/leader effectiveness and early learning will shed light on how Centers’ capacity-building principles inform their project implementation, how they work toward complex goals, and how they produce and measure outcomes in specific contexts and policy areas.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, state education agencies (SEAs) have faced pressure to take on expanded roles and responsibilities in carrying out educational reforms. This pressure has challenged SEAs to develop new capacities, often in the face of limited resources. The Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers are charged with assisting SEAs in meeting these challenges. The Centers’ charge is to “provide technical assistance to state educational agencies (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” (77 FR 33563).5

The National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers is examining the 22 Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education for the years 2012–2017. This interim report, based primarily on interviews with Center staff in 2015, focuses on how the Comprehensive Centers designed their technical assistance (TA). The final evaluation report, to be produced in 2018, will focus on TA implementation and outcomes. The full evaluation is designed to:

- Document and analyze how the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers define capacity building, design and implement TA to build SEA capacity, and produce capacity-building outcomes.
- Analyze the implementation and outcomes of a sample of Centers’ projects in two specific priority areas, teacher/leader effectiveness and early learning, to examine in depth whether and how differing capacity-building strategies and outcomes emerge in response to different policy needs.
- Expand on the evaluation of the Comprehensive Centers for the 2005–2011 grant period.6 That evaluation, completed in 2011, addressed Centers’ performance across all state priorities; analyzed the extent of SEA capacity change; and considered the quality, relevance, and usefulness of Centers’ services. This report builds on the prior evaluation by examining the processes by which Centers produce changes in SEA capacity. In addition, the current evaluation seeks to provide more nuanced information through a close study of two priority areas.

This introductory chapter describes the Comprehensive Centers, their legislative mandate, and the evolving expectations over the past few decades that have prompted the need for TA to build the capacity of SEAs. This chapter also presents an overview of the evaluation design, including the broad conceptual framework that guided it. Chapter 2 describes the research methods used for this report. Chapters 3 and 4 present findings on how the Centers designed their work: Chapter 3 discusses how the Centers define capacity building, and Chapter 4 focuses on how they formulate and use theories of action, assess needs, and develop work plans. Chapter 5 concludes

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5 The full solicitation may be found at https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2012/06/06/2012-13735/applications-for-new-awards-comprehensive-centers-program#h-4
6 See Turnbull et al., op. cit.
this report with a discussion of the findings, including an updated version of the conceptual framework of the Comprehensive Centers’ work that incorporates the report’s findings.

**Background of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers**

Title II, Section 203, of the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002[^7] authorized the Comprehensive Centers program, a discretionary grant program that established TA centers. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a total of $52 million for the first year of five-year cooperative agreements to 15 Regional Centers and seven Content Centers under the Comprehensive Centers program. Each Regional Center serves between one and seven U.S. states, territories, and possessions, as shown in Exhibit 1. The Regional Centers are required to build SEA capacity in the following federal priority areas, focusing on those that address each state’s particular needs:

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
7. Using data-based decision making to improve instructional practices, policies, and student outcomes

The Content Centers are required to deliver TA nationally in one of seven priority areas (the first six above plus one focusing generally on “building state capacity”), using their content expertise to build the capacity of SEAs and Regional Centers in that priority area. The seven Content Centers are:

- Center on Building State Capacity and Productivity
- Center on College and Career Readiness and Success
- Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes
- Center on Innovations in Learning
- Center on Standards and Assessments Implementation
Context of the Comprehensive Centers’ Work: Changing Roles of SEAs

Over the past few decades, SEAs have been asked to expand their traditional role of monitoring district and school compliance to include building standards and accountability systems and improving school performance. SEAs are responsible for administering state and federal education laws, distributing state and federal resources, and providing guidance to districts and schools across their states. Increasingly, SEAs are being challenged to align and make sense of different funding streams and programs, verify compliance with regulations for evidence of increased effectiveness (at school, district, and state levels), and provide TA to turn around the lowest-performing schools. These agencies are facing challenges in meeting their expanding role due to a lack of capacity, expertise, and adequate funding.

Federal Legislation Shaping SEAs

Accumulating demands and expectations have driven the SEAs’ needs for TA from the Comprehensive Centers and other sources. Beginning in the 1990s, federal mandates have required the SEAs to take on expanded roles and responsibilities in implementing educational reforms. In the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Congress linked new requirements for state action to states’ eligibility for funding. When ESEA was reauthorized in 2001, the President and Congress further strengthened its requirements through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB required states to adopt grade-level standards, administer state assessments in reading and math, and develop accountability systems. States faced significant implementation challenges with NCLB and with subsequent federal developments that aimed to enhance or modify state roles.

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11 Ibid.


Between 2011 and 2014, 43 states received ESEA flexibility waivers from the U.S. Department of Education, waiving certain NCLB requirements and penalties.\(^{15}\) In exchange for the waivers, states submitted plans for adopting and implementing reforms such as college- and career-ready standards and rigorous teacher and leader evaluation systems that include student achievement data.

In 2009, the federal government invested $4.35 billion in the Race to the Top (RTT) initiative, created with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. RTT established a competitive grant program for states committed to implementing a comprehensive set of education reforms in several areas (such as data systems and school turnaround); through 2011, 19 states were awarded RTT grants for up to four years. In addition, 20 states received RTT Early Learning Challenge Grants to improve and increase access to early learning programs and services. During the period covered by this report, implementation of RTT grants was often a focus of Comprehensive Centers’ TA because the plans were complex and required SEAs to extend their areas of expertise, implement new policies and practices, and provide extensive guidance to LEAs.

Also, between 2005 and 2015, 47 states received Statewide Longitudinal Data System Grants, which are intended to enhance the ability of states to manage, analyze, and use education data, including individual student records, efficiently and accurately.\(^{16}\)

On December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law, replacing NCLB.\(^{17}\) ESSA focuses on the goal of preparing all students for success in college and career. Compared to NCLB, it gives SEAs more flexibility to tailor their own education policies. These increased responsibilities could pose capacity challenges for many SEAs as they develop and implement plans for implementing new accountability systems, evaluating teachers, testing students, and spending Title I funds to support low-income students.\(^{18}\)

**Roles and Structure of SEAs**

SEAs vary in their structure and approach to their work. Each agency is led by a chief, who may be called a superintendent, secretary, director, or commissioner of education or public instruction.\(^{19}\) In some states, governors appoint the chief, while in others the chief state school officer is elected. SEAs are operated under the authority granted by a state’s constitution, state laws and regulations, and federal law. In some states, a state board of education also exercises oversight and shares key responsibilities with the SEA. The local context and capacity influence

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\(^{15}\) [http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/infographics/nclbwaivers.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/infographics/nclbwaivers.html)

\(^{16}\) [https://www2.ed.gov/programs/slds/index.html](https://www2.ed.gov/programs/slds/index.html)


\(^{19}\) Brown et al., *op. cit.*
how agencies perform the roles of funding and oversight, policy leadership, and communications with a wide variety of stakeholders. For example, SEAs have differing levels of influence on state education policy and differing levels of authority over districts. Some SEAs administer the teacher evaluation systems in their states, while others have no role or only provide guidance or recommendations. SEAs have different levels of influence on teacher preparation programs and on the kinds of practices needed to carry out the educator equity plans.

Technical Assistance Resources Available to SEAs

The national Comprehensive Technical Assistance Center program is one of many federal programs that provide TA to SEAs. The following are several major sources of TA that, together with the Comprehensive Centers, form a complex landscape. In contrast to most TA providers, the Comprehensive Centers address a wider range of policy areas and SEA needs. The major TA providers at the time of the data collection for this report (2015) are described below.

- The Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) conduct applied research projects and provide TA in partnership with school districts, SEAs, and others to build their capacity to use evidence. The REL regions overlap with but do not perfectly correspond to the Comprehensive Center regions. Both RELs and Comprehensive Centers aim to build SEA capacity to improve student achievement, with the RELs focusing specifically on research and analytic capacity and the Centers focusing on designing and implementing education reforms.

- The Equity Assistance Centers, established under the 1964 Civil Rights Act, help school districts offer equal educational opportunities to all, regardless of race, sex, or national origin. Typical activities include TA in the selection of appropriate education programs for students with limited English proficiency or training designed to develop educators’ skills in specific areas. For example, the centers disseminate information on successful education practices and the legal requirements related to nondiscrimination in education programs.

- The Early Learning Challenge Collaborative supports states applying for and receiving RTT Early Learning Challenge Grants, helping them through tailored TA, topical consortia, webinars, and other learning community activities.

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22 http://www2.ed.gov/programs/equitycenters/contacts.html
Research Questions, Evaluation Design, and Conceptual Approach

Research Questions

The National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers addresses the following research questions about the Centers’ design, implementation, and outcomes. The questions about the design of the Centers’ work (questions 1–3) are the focus of this interim report.

Design of the Centers’ Work

1. How did the Centers define capacity building? Did their definitions change over time? If so, how?
2. What theories of action did the Centers use to guide their general capacity-building work? Did the theories change over time? If so, how?
   a. What theories of action did the Centers use to guide their capacity building within a particular priority area? Did the theories change over time? If so, how?
   b. What short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes were the Centers aiming for?
   c. What sources of evidence did the Centers anticipate using to determine whether outcomes were achieved?
   d. What strategies did the Centers include in their theories of action to achieve outcomes?
   e. To what extent did the Centers’ theories of action vary by type of Center (Regional or Content), priority area, or state?
3. How did the Centers address the needs of their constituencies?
   a. How did they assess their needs?
   b. How did they develop work plans to address those needs?

Implementation of the Centers’ Work

4. What strategies did Centers employ to achieve their outcomes?
   a. How did strategies vary for Regional vs. Content Centers and by priority area?
   b. What were the characteristics of the strategies Centers implemented?
   c. To what extent and how did Centers collaborate with each other, for example, by sharing or building on other Centers’ resources and expertise?
5. To what extent did Centers implement technical assistance to their constituents as planned?
a. What challenges or barriers did Centers face in providing technical assistance to their constituents?

b. What helped them to overcome barriers and challenges?

**Outcomes of the Centers’ Work**

6. To what extent did Centers achieve their goals and objectives?
   
a. To what extent and in what ways did the Centers contribute to their constituents’ capacity?
   
b. What (if any) were the unanticipated outcomes of the Centers’ work?
   
c. What sources of evidence did Centers use to determine whether outcomes were achieved?
   
d. If Centers did not achieve expected outcomes, what factors contributed to this? How did Centers respond?
   
e. What strategies were perceived by Center staff and their constituents to be most effective and why?
   
f. Did different strategies produce different types of capacity outcomes?
   
g. Did the actual outcomes align with and support the Centers’ theories of action? Did different theories have different outcomes?

**Evaluation Design**

The research team is using a mixed-methods approach to answer the research questions, drawing on Center documents, Center TA activity reports, and surveys and interviews with both Center staff and TA recipients. The final evaluation report will draw from all of these sources. The current report is based on reviews of Center documents and on interviews conducted in 2015 with Center staff and TA recipients.

The research questions about design apply broadly to the Centers’ TA across all priority areas. The implementation and outcomes questions, which will be addressed in future reports, focus on two federal priority areas: (1) identifying, recruiting, developing, and retaining highly effective teachers and leaders and (2) ensuring the school readiness and success of preschool-age children and their successful transition to kindergarten. Focusing on just two priority areas limits the data collection burden on Centers while allowing for an in-depth examination of how the Centers develop SEA capacity and whether they achieve their stated goals and objectives. 23 Future reports will address these questions by presenting findings from surveys, interviews, documents, and reports on Center activities.

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23 The selection of two priority areas in no way implies that the U.S. Department of Education has a preference for these areas over others or that the Centers or SEAs should shift their focus to these areas.
Conceptual Framework

The research team developed a preliminary conceptual framework to guide the evaluation design and analysis, and to inform the development of interview protocols and coding. This framework (see Exhibit 2) illustrates the broad elements of the Centers’ design, implementation, and outcomes. These elements will be the subject of examination and further refinement throughout the evaluation.

The conceptual framework was based on a document review and informal meetings with Center staff conducted in the first year of the evaluation (2014). To further inform the conceptualization of SEA capacity building, the research team reviewed literature that described or defined the process and goals of capacity building in public agencies or systems, particularly in education. Some of these documents were suggested to the research team by Center staff during the informal meetings with the Centers. The team also conducted a database search of reports and articles, searching Google Scholar, JSTOR, and EBSCO for publications from 2003 to 2013 that focused on capacity building in education and in public reform. The literature was used to identify possible themes in the Centers’ approach to capacity building and to develop interview questions and constructs for coding.

The following concepts emerged from the literature review and informed the study design:

- **Century’s four types of “capacity within systemic educational reform.”** Century defines capacity as an entity’s “ability to achieve the goals of a reform” and articulated four dimensions of capacity necessary for reform: human, organizational, structural, and material. Human capacity requires people with “intellectual proficiency and will,” including knowledge, expertise, understanding, and persistence for carrying out reform. Organizational capacity involves interactions and communication among individuals in the system, forming an organizational culture. Structural capacity includes the elements of the system that exist independently of the individuals in the system, such as policies, practices, and processes, which may or may not be sustainable. Material capacity, which is less amenable to TA than the other dimensions, is made up of the financial and material resources and support available to the reform.

- **Harsh’s notions of “stages” of capacity building, culminating in sustainability.** Harsh, a former director of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center, describes capacity building that gradually moves organizations through the stages of exploration, emerging implementation, full implementation, and sustainability. In the final stage, the constituent organization is able to make “pervasive and consistent” use of the newly gained skills and practices and to self-analyze and modify practices when needed.


• **Coburn’s requirements for bringing educational reforms to scale.** Coburn emphasizes four requirements for going to scale: “deep change,” or changes in beliefs, norms, and principles; “sustained” change, or change that continues over time; “spread” of change; and “ownership” of the reform by all the participants.

• **Studies of SEA capacity in specific policy areas have found widely varying state needs for TA.** Massell et al., focusing on how SEAs use research in school improvement policy, and McGuinn, looking at SEAs’ implementation of new teacher evaluation systems, found that SEAs had widely differing numbers and types of staff, organizational structures and rules, and relationships with external organizations, all of which affected their use of TA.

Exhibit 2 illustrates the preliminary conceptual framework for the evaluation.

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The box in the upper left side of this model indicates the federal requirements and scope that guide the seven Content Centers and the 15 Regional Centers, including the seven federal priority areas. The two focal priority areas of this evaluation are Priority #2, Great Teachers and Leaders, and Priority #4, Early Learning.

The design component in the center of the exhibit presents the constructs that were examined in depth for this interim report. The design incorporates the Centers’ definitions of capacity building, types of capacity building, and theories of action. These shaped how the Centers assessed needs, set goals, developed work plans, identified TA strategies, and chose outcome indicators.

The implementation component, the subject of an upcoming report, aligns with the evaluation’s implementation questions about adherence to plans, delivery of TA projects and services, creation of partnerships, monitoring and evaluation, and implementation challenges.
The long curved arrow leads to the expected outcomes of the Centers’ work, also to be the subject of a future report. The outcome of focus in this evaluation is capacity change among SEAs and, if relevant, capacity change in the Regional Centers. The framework indicates that the ultimate outcome of the Comprehensive Centers program is improvement in student achievement.

The bottom box identifies national and state contextual factors that can influence any of the other components of the conceptual framework. Emerging national and state policies, new leadership, and changing educational priorities or needs all affect states’ TA needs. In addition, each state has its own cultural, financial, and political context that may influence how its SEA works with the Centers.

Analysis of the data gathered for this report has provided a deeper understanding of the design portion of the preliminary conceptual framework shown in Exhibit 2. The key findings that informed those refinements are reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4, and the refinements themselves are illustrated in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH METHODS

Data Collection Activities

The National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers combines quantitative data from surveys and activity reports with extensive qualitative data that allow researchers to closely examine the capacity-building process. Exhibit 3 crosswalks the evaluation questions with the data collection methods.

Exhibit 3. Data Collection Methods for Comprehensive Center Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Documents</th>
<th>Center Activity Reports</th>
<th>Surveys</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How did the Centers define capacity building? Did their definitions change over time? If so, how?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What theories of action did the Centers use to guide their general capacity-building work? Did the theories change over time? If so, how?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. What theories of action did the Centers use to guide their capacity building within a particular priority area? Did the theories change over time? If so, how?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. What short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes were the Centers aiming for?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. What sources of evidence did the Centers anticipate using to determine whether outcomes were achieved?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. What strategies did the Centers include in their theories of action to achieve outcomes?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. To what extent did the Centers’ theories of action vary by type of Center (Regional or Content), priority area, or state?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How did the Centers address the needs of their constituencies?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. How did they assess their needs?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. How did they develop work plans to address those needs?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What strategies did Centers employ to achieve their outcomes?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. How did strategies vary for Regional vs. Content Centers, and by priority area?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. What were the characteristics of the strategies Centers implemented?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. To what extent and how did Centers collaborate— for example, by sharing or building on other Centers’ resources and expertise?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. To what extent did Centers implement TA to their constituents as planned?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. What challenges or barriers did Centers face in providing TA to their constituents?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. What helped them to overcome barriers and challenges?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This report focuses on the design questions—questions 1–3—using the results of interviews conducted in spring 2015 with Center staff and with TA recipients, as well as document reviews.

**Center Staff Interviews**

In spring 2015, researchers made site visits to each of the 22 Centers. At each Center, the site visit team conducted two or three 1-hour group interviews with Center leaders and key staff.29 These interviews were conducted in person at each Center’s headquarters. At the time of the interviews, the Centers were in year 3 of their five-year Department of Education grant.

The first group interview focused on the research questions in the design domain. Researchers asked about Center definitions of capacity building, theories of action, and approaches to needs assessment and planning. On the same day, researchers conducted one or two additional group interviews focused on research questions about implementation of selected projects in one or both of the evaluation’s focal priority areas: teacher/leader effectiveness and early learning. Separate group interviews dealt with each priority area in which the Center was working. Centers chose which projects were the focus of these interviews. During these interviews, researchers asked Center staff about needs in the priority area, project plans, goals, partnerships, TA

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29 All 22 Centers participated in an interview that focused on the research questions in the design domain. All Centers also participated in an interview that focused on implementation of technical assistance in the priority area of teacher/leader effectiveness. Fifteen Centers had work in the early learning priority area. These 15 Centers participated in a third interview that focused on implementation in the early learning priority area.
activities, project progress, and challenges to implementation. Protocols for the design and implementation interviews are in Appendices A and B, respectively.

All of the group interviews included some combination of the following Center staff members: director, deputy directors, evaluators, project leads, content leads, and TA providers. As the site visits were planned, each Center director was given the flexibility to determine which of his or her colleagues (up to five individuals) would be present for the interviews. Each site visit team consisted of the site liaison (a research expert) and a TA expert.

In interviewing the Center staff, researchers addressed the full group of staff who were present, and individuals in the group responded as relevant to their areas of responsibility or knowledge. The interviewers did not actively seek consensus from all participants, and interviewers were prepared to note any disagreements or contradictions that might have emerged in each group. However, the interviewers did not encounter disagreements in any of the group interviews. In response to each question, either one person provided an answer and others indicated agreement (verbally or nonverbally), or participants built upon or complemented one another’s answers. Together, the individual responses formed a group response to each interview for each Center. In this report, therefore, the Center is the unit of analysis, and each Center has a design interview transcript, plus one or two implementation interview transcripts, depending on whether the Center had a project in each focus priority area.

**Technical Assistance Recipient Interviews**

After the site visits, researchers conducted one-on-one telephone interviews with TA recipients. Staff at each Center provided the names of up to two recipients of TA in each of the two focus priority areas. Therefore, up to four TA recipients (two per priority area) were interviewed per Center. The research team completed telephone interviews with 51 of the 55 recommended TA recipients, for a response rate of 92.7 %. The interviews lasted about 45–60 minutes each. The TA recipient interview protocol (Appendix C) includes several design domain questions that correspond to those in the Center design interview protocol.

**Document Review**

The research team gathered Center documents that were relevant to the design questions, including Centers’ theory of action diagrams (sometimes called “logic models”) and capacity-building models or definitions that the Centers produced in document form. To understand the theories of action and definitions of capacity building that informed the design of the Centers’ work, the research team focused on how Center staff described these concepts in interviews, including any references to documents they chose to present to illustrate their responses. The team reviewed the documents for clarification and illustration of concepts described in interviews.
Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed from audio files and uploaded to NVivo™ software for organization and coding. A design domain codebook (Appendix D) was iteratively developed based on the design domain research questions, the preliminary conceptual framework (Exhibit 2), and site visitors’ brainstorming of concepts that emerged in the interviews. The codebook used to analyze the design interviews translates major themes or constructs in Centers’ capacity-building definitions and theories of action into codes and subcodes. Codes related to needs assessment and planning were also applied to the Center staff implementation interviews.

The researchers strove to ensure that all aspects of the coding and analysis met standards of clarity, consistency, and transparency:

- **Clarity**: Coding and analysis rules are easy to understand for members of the coding and analysis teams, the larger research team, and outside reviewers.

- **Consistency**: Coding and analysis rules are applied in the same instances, and in the same manner, across interviews, coders, and the duration of the analysis activity.

- **Transparency**: Coding and analysis rules are well documented and accessible to the coding and analysis teams, the larger research team, and outside reviewers.

For this evaluation, the lead coders worked in close collaboration to create and manage the analytic dataset requirements. Members of the whole research team were included in discussions of data interpretation because of their firsthand working knowledge of the Centers. Throughout the coding and analysis period, the lead coders and analysts had regular meetings with project directors and members of the larger research team, built multiple feedback loops into the coding procedures, and documented interrater agreement levels.

**Codebook Development**

The evaluation team developed a first draft of the design-related codes to be applied to the interview transcripts, based on:

- The research questions
- The literature review and conceptual framework
- Informal meetings with Center staff held in 2014
- Evaluation team brainstorming sessions

The preliminary codes included:

**Topical codes** for each of the major constructs addressed in the research questions and conceptual framework; for example, definitions of capacity building, outcomes of capacity building, and approaches to needs assessment.
Attribute codes for Center and respondent attributes that will be used for subgroup analysis, such as Regional vs. Content Center, Center staff vs. TA recipient, and other contextual characteristics to be determined.

Subcodes that emerged from patterns in the data, capturing types or categories of topical codes or more granular information about Centers’ approaches and practices relevant to each of the constructs. Subcodes cover, for example, major concepts emerging in Centers’ capacity-building definitions, key state contextual factors that influence capacity building, methods of needs assessment, and key TA strategies and approaches appearing in Centers’ theories of action.

The team developed a preliminary codebook including the following:

- Topical and attribute codes and subcodes
- Definitions of codes, including decision rules for assigning codes, where needed
- Examples from the data illustrating the application of each code

The codebook was piloted and refined through an iterative process. The team revised and added codes based on themes that coders discovered in the piloting phase. The face validity of each code was established by discussing the codes with the research team. Based on this check, adjustments were made to the codebook. For example, “Refinement, Rethinking of Theory of Action” was added as a subcode within the Changes in Theory of Action code.

Coding and Interrater Agreement

Exhibit 4 illustrates the process of refining the codebook and establishing interrater agreement.
When the first version of the codebook was ready (after the validity check with the research team), two lead coders independently applied the codes to a randomly selected interview. They then compared coding selections and discussed whether the codebook should be refined; that is, whether code definitions should be clarified, examples added, subcodes developed, and so on. This process was repeated until the lead coders achieved a minimum agreement score of 70% for each of the top-level codes. Use of a simple percent agreement measure was more appropriate than a kappa measure because of the complex and nuanced nature of the interview data. Kappa scores are so sensitive (especially in NVivo) that they can be skewed when, for example, one person’s coding extends half a sentence farther than the others’. Such minor discrepancies, though they can yield different kappa scores, do not affect the analysis of the data. For this reason, researchers used a straightforward agreement template, based on

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previous research, to determine agreement, consulting NVivo’s coder comparison tool for help with difficult codes. The threshold of 0.70 was based on the complexity of the interviews, the number of coders (seven), and the amount of oversight that would be provided (described below). After reaching the 0.70 level of agreement, coders could begin to work independently.

The two lead coders and another member of the research team developed a half-day training, and five additional coders were trained to use the codebook. The coders practiced application of the codebook by independently coding a selected interview and then discussing their process and findings as a group. This practice exercise was repeated; then coders worked to achieve 70% agreement with a lead coder. Each coding team member independently coded an assigned interview and then reviewed his or her selections with one of the lead coders, who had coded the same interview. Any discrepancies were discussed, and final coding decisions were made. This anchoring process continued (with a new interview) until each coding team member reached an agreement score of at least 70% with a lead coder on every top-level code. Three of the five coders reached this level of agreement after coding two interviews. The other two coders needed an additional one or two interviews to achieve the desired score. Once a coder had achieved a 0.70 agreement score, that coder could code interviews independently. Throughout the coding process, the lead coders conducted spot-checks. They selected one top-level code and its second- and third-level subcodes and then reviewed each coder’s application of those codes. The work of each member of the coding team was spot-checked at least once by each of the lead coders.

Data Synthesis

After the data were coded, the next analytic stage involved systematically examining recurrent thematic patterns in the data to address the design domain research questions. Throughout the analysis, the research team asked the following questions:

What constructs emerge in responses to specific interview questions? How do these constructs help to illuminate the research question(s)? Which constructs appear in the data most frequently?

Do clear distinctions or differences among Centers emerge in the codes? What are the key differences, and how might they be explained? Are there differences among key subgroups of Centers such as Content Centers and Regional Centers? How can examples in the data help to illuminate the research question(s)?

The team analyzed patterns by identifying the most frequently appearing codes and subcodes, providing examples of how Center staff described the practices reflected in those codes, and explaining distinctions among the most important codes. For example, often Centers define

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capacity building as “fostering ownership”—providing TA that ultimately leads SEA staff to take over a process that the Center formerly handled for them, such as leading training sessions with LEAs. Data analysts identified the number and types of Centers that included this concept in their definition of capacity building and then identified, in the interview data, examples Center staff members gave to illustrate how this shift in ownership occurs.

To analyze Centers’ theories of action, researchers broke down the theories of action into components or constructs such as needs assessment and planning, selection of strategies, types of strategies (including both broad approaches and concrete activities), and changes over time. We coded Centers’ approaches to each of these components (see Appendix D), identifying the most common approaches and the differences among Centers. In contrast to a theory of action for a specific intervention designed to address a specific problem, Comprehensive Centers’ theories of action are likely to embody a set of broad principles and assumptions about how best to respond to varied and ever-changing needs. Center staff may, for example, describe their approach to needs assessment and planning in terms of “relationship building” and their key TA strategies as “scaffolding”—helping SEAs to link their immediate practical needs to broader goals for policy reform or organizational development. The design domain analysis identified these and other key categories; the implementation report will elaborate on the specific practices that comprise each of the categories.

In analyzing the coded qualitative data, the team took the following steps:

1. Ran queries to produce summaries of data by topical code, attribute code, and (where appropriate) subcode. Analysts ran cross-tabulations to highlight differences by type of Center (and, for the implementation analysis, by priority area, as appropriate).

2. Looked closely at the actual content of coded text excerpts to explore the nature and type of any relevant thematic variations.

3. Generated successive drafts of internal summary memos (pre-drafts of report sections) on the patterns for each of the three design domain research questions, including the frequency with which Centers or projects fell into key categories, with supporting evidence in the form of quotations or examples.

4. Discussed results and major findings, including unexpected findings or relationships, during weekly internal team meetings.

5. Added or adjusted codes or subcodes, if necessary, and applied them to interviews for further analysis.

The findings presented in this report are based on the capacity-building themes, approaches, and practices that surfaced most frequently in the interview data. Although outliers were investigated in case they could provide counterexamples or lessons, this report focuses on patterns of responses that suggest how capacity building is generally understood and practiced across the Centers. Direct quotations help illustrate concepts or activity related to the Centers’ capacity-building work. These quotations also provide examples of how researchers applied specific codes, reinforcing the clarity and transparency of the analysis.
Due to the complexity and variety of meanings assigned by Center staff to the terms “capacity building” and “theories of action,” specific frequencies reported in these analyses are more suggestive than conclusive. For example, reporting the number of Centers that described a particular approach does not mean that the other Centers did not use this approach—only that staff did not report using it when asked an open-ended question. Findings in this report should be considered with this caveat in mind.
CHAPTER 3. CENTERS’ DEFINITIONS OF CAPACITY BUILDING

Centers are not required to produce formal definitions of capacity building, although some Centers have stated or illustrated their definitions in documents. To elicit the essential concepts of capacity building that inform the design of Centers’ work, this evaluation focuses on the interview responses of Center staff. Staff members sometimes included references to Center documents, which the researchers then examined. In providing their definitions of capacity building, Center staff described both the broad principles underlying their capacity-building approach and the specific types or categories of SEA capacity they sought to change. These broad principles informed not only the Centers’ planning and goal-setting activities with SEAs, but also their selection of TA activities that were likely to produce capacity-building outcomes.

Centers’ Capacity-Building Principles

Center staff distinguished capacity building from TA that was simply “capacity replacement,” which they defined as short-term assistance to fill gaps in SEA staffing. Key principles of capacity building mentioned by interviewees included fostering SEAs’ ownership of practices and processes imparted by the Centers (17 Centers), fostering long-term change in how SEAs function (15 Centers), and fostering systems change (11 Centers). As Exhibit 5 shows, 16 Centers described capacity building as embodying two or more of these principles.
### Exhibit 5: Principles of Capacity Building

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles of Capacity Building</th>
<th>Fostering Ownership</th>
<th>Fostering Longer-Term Changes</th>
<th>Fostering Systems Change</th>
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### Fostering SEA Ownership

Center staff described the process of fostering SEA ownership as a “gradual release” of the Center’s leadership as the SEA staff assumed increasing responsibility for a given project. For example, SEA staff might gradually take over from Center staff the delivery of training on a new teacher evaluation method to districts or facilitation of meetings of key stakeholders to develop a strategic plan. Fostering ownership was the capacity-building principle most frequently described: Staff at 17 of the 22 Centers described strengthening or enabling the SEA staff and organizations to take over initiatives, and, ultimately, to run those initiatives without the Center’s help. One Center director described what the staff tell SEAs:
One of the ways we try and explain this [to SEAs] is, “We don’t provide services to you or for you. We work with you. Because our ultimate goal is for you to be able to do this kind of work and pursue these goals without us.”

A staff member at another Center explained what fostering SEA ownership looks like in that Center’s work:

> We see it happen really [when] they start to take over the mechanisms of the project itself; we call it a gradual release model.... It’s a much slower process. They really have to understand and take hold and get an idea. They’re part of the building of the project, but [at first] they’re usually not ready to do any leading of it, taking charge of things. It’s funny. They’ll say, “I know. We’re ready for the gradual release.” They get little bits of responsibility as they’re ready for it. We’re there to support. It’s like Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. We scaffold them. They’re there with us all of the time. Little by little we start to turn things over to them so that their capacity is built to run the project.

**Fostering Long-Term Change**

A second principle cited by interviewees from 15 Centers is fostering changes in SEA practice or capability that would endure beyond any one project or initiative. Staff from five Centers described scenarios in which this shift from short-term to longer-term thinking begins with an initial request to the Center. For example:

> The person might say, “Well, we need it as soon as possible. We have a crisis.” Okay, there’s an immediate need to put out a fire this week, but what is the longer-term desired outcome? Then it’s not just about sending them a bunch of resources, but really connecting them with individuals both within their state, across states, and building their knowledge or networks to draw on.

Another Center staff member described work the Center did in focusing SEAs beyond their immediate need:

> We often get a request for X. “Help us craft a survey of kindergarten teachers because we just implemented full-day K policy!” We help them do that. Then ... What’s the capacity-building goal? What’s the next step? [We] help them think through... How can [they] support effective implementation and changes of practices around kindergarten? [If they say,] “Let’s craft a peer learning community,” [then we say] “What do you need to do to put that in place?” [The TA is] stackable, if you will, towards a longer-term goal.
Fostering Systems Change

A third, related capacity-building principle described by staff of 11 Centers concerns fostering SEA systems change, often by designing (or co-designing with the SEA) tools or guidance focused on SEA organizational systems and processes. Such tools or guidance are designed to be applied across multiple policy areas or situations. For example, one Center developed a framework for standards implementation that presented detailed processes and procedures to be applied by SEAs as curriculum standards changed.

A staff member at one Content Center noted the difficulty of providing this kind of support:

How do we really start to create system structures that will be sustainable past [current] personnel? It’s really, really difficult no matter who you’re looking at, [whether they’re] policymakers, whether they’re chiefs—We know the tenure of chiefs is ridiculously short nowadays; the tenure of state legislators is something like an average of two years.

A change to the SEA system or structure can be explicit, such as a Center helping an SEA through restructuring:

One of the states ... restructured their office of learning and development over the course of the last year and a half and have hired new personnel. We’ve met rather intensively with them in two different retreats or strategic planning sessions where they set goals for their office.

Most often, Centers foster systems change implicitly, by demonstrating or modeling new ways of doing things, such as a process for developing standards. One staff member described an SEA’s increasing command of a policy development process gained from its work with the respondent’s Center:

If we’re gone ... [the SEA] could do [the work] because they’ve been with us hand in hand. [They’ve learned to answer questions like] “How do you develop the process? Where do you find some research and what do you do with it?” We know that [the SEA] will be able to do it.

In presenting their definitions of capacity building, respondents from all Centers identified outcomes: types or categories of SEA capacity that they sought to change.

Targeted Capacity Outcomes

Center staff most frequently reported that they focused on helping SEAs achieve the following capacity outcomes: staff knowledge and skills (sometimes called “human capacity”), organizational development, policy implementation, and policy design (sometimes called “structural” or “educational systems” change). Fifteen Centers identified three or more of these
outcomes as areas of expected SEA improvement as a direct result of their capacity-building efforts. Exhibit 6 presents this information at the Center level and illustrates the frequency, by type of Center, with which Centers reported targeting each type of outcome.

Respondents from all 22 Centers highlighted the development of individual staff members’ knowledge and skills as an important category of capacity-building activities and targeted outcomes. Center staff described the building of knowledge and skills as “foundational” or as a shorter-term outcome that they sought as a means of equipping SEA staff to work effectively on designing policies and implementing them with their districts. As one Center staff member reported, “We now say that, when we build human capacity, we know that we have achieved some short-term outcomes, which is just the foundation of the change.” Staff from eight Regional Centers and six Content Centers said that they built knowledge and skills in policy-relevant areas such as standards and assessment design, college and career readiness systems, and data use. Staff from six Regional Centers and two Content Centers reported building knowledge and skills to enhance SEA leadership or management capacity.
### Exhibit 6. Targeted Capacity-Building Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted Capacity Building Outcomes</th>
<th>SEA Staff's Knowledge and Skills</th>
<th>SEA Organizational Development</th>
<th>SEA Capacity to Implement Policy</th>
<th>SEA Capacity to Design Policy</th>
<th>Capacity of Other Centers</th>
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Staff from most Centers (18) identified SEA organizational development as a key capacity-building outcome. Center staff viewed change in SEA organizational capacity as leading to more sustainability than the development of individuals’ knowledge and skills, although organizational change requires more time and effort. Within this dimension of capacity building, staff reported that they targeted specific areas of organizational development:

**SEA communication and coordination** (5 Regional Centers, 2 Content Centers). Center staff described building capacity for stronger collaboration across SEA divisions as well as between the SEAs and other agencies and stakeholders. They noted that the need for stakeholder collaborations and cross-departmental or cross-agency integration was increasing, especially in the priority areas of early learning, college and career readiness, educator effectiveness, and assessment.

**SEA restructuring and performance management** (3 Regional Centers, 3 Content Centers). Development in these areas was designed to meet new priorities (such as...
early learning, which formerly was not housed in SEAs), to increase efficiency, and to improve staff performance. For example, staff at two Centers described consulting with SEAs on performance measurement; staff at one Center reported participating in several strategic planning sessions during which they advised the SEA on setting goals for a new division.

**SEAs’ culture of learning and continuous improvement** (5 Regional Centers). Creating a culture of continuous improvement meant helping SEAs to change organizational norms, behaviors, and processes in ways that would promote efficiency and effectiveness and that would endure (or be revisited) beyond a single project.

Staff from 16 Centers identified SEAs’ ability to implement policy reforms, including their ability to support LEAs in adopting reforms, as a type of capacity that they sought to build. The SEAs’ capacity to roll out new policies or reforms statewide was an important focus and an expected long-term outcome of capacity-building efforts. Rolling out a policy might entail developing a statewide communications strategy; eliciting questions, concerns, and suggestions from local agencies; and disseminating guidance materials. Staff from 10 Centers specifically identified the SEAs’ capacity to train or provide TA to district and school staff as a target of their capacity-building efforts.

Respondents from eight Centers cited SEAs’ role in policy change or policy design as a target of capacity building. Although these Center staff might view new policies as emanating from state law rather than the SEA per se, they aimed to build the SEA’s capacity to recommend, inform, and interpret policy regarding educational systems or structures in their states. Examples reported in interviews included the SEAs’ role in designing and selecting systems of integrated standards and assessment and in designing professional learning standards for teachers and principals.

The Content Centers identified Regional Centers as possible targets for capacity-building efforts, although Content Center staff noted that they preferred to approach Regional Centers as partners. One Content Center interviewee described the capacity-building relationship with the Regional Centers as a “delicate balance,” because the Regional Centers do not view themselves as TA clients. Staff from three Content Centers described regular conversations or conferences in which they discussed common needs and shared content expertise with the Regional Centers. A respondent from one Content Center reported building “the capacity of the Regional Centers to ask the right questions” of their constituents. On the flip side, staff from one Regional Center did note that they aimed to build the capacity of Content Centers by informing them about regional needs.

**Changes in Capacity-Building Definitions**

Researchers asked Center staff whether their definitions of capacity building had changed since the current round of funding began in 2012. Interviewees did not report any major changes in their definitions of capacity building over time, but staff from five Centers described refining their
definitions based on experience and reflection. They said they learned how to better apply their existing definitions, sometimes clarifying the definitions as needed to guide practice. One interviewee, for example, said of the Center’s definition of capacity building:

> We haven’t changed it. We’ve internalized it a bit more, we’ve thought more about what it really means, and we’ve tried to get it into very concrete actionable strategies.... It hasn’t changed, but I think [what’s changed is] our understanding and our ability to more easily talk about it and be explicit about what it means to build.
CHAPTER 4. CENTERS’ THEORIES OF ACTION AND WORK PLAN DEVELOPMENT

To understand the theories of action that informed the design of the Centers’ work, the research team focused on how Center staff described key elements of these theories in interviews, including any references to theory of action diagrams or logic models they used to illustrate their responses. Every Center had one explicit theory of action presenting basic principles of its TA approach. Theory of action diagrams illustrated the expected relationships among SEAs’ (and other constituents’) needs, the Centers’ TA strategies, and short-term and long-term outcomes of the Center’s work.

Regional and Content Centers’ theories of action differed slightly, although both intended to build SEA capacity. Content Centers, which are responsible for specific areas of educational policy, aimed to build SEA capacity to produce outcomes in their specific areas: standards and assessment systems to serve diverse learners, high-quality early learning systems, support for low-performing schools, or other reforms related to the Content Center’s area of expertise. Regional Centers, by contrast, are responsible for specific states. Their theories of action emphasized building SEA capacity in a wide range of areas, with a focus on the seven federal priority areas.

Centers’ plans and strategies varied widely according to state needs and priority area focuses, but the fundamental principles (such as responsiveness to needs and targeting strategies to outcomes) exhibited in each Center’s theory of action did not vary by priority area or state. The Centers varied in how they operationalized their respective theories of action. Staff from about half of the Centers (eight Regional and three Content Centers) reported that they used their theories of action explicitly to plan and monitor their TA. The staff from the other Centers (seven Regional and four Content) reported that theories of action informed their work more indirectly through a Center-wide team philosophy and mindset.

The Centers reported that their focal strategies sometimes shifted as they responded to changing needs and priorities but that the fundamental principles underlying their theory of action were stable over time. Staff from 16 Centers (11 Regional and five Content) reported that as their work progressed over time, they had reflected on and slightly refined their key TA strategies or expectations. Staff from one Center explained that over time, they improved their understanding of the SEAs’ needs and existing capacity, and built on this understanding to better target their strategies and goals to meet each SEA’s needs. This re-focusing fulfilled essential components of their theory of action, including responsiveness and targeting of services to achieve capacity change.

To fully delineate the theories of action and understand how they varied across Centers, the interviews addressed not only the expected outcomes discussed in Chapter 3, but also the other elements of how the Centers design their work, including attention to state context; federal priority areas; needs assessments and planning; relationship building; key technical assistance.
strategies; and sources of evidence for capacity-building outcomes. The findings in these areas are reported below.

Elements of State Contexts That Influenced Centers’ Theories of Action

Although the Centers did not develop separate theories of action for each state, they reported that their design approaches included attention to each state’s specific context. Center staff reported that their needs assessment, planning, and TA strategies took a wide variety of contextual factors into account. Among these factors were each SEA’s existing capacity levels in each policy area; the changing priorities of state educational leaders; the SEA’s relationships with the districts in the state; and a variety of political, cultural, and fiscal factors that influenced the SEA’s TA needs.

Baseline Capacity

Although the Centers did not measure SEA baseline capacity, staff from nine Centers made a point of noting that SEAs clearly differed in their readiness to move forward with educational reforms. Readiness reflected department staffing levels, expertise, and experience as well as the political environment and the SEA’s commitment to a specific reform. Center staff reported that they designed TA services to align with each SEA’s level of readiness or existing resources and capacity. For example, strategies for SEA staff who have limited experience in a given policy area might include the design of cross-state sharing and knowledge building. For an SEA ready to move forward on implementing an initiative, Centers might plan to support the SEA in conducting trainings with district staff. One Center staffer noted that two SEAs might request a seemingly similar service, such as help with a strategic plan, but one SEA might “need help from the very beginning of the process,” while the other might need only a review of the draft plan. This respondent explained:

*Every state is unique, and [the states are] at different levels or start at different levels. They have their own unique strengths and opportunities for growth. We have to know that. We have to listen…. We understand and help them understand collegially where it is we need to … provide a level of support.*

One Content Center staff member noted that the Center developed products, such as guidance documents and frameworks for action that could be used by SEAs at a variety of entry levels:

*We try to build our products so that they have entry points for states that are at varying levels of knowledge about the content or at different levels in terms of rolling out … an implementation of an initiative. We are very cognizant that states are at really different levels. We try to make those things relevant to them, given that difference.*
States’ Changing Leadership and Educational Priorities

Center staff reported that shifts in state educational leadership and leaders’ priorities necessitated frequent readjustments in Center–SEA relationships and plans. Staff from 11 Regional Centers and four Content Centers reported that SEA leadership or staff turnover affected their planning and TA approaches when working with SEAs. But Center staff also reported that flexibility, patience, and attentiveness to changing priorities were incorporated into their theories of action, guiding their approach to working with SEAs. Center staff noted that they aimed to be “nimble” in response to change while also drawing on their past work, reputation, and networks in the states to build some continuity in the work despite the turnover. One staffer said:

As chiefs change, we try to get as much information about the new chiefs to understand their ... needs and try to figure out ... what might be on the agenda.... [We try] to help them see what we’ve done and provide the context of materials and information that help inform their understanding of what preceded them.

Center staff also reported that they were attentive to emerging developments in state political and fiscal circumstances, SEA staffing, and budgets in the Centers’ priority areas, any of which might need to be considered in the Centers’ plans for the coming year:

We do semi-monthly reporting, and part of that is updates on state contacts.... We try to keep a thumb on the politics, the legislature, the changes in the SEA staff. [For example, one state] just barely got their budget approved just last week. That had a lot of implications about people potentially getting laid off in July, and so that information caused our team to be, first of all, sensitive to the feelings and the culture of the employees that staff members are working with, to try not to push them too hard. Then, also, it caused us to reflect and stop and say, “Well, okay, what implications will this have for our work next year in the event funding doesn’t materialize.”

This staffer went on to say that constant monitoring was an essential part of the Center’s response to change in the SEA.

Relationships between SEAs and Districts

Staff from seven Regional and three Content Centers commented that their approach to TA in each state took into account the nature of the SEA’s authority and the history of the SEA’s relationships with districts. SEA roles varied widely in some regions. For example, one Regional Center staff member said:

We know ... the differences and basically the state approaches to their districts, that some are much more prescriptive than others, for example. Some emphasize accountability more than instructional improvement.... [We know that] culture is
really important because you have to then fit your support within ... that, knowing that context.

Staff from five Regional and two Content Centers noted that changes in what is expected of SEAs—particularly the increasing demands that SEAs guide and support districts rather than merely monitor them—was a major consideration in designing TA. Some SEAs found this shift more challenging than others. Staff at one Center noted that an SEA, accustomed to a traditional role in monitoring district compliance, was having difficulty defining a new role that required the agency to be a “helper” or a “broker,” guiding districts in their own choices:

One of the things that we hear from the state department of ed now is, “Well, what’s our role ... in terms of our role of helping an LEA?” I think we hear more and more that emphasis, “Well, [the SEA] needs to be a broker.” [SEAs] need to share resources, or need to identify them, but can’t direct them through a funding stream.

Priority Areas and Centers’ Theories of Action

Center staff noted that, in designing their work across different priority areas, they took into account the differing structures, systems, and policy agendas that defined each priority area in each state (14 Centers). Staff from one Regional Center noticed that, although the Center’s fundamental theory of action did not change, they incorporated a state’s own logic model for an early learning initiative, and the state’s specific early learning terminology, into the Center’s plans for work with that state. Staff from one Content Center noted that although project planning for different teacher/leader effectiveness projects required the specification of different strategies, the Center’s underlying approach across all projects was to identify a need, develop a strategy to meet the need, collaborate with stakeholders, try out the strategies or “prototypes,” and refine them before disseminating them widely.

Needs Assessment and Planning in Centers’ Theories of Action

Methods of Needs Assessment

SEA needs are a major driver of TA design in Centers’ theories of action. A starting point for the Centers’ assessment of needs was an understanding of state educational goals. Center staff reported working closely with SEAs in a process of jointly identifying states’ needs for TA to enable them to meet their goals and then jointly developing Center work plans to provide this assistance. Staff from all but one of the 22 Centers reported that meetings with SEAs and/or chief state school officers were a primary means of needs assessment. The descriptions of needs assessment processes revealed ongoing efforts informed by multiple sources of information, especially the intentionally structured communications (such as regular needs-sensing meetings and frequent check-in calls or meetings) that Centers maintained with SEAs. Exhibit 7 illustrates
how individual Centers combined multiple approaches to needs assessment, as well as the most frequently reported methods of needs assessment, by type of Center.

**Exhibit 7. How Centers Assess SEA Needs**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Centers Assess SEA Needs</th>
<th>Meetings w/ SEAs</th>
<th>State-Initiated Request</th>
<th>Meetings w/ Chief State School</th>
<th>Center's Knowledge of Needs in Field</th>
<th>Data Review</th>
<th>Partnerships</th>
<th>Tracking Requests</th>
<th>Surveys</th>
<th>Center Staff Embedded w/SEA</th>
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Staff from both Regional and Content Centers emphasized the process of working closely with SEA leaders or staff to identify needs. Staff from nine Regional and five Content Centers noted that needs were sometimes identified when SEAs brought a specific request for help to the Center. Respondents from two Regional and three Content Centers reported that they tracked the types or categories of requests that they received to identify emerging needs, especially common needs across states; they then used this information to proactively or strategically identify TA needs that they could address across states within a region (in the case of Regional Centers) or nationally (in the case of Content Centers). Staff of the Content Centers were more likely than the Regional Centers to emphasize drawing on their own expertise: Respondents from six of the seven Content Centers, compared to six of the 15 Regional Centers, said that they identified needs from their ongoing immersion “out in the field” in their content areas of focus.

Other needs assessment methods identified by Center staff include administration of needs assessment surveys to SEA staff (four Centers) and review of state and national data (nine Centers), especially student performance data. Four Regional Centers “embedded” staff in some SEAs. In these cases, a Center liaison worked onsite at the SEA office to maintain a regular
presence at SEA meetings, stay apprised of new developments, and perform ongoing needs assessment for the Center. An interviewee from an SEA that had embedded staff described how the needs sensing process worked:

_We have this [embedded Center staff person] on our [policy goal] team. That person also sits on that with us and is there to say, “If [the SEA] needs support with this, let us know, and we’ll see what we can do. I can see if [the Center] can help you all compile all that information.” The relationship is already established. She’s already in meetings._

Recipients of the Centers’ TA services in the early learning and teacher/leader areas, usually SEA staff, were asked about their experience with the Centers’ needs assessment and planning methods. These TA recipients were not always familiar with the Centers’ broad approaches to needs assessment, but they provided illustrations of how the Centers’ needs assessment and planning were intertwined in planning specific projects. For example, one TA recipient from an SEA explained:

_Rather than determining what we need ... [the Center staff members] look at where we’re headed and [together we] co-determine what we need, and really plug in some of those holes with technical assistance. [Center staff members] ask the right questions, “What problem do we need to tackle so that we can move towards our goal?” That is the intermediary between your overarching goal and getting down to the day-to-day work._

**Partnering with Other Centers to Identify Needs**

Staff from three Regional and five Content Centers described partnering with other Centers to identify, prioritize, or understand SEAs’ needs as they developed their annual plans. Content Center staff described monthly, quarterly, or annual calls or meetings in which Regional Center staff identified specific SEA needs. In these discussions, Regional Center staff might supplement the SEA’s description of its needs with their own interpretation of its readiness to tackle those needs. For example, staff at one Regional Center explained to the Content Center that while an SEA needed help in a certain area, it was “not ready for that yet.” A staff member from another Regional Center reported bringing the director of a Content Center to a meeting with the chief state school officer to “hone in” on needs and options.

Center staff more often reported cross-Center partnerships when discussing policy-specific needs assessment and planning to develop projects in the two priority areas (five Content and 10 Regional Centers). Regional Center staff described attending meetings or conferences led by Content Centers, sharing resources and engaging in needs sensing discussions by telephone with Content Center staff in the relevant policy areas, and, in one case, using the results of a needs-sensing survey conducted by a Content Center:
We did a lot of needs sensing. We did a lot of phone calls with each state, all their early childhood teams. We also did some mini-surveys. We pretty much piggybacked off of our Content Center ... that had conducted a survey, and we utilized that to [identify needs].

Staff from one Content Center noted that when planning an initiative in a specific region or state, the Regional Centers were helpful, and even essential, to them in understanding local needs:

We worked very closely with the [Regional Center] because while we work with all 50 states, they work with only three or four, and they can have very, very close ties with the stakeholders on the ground there, and know all of the players over many, many years.

Staff from three Content Centers that reported partnering with Regional Centers to understand needs also reported gathering information about needs through national organizations, including the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Governors Association, and the Council of Great City Schools.

**Planning Center Strategies**

**Development of Annual Plans**

Staff from 18 Centers (14 Regional, 4 Content) reported using an iterative approach to develop their annual technical assistance plans, engaging in an interactive planning process with state educational leaders. Center staff described a process through which they posed clarification questions, obtained leadership commitment, and developed detailed objectives and activities based on a conversation or series of conversations between Center staff members and the chief state school officer or SEA leaders. These meetings sometimes began with discussion of SEA needs or goals as a basis for plan development. One interviewee summarized this view:

We want the chief to say, “These are the things that are important to me and my team. Here’s what we’re trying to get done.” Then we work with them in a very interactive way to help them describe what a successful outcome of that work would be. “If we do this with you, superintendent, what do you need at the end and when do you need it?” We have this interaction at that time [so that] the work plan is pretty much set when we leave the room.

Staff from most Centers (16) also identified the efficient targeting of resources to activities with the highest impact as a major consideration that informed their work plans. Center staff reported that in selecting and committing to the strategies they would employ to help SEAs meet their

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32 All Centers develop broad annual “management plans” that they submit to the U.S. Department of Education prior to the start of each grant year. Regional Center plans include projects planned for each state within the regions. Content Center plans include a mix of national projects or activities and some state-specific projects.
goals, resource availability and the expected return on investment in terms of capacity-building outcomes were important factors. Staff explained that efficient and effective use of resources was aided by drawing on partnerships through the Center network and elsewhere. In addition, Centers considered whether the SEA leaders were committed to each project and whether a positive capacity-building outcome was likely. For example, one interviewee said:

*Obviously, we think about priority in terms of resources and in terms of our ability to build to capacity.... We have a long list of requests. We’re not going to be able to do all of those things, so we’ll be looking closely at, “What does the data say that we need? Who are the players in the department that are making the request? Do we really feel we can make an impact?” Then we’ll narrow it down to those projects that we will be moving forward with.*

Content Centers considered how best to maximize their resources as they planned a combination of single-state, multi-state, and national (usually web-based) projects. Five Content Centers reported partnering with Regional Centers to plan projects. Four Content Centers reported that they chose to focus their work on topics of common concern across states. One staff member noted that, as national centers, Content Centers need to consider, “How are we going to benefit the most states?” A staff member from a different Content Center commented:

*We could be a mile wide and an inch deep. That’s not where we can really have impact in building capacity of states and [Regional Centers]. Picking a few areas of focus that are relevant to all states is the strategy that we use. That allows us to go deep with content and allows us to go deep with states.*

**Development of Project Plans in the Two Priority Areas**

Interviewers also asked Center staff members to describe the processes of developing specific projects in the teacher/leader effectiveness and early learning priority areas. The process was most often characterized as a series of interactive sessions or conversations with SEA staff (14 Centers, nine Regional and five Content). This process was similar to the process for developing the Center’s broad annual plans, but project planning involved SEA division-level staff and specialists, rather than (or in addition to) chief state school officers and department directors. TA recipients, when questioned about the process of planning projects in the focus priority areas, were also most likely to describe meetings and series of conversations. For example:

*The [Center staff] ... set up regular face-to-face meetings and conference calls to do updates on our plan of what we want to work together on and ... where our initiatives or our priorities ... align with things that they can help us on. So it’s on a regular basis and pretty frequent.*

Staff from 11 Regional and five Content Centers reported that project ideas in one or both of the two priority areas were initiated by the SEA, and that state goals were driven in part by federal mandates or initiatives. The mandates and initiatives they described include the requirements of
RTT grants, teacher equity plans, preschool development grants, school improvement grant regulations, and NCLB waivers. As SEAs identified policy goals or needs, the Centers worked with the SEAs to, as one interviewee put it, “reformulate” the need in terms of manageable practices and processes and to break down the goal into operational steps. One Center interviewee explained:

> When we have these discussions, it’s not just about [the fact] that at the end of the day you’ll have a better professional learning system. It’s also about what would we need to change in terms of what people know and are able to do, and the supports that are there for them. [We] focus on asking the right questions and conducting an audit of what [the SEA has] already in place that could be used to push this work forward.

Staff from another Center described developing a project in the early learning area by building on the SEA staff’s concern about low reading proficiency in the third grade and their emerging interest in building more connections between early childhood education and literacy in the primary grades:

> The idea for the initiative came from the SEA staff. When we shared with them the type of capacity-building technical assistance that we could provide, they could begin to see what kind of role [the Center] could play in helping them support early learning. We collaboratively could shape what we could do to assist them in this work.

One consideration in this process, reported by staff from six Regional Centers and one Content Center, was that SEA staff need help ensuring that implementing their strategic plans—whether for teacher equity, teacher evaluation, or early learning standards—is feasible. As one interviewee said:

> One of the things that we have already learned is that states really need more support in what high-quality implementation of any strategic plan looks like. This ties in again kind of nicely with how we think about capacity building and our theory of action.... [We talk to the SEA about:] “What are the stages of implementation, and how do you monitor that? And how do you report on that? And how do you continually revise and improve your strategic plan?”

Four of these Regional Centers spoke about assisting SEAs specifically in planning to engage stakeholders in the implementation process. For example, staff from one Center reported:

> We’re building in pressure by the client base, whether they’re stakeholders or not, to expect this kind of behavior from the department—to expect to be included—which is all part of the reciprocal relationships that we’re trying to build. It’s a conscious effort.
Staff from nine Regional and two Content Centers stressed that they researched the policy landscape, including the organizational and political context of the policy, to inform their planning of projects with SEA staff. They emphasized that early learning and teacher/leader needs, and the readiness of the SEA to tackle specific policy approaches, are specific to each state. Staff from one Center explained that successful planning for teacher effectiveness projects depended on:

...the way you understand the context of the state; its political dynamics and the pressures that they’re under and where the priorities are. Because if you come in and try to...sell an initiative that doesn't align with their [situation], that will likely not go anywhere. There is that homework piece, then knowing how to probe.

Staff from another Center illustrated this approach through an example in which they brought to a rural state their knowledge of challenges to creating a qualified teacher workforce in rural areas, appreciation of the state’s efforts, and technical assistance ideas based on understanding how “addressing an equity gap in that context is a lot different than what people are going to be thinking of in an urban setting.”

**Relationship Building in Centers’ Theories of Action**

Staff from many Centers (16) reported that relationships with SEA staff members and chief state school officers were an important foundation for designing their work, supporting ongoing communication, assessing needs, and planning TA services. Center staff noted that building and maintaining trusting relationships fostered mutual understanding. Center staff communicated their capacity-building mission to SEAs, while also listening and ensuring that they were as responsive as possible to state needs. As one interviewee said, trusting relationships enabled the Center to:

...honestly identify the existing knowledge and skills and their attitudes around particular areas of work and [have] those in-depth conversations—really talk—really understand where they are at a particular time and then ... move from that position.

This ongoing responsiveness was particularly important to Regional Center staff. Staff from 10 Regional Centers, compared to just one Content Center, emphasized that they were flexible in their ongoing work with SEAs and that trusting relationships, focused on what several respondents called “customer service,” made this responsiveness possible. Because of frequent turnover among chief state school officers and SEA staff, with the associated changes in educational priorities, staff from nearly half of the Centers (six Regional and three Content Centers) emphasized that their ability to work effectively depended on their own stable presence in the region—the continuity they provided for the SEAs—as well as their willingness to exercise patience, shift focus, and work with new leaders to modify plans.
Key Technical Assistance Strategies in Centers’ Theories of Action

In developing work plans and designing projects with SEAs, Center staff emphasized particular approaches to TA that they believed most critical to producing capacity-building outcomes in the states. As the refined conceptual model in the next chapter illustrates, these strategies were informed by the Centers’ definitions of capacity building, as well as by the needs assessment and planning process. In implementing their plans and delivering TA, the Centers used a range of specific TA delivery methods and modes, which will be discussed in the final summative report. This report describes in broad terms the TA strategies that were most likely to be included in the Centers’ theories of action. Center staff considered these strategies vital to success and integrated them throughout their activities and projects. Key strategies included collaboration with other Centers and other TA providers, scaffolding of SEA knowledge and organizational capacity so that SEAs could gradually acquire more ownership of projects, serving as a “thought partner” or “critical friend” available for consultation on an ongoing basis, and building on common concerns and experiences among SEAs through cross-state sharing of information and best practices. Exhibit 8 illustrates the most frequently reported strategies by Center type.
Center staff most often highlighted collaboration with other Centers (17 Centers) as a strategy for delivering TA. They drew on the expertise, support, and constituent networks of other Centers in order to deliver TA that met SEA needs. Center staff reported that their ability to draw on the network of Centers was important in meeting project goals and in building SEAs’ confidence. One Regional Center interviewee stated:

*We have become very adept at leveraging the whole national system to support our states. Our states know that ... we’re able to tap into that whole national system.*

A Content Center interviewee commented that provision of resources and strategic partnering improved outcomes:
We are really about trying to broker knowledge, resources, and expertise. We think that there are much better outcomes for our clients when we bring more resources and partners to bear on really complex problems of practice.

Center staff reported that the Regional and Content Centers complemented each other through their different specialties. Staff from six Content Centers who highlighted collaboration as a strategy reported that they connected with the Regional Centers to help with contextual knowledge and customization of TA to a state or region, or to tap into SEA contacts or regional networks of educators. Staff from 11 Regional Centers who discussed collaboration reported seeking out expertise from a Content Center for support on the design and delivery of TA in the priority area aligned with that Center. Interviewees from three Regional Centers also reported that they collaborated with each other on designing cross-regional projects. Staff from seven Centers said that they collaborated with other TA providers and experts outside of the Comprehensive Center system as well.

Staff from 12 Centers identified scaffolding as a key approach to capacity building. Center staff explained that they responded to SEAs’ requests for short-term fixes by gradually building agencies’ knowledge and organizational processes so that the SEAs would take over the development and implementation of reforms on their own and be better equipped to tackle the next challenge. One Center staff member provided an example of a request from an SEA to convene a group of professionals. The staffer explained to the SEA that the Center did not offer meeting planning services; instead, the staff member offered to talk through the meeting’s goals and processes with the SEA staff and provide guidance that SEA staff might apply on their own with minimal direct assistance. This interaction opened an opportunity to discuss how to frame the purpose of a meeting, think about facilitation, and determine what to document.

A thought partner approach was highlighted by staff from 12 Centers, indicating that Center staff members were available on an ongoing or as-needed basis to consult with SEA staff on solving problems. Center staff reported that the thought partner role allowed them to tailor their TA by conversing regularly with SEA staff, remaining up to date on their emerging concerns, building trust and confidence, and providing useful advice. A Center interviewee provided an example of a thought partnership with an SEA on revising its teacher certification system:

[The SEA has] a lot of capacity already there, but they [wanted to revamp the system] and needed help. [The SEA asked,] “How can we look at this? How can you help us walk through what exists and help us think about how we could change it?”

Staff from 11 Centers identified cross-state knowledge sharing, including peer-to-peer learning, as a major strategy for addressing SEAs’ common needs. Center staff reported that SEAs frequently ask, “What are other states doing in this area?” The Centers have planned a variety of TA services or products, including peer learning forums (sometimes called “regional collaboratives”), state policy scans, webinars, conference calls, and presentations from representatives of states with cutting-edge practices to address common state needs and foster
sharing of lessons from practice. Staff from three Content Centers reported that tracking individual SEA requests enabled them to detect patterns or trends across states and strategically share new practices or address emerging needs that were common to a number of SEAs.

**Sources of Evidence for Capacity-Building Outcomes**

In almost all Centers (21), plans for measuring capacity-building outcomes were included in project plans and internal management plans, with planned measures ranging in rigor from anecdotal reports (14 Centers) to the use of a structured capacity-building rubric (four Centers). Exhibit 9 shows the measures Centers planned to use to assess the projects selected for the evaluation. Staff from 14 Centers reported planning to use at least two different sources of evidence. Two Regional Centers reported planning to use four sources, and one Regional Center planned to use five sources: surveys, interviews, case studies, anecdotal methods, and a capacity-building rubric. Exhibit 9 also shows how individual Centers combined methods. All Centers worked with either internal or external evaluators to produce annual performance reports and evaluation reports, as required by the U.S. Department of Education. The Center-level evaluations were designed to address required performance measures (quality, relevance, and usefulness). Centers and their evaluators had discretion to develop additional research questions and methods, and chose to measure or describe capacity-building activities and outcomes using the varying methods described here.
### Exhibit 9. Centers’ Sources of Evidence for Capacity-Building Outcomes

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As Exhibit 9 illustrates, surveys designed by Center staff or local Center evaluation teams were the most common method that Center staff planned to use to measure capacity-building outcomes. Centers planned to target the surveys to SEA staff members, other constituents who attended Center events, and sometimes Center staff members themselves. Although the surveys were designed to include customer feedback questions about the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the Centers’ TA, as required by the Government Performance and Results Act indicators, Center staff reported that surveys also were designed to include questions that capture capacity-building outcomes. As one Regional Center interviewee reported:

> *After we have exposed them through various TA events, sessions, meetings, we will give them a survey asking them ... “Your knowledge on these issues prior to us working with you was where? Now that you’ve been exposed, how would you rate*...

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your knowledge on this?” Even though it’s perceptual data, at least it gives us some sense that we’re moving the knowledge needle and people’s understanding.

Staff from a smaller number of Centers reported that they planned to use interviews and case studies to gather evidence of outcomes. Six Regional Centers reported planning to use interviews with the SEA staff conducted by Center staff members or local evaluators. One Center interviewee described annual interviews during which “we use the theory of action and the definitions of capacity to drive those questions.” Center staff members or evaluators in four Centers conducted reported planning to conduct case studies of projects or SEAs for in-depth analysis of the process of building capacity and producing results.

Staff from over half (14) of Centers reported planning to collect anecdotes: “stories” or staff impressions of project outcomes, which staff would then document in project logs, or share through discussion in Center meetings, which often included evaluators. Staff from one Center reported plans to schedule quarterly “reflection meetings” in which the project teams would share their personal observations of changes in SEA capacity and discuss the implications for the design of future TA. A story might focus on “an SEA taking immediate responsibilities that we were taking on before because we’ve helped them build that capacity.” Centers expected that their local evaluators would record these stories or follow up with additional, more formal data collection that might result in complete case studies of projects or states.

Four Centers designed capacity-building maps or rubrics to measure change along several dimensions of capacity. Respondents from these Centers reported drawing on a capacity-building tool developed by Sharon Harsh, former director of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center, that measures change in specific capacity indicators (grouped by type of targeted outcome) along a scale of four implementation levels.34 Staff from three Centers described the rubric primarily as a tool for team reflection on SEA outcomes or for structuring the qualitative documentation of capacity-building accomplishments in specific projects. For example, one Center developed a rubric, based on Harsh’s work, that measures 18 capacity “traits” or “key actions” using a four-point rating scale ranging from “little or no development and implementation” to “exemplary development and implementation.” Specific indicators of staff or organizational development and progress are provided for each cell in the rubric. This Center’s staff reported that they plan to conduct pre- and post-intervention capacity assessment, administering the rubric through structured interviews to SEA staff members at the beginning of each project and again after six months.

Respondents from half of the Centers (11 Centers) reported experiencing challenges in designing outcome measures. These challenges included the following:

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Due to the complexity of capacity-building outcomes, which may involve changes in organizational and cross-organizational processes, indicators are difficult to design, validate, and administer.

Attributing a causal role to the Centers’ TA is difficult. Even if Center staff observe positive changes in SEA outcomes, it would generally not be possible to empirically measure the extent to which the change was directly attributable to the Center’s work.

Center resources are insufficient to support rigorous outcome evaluations.

Because this interim report is focused on the design domain—how Centers design their work—the exploration of outcomes was limited to how outcomes fit into the Centers’ theories of action. Although the research team learned that the Centers plan to build capacity and (to a lesser degree) measure whether capacity was actually built, further insight into capacity-building measures and outcomes will be provided in the final summative report, which will be focused on the implementation and outcome domains.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Refined Conceptual Model

The findings on Centers’ design informed refinements to our preliminary, broad conceptual framework on Centers’ work presented in Chapter 1 (Exhibit 2). The conceptual model will continue to evolve as the research team explores how Centers actually implemented their work and what outcomes they achieved. Those revisions will be reflected in a final conceptual framework, which will be part of the final report.

Exhibit 10 is the design-focused portion of the conceptual framework, based on the findings in this report. It shows that Centers design their work with SEAs based on what they learn from ongoing needs assessment: conversations with the SEAs, SEA requests, and ongoing research in their fields of expertise (especially among Content Centers). Ongoing needs assessment is directly influenced by both federal priorities, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, and SEA goals, for example, the need to implement new teacher evaluation protocols. Centers’ ability to assess the needs of the SEA and the field is supported by the relationships that the Centers build and cultivate with SEAs. These relationships also inform the process of planning the Centers’ work. The Centers’ TA planning process is usually interactive, involving ongoing communication between Center staff and key decision makers such as chief state school officers and other SEA staff. Centers focus their work using key TA strategies designed to achieve targeted outcomes for the SEAs. Dashed arrows in the exhibit indicate the bi-directional influence of strategies and targeted outcomes. The dashed arrows also emphasize an iterative loop of planning, selecting strategies, targeting capacity-building outcomes, and incorporating sources to measure those outcomes. This loop accommodates SEAs as their capacity-building outcomes expand from, for example, development of individual skills and knowledge to organizational development. Centers use a variety of sources of evidence to inform the iterative loop. All of the Centers’ design work happens against the backdrop of both federal and state context, as well as the Centers’ capacity-building principles.
Exhibit 10. How the Comprehensive Centers Design Their Work

**CAPACITY-BUILDING PRINCIPLES**
Fostering Ownership, Fostering Long-Term Change, Fostering Systems Change

**Ongoing Needs Assessment**
- Meetings with State Education Agencies and Chiefs
- Requests Initiated by State Education Agencies
- Center Expertise in Needs in Field

**Planning Center Strategies**
- Interactive Planning with State Education Agencies and Chiefs
- Planning for Maximum Yield Relative to Resource Use

**Key TA Strategies**
- Collaboration
- Scaffolding & Shifting of Ownership
- Engagement as Thought Partner
- Cross-State Sharing

**Targeted Capacity-Building Outcomes**
- Skills and Knowledge
- Organizational Development
- Policy Implementation
- Policy Design

**Sources of Evidence of Capacity-Building Outcomes**
- Surveys
- Anecdotal Information
- Interviews and Case Studies
- Capacity-Building Rubric

**Relationship Building with SEAs**
- Flexibility
- Responsiveness
- Continuity

**Federal and State Context**
Policies, Plans and Priorities, Funding, Existing Organizational Structure and Processes, Politics and Culture, Leadership and Staff Turnover/Changes, SEA Baseline Capacity
SEAs continue to need TA as a result of changing and often heightened expectations of their roles in guiding and implementing reforms, particularly in response to recent changes in federal education law. The Comprehensive Centers share the fundamental goal of SEA capacity building, which includes shifting “ownership” of reform-oriented practices from the Centers to the SEA. However, Center staff have found that SEAs vary greatly in their needs and priorities for TA in key policy areas. Center staff work to understand each state’s educational leadership and its fiscal, political, and institutional context as a means of building the types and levels of capacity that fit each SEA’s needs.

Cross-Center partnerships play an important role in the Centers’ identification of SEA needs and in the planning and selection of TA strategies and projects. Although the Regional and Content Centers share broad goals of building SEA capacity, they complement each other through their different types of expertise and networks: Regional Centers provide local relationships and knowledge, and Content Centers provide expert assistance and resources in their designated content areas. The implementation component of this evaluation will contribute to a more detailed understanding of cross-Center partnerships and the circumstances in which they are likely to flourish.

Centers design and plan their services for SEAs through an iterative process, informed by ongoing relationships and interactive discussions with SEA staff members and chief state school officers. The Centers work to identify and address SEAs’ short-term needs while also guiding them toward long-term and sustainable capacity changes. Due to their ongoing relationships with the states, Regional Centers in particular must be adept at planning and balancing their responses to SEAs’ desire for immediate fixes with the more gradual and strategic work of capacity building.

Given the complexity of their goals and related outcomes, the Centers face challenges in measuring the outcomes of their work. Early findings indicate that, although the Centers share similar capacity-building principles and outcomes expectations, their outcome measures and methods of data collection vary widely.

**Focus of the Next Evaluation Phase**

This understanding of how Centers design their TA will provide a foundation for the next phase of the evaluation. The upcoming focus on project implementation in the priority areas of teacher/leader effectiveness and early learning will shed additional light on how the Centers meet complex or competing goals and produce and measure outcomes in specific contexts and policy areas. More specifically, the research team will examine the following topics as part of the final summative report:

- Whether and how Centers’ capacity-building principles inform their project implementation
- Whether and how the key broad TA strategies, such as thought partnering, scaffolding, and collaborating, are reflected in project services and activities
• How cross-Center partnerships work throughout project implementation, and what challenges they experience
• How Centers follow through in documenting or measuring capacity-building outcomes, and whether and how they use the results to inform their work
• Whether and in what ways Regional and Content Centers differ in their approach to project implementation in the two priority areas
• Major challenges to implementation across the two focal priority areas and across different types of projects and TA activities
• Major successes and challenges in producing outcomes, especially SEA capacity-building outcomes.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. DESIGN-FOCUSED INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CENTER STAFF

The OMB Control Number for this information collection is 1850-0935 and the expiration date is 4/30/2020.

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[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Below are suggested introductory remarks. While it is not necessary to follow this as a script, it is important that you cover all of the main points contained here.]

I work for IMPAQ International, and we are evaluating the system of Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers. The U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences contracted with us to conduct this study. You may recall that we visited last year to learn about your Center.

As part of our study, we will be interviewing directors, managers, and staff at the Centers to understand the work that you do. The purpose of the study is to gather data to describe the work of the Centers and how the Centers build the capacities of state departments of education, and to report that information to the Department of Education. What you have to say is important to us and we appreciate you helping us understand your work. We want to assure you that participation in this interview is voluntary. We estimate that this interview will take 60 minutes.

[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Please read the following to the respondent(s):

“Information collected for this study comes under the confidentiality and data protection requirements of the Institute of Education Sciences (The Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, Title I, Part E, Section 183). Responses to this data collection will be used only for research purposes. Findings from the interview data will be reported in summary form and individuals will not be identified by name. However, respondents’ roles and the CC they work with may be identified in the report, which may lead to individuals’ being identified. Other than this situation that we have made respondents aware of, we will not provide information that identifies you to anyone outside the study team, except as required by law.”

Before we begin, do you have any questions about the purpose of the evaluation or our confidentiality policy?

To start, do you mind if we audio record our session for the accuracy of our note taking?
These questions will be asked of Center leadership (manager or director) and may include a larger group including technical assistance providers. If respondents in a group interview differ in their responses/opinion, those differences will be recorded in the interviewer notes. Prior to conducting the interview, the interviewer will review relevant extant documents such as proposals, annual performance review reports, evaluation reports, etc. Some of the answers to questions asked below may be in those documents. If so, the interviewer will start the question by referring to information gleaned from the document, and will ask the respondent to verify the accuracy of the information.

**Capacity Building Definition**

1. For the purposes of your Center work with state education agencies (SEAs) [or for Content Centers, SEAs and Regional Centers], how do you define capacity building? What is the basis for your definition (research, experience, other Centers)?

   **PROBES:**
   
   How do you talk about capacity building among your Center staff?
   
   Do you focus on different types of capacity building (e.g. human, organizational, structural, etc.)? If so, please tell us about that.
   
   [For Content Center interviews: Do you focus on different types of capacity building for Regional Centers as compared to SEAs? Does capacity building look different for Regional Centers and SEAs?]
   
   How do you discuss capacity building with your SEA constituents—to what extent do you use the term “capacity building”?

2. When thinking about your work, how do you know when you have built capacity? What does that “look like”? In other words, what observed changes in stakeholder behaviors indicate capacity building? What are the outcomes that you expect to see?

3. Do you collect evidence to assess your progress in building capacity? If so, what kinds of evidence do you collect?

**Theory of Action**

We are interested in the assumptions behind your work with SEAs—how you decide, out of all of the options available, what work you will do with the SEAs (and for Content Centers, the Regional Centers) and how you monitor and adjust that work as needed. Please describe (and/or show us graphically) your theory of change and explain how you arrived at it.

4. How do you assess SEA needs—what information do you request, collect and review?

   **PROBES:**
   
   Who is involved in conversations/meetings about SEA goals? [for Content Centers, ask also about Regional Center goals and goals that might be generated through means other than directly by states or Regional Centers, e.g., addressing a broad, multi-sector or national need]
To what extent do your SEAs present you with their goals, and to what extent do you suggest goal options to them?

5. How do you determine the needs you can help the SEA meet or the goals the SEA can pursue through collaboration with your Center?

6. How do you assess the SEA’s current level of capacity to meet their goals? [For Content Center interviews, also ask: is the process different in your work with Regional Centers? If yes, in what ways?]

   **PROBES:**
   To what extent do your SEAs present you with their goals, and to what extent do you suggest goal options to them?
   If different SEA personnel present you with different goals, how do you resolve this?

7. To what extent do the states’ identified needs align with the Federal priority areas? Have you encountered many state needs or requests for TA that did not align with these priorities? Or that you could not address for some other reason? If so, please explain. How do you respond in these cases?

8. Once SEAs have determined their goals, how do you choose your Center objectives—the overall results your Center hopes to achieve to support the SEA’s goals?

   **PROBES:**
   Who is involved in conversations/meetings about Center objectives?
   To what extent are the Center objectives determined by the SEA’s requests of you, and to what extent do you suggest the Center’s objectives to the SEA?

9. How do you choose which specific strategies or projects to pursue to achieve your objectives? What is your theory about how these strategies, activities, or projects will contribute to achieving your objectives?

   **PROBES:**
   Who is involved in conversations/meetings about strategies?
   What do you take into consideration when deciding upon strategies (feasibility, evidence, availability of expertise, experience in other projects, expectations of SEA, likelihood of building capacity, etc.)
   To what extent are your projects/strategies determined by the SEAs’ requests of you, and to what extent do you suggest the projects to the SEAs?

10. How do you customize strategies to the SEA’s existing capacity level and needs?

11. Can you describe how the local context—political, economic, etc.—affects your choice of strategies/projects, if at all?

   **PROBES:**
   How do you become aware of these contextual factors?
How influential do you think context is in your decision making?

12. How does the availability of Center resources (financial, human, etc.) enter into your choice of strategies? [If resources do affect strategy choice: If you’re making decisions about projects based on resources, do you involve stakeholders (SEAs/Rocs) in the decision process? If so, how?]

The next set of questions asks about practical aspects of your project work, such as how you monitor project activities and how you determine timeframes. These questions will help us describe the process by which you do your work, and how your theories of actions inform the process.

13. How do you track and assess progress in your projects? What evidence do you collect or review to do this?

14. How do you choose which outcomes to track for specific projects or the Center as a whole? Can you give us any examples of outcomes that you’ve documented so far?

   **PROBES:**
   - Who is involved in decisions about outcomes?
   - What implementation milestones do you track, and how?
   - What do you do if implementation milestones aren’t met?
   - How do you decide on longer-term outcomes for your Center work?
   - How do you measure your longer-term outcomes?

15. How do you determine the timeframe for a particular project? Do you have any rules of thumb about how long projects should be?

   **PROBES:**
   - How do you take stakeholder expectations and availability into account when developing timelines? How does the SEAs’ planning process impact project timelines?

16. To what extent, if any, has your Center updated plans during a project? If so, how did you become aware of a need to change something? Can you describe this process of changing projects or strategies? How often does this happen?

17. As you track progress toward your Center objectives, to what extent do you also assess SEAs’ progress toward their goals?

18. Have you modified your theory of change over time? If so, please describe how and why.

19. What else would you like to share about your approach to working with SEAs [or RCs, for Content Centers]?
APPENDIX B. IMPLEMENTATION-FOCUSED INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CENTER STAFF

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[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Below are suggested introductory remarks. While it is not necessary to follow this as a script, it is important that you cover all of the main points contained here.]

I work for IMPAQ International, and we are researching the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers. The U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences contracted with us to conduct this study. You may recall that we visited last year to learn about the Center.

As part of our study, we will be interviewing directors, managers, and staff at the Centers to understand the work that you do. The purpose of the study is to gather data to describe the work of the Centers and how the Centers build the capacities of state departments of education, and to report that information to the Department of Education. What you have to say is important to us and we appreciate you helping us understand your work. We want to assure you that participation in this interview is voluntary. We estimate that this interview will take 60 minutes.

[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Please read the following to the respondent(s):]

“Information collected for this study comes under the confidentiality and data protection requirements of the Institute of Education Sciences (The Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, Title I, Part E, Section 183). Responses to this data collection will be used only for research purposes. Findings from the interview data will be reported in summary form and individuals will not be identified by name. However, respondents’ roles and the CC they work with may be identified in the report, which may lead to individuals’ being identified. Other than this situation that we have made respondents aware of, we will not provide information that identifies you to anyone outside the study team, except as required by law.”

Before we begin, do you have any questions about the purpose of the evaluation or our confidentiality policy?

To start, do you mind if we audio record our session for the accuracy of our note taking?
All questions will be asked about the Early Learning priority area first, and then about the Great Teachers/Leaders priority area. Questions are for staff of both Regional Centers and Content Centers unless specifically noted otherwise. Interview respondents for the first section (“Overall Perspective”) should be Center Directors, Content Specialists in the Early Learning or Great/Teachers Leaders areas, and lead TA providers who work within these priority areas. Interview respondents for the second section (“Project Background”) should be lead TA providers who work on the identified projects, but Center Directors and Content Specialists may also be involved with these projects and should be included as relevant. Prior to conducting the interview, the interviewer will review relevant extant documents such as proposals, annual performance review reports, evaluation reports, etc. Some of the answers to questions asked below may be in those documents. If so, the interviewer will start the question by referring to information gleaned from the document, and will ask the respondent to verify the accuracy of the information.

Further introduction from the Interviewer: We are going to ask you questions that focus on two priority areas. We will begin with the Early Learning priority area; we will first ask about your overall approach to TA in this area, and then we will ask about specific projects. We will then ask about the Great Teachers/Leaders priority area, again starting with questions about your overall approach followed by questions about specific projects.[Note to interviewer; ask ALL questions, including both overall perspective and project-specific questions, first about Early Learning and then repeat all the questions focusing on Great /Teachers Leaders.]

Overall Perspective on the Priority Area

Ask Regional Centers Only:
1. Are there needs for technical assistance within the Early Learning [Great Teachers/ Leaders] priority area that have been identified by your states? If so, please describe the needs.

2. If there are needs, how did they come to your attention? If this area has not been identified as a priority need, do you know why not? What do SEA staff say about why this area is or is not a priority TA need?

   PROBE: What evidence have you reviewed that helps you understand the needs?

3. Is there a range of early learning [great teachers/leaders] TA needs across states in your region? How do states in your region differ in the types and level of these needs?

Ask Content Centers Only:
4. Are there needs (whether state, regional, national needs) in this priority area that have fallen within the purview of your center, or intersected with the focus of your center? If so please describe these needs. How did these needs come to your attention?
**PROBES:** Have early learning [great teachers/leaders] needs come up in discussions with Regional Centers, other Content Centers, SEAs, or other constituents? What evidence have you reviewed that helps you understand the needs?

5. Have you encountered a range of early learning [great teachers/leaders] needs across states and regions? If so please describe the differences in level or types of needs.

*If no needs have been identified in the Early Learning priority area, skip the remaining questions for Early Learning and start over with the Great Teachers/Leaders area.*

6. Have the needs in this priority area changed since first identified to the Center? If so, please describe how. How did you learn about any changes?

7. Who (individuals, agencies, groups) has been part of the Center’s discussion of early learning [great teachers/leaders] needs and any plans to address them?

**PROBES:**
- Chief State School Officers or other SEA leadership
- Other SEA staff (such as middle management staff)
- Leadership in other Agencies such as Human Services, Family and Children's Services, etc.
- Other staff within these agencies (such as middle management staff)
- Others such as governors' offices, task forces, etc.
- Advocacy or TA groups
- Other Centers, whether Regional or Content Centers

8. Do you have designated staff and partners who work with you on early learning [great teachers/leaders] projects? [If so], please identify them and their expertise relevant to this area of work.

9. Do you have a theory of action that is specific to early learning? [If so], please describe it. By theory of action, we mean how your Center works to build SEA capacity in early learning, including the chain of causal assumptions linking program resources, activities, intermediate outcomes and ultimate goals. Specifically, we’d like to know:

9a. What are you trying to help the states achieve in early learning? What are the expected outcomes? How is this TOA anchored to the needs we discussed above?

9b. Can you identify any overall approaches or strategies (e.g., ones that cut across specific projects or activities) that you use to help states achieve these outcomes in early learning [great teachers/leaders]—approaches or strategies that are specific to this priority area? How do the strategies lead to the outcomes?

10. [Note to interviewer: whether the Center being interviewed is a Regional or Content Center, be sure to ask about how they work with both types of Centers.] Do [other] Regional Centers
work with you on these approaches or strategies? If so, how? Do [other] Content Centers work with you on these approaches or strategies? If so, how?

11. What has gone particularly well in your work with other Centers—with both Regional and Content Centers—in this priority area? What has been challenging in working with other Centers—with both Regional and Content Centers?

12. [Note to interviewer: ask this of both types of Centers, since Content Centers may receive training from other Content Centers.] Have you received TA or training in this priority area from any of the [other] Content Centers (directed to your own center as distinct from or in addition to SEA staff)? If so, please describe and tell me how you have used this information.

13. As you think about all of your work in early learning [great teachers/leaders], what do you consider to be going very well? How do you know? What indicators do you rely on?

14. As you think about all of your work in early learning [great teachers/leaders], what have you found to be unsuccessful or challenging? How do you know? What indicators do you rely on?

**Project Implementation**

We will now discuss up to 2 projects from your center as examples of how the Center works in this priority area. As we discussed with you earlier when planning this visit, if you have more than two projects in this priority area, please select the two projects that you consider the best illustrations of your work in this area in terms of their capacity building potential, or uniqueness to the work that you do at your center.

15. [Start with one project] What do you call this project?

16. Is this a state, regional, or national project? Please identify the specific states or regions, if relevant, or describe the scope of the project.

17. Is the project completed or ongoing? What was the start date, and the ending date (or anticipated end date) if applicable?

18. Why did you select this project as a focal project for discussion?

19. What prompted this project? Who initiated the concept of this project? Who participated in the early discussions? Who helped plan the project? What needs were identified as having the greatest priority? How did you decide on priorities?

**PROBES:**
- Chief State School Officers
- SEA staff below leadership level
- Other Centers
20. Which constituents (SEA representatives or others) do you work with most closely on this project? Please describe their roles on the project. Can you give us their contact information so we can contact them for interviews to obtain the TA recipient perspective?

21. Please identify and describe the roles of any organizations serving as partners in this project. What is their role in implementing the project and how do the partners work together?

**PROBES:**
- Other Regional Centers or Content Centers
- RELs
- Other TA providers or experts

22. Which Center staff members work on this project? Please describe their respective roles on the project.

23. What were the elements of the context—political, fiscal, legal, economic, etc.—that were influential factors during the project’s early development? Did these elements facilitate or impede the project in any way? If so, how?

**PROBES:**
- How influential do you think these elements of the context were?
- How did it impact what your team was thinking and doing in relation to this project?
- Did the state(s) have any Federal or state grant money behind this project?

**Project Goals**

24. What are the broad goals of the project? What areas of SEA capacity are expected to improve? Which SEA staff are the primary targets of this project?

**PROBES:**
- Human capacity/knowledge/skills
- Organizational capacity
- Structural capacity/policy change

25. Have the goals of the project changed over time? If so, please describe.

26. What are the key strategies and activities—including training events, products, meetings—that are part of achieving the goals? Who are the recipients of these strategies and activities?

27. Have you modified the strategies or activities originally planned for this project? [If so] Please tell us about how and why these were changed.
Project Communication

28. How often do you meet or talk with SEA representatives, or other key constituents, if relevant, regarding planning and implementation of the project? With which SEA representatives do you meet? What do you discuss? How do these discussions inform implementation of the project?

Project Implementation and Outcomes

29. What is your definition of success in this project? What will we ‘see’ if this project is successful? What are the milestones for the project?

30. Based on your definitions of a successful project, how have things gone so far? What is your evidence for making this assessment of progress?

   **PROBES:**
   Has the project met its milestones so far? Why/why not?

31. What have been the outcomes so far? Have you seen changes in the capacity of the SEAs or other targeted constituencies? Please describe any changes in each of these types of capacity, and the evidence of the change:
   - Knowledge and skills (e.g., knowledge, expertise, skills, will, understanding necessary to implement something)
   - Organizational (e.g., interaction, collaboration, communication among individuals in a system; evaluation and feedback on processes and structures for continuous improvement)
   - Structural/policy change (e.g., policies, procedures, and formalized practices) **PROBE:** Has the SEA capacity to work with LEAs improved?

32. What has been the most challenging aspect of this project—including any challenges to implementation or to building SEA capacity? Please describe. How have you handled the challenges?

   **PROBES:**
   Has there been turnover within the SEA?
   Have there been challenges in communicating with the SEA?
   Have there been other challenges in working with the SEA
   Have there been challenges in working with partners?
   What makes it difficult to build capacity?

33. Overall what do you think has been the most successful aspect of this project? Please describe it. To what do you attribute this success? What have you learned from this?

34. Are there plans for the Center to build on, replicate, or continue this project?
35. Have the SEAs or other constituents begun to take over or "own" this work in any way? What are their next steps?

36. Are there upcoming events associated with this project that we may be able to observe to help us understand project implementation? [If so] Please describe them and provide dates.

37. Are there products/materials associated with this project (in addition to those we’ve received prior to the interview) that we could collect and read to help us understand project implementation or outcomes?

*Repeat project questions for the 2nd project in the Early Learning area, if applicable. Then repeat all questions for the Great Teachers/Leaders priority area.*
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEWS WITH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE RECIPIENTS

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[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Below are suggested introductory remarks. While it is not necessary to follow this as a script, it is important that you cover all of the main points contained here.]

I work for IMPAQ International, and we are evaluating the system of Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers. The U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences contracted with us to conduct this study.

As part of our study, we will be interviewing recipients of Center work. The purpose of the study is to gather data to describe the work of the Centers and how the Centers build the capacities of state departments of education. We will use the information we learn from our visit today to report our results to the U.S. Department of Education. What you have to say is important to us and we appreciate your helping us understand the Centers’ work. We want to assure you that participation in this interview is voluntary. We estimate that this interview will take 60 minutes.

[NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: Please read the following to the respondent(s):

“Information collected for this study falls under the confidentiality and data protection requirements of the Institute of Education Sciences (The Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, Title I, Part E, Section 183). Responses to this data collection will be used only for research purposes. For the most part, findings from the interview will be reported in aggregate form only and will not be associated with specific individuals or Centers. Quotations from individual respondents may occasionally be presented for illustrative purposes. We will not identify the names of these individual respondents or their Centers, but we may provide the broad respondent category they belong to (e.g., “SEA staff”; “Regional Center”). Because the number of Centers is small and because we will describe specific content and contextual features of the Centers’ work, in some cases it may be possible to indirectly identify some Centers. We will not provide information that directly identifies you to anyone outside the study team, except as required by law.”

Before we begin, do you have any questions about the purpose of the evaluation or our confidentiality policy?

To start, do you mind if we audio record our session for the accuracy of my note taking?
Individual Information and Knowledge of Centers
1. Please describe your position and your responsibilities with the SEA.

2. How long have you been in this position? How long have you worked with the SEA?

3. Please describe any other background particularly relevant to your current work with the SEAs?

4. When did you first work with or receive services from any of the Comprehensive Centers? Which Centers have you worked with or received technical assistance from since that time?

5. I would like to focus now on the Centers that are currently funded (funded Centers since late 2012). We’d like to hear about ways you’ve worked with or received services from these Centers. How did the Center try to learn about your needs?
   PROBES:
   What data or documents did the Center request?
   Whom did the Center interview?
   What was discussed in the early contacts/meetings?
   Have you had regular contact with them since the first contact?
   Is this typically in person, by phone, or by e-mail?

6. Please describe the major projects or services the Center has provided you or that you’ve participated in with the Center(s).

7. How are decisions made about what services the Center should provide to the SEA?

8. How would you characterize the specific role of the Center(s) in serving the SEAs, as distinct from other TA providers available to the SEA?

9. What are you most hoping to get from the Center? What needs do you hope the Center will address?
   PROBE:
In what ways do you hope the Center will build your capacity?

10. Do you believe the Centers have been effective in addressing the needs of the SEA and the state? If yes, please describe how and what evidence you have of their effectiveness. If no, please explain why and how/in what ways they have not been effective in serving the SEA/state needs.

Project Background
Now we’d like to discuss one or two specific projects that the Center staff has identified as illustrative that they are implementing with your SEA:

11. How would you briefly describe the ________________ project to someone who isn’t familiar with it?

12. What are the key strategies and activities—including training events, products, meetings—that are part of achieving the goals?

13. How does the project fit into the overall work at the SEA or your division?
   
   **PROBES:**
   Are there other initiatives or projects at the SEA that are related to this project? What is the policy or regulatory context for this project?

14. What prompted this particular project? What needs does it address? Why did you decide to work with the Center on this?

15. How did you work with the Center to develop this project?
   
   **PROBES:**
   Did your staff suggest the strategy or activities the Center might undertake to address the needs, or did the Center recommend the strategy? Please describe how you arrived at the project plan.

16. Is there any part of the local context (political, fiscal, legal, economic, etc.) that you think played a role in the project’s early development?
   
   **PROBES:** How did it impact what your team was thinking and doing in relation to this project? Did your office have any Federal or state grant money behind this project?
17. Can you tell me about the other SEA or other state agency team members on this project? Specifically, what are the titles or positions of SEA staff, and what are their respective roles on the project?

**PROBE:** [Ask about other agency staff (such as workforce staff for college and career readiness, or human services staff for early childhood) where appropriate.]

18. Whom from the relevant Center(s) do you work with on this project?

19. Who else from outside the SEA or the Center is involved in this project?

**PROBES:**
- LEAs?
- Other Centers?
- Other partners (TA providers or consultants, universities, foundations, etc.)

20. How often do you meet or talk with Center representatives, or other key constituents, if relevant, regarding planning and implementation of the project? With which Center representatives do you meet? What do you discuss? How do these discussions inform implementation of the project?

**PROBES:** How would you describe the roles and responsibilities of the various organizations involved in the project?

### Project Goals and Progress

21. Ultimately, what will we “see” if this project is successful? In other words, what are your hoped-for outcomes from this project?

22. Have the SEA needs or goals changed or shifted since the project began? [If so] Please tell us about that. How has this affected your work with the Center on the project?

23. So far, has the project been implemented as planned? Please describe the progress of implementation so far, as well as any deviations from plans. What are the reasons for any changes in plans?

24. Has any part of the local or state context changed in a way that has impacted the project’s implementation or success since its early development? How?
**Project Outcomes**

25. Have you used any products or materials produced by the Center through this project (including webinars, trainings, presentations)? *[If so]* have you been able to make use of what you learned? *[If so]* can you explain how? *[If not]* can you explain why?

26. Do the products/materials or technical assistance events help address the project goals, and if so, how?

27. What have been the major challenges related to this project (if any)? Please describe them. How were the challenges addressed (if at all)?

28. In your opinion, what has been the most successful aspect of this project? Please describe it.

29. What have been the outcomes so far? Have you seen changes in your or your organization’s capacity? Please describe any changes in each of these types of capacity and the evidence of the change:
   - Knowledge and skills (e.g., knowledge, expertise, skills, will, understanding necessary to implement something)
   - Organizational (e.g., interaction, collaboration, communication among individuals in a system; evaluation and feedback on processes and structures for continuous improvement)
   - Structural/policy change (e.g., policies, procedures, and formalized practices)
   
   **PROBE:** Has your capacity to work with LEAs improved?

30. Are you or the SEA as an organization doing anything differently now, that you have not mentioned above, as a result of this project and the TA from the Center?

   **PROBES:**
   - How are you using new knowledge or skills?
   - How has the TA influenced policies and procedures or practices at the SEA?
   - How has the TA influenced the SEA’s internal interactions, collaboration and communications?

31. Are there plans in your agency to build on, replicate, or continue this project or this line of work? Are you planning to do this with or without the Center(s)? What are the next steps?
32. Overall, have you learned any lessons from this project's implementation? Any recommendations you might make to Comprehensive Centers based on either successes or challenges of this project? Any lessons for your own agency?
APPENDIX D. DESIGN DOMAIN CODEBOOK

The coders applied these codes to transcripts, or parts of transcripts, of interviews with Center staff and TA recipients that addressed questions about the design of Centers’ work.

The coders were instructed to read through each interview transcript, coding paragraphs or passages of text to all applicable codes or subcodes. It was permissible to assign more than one node to the same selection of text.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Top Level Code</th>
<th>Level 2 Code</th>
<th>Level 3 Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capacity Building</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Capacity Building Conceptual Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>How the Center conceptualizes capacity building—including the meaning of capacity building, how the Center works with the SEA to build capacity, and the themes of TA that are specific to capacity building and are different from other types of TA. (Do not confuse with code 3 on types of capacity-building outcomes.)</td>
<td>See level 2 codes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Fostering Long-Term</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center focuses on long-term changes in the SEA or changes that are embedded in SEA systems and not easily dislodged. This code can be applied to capacity building that goes beyond near-term, quick-turnaround changes or to capacity building that is both long-term and systemic (and therefore sustainable). May also be defined as “institutionalizing” processes or practices.</td>
<td>The Center helps the SEA change in ways that are resilient in the face of staff turnover. Many Center staff mentioned that capacity building means long-term change in a large system, such as changes in state standards, assessments, teacher evaluation policy, or relationships between SEAs and LEAs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Fostering Ownership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center focuses on enabling SEA staff to take over initiatives and ultimately run them without the Center’s help.</td>
<td>“[SEA staff] phase us out.” “When we see it happen, really, they start to take over the mechanisms of the project itself. We call it a gradual release model.... It’s a much slower process. They really have to understand and take hold and get an idea. They’re part of the building of the project, but they’re usually not ready to do any leading of it, taking charge of things. That’s what they term it too.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Systems Change</td>
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<td>Center work creates changes in fundamental systems or practices; it produces broadly applicable knowledge, processes, frameworks, or tools. SEAs or LEAs gain something that they can apply to a variety of situations or processes going forward, rather than just filling a short-term need. Centers may provide a</td>
<td>One respondent described how the Center trained SEA staff by leading a process for grant review that the SEA could use going forward. Another Center developed a framework that SEAs can use when implementing new standards and assessments. Another respondent:</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Changes in Capacity-Building Definition Over Time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>framework that includes both a set of considerations or principles and a process for making decisions.</td>
<td>“Essentially, our definition of capacity building is increasing, in our case, a SEA’s ability to successfully undertake an initiative and then to learn from that process and apply those lessons to future initiatives.”</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Capacity-Building Outcome Types</td>
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<td>Whether and in what ways the Center changed its conceptual understanding/broad approach to capacity building (not specific strategies).</td>
<td>See level 2 and 3 codes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>SEA Staff Individual Knowledge and Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Types/levels of skills and practice, behavior, or policy changes the Center is trying to achieve. If respondents give examples of outcomes to illustrate the capacity-building design, those can be included here. (Don’t confuse this code with code 1, Capacity-Building Conceptual Definition, which covers the broad concepts.)</td>
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<td>3.2</td>
<td>SEA Organizational Development</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Center helps SEA to develop task force or committee or to create a new position to sustain work. Other examples include “breaking down silos” to work across divisions or agencies.</td>
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<td>3.2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication and Coordination</td>
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<td>3.2.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Agency Restructuring</td>
<td></td>
<td>Creating a new division, such as an early learning division.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.2.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Continuous Improvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>Creating processes of self-evaluation; creating performance metrics.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Policy Design</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center helps the SEA make policy choices or recommendations.</td>
<td>Center advises the SEA on selecting or designing the teacher evaluation model, curriculum, or assessment that districts must use.</td>
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<td>3.4</td>
<td>Implementation of Policy or Practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Center supports the SEA and builds capacity in disseminating guidance and tools, training and supporting LEAs and schools in translating policy into practice. May involve either building capacity of SEAs to work with LEAs or direct capacity building of districts or schools.</td>
<td>Center work designed to inform statewide implementation of teacher evaluation models or with institutions of higher education in incorporating new standards in curriculum; Center may help SEAs work with/train LEAs or may work directly with LEAs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Building Capacity of Other Centers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enhancing capacity of Regional Centers to work with their SEAs in specific content areas or enhancing capacity of Content Centers to work across priority areas.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Capacity-Building Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How the Center monitors, measures, or operationalizes capacity-building TA and outcomes.</td>
<td>See level 2 and 3 codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Specific Measurement Tool or Map</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Has specific tools or instruments (rubrics, matrices, inventories, maps, etc.) that provide capacity-building indicators and that document or measure types of capacity building (and capacity-building progress), for internal and/or external use.</td>
<td>One Center uses a capacity-building inventory, capacity-building interviews, and SEA self-assessment to assess baseline capacity and measure growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1</td>
<td>Uses Internally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center uses tool internally to monitor progress of capacity-building initiatives; may use for team building or visioning.</td>
<td>One Center has a capacity map that it uses only internally for reflective practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2</td>
<td>Uses or Discusses with SEA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center uses tool along with SEA to measure progress.</td>
<td>One Center uses capacity-building tools to measure growth in partnership with the SEA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Other Capacity-Building Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center does not have tools specifically designed to measure capacity building, but the Center or its local evaluator may either gather feedback and anecdotal data informally or add relevant questions to evaluation surveys, interviews, or case studies.</td>
<td>See level 3 codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1</td>
<td>Evaluation Surveys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Centers may add questions about capacity building to evaluation surveys and interviews. (Do not use this code unless it is clear that the survey includes questions or</td>
<td>Center administers surveys to SEA staff members before and after project to measure knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors on a particular topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.2.2</td>
<td>Informal Discussions</td>
<td>Centers ask SEA staff about capacity changes and capacity outcomes they are experiencing.</td>
<td>“In our conversations with states, they tell us that the conference was very helpful.”</td>
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**Theory of Action**

- **5. Follows Theory of Action**
  - Center staff talk specifically about either using or not using a theory of action to guide their work; they give examples of assumptions or principles that guide their work. They may reference a diagram or logic model. This code should reflect intentional use of a theory or model.

- **6. Needs Assessment**
  - How the Center assesses SEA needs for Center TA, including assessment of existing SEA capacity to meet its goals.
  - Center may reference data in a particular report such as a state inspector general’s report or a report on national or state standardized test scores.

- **6.1. Data Review**
  - Center reviews existing data (such as student performance data) or studies that identify states’ educational needs.

- **6.2. Meetings with SEA**
  - In-person or telephone meetings with SEA leaders and/or staff.
  - “Facilitated meetings twice per year plus weekly or monthly phone calls with project staff.”

- **6.3. Surveys**
  - Surveys of constituents to assess needs.

- **6.4. Discussions with State Chiefs**
  - In-person or telephone meetings with chief state school officers (commissioners, superintendents, depending on the state).

- **6.5. Relationship Building**
  - Center staff develop relationships with chiefs and SEA staff (and others) and, through ongoing relationships, learn about and understand needs.

- **6.6. Content Expertise**
  - Content Center staff work in the priority area (e.g., early learning), understand national priorities and policies, and know the issues/needs that states are facing.
  - “It is our business to know the emerging needs in the field.” Some respondents referenced their knowledge of the most recent national studies.
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<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Tracking Requests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Centers have a system for monitoring and recording the requests that they receive from SEAs.</td>
<td>Several Centers have online tracking systems accessible to all staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>Work with Partner Organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Centers may draw on specialized organizations with intimate knowledge of state or content-specific needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.8.1</td>
<td>Work with Other Comprehensive Centers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A Center works with other Centers to assess the needs of a SEA. Usually a Regional-Content collaboration.</td>
<td>Content Centers rely on Regional Centers to assess regional and state needs; Regional Centers rely on Content Centers to assess content-specific needs and share expertise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>SEA Initiated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SEA initiates contact with the Center, identifying a particular need for help. (Distinguish from short-turnaround requests.)</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>SEA Planning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center works with the SEA or leader to develop and clarify the state’s policy goals, initiatives, and plans. (Distinguish from code 8, Choosing Center Strategies, which addresses how the Center decides on its own role.)</td>
<td>See level 2 codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How the Center helps the SEAs or constituents identify their own goals (as distinct from Center objectives or strategies).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Process Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How the Center helps SEAs or constituents identify or develop feasible steps or processes to reach goals.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Choosing Center Strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How the Center plans and decides which Center TA strategy is likely to be most successful, matches strategies to needs/goals/objectives. (In contrast to code 7, SEA Planning, this code focuses on the Center’s role.)</td>
<td>See level 2 codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Politics, cultural factors, turnover in state; SEA resources.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Past Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Using lessons learned from successful Center strategies.</td>
<td>Center staff know what’s working in other states. “Don’t want to reinvent the wheel.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center budget, staff, time.</td>
<td>“Fits within budget, workload.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interactive Planning Process</td>
<td></td>
<td>Back-and-forth between Center and SEA informs TA plans.</td>
<td>“A continuous dialogue assessing Center strengths and state needs and where’s the best fit.” Some Centers use the term “transactional” to describe the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Formal Decision Rules</td>
<td></td>
<td>Written or commonly understood rules for determining a TA strategy.</td>
<td>Decision tree, decision-making index, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Build on Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td>Center understands the SEA or constituent well enough to match strategies to needs/capabilities/goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>TA Strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The broad TA strategies that Centers identify as “high leverage” or key to producing capacity-building results.</td>
<td>See level 2 and 3 codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Broad Approaches</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The broad TA approaches that Centers identify as “high leverage” or key to producing capacity-building results.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9.1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Modeling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Center staff model a process so SEA staff can learn the process and implement it on their own.</td>
<td>Center organizes professional development presentations/work sessions for the SEA, using a format that the agency can then replicate for use with LEAs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td></td>
<td>Building on SEAs’ requests for short-term, pragmatic help to identify fundamental capacity needs and develop strategic capacity-building projects that will have a lasting effect on SEAs’ capacity and ability to solve related problems independently. This is the practical counterpart to code 1.2, Fostering Ownership.</td>
<td>“How can we take [SEAs’] requests for bits of information/resources or for ‘housekeeping help’ and transition from these to a true capacity-building project? What does this request tell us about fundamental capacity building needs that we can address?” “Building capacity bit by bit.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td></td>
<td>Center works with other Centers or other TA providers. Center identifies collaboration as a key strategy or approach; can apply to any networking or support across Centers and does not have to be limited to structured partnerships. Does not apply to cross-state collaborations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.1.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-State Knowledge Building</td>
<td></td>
<td>May include a variety of Center-run regional activities and sharing or dissemination of promising practices. Includes Center activities such as training, web scans, resource libraries that synthesize information from various states. States may or may not be actively meeting or working together.</td>
<td>Cross-state peer networks, training, and professional development collaboratives. SEA staff may present their promising practices to staff from other states, or the Center may scan the practices of various states and share the results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing Continuity</td>
<td></td>
<td>When turnover in SEA leaders and staff occurs, Centers provide continuity through their continuing presence in and knowledge of the state, their relationships with staff who remain, their documentation of completed work, and their ability to resume projects with new leaders or staff.</td>
<td>One respondent noted that a new chief state school officer or SEA manager might contact the Center because of the Center’s long history of working with the SEA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Thought Partner</td>
<td></td>
<td>Center is available to the SEA for ad hoc advice and consultation.</td>
<td>“I think we’ve helped [SEA staff] bring together a space where we can exchange ideas and brainstorm about what is best, and bring in resources from the outside ... helping to give them another perspective.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility/Responsiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Modifies plans in response to changing needs, new leadership directions, or other changes in circumstances. Nimbleness.</td>
<td>In order to continue an early learning project when the state leadership shifted its focus to school turnaround, the Center reframed the project to focus on early learning in turnaround schools and districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>Context</td>
<td></td>
<td>Political, fiscal, policy environment at the state or federal level that influences the Center’s TA.</td>
<td>See level 2 and 3 codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Disruption and Turnover</td>
<td></td>
<td>See level 3 codes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership Turnover</td>
<td></td>
<td>Turnover of chief state school officers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>SEA Staff Turnover</td>
<td></td>
<td>SEA staff turnover or cutbacks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>New Legislation, Policies, or Funding</td>
<td></td>
<td>State waivers under No Child Left Behind, state adoption of new curriculum, Every Student Succeeds Act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Top Level Code</td>
<td>Level 2 Code</td>
<td>Level 3 Code</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Example/Quotation from Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>Changing Expectations of SEA Role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Changing expectations of SEAs affects Center’s work. Recent federal legislation (No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top) expects SEAs to take more responsibility for implementing educational reforms, including working more directly with districts and schools. SEAs are increasingly asked to take on more responsibilities with tighter budgets and fewer staff.</td>
<td>Several Center staff mentioned that SEAs are evolving from compliance focus to focus on TA and support for LEAs. Some respondents mentioned SEA budget cuts and staffing reductions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>SEA Relationship with Districts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Variations in the relationship between SEAs and LEAs include the degree of centralized vs. local authority and the quality of communication between SEA and districts.</td>
<td>Pennsylvania is sometimes characterized as “local control” state with considerable district autonomy and with a strong role for “intermediate units”—county offices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Culture or Politics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aspects of regional, local, or political culture that influence the Centers’ work. If geography is identified as a distinct factor (ruralness, isolation, etc.), code as Context, Other.</td>
<td>Differences in receptiveness to federal legislation or initiatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Changes in Theory of Action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Changes or consistency in the Center theory of action in regard to needs, context, or strategies.</td>
<td>See level 2 codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>In Response to Changing State Needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strategy changes in response to changing state needs.</td>
<td>Respondents cited an evolution “downward” toward implementing standards and assessments in districts, schools, and classrooms, so that more local training is needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>Strengthening of Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Centers increasingly recognize the importance of relationships.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Refinement, Rethinking of TA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Centers make or discuss changes in their TA strategies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>May be cross-coded with any code or subcode.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>May be cross-coded with any code or subcode. Refers to challenges experienced by the Centers, not by SEAs, unless these challenges also apply to Centers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Reference to Document</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Center staff reference a document in the interview.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Top Level Code</td>
<td>Level 2 Code</td>
<td>Level 3 Code</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Example/Quotation from Data</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>Theory of Action Document</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>Capacity-Building Document</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>