

National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers

Final Report

Executive Summary

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Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

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

Contents

	Page
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest.....	v
Executive Summary.....	ix
The Comprehensive Centers Program.....	xi
Research Questions and Methods.....	xii
Center Operations.....	xiv
Extent to Which Centers Addressed State Priorities.....	xvii
Ratings of Center Assistance.....	xx

Executive Summary

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

With the redesign of the Center program, the primary focus of technical assistance was directed to states. In order to build states’ capacity for carrying out NCLB responsibilities, which include assistance to struggling school districts and schools as well as other areas of NCLB program administration, the Center program was designed to supply ongoing technical assistance in using research knowledge and promising practices. There are two types of Centers:

- Sixteen Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs) are responsible for providing ongoing technical assistance to states assigned to their region, working with a range of one to eight states per Center
- Five Content Centers (CCs) are expected to supply knowledge to RCCs and work with RCCs to assist states in the CC’s specialty area: Assessment and Accountability, Instruction, Teacher Quality, Innovation and Improvement, or High Schools

Given this program design, the evaluation provides a description of Center operations. It also reports on assistance delivery and contributions to state capacity as judged by managers in state education agencies (SEAs), on quality as judged by panels of subject-matter experts, and on relevance and usefulness as judged by practitioners who participated in Center activities or received Center products. The evaluation data, collected annually, pertain to the Center program years 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09, covering three of the five program years starting with the second year of program funding.¹

- ***The operations of the RCCs and CCs were consistent with the Center program design.*** RCCs and CCs assessed client needs annually to determine their technical assistance plans, with informal communications as the mode most commonly reported for 2008-09. The most common activity found in sampled RCC projects²

¹ Notice Inviting Applications for New Awards for Fiscal Year 2005. *Federal Register*. (2005, June 3). 70(106), 32583-94. The awards were subsequently extended.

² For the purposes of this evaluation, the team identified “projects” as a common level of aggregation of Center activities that would constitute units large enough for review and rating, but focused enough for coherence. A

was “ongoing consultation and follow up” (82, 93, and 91 percent of the sampled RCC projects in years 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09, respectively), consistent with the charge to provide frontline assistance on an ongoing basis to states. In CC projects the most common activity was “research collections and synthesis” (more than 70 percent of sampled projects in each year), consistent with the CCs’ prescribed focus on synthesizing, translating, and delivering knowledge to RCCs and states. Across the three years studied, both RCCs and CCs were more involved in each other’s projects. Among sampled RCC projects, the percentage that included direct assistance from CC staff was 18 percent in 2006-07, 22 percent in 2007-08 and 30 percent in 2008-09. The percentage of CC projects that included RCC direct assistance was 11 percent in 2006-07, 12 percent in 2007-08, and 38 percent in 2008-09. In addition, by 2008-09 all 16 RCCs reported receiving knowledge resources from CCs and all 5 CCs reported providing knowledge resources to RCCs.

- ***Centers addressed the most frequently cited state priority of “statewide systems of support,” and an increasing number of state managers reported each year that Center assistance served their purposes.*** “Systems of support” consists of an infrastructure for the delivery of onsite assistance, and strategies and materials designed to help struggling schools and districts improve student performance. The most widespread NCLB-related priority for state managers was “statewide systems of support or school support teams,” which was identified as a major or moderate priority for technical assistance by more than 90 percent of managers, weighted, in each year. Of this group of state managers, more than 90 percent reported each year that the Centers delivered assistance related to this responsibility. “Systems of support” was not only the most widely reported state priority but also the topic addressed in more Center projects in each year than any other topic, according to the inventories compiled by the Centers (19 percent of all projects in 2006-07, 25 percent in 2007-08, and 21 percent in 2008-09, compared with 10 percent or fewer projects addressing any other topic). With each state weighted equally in the analysis, the proportion of state agency managers reporting that assistance from the Centers had “served the state’s purposes completely” rose from about one-third (36 percent) in 2006-07 to more than half (56 percent) in 2008-09.
- ***Center assistance was reported by state managers as having expanded state capacity in “statewide systems of support,” which has been a predominant focus of Center assistance.*** Among state managers who reported statewide systems of support or school support teams as a state priority for technical assistance in 2008-09, 82 percent credited Center assistance with a “great” or “moderate” expansion of state capacity in this area. In other areas of state responsibility identified by state managers to be a priority for technical assistance, the percentage reporting a great or moderate expansion of state capacity in 2008-09 ranged from 77 percent (for research-based curriculum, instruction, or

“project” was defined as *a group of closely related activities and/or deliverables designed to achieve a specific outcome for a specific audience.*

professional development in academic subjects) to 39 percent (for NCLB's provisions on supplemental educational services and choice).

- ***On average across each of the three years, expert panels rated sampled project materials between “moderate” and “high” for quality, and project participants rated the sampled projects “high” for relevance and usefulness.*** Program-wide average ratings, on a 5-point scale with 5 at the high end, were 3.34 in 2006-07, 3.51 in 2007-08, and 3.57 in 2008-09 for technical quality; 3.94, 4.08, and 4.15, respectively, for relevance; and 3.69, 3.95, 3.96, respectively, for usefulness.³ In addition, the average quality rating was consistently higher among CC projects than RCC projects by more than one-half of a standard deviation while RCC ratings went up each year.⁴ The average ratings of relevance were higher for RCC than CC projects in 2006-07 and 2007-08 although CC ratings went up each year; there were no consistent differences in the usefulness ratings between RCCs and CCs.

The Comprehensive Centers Program

In its authorization under the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002, the Center program was given an overall charge of supporting state and local NCLB implementation. The U.S. Department of Education (ED), using discretion provided in the legislation, established two major program features that differed from the design of Comprehensive Center programs under prior legislation:⁵

- First, the primary focus would be on assisting states to carry out NCLB responsibilities and helping build state capacity to deliver assistance to schools and districts; ED specified that Centers could only work directly with districts or schools under special circumstances.
- Second, awards would be made to 21 Centers to establish two-tiers of technical assistance with 16 RCCs and 5 CCs. They were instructed to work as follows:
 - Each RCC was charged with providing ongoing assistance directly to states in its region (“frontline assistance”), serving the needs of either one

³ This averaging procedure across Centers and across projects was designed so that each Center contributed equally to the overall mean for the program (or for its type of Center, where RCC means were compared with CC means), and each project sampled from a Center contributed equally to the Center mean.

⁴ All project-level differences described in this report (e.g., more, higher) reflect a difference of one-half of one pooled standard deviation between groups of projects. Using a metric derived from Cohen (1988), the evaluation team estimated Cohen's d (an estimate of the effect size defined as the difference in means divided by the pooled standard deviation) and adopted the logic of Cohen for what would be considered a moderate difference. For this study, inferential tests of statistical significance were not conducted to examine project-level differences in these non-probability samples. All participant-level differences described in this report reflect statistical test of significance with a criterion value of $p < .05$.

⁵ Notice Inviting Applications for New Awards for Fiscal Year 2005. *Federal Register*. (2005, June 3). 70(106), 32583-94.

large state or a group of two to eight states and other jurisdictions.⁶ The RCCs were also expected to deliver technical assistance to their assigned states, addressing the needs and building capacity of the states to assist their districts and schools.

- Meanwhile, each CC would work on a nationwide basis to provide in-depth knowledge of the content and research within a particular substantive area: Assessment and Accountability, Instruction, Teacher Quality, Innovation and Improvement, or High Schools. CCs would facilitate access to, and use of, existing research and practices.
- The absolute priorities for the two types of Centers indicated that they should work together: Regional Centers should draw information and resources from Content Centers as well as other sources; and Content Centers should both supply knowledge to Regional Centers and “work closely with Regional Centers to provide technical assistance to States.”

Research Questions and Methods

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

1. How did the Regional Comprehensive Centers and Content Centers operate as part of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Center program?
 - How did Centers develop, refine, and carry out their plans for technical assistance? How did they define their clients’ educational needs and priorities?
 - What were the objectives of the technical assistance the Centers offered? What kinds of products and services were provided by the Centers?
 - How did the Regional Comprehensive Centers and Content Centers coordinate their work?
2. What was the performance of the Comprehensive Centers in addressing state needs and priorities? How did their performance change over the period of time studied?
 - How did the Centers’ state clients define their needs and priorities?
 - To what extent, as reported by states, did Center assistance expand state capacity to address underlying needs and priorities and meet the goals of NCLB?

⁶ The nonstate jurisdictions that the Centers were to serve were the following: the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Yap), Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. Throughout this report, the term “state” will be defined to include the 50 states as well as these other jurisdictions.

- To what extent did states rely on other sources of technical assistance besides the Centers? What were other sources of technical assistance that states used? How did the usefulness of Center assistance compare with the usefulness of assistance from other sources?
3. To what extent was the assistance provided by the Centers of high quality, high relevance, and high usefulness?
- Did the quality, relevance, or usefulness of Center assistance change over the period of time studied?
 - What was the variation in the quality, relevance, and usefulness of Center assistance across types of projects and participants?

The evaluation gathered information annually on the Center program for the years 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09 from six data sources in order to address the research questions above. Data sources included:

- **Management plans.** The evaluation reviewed these plans as a data source for each Center’s intended focus at the beginning of the year, drawing from the plans a list of topics as foci of Center objectives.
- **Project inventory forms and cover sheets.** Each Center completed an inventory of its work that grouped related activities and deliverables into “projects,” with the project defined as a group of closely related activities and/or deliverables designed to achieve a specific outcome for a specific audience. Projects were in turn classified by the Centers into major, moderate, and minor projects on the basis of the relative level of effort they reflected. The Centers also classified the projects, according to the topics addressed, into 22 topical categories.⁷ At each stage, the evaluation team provided written guidance and training for inventory development, reviewed the Centers’ drafts, and clarified definitions as needed. For projects sampled for the evaluation, the Centers prepared “cover sheets” providing brief descriptions and contexts for the activities and resources included in the project. The evaluation team used the cover sheets as a data source for coding project activities and resources.

⁷ The 22 topics were: components of effective systems of support for states, districts, and schools; data use or data-driven decision making; formative assessment; reading; adolescent literacy; mathematics; dropout prevention; high school redesign or reform; transition to high school; special education curriculum, instruction and professional development; special education assessment; English language learners; “highly qualified teacher” provisions of NCLB; teacher preparation and induction; teacher professional development; supplemental educational services; Response to Intervention; migrant education; Indian or Native American education; data management and compliance; assessment design; and parent involvement. In addition, projects that addressed none of these 22 topics were categorized as “other.”

- **Center staff interviews.** Using structured response categories, Center staff were asked about how they planned their programs of work; how their plans evolved during the program year; and what they offered to clients with respect to the topics addressed, the delivery modes used, and their sources for content expertise.
- **Survey of senior state managers.** SEA managers were surveyed about their state's technical-assistance needs and what was provided by the Centers (including their RCC and any CCs with whom their state had worked).
- **Expert panel review.** The same sample of major and moderate projects was reviewed for quality by a panel of experts. Content experts were recruited and trained to use standard criteria to rate the *technical quality* of the sampled Center projects on the basis of a review of all project materials.
- **Survey of project participants.** A representative sample of clients who had participated directly in the evaluation's purposive sample of major and moderate Center projects furnished descriptive information, through surveys, on the activities and resources that the project had delivered to them. These clients included individuals working at the state level who had participated in RCC or CC projects, and RCC employees who were among the clients of CC projects. They rated the *relevance* and *usefulness* of the sampled projects.

Center Operations

In designing the Center program, ED established structures and expectations for the functioning of the Centers. Key features of the design, emphasized in ED's Notice Inviting Applications, were a requirement for needs assessment in consultation with clients, a focus on technical assistance with state responsibilities in school and district improvement, and the specialized roles of RCCs and CCs. The Centers' work from 2006-07 to 2008-09 conformed to the program's requirements in each of these respects. The barriers to technical assistance that Centers most often reported were staff turnover in state agencies and limitations on the CCs' scope of work.

A key expectation of the Centers was to organize their plans around the priorities and needs of client organizations. At the start of each program year, the Centers were required to deliver a management plan to ED outlining the program of technical assistance they planned to provide. Across years, Centers used a range of methods to assess needs and plan technical assistance with their clients. Among RCCs, there was a shift away from conducting surveys for needs assessment while maintaining frequent interaction with states as a means of learning about needs: all 16 RCCs reported assessing needs for 2008-09 through ongoing communication with state staff (an increase from 15 RCCs in 2006-07); 15 had a designated liaison to the SEA on staff in 2008-09 (up from 13 in 2006-07); 8 of the 16 conducted surveys (down from 11). Across years, all 5 of the CCs reported forming their work plans with RCC input acquired through ongoing communication; in 2008-09 all 5 CCs reported surveying RCCs (up from 4 of the 5 in

2006-07). In addition, all 5 CCs reported learning about state needs for 2008-09 through ongoing interaction with states as well as through communication with RCCs.

Centers were expected to show responsiveness to needs and requests for technical assistance but might not be in a position to respond to every client request. In each year, more than half of the Centers reported that they had turned down a client request for assistance, a situation that was handled differently by RCCs and by CCs. The number of Centers that reported having turned down one or more requests was 12 of the 21 in 2006-07, 13 of 21 in 2007-08, and 14 of 21 in 2008-09. Among Centers that declined any client request for assistance in 2008-09, RCCs most often reported substituting a different type of assistance (7 of the 10 RCCs that turned down work used this strategy), but none of the CCs reported doing so. The reason most commonly reported by RCCs was that a request fell outside their legitimate scope of work (5 RCCs vs. 1 CC). CCs reported more concerns with the requests fitting the Center's priorities (2 of the 4 CCs that turned down work vs. 2 of the 10 RCCs) or the Center's capacity (2 of the 4 CCs that turned down work vs. 2 of the 10 RCCs).

The Centers placed a priority on assistance with the state role in supporting improvement in struggling schools and districts. In every year of the evaluation, on the inventories completed by Centers that grouped their technical assistance activities into projects and categorized projects into 23 topics, the most common topic for all Center projects was "components of effective systems of support—state, district, school," a topic that included but was not limited to statewide systems of support and school support teams. Among all projects on the Center's inventories, 19 percent in 2006-07, 25 percent in 2007-08, and 21 percent in 2008-09 addressed the topic of systems of support, which in each year was more than twice as many as any other topic.

Although the two types of Centers each retained a focus on activities distinctly associated with the original program design, their ways of working became more similar over the years. The guidance given by ED through the Center grant competition and afterwards laid out a particular structure for the Centers' work: RCCs would specialize in interactions with state clients while CCs would specialize in activities that required a content focus. The most common activity found in sampled RCC projects was "ongoing consultation and follow up" (82 percent in 2006-07; 93 percent in 2007-08; 91 percent in 2008-09); in CC projects, it was "research collections and synthesis" (74 percent in 2006-07, 85 percent in 2007-08, and 77 percent in 2008-09), while fewer RCC projects included this activity (53 or 54 percent in each year) (exhibit ES.1). In 2008-09, in a departure from past CC practice, a majority of sampled CC projects (62 percent) included ongoing consultation and follow-up.

Exhibit ES.1. Sampled RCC and CC projects by types of activities and resources, by year

Activities and resources	Percent of sampled RCC projects			Percent of sampled CC projects		
	2006-07 (n=96)	2007-08 (n=96)	2008-09 (n=93)	2006-07 (n=27)	2007-08 (n=26)	2008-09 (n=26)
Ongoing consultation and follow-up	82%	93%	91%	22%	15%	62%
Research collections and syntheses	54	53	53	74	85	77
Engagement of participants in project planning	45	63	59	30	31	27
Training events	43	55	59	37	50	50
Task force meetings and work	50	58	56	7	8	8
Conferences	27	35	40	63	42	38
Support development of a formal plan to implement a program or policy	19	32	31	7	15	23

EXHIBIT READS: For the 2006-07 program year, 82 percent of sampled Center projects included ongoing consultation and follow-up.

SOURCE: Project cover sheets prepared by Centers for the expert review of project materials. In addition to serving as resource material for the expert reviewers, these cover sheets were coded by the evaluation team.

The delivery of technical assistance depended on the Centers working effectively with their clients. Both RCCs and CCs described the barriers they perceived as having impeded their assistance to states. Turnover in staff within state offices or intermediary units was reported by both types of Centers as a barrier to achieving their objectives in assisting states (10 of 16 RCCs and 3 of 5 CCs). Turnover at the leadership level was a reported barrier for 8 RCCs and 3 CCs. Three of the 5 CCs reported “a state’s most important priorities for assistance fell outside the Center’s scope of work,” as a barrier; they indicated that some states wanted help with topics that went beyond their own assigned substantive focus.

Under the two-tiered Center program design, RCCs and CCs were expected to work together to serve state clients. Among RCC projects, 48 percent had a CC contribution (of materials, in-person assistance, or advice) in 2006-07, 32 percent in 2007-08, and 47 percent in 2008-09. Among CC projects, the percent incorporating some RCC contribution was 37 percent, 38 percent, and 42 percent across the years. The extent to which RCCs and CCs drew on the other as substantive partners in delivering assistance increased in 2008-09: the percent of sampled RCC projects in which CCs delivered technical assistance went up from 18 percent in 2006-07 to 30 percent in 2008-09, and the percent of sampled CC projects in which the RCCs delivered technical assistance rose from 11 percent in 2006-07 to 38 percent in 2008-09.

With 16 RCCs and 5 CCs all charged with working with the other type of Center, coordination varied across the different pairs of an RCC and a CC. For example, while 15 of the 16 RCCs reported teaming up with at least one CC to provide technical assistance to states, 14 of them reported teaming up with one of the CCs but 7 of them reported doing so with another of the CCs. In addition, CCs were expected to provide assistance to RCCs, and the barrier most often reported by both types of centers to have impeded CCs' achievement of their technical assistance objectives with RCCs was that "RCCs' most important priorities for assistance fell outside the CC's scope of work" (reported as a barrier by 7 of 16 RCCs and 4 of 5 CCs).

Extent to Which Centers Addressed State Priorities

The perceptions of senior managers in state education agencies, who are involved in identifying state needs and priorities for technical assistance, provide a relevant perspective on the outputs of the program. Because the Centers had a mandated focus on the states, the extent to which state managers perceived that Center technical assistance served state purposes is one way of gauging the program's attainment of its objectives. Capacity building for states is also a focus of this evaluation, because it was prominent as a goal for the Comprehensive Centers program. The first priority for all Centers, articulated by ED in the Notice Inviting Applications, included "helping states build the capacity to help school districts and schools implement NCLB provisions and programs."⁸

An increasing percentage of state managers (weighted) over three years reported that the Centers' technical assistance "served the state's purposes completely" (exhibit ES.2). Thirty-six percent of the state managers, weighted, chose this response for 2006-07, 47 percent for 2007-08, and 56 percent for 2008-09.

Among the managers who said their state's purposes were not completely served, a larger proportion in each year reported that they wanted more interaction with the Centers. The percent of weighted state managers saying, "Center staff are not able to spend as much time working with the state as we would like" was 17 percent of those who did not say the state's purposes were "completely" served in 2006-07. The corresponding figures for subsequent years were 27 percent in 2007-08 and 43 percent in 2008-09.⁹ (These respondents were 9 percent, 10 percent, and 16 percent, respectively, of all state managers, weighted.)

⁸ Notice Inviting Applications for New Awards for Fiscal Year 2005. *Federal Register*. (2005, June 3). 70(106), 32585.

⁹ The percentage of state managers reporting that their state's purposes were not completely served varied by year. Thus, for the follow-up question ("reasons the technical assistance has been less helpful than it might be"), comparison of percentages from year to year may include variation in responses over time as well as changes in respondents addressing the question.

Exhibit ES.2. Extent to which technical assistance from the Centers served state purposes, as judged by state managers, by year

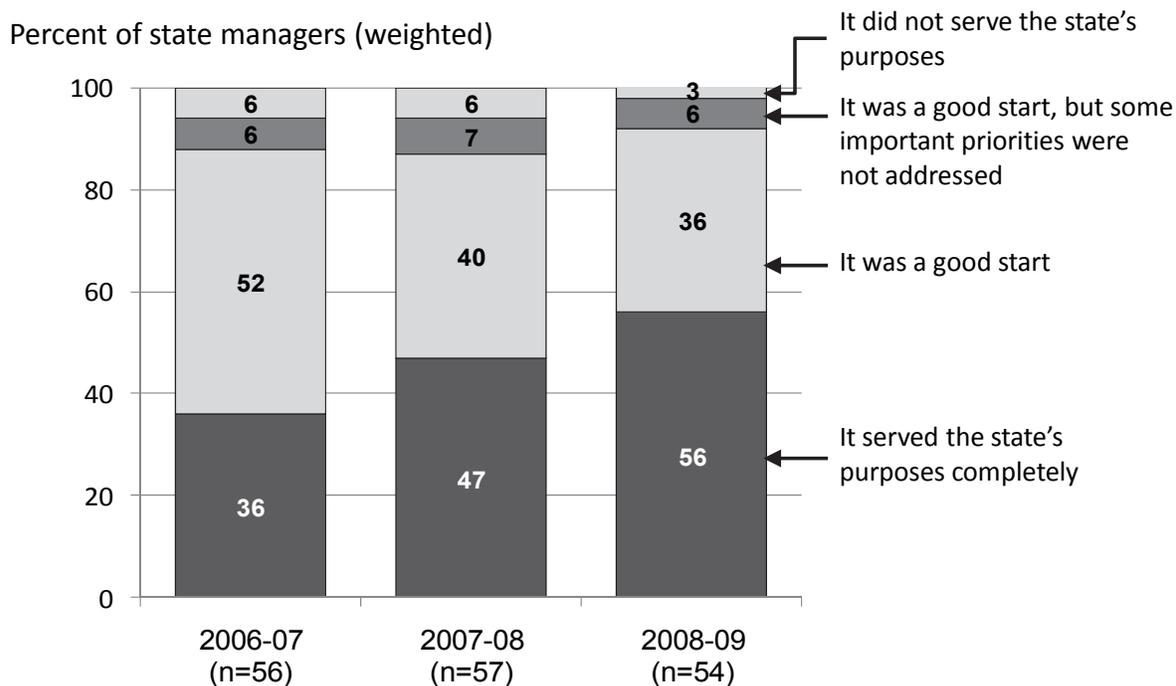


EXHIBIT READS: In 2006-07, 36 percent of state managers, weighted, reported that Center technical assistance served the state's purposes completely.

SOURCE: Surveys of State Managers. Responses weighted so that each state was equally represented in instances where more than one manager from a state responded.

State managers in a high proportion of states reported that Centers delivered assistance on “statewide systems of support or school support teams,” which was the most widespread priority among areas of technical assistance for state managers. In 2007-08 and 2008-09, more than 90 percent of state managers, weighted, identified this area of state responsibility as a major or moderate priority for technical assistance (95 percent in 2007-08, 94 percent in 2008-09). Of this group of state managers that reported this priority¹⁰, more than 90 percent reported that the Centers delivered assistance related to this responsibility (94 percent in 2007-08, 91 percent in 2008-09).

Looking at state reported capacity building across areas of major or moderate state priority for technical assistance, the highest percentage of state managers reported Center assistance to have expanded their agency's capacity to a “great” or “moderate” extent in statewide systems of support or school support teams¹¹ (72 percent in of those who rated the area

¹⁰ The subgroup of state managers who identified a particular area of state responsibility to be a major or moderate priority for technical assistance varied by year. Thus, for the follow-up question about the priority areas in which states received technical assistance from Centers, a comparison of the percentages from year to year may include variation in responses over time as well as changes in respondents addressing the question.

¹¹ Percentages are based on the state manager respondents who rated each area as major or moderate technical assistance priority, which varied by year. Thus, for the question about state capacity building, comparison of

as a state priority in 2007-08 and 82 percent in 2008-09) (exhibit ES.3). The next-highest in both 2007-08 and 2008-09 was “development or dissemination of research-based curriculum, instruction, or professional development programs in academic subject(s)” (64 percent in 2007-08 and 77 percent in 2008-09). In both years, the lowest was “administration of supplemental educational services and choice provisions” (44 percent and 39 percent, respectively, of those who rated the area as a priority), which was an area rated as a priority by the fewest state managers (49 percent and 48 percent, respectively).

Exhibit ES.3. Extent to which Center assistance expanded state capacity in priority areas, as judged by state managers who rated the area as a major or moderate technical assistance priority, by year

Area of state responsibility under NCLB	Percent reporting capacity expanded by a great or moderate extent	
	2007-08	2008-09
Statewide systems of support or school support teams (n=56, n=50)	72%	82%
Policies and practices for English language learners (n=43, n=40)	59	73
State assessment and accountability systems (n=42, n=39)	57	59
Development or dissemination of research-based curriculum, instruction, or professional development programs in academic subject(s) (n=41, n=39)	64	77
Assistance with educators' use of assessment data (n=37, n=36)	62	61
Monitoring compliance with NCLB requirements (n=35, n=30)	57	57
Administering supplemental educational services (SES) and choice provisions (n=25, n=26)	44	39
Communication with parents or the public (n=25, n=26)	48	50

NOTE: Percentages are based on the state manager respondents who rated each area a major or moderate technical assistance priority, which varied by year. State managers who chose the response, “Does not apply, or not able to judge,” were included in the denominator of the percent calculation.

EXHIBIT READS: For the 2007-08 program year, among the 56 state managers (weighted) who reported that technical assistance in statewide systems of support or school support teams was a major or moderate priority for their state, 72 percent reported that technical assistance received from the Centers expanded the state’s capacity in this area to a great or moderate extent.

SOURCE: Surveys of State Managers. Responses weighted so that each state was equally represented in instances where more than one manager from a state responded.

percentages from year to year may include variation in responses over time as well as changes in respondents addressing the question.

State managers reported that the Centers were one of multiple sources that they used for technical assistance, but over time they turned to the Centers for more purposes. The purposes for which states used the Centers more than other sources in each of the three study years were “to plan the initial steps in solving a problem” (reported as a purpose for Center technical assistance by at least 60 percent of state managers in each year) and “to develop the skills of SEA or intermediate education agency staff” (at least 55 percent of state managers in each year). In 2007-08 and 2008-09, Centers were reported by state managers to be the top source for two additional purposes: to help states complete tasks where they lacked resources (58 percent and 64 percent, respectively) or expertise (49 percent and 53 percent, respectively).

Ratings of Center Assistance

To assess the technical assistance provided by the Center program, quality, relevance, and usefulness of a sample of Center projects were rated. All sampled projects were identified by the Centers as “major” or “moderate” in their level of effort, relative to other projects in the same Center. The projects were rated for technical quality by panels of experts with strong knowledge of the content or substantive focus of the specific projects they reviewed. Projects’ relevance and usefulness were rated by a sample of participants—state staff, intermediate agency staff, local educators working on behalf of the state, and RCC staff—who were the intended beneficiaries of the project and who had received at least some of the technical assistance the project provided. Quality was judged on three dimensions; relevance was assessed with eight survey items and usefulness with 11 survey items (exhibit ES.4). Each overall measure (relevance, usefulness, or quality) was calculated as the mean of ratings assigned to each item. The item-level ratings themselves were based on 5-point rating scales.¹²

Based on the ratings, Center technical assistance was rated higher on each measure in each successive year, with program-wide average ratings in 2008-09 falling in a range between “moderate” and “high” for quality, and around “high” for relevance and usefulness (exhibit ES.4). On a scale of 1 to 5 with a 3 representing “moderate” and a 4 representing “high,” the program-wide average ratings for the sampled projects were 3.34 in 2006-07, 3.51 in 2007-08, and 3.57 in 2008-09 for technical quality, scored by panels of content experts. Program-wide average ratings for relevance, scored by participants, were 3.94 in 2006-07, 4.08 in 2007-08, and 4.15 in 2008-09. Average usefulness ratings for the program were 3.69 in 2006-07, 3.95 in 2007-08, and 3.96 in 2008-09, also scored by participants.¹³

¹² Efforts were made to develop parallel wording and rubrics that would result in similar gradations between rating levels (e.g., very high vs. high vs. moderate) across the three measures. However, given the different content of each set of items within the three measures and the different contexts for the ratings (experts who underwent training for the rating process and reviewed identical packages of materials vs. survey respondents who typically participated in different subsets of project activities), the ratings across the three measures are not directly comparable.

¹³ This averaging procedure across Centers and across projects was designed so that each Center contributed equally to the overall mean for the program (or for its type of Center, where RCC means were compared with CC means), and each project sampled from a Center contributed equally to the Center mean.

Exhibit ES.4. Quality, relevance, and usefulness items

From expert panel scoring	From project participant surveys	
Technical quality	Relevance	Usefulness
<p>Reviewers were directed to assign a score to each dimension and to include the basis for their ratings on the rating form, including the specific artifacts on which their score was based. The three dimensions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Demonstrated use of the appropriate documented knowledge base – to include an accurate portrayal of the current state of information with prominence to those with the most accurate/rigorous evidence b. Fidelity of application of the knowledge base to the products and services provided – materials are consistent with the best/accurate information available and the presentation adequately conveys the confidence of the information c. Clear and effective delivery – information is well organized and written and accessible to the intended audience for easy use 	<p>Based on <i>your</i> experience, to what degree was this set of activities and resources relevant to your work, in each of the following respects?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Addressed a need or problem that my organization faces b. Addressed an important priority of my organization c. Addressed a challenge that my organization faces related to the implementation of NCLB d. Provided information, advice, and/or resources that could be directly applied to my organization’s work e. Addressed our particular state context f. Addressed my organization’s specific challenges (e.g., policy environment, leadership capacity, budget pressures, local politics) g. Provided information, advice, and/or resources that could be used to guide decisions about policies, programs, or practices h. Highlighted the implications of research findings (or information about best practice) for policies, programs, or practices 	<p>Based on <i>your</i> experience, to what degree was this set of activities and resources useful to you, in each of the following respects?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Provided resources that were easy to understand and easy to use b. Employed an appropriate format (e.g., a work group, a conference, individual consultation, written products) c. Provided adequate opportunity to learn from colleagues in other states d. Included adequate follow-up to support the use of new information and resources e. Were timely f. Helped my organization solve a problem g. Helped my organization maintain or change a policy or practice h. Helped my organization take the next step in a longer-term improvement effort i. Provided my organization with information or resources that we will use again j. Helped my organization develop a shared expertise or knowledge-base k. Helped individuals in my organization to develop skills that they will use again

Exhibit ES.5. Mean ratings of technical quality, relevance, and usefulness, by center type and by year

	Technical quality			Relevance			Usefulness		
	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
All Centers (N=21)	3.34	3.51	3.57	3.94	4.08	4.15	3.69	3.95	3.96
All RCCs (N=16)	3.21	3.41	3.52	3.99	4.18	4.15	3.71	3.99	3.94
All CCs (N=5)	3.73	3.86	3.72	3.78	3.96	4.17	3.65	3.84	4.01
Difference of RCC and CC means	-0.52[†]	-0.45[†]	-0.20[†]	0.21[†]	0.22[†]	-0.02	0.06	0.15[†]	-0.07
<i>Pooled standard deviation (all Centers)</i>	0.41	0.41	0.37	0.34	0.22	0.24	0.34	0.23	0.27
<i>Ratio of difference in means to pooled standard deviation</i>	-1.28	-1.09	-0.55	0.62	1.00	-0.08	0.18	0.64	-0.26

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

EXHIBIT READS: In 2006-07 among the 21 Centers, the mean technical quality rating was 3.34.

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

Given that the RCC and CC roles and activity emphases differed, the evaluation looked at variation across Center types. The mean ratings for types of Centers, based on their sampled projects, showed the CCs with higher mean ratings than RCCs for the quality of their sampled projects in all three years although RCCs’ average quality ratings were higher in each successive year (exhibit ES.5). The RCCs had higher mean ratings than CCs for the relevance of their sampled projects in 2006-07 and 2007-08 although the average ratings of relevance for CCs went up each year. There were no consistent differences in mean ratings of usefulness across types of Centers.

The evaluation also looked at the relationships between the three measures: quality, relevance, and usefulness. It was reasoned that the content experts rating quality and the participants rating relevance and usefulness might be better able to judge different aspects of a Center project. On this rationale, content experts rated the projects for their technical quality, and participants rated the projects for relevance and usefulness. An examination of the associations among the three dimensions was conducted by calculating correlation coefficients.¹⁴ Such a statistic indicates the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two factors. A correlation coefficient can vary from positive 1.00 (indicating a perfect positive relationship),

¹⁴ For this analysis, the evaluation team used Spearman’s rank order correlation, as this non-parametric rating is the appropriate statistical function to describe correlations between two variables where the values of the variables are not normally distributed and are on a scale (such as ratings).

through zero (indicating the absence of a relationship), to negative 1.00 (indicating a perfect negative relationship). If the correlation is statistically significant ($p < .05$), we can have strong (95 percent) confidence that what we calculated is not due to chance.

In every year, ratings of quality were unrelated to ratings of relevance and usefulness, although relevance and usefulness ratings were highly correlated with each other within each of the three data collection years. The correlation coefficient for relevance and usefulness was +0.84 for 2006-07, +.79 for 2007-08, and +.83 for 2008-09. This indicates that the extent to which participants rated the projects as relevant was associated with how they deemed the project to be useful to their agency. These coefficients were all statistically significant at $p < .05$. On the other hand, the results indicated correlations ranging from -0.12 to +0.04 between quality and relevance, and from -0.09 to +0.07 between quality and usefulness. Because these coefficients are not statistically significant we cannot be sure that they are different from zero (no relationship). In other words, the extent to which a project faithfully reflected the knowledge base on a topic and provided appropriate caveats about the quality of its evidence was unrelated to the extent to which participants deemed that project relevant or useful to their agency.

Given the variation in ratings across Centers, additional analyses were conducted to explore whether there were consistent patterns between ratings and the particular features of the projects. Such information could provide suggestions for possible program improvement if there were consistent relationships. Quality ratings in 2008-09 were higher for RCC projects that included CC contributions of materials or in-person help than projects that the RCCs completed without CC contributions (3.72 vs. 3.39), although this was not the case in earlier years. In addition, quality ratings were higher in 2008-09 for projects that had been reviewed by CCs (3.83 vs. 3.46) and by outside experts (3.73 vs. 3.42) for quality assurance as opposed to projects that had not been reviewed in each of these ways (a project-level feature that was studied only in that year of the evaluation). In other analyses of project-level variation, projects that differed from each other in the activities they encompassed or the topics they addressed did not show differences in ratings of quality, relevance, or usefulness that were consistent across the three years.

On the other hand, more consistent differences were found in ratings of relevance and usefulness awarded to projects by different types of participants. Higher ratings were awarded by those participants who had been involved in determining the project goals or design than by participants not involved in this way, and by those who had spent more time in project activities (i.e., 6 or more days) as compared to participants who had spent five days or less (these differences were statistically significant, with $p < .01$ for both relevance and usefulness). For 2007-08 and 2008-09, also, each type of Center targeted its assistance more successfully to participants who worked in one type of agency, compared with participants who worked in other types of agencies: specifically, RCC projects were rated higher by participants from SEAs than participants from intermediate or local education agencies or schools; CC projects were rated higher by RCC staff than by SEA staff (statistically significant differences, with $p < .05$ for both relevance and usefulness).

