



Benchmarks

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HIGH QUALITY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

By Wendy Russell

Reforming schools comprehensively entails improving almost every aspect of the schools, from curriculum and instruction, professional development, and parental involvement, to assessment plans and school management. This process can be complex for schools to tackle unaided. Schools often need assistance and training to plan for, implement, sustain, and evaluate their comprehensive school reform (CSR) programs. Recognizing this need, Public Law 107-110, Title I, Part F, Section 1603 of the recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, requires that schools applying for funds from the federal Comprehensive School Reform program demonstrate, in an application to the state, a plan for procurement of ongoing, high-quality technical assistance from external entities with expertise in whole school reform. Such an emphasis on high-quality technical assistance (TA) acknowledges the challenges reforming schools face, and underscores the important role TA plays in the success of CSR. To help states meet this requirement, the Title I legislation (Section 1116) specifies appropriate providers and types of technical assistance necessary to reform schools; however, it does not specify how technical assistance should be provided. As a result, important questions remain, such as “What constitutes high-quality technical assistance?” and “How can states, districts, schools and technical assistance providers work effectively with each other?”

In this issue of Benchmarks, Wendy Russell, of the RMC Research Corporation, addresses these questions. Ms. Russell’s analysis is particularly valuable as she is currently engaged in the provision of

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TA through the Region III Comprehensive Center (R3CC), one of fifteen Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education to improve student achievement by informing and assisting the practices of educators working within public school systems and state education agencies. The Center is a project of The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education in partnership with RMC Research Corporation, Research for Better Schools, and ESCORT (at the State University of New York Research Foundation).

Designed to help those who need to become quickly informed to work within the new requirements under the Title I legislation, this article synthesizes the current literature on high-quality technical assistance—how technical assistance providers should meet their obligations to TA recipients, and what the TA providers’ and recipients’ specific roles and responsibilities are in the intricate process of negotiating and maintaining a collaborative partnership focused on school improvement.

HOW TITLE I LEGISLATION DEFINES TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

In order to understand how to improve or develop programs through TA, it is imperative to explore what is expected of TA providers in reform efforts. Title I legislation, section 1116, Academic Assessment and Local Education Agency (LEA) and School Improve-

The ability to foster real change through new practices requires that the recipient be provided with opportunities and assistance to work with the information, through inquiry and innovation, to put the new ideas and information into practice (Senge, 1990).

ment, specifies what constitutes TA and notes appropriate types of technical assistance providers. According to the legislation, TA includes assistance in three major areas:

1. analyzing data from the state assessments, and other examples of student work, to identify and address areas of need;
2. identifying and implementing professional development, instructional strategies, and methods of instruction to improve the school’s weak areas that caused the school to be identified for school improvement; and
3. reallocating the school budget to better use resources to improve student academic achievement.

Further, the law requires that any technical assistance provided must be based on scientific research.

A variety of organizations and agencies are authorized to deliver technical assistance: LEAs, state education agencies (SEAs), higher education institutions, private not-for-profit or for-profit organizations, educational service agencies, or other entities with experience in helping schools improve academic achievement.

In addition to defining TA and specifying institutions through which it can be delivered, the law prescribes state and district responsibilities with regard to identifying and supporting low-performing schools and schools not meeting adequate yearly progress milestones. After the initial step of identifying low-performing schools, the LEA is required, in consultation with the school, to develop or revise a school



plan and provide technical assistance as the school develops and implements the school plan.

Technical assistance is designed to help recipients—states, districts, and schools—improve or develop programs, organizations, and systems by linking state-of-the-art knowledge and practices to the fulfillment of needs or solution of specific problems. As an intervention, TA introduces external people, practices, or products into an existing organization (Suarez & Montgomery, 1989). Such tools and strategies, however, should not be introduced under the assumption that the recipient has the capacity to apply them. The ability to foster real change through new practices requires that the recipient be provided with opportunities and assistance to work with the information, through inquiry and innovation, to put the new ideas and information into practice (Senge, 1990).

Technical assistance providers, as supporters of school improvement, must be clear about the roles and services they can offer, and under what conditions. High quality TA services can take many forms, such as consultation, training, dissemination, network building, and materials development. Creating high perfor-

mance schools requires that TA providers and recipients work simultaneously to create and sustain effective partnerships. Each has a role to play, and each brings characteristics to the relationship that influence the partnership's effectiveness.

ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TA PROVIDERS AND RECIPIENTS

Defining roles and establishing partnerships are at the core of *how* to best support school improvement through technical assistance. Initially, supporting the development of capacity for systemic change requires that TA providers and TA recipients rethink the nature of their relationships (Mojkowski, 1995). To begin, the provider, in conversation with the recipient, must carefully consider the following questions:

1. Who, specifically, are the recipients?
2. What are the recipients' needs?
3. What contextual issues must be addressed before designing and implementing a successful intervention?
4. Do the philosophies of the TA provider and the recipient align?
5. How should technical assistance services be provided to this particular recipient?
6. What relationship does the TA provider have or want to develop with the recipient?

7. Can the TA provider and recipient meet the needs of the other? (i.e., What is the amount of TA required—scope, intensity and cost? How will the recipients support the assistance? What impact can realistically be achieved by providing TA to this recipient?)

8. How, and by whom, will the TA services be evaluated? (Trohanis, 1998).

In addition, the TA provider must pay close attention to the recipient's expectation of the provider and the reasons they have for seeking this assistance. States, districts, and schools have several reasons for seeking technical assistance and support for school reform. Bruner (1993) describes some of these as

- the expertise is not available in the school because the expertise does not exist or the expertise is not available within the required timeframe,
- the desire to know what others in



similar situations have done and to learn from their experience,

- the need for time- and resource-limited assistance, which can be provided by an expert,
- the need for an independent perspective from a legitimate party who is impartial to all participants, and
- the need for technical assistance that cuts across professional disciplines.

Such information is necessary to negotiate a successful partnership. Although answers to all of these questions may not be immediately available, a thorough discussion about each will help both the TA provider and the recipient. In these initial conversations, it will also be important to establish a clear understanding of both the technical assistance providers' and the recipients' specific roles and responsibilities.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDER AND RECIPIENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Provider Roles and Responsibilities

From the onset of the TA-recipient relationship, TA providers must present themselves as more than just experts. They must also demonstrate that they are primarily helpers to the people who perform the actual work. They must listen to and work with the recipient to arrange appropriate solutions to their most significant problems (Buckley & Mank, 1994). In order to accomplish this with finesse, TA providers play four critical roles:

1. Relationship builders who create an environment for recipients that supports reform program involvement. (TA providers are not monitors who report problems.)

2. Facilitators who help recipients identify problems, issues associated with past efforts, and the most appropriate means of addressing problems. (TA providers do more listening than presenting.)

3. Brokers who coordinate the assistance recipients need. (TA providers face an impossible task if they attempt to be experts who have the solution to every problem.)

4. Information specialists who seek, organize, and analyze new information and make it accessible to education professionals (Buckley & Mank, 1994).

2. Maintain an eye for the whole chessboard. (Helping organizations must help the recipients make systemic connections and to understand the district and its schools as a system.)

3. Watch, listen, and reflect. (External organizations should conduct multiple diagnoses and assessments with the help of their recipients.)

4. Be there and develop a deep understanding of barriers to change, the organizational processes and structures, and the policies and practices that constitute the “DNA” of the school. (Every district and school needs a “critical friend” who understands its culture and needs.)

5. Anticipate future needs while addressing current demands, and assist recipients in doing the same.

These five functions also help the recipient move toward an independent future fostering lasting change.

A responsible TA provider has to be many things to the recipient. Overall, TA providers must be big picture specialists and must help the recipient understand, reflect upon, and develop the capacity necessary to manage change. The terms under which they will enter into the relationship must be clear and understood by both parties.

Recipient Roles and Responsibilities

Equally important to the TA provider and recipient partnership is for the recipients to carefully examine

The above roles are tasks often associated with TA. Mojkowski (1995), however, outlines five additional roles that TA providers must offer in the high-stakes environment of school accountability. They are to

1. Provide direct services that build recipients’ capacities to serve themselves. (Pre-packaged solutions may not meet long-term needs and may make them dependent on external help.)

their roles and responsibilities. Because the reasons for requiring TA can be varied, recipients are responsible for being clear about why they seek outside assistance and the issues they would like addressed. Moreover, schools working to improve cannot address all improvement needs at once, and thus should seek focused and specific technical assistance. In considering why and what TA is needed, the recipients—states, districts, and schools—have the responsibility to align the goals and practices of individuals at every level of the organization (Kanter, 1999). In this regard, prior to embarking on a partnership for school change, leaders at every level have a critical role to play—ensuring that their organizations and staff are *change adept*.

Change adept organizations share three key attributes—each associated with a particular role for leaders:

1. *Imagination to innovate.* Leaders encourage innovation.
2. *Professionalism to perform.* Leaders expect personal and organizational competence.
3. *Openness to collaborate.* Leaders make connections with partners who can energize the organization's practices and provide resources that will enhance its offerings (Kanter, 1999).

Thus, for the TA to be effective, recipients have three primary roles. They must (1) recognize their need for help, then (2) be clear about the assistance needed, and (3) prepare the environment for infusion of new knowledge to realize the desired change. Beyond a good understanding of partner roles and responsibilities, cognizance of the characteristics that both the

TA provider and the recipient possess is necessary to facilitate an effective relationship.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDER AND RECIPIENT CHARACTERISTICS

As a supportive and helping process, technical assistance embodies principles of counseling and consultation, such as establishing credibility and a trusting relationship, maintaining a confidential relationship, and matching compatible providers with recipients (Suarez & Montgomery, 1989). This implies that both the TA providers and recipients bring particular characteristics to the relationship.

Provider Characteristics

Effective TA providers are proactive and responsive to recipients' needs (Yin & White, 1984). Influential TA provider attributes are expertise, consulting skills, interpersonal skills, and quality performance (Suarez & Montgomery, 1989). As TA is a process of transfer-



ring knowledge or practices, the provider must possess extensive content and process knowledge that comes from experience. Consulting skills enable the TA provider to diagnose recipient needs, set goals and formulate plans, take action and provide feedback, and extend or terminate the relationship as the recipient's capacity expands (Block, 1981). In addition, effective TA is based on a strong interpersonal relationship in which the provider is perceived as possessing skills such as warmth, openness, being non-judgmental, and providing the sense of support that encourages recipients to openly specify needs and share contextual aspects (Suarez & Montgomery, 1989).

Recipient Characteristics

Recipients are first and foremost characterized by who they are and how they perceive their roles within the system. There is a deep, vertical audience for educational information. Administrators at the federal, state, district, and local levels, as well as topic and technology specialists, parents, teachers, and students are all members of this extensive audience through which educational ideas and practices must filter down (Farr, 1969). Desirable characteristics of recipients include those who have incentives for reform, continuity of staff and resources; ownership over the TA process; some capacity, skills, or training in the subject (Yin & White, 1984); and openness to accept new ideas and change. Suarez and Montgomery (1989) acknowledge that, in addition to the individual recipient characteristics, there are certain influential contextual and historical factors, such as leadership support, local commitment, political influences, organizational setting, and the policy environment. As more desirable school characteristics and contextual factors fall into place, the effectiveness of the TA process will be strengthened.



Change in low-performing schools requires that both the TA provider and the educational recipient play supporting roles and bring positive characteristics to the relationship. The challenges facing schools are too great to be addressed by any one group. By partnering together, however, more can be accomplished. Throughout the partnering process, effective strategies for building and sustaining the relationship must be considered.

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDER-RECIPIENT PARTNERSHIPS

For TA to have a long-term effect, an ongoing inter-organizational relationship between the TA organization and the recipient is necessary. As Austin explains,

“The process of partnering can be as important as the substance” (2000, p. 3). At the heart of strong relationships are respect and trust. Open communication between partners is the vehicle by which trust is established and good partner relationships are sustained (Justice, 1993).

Efforts to secure a trusting relationship must begin at the first attempt to partner, and continue throughout the TA process. Timely introductions of key participants, thorough and continuous needs assessments, mutually agreed upon evaluation systems, and ongoing communication (Bruner, 1993), will engender trust and respect between the TA provider and the recipient. Such efforts can occur during all phases of the technical assistance program and, in fact, are necessary to maintain trust. Additional efforts that sustain a trusting relationship include sharing decisions between TA provider and recipients; recognizing and appreciating differences in values; working toward a common vision; building shared ownership; getting to know each other on a personal level; acknowledging that all contributions are important; sharing recognition and credit; and using a win-win approach (Miller et al, 1992).

CONCLUSION

High-quality technical assistance necessitates that both TA providers and recipients be cognizant of their roles, strengths and limitations while practicing effective partnering principles. These principles mirror sound TA planning by requiring that partners openly discuss and agree upon goals, work toward mutual agreements and understandings, are flexible, and adhere to established objectives. This means that both TA providers and recipients should

- agree on the definition of success;
- establish not only clarity of mission

but also mutual understanding of partners’ characteristics and roles;

- understand not only the values, goals, and constraints of the partnership itself, but also the values, goals, and constraints of each other;
- translate broad goals into accomplishable interim targets and timeframes;
- be cognizant that different issues require different types of partnerships; and
- work to maintain the partnership, through collaborative strategies (Emerging Partnerships, n.d.).

Through an examination of and attention to partner roles, responsibilities, and characteristics, as well as the above described critical aspects of partnerships such as trust, communication and collaboration, an effective TA provider-recipient relationship can develop. When done well, high quality technical assistance will provide low-performing schools with the support they need to improve.



Resources

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