

NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE COMPREHENSIVE CENTERS PROGRAM

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

KEY FINDINGS

- **TA recipients reported that Centers contributed to their capacity, particularly in support of knowledge and skills.**
- **Centers shared similar approaches to the design and implementation of their TA.** Common principles of capacity-building included fostering ownership, long-term change, and organizational process changes. Common TA strategies to implement these principles included thought partnering, cross-state sharing, and modeling new practices.
- **Center practices perceived to be instrumental to building capacity included:**
 - **Engaging a broad array of stakeholders** to provide input on policy
 - **Providing products and tools for SEA staff** as they took greater ownership of new practices
 - **Identifying and imparting resilient practices** (such as better communication across agencies) that could be sustained throughout turnover in state leadership, SEA staffing, and policy priorities
 - **Being flexible in implementation of plans** in response to SEAs' feedback, evolving needs, and new priorities
- **Centers and their TA recipients pointed to a few areas for program improvement including:**
 - **Further clarify the Centers' role and expected outcomes at the local level.** The U.S. Department of Education has encouraged the Centers to increase their direct TA to local education agencies. It would be helpful to refine the definition of capacity building to specify program goals and intended outcomes at this level.
 - **Provide additional guidance for SEAs about how best to use the Centers.** Some TA recipients reported that they would benefit from receiving more detailed information about what services Centers do and do not provide, and how the scope of their TA is distinct from that of other federal TA providers.

