

## Frequently Asked Questions About the SWCC

Here are some commonly asked questions that state education agency personnel have regarding SWCC services.

### How We Provide Services

Through technical assistance of advice and support, the SWCC helps SEAs build internal capacity to carry out their own work in schools and districts. There are three levels of technical assistance:

- » Level One: Sharing of Information and Resources to Build Awareness (*Example: Providing a state with information regarding how other states have developed licensure systems that are totally automated*);
- » Level Two: Providing Existing Solutions and/or Materials (*Example: Helping a state use a well-established instrument to assess its capacity to provide services to districts and schools*); and
- » Level Three: Providing Customized, Long-term, On-site Support (*Example: Planning with a state to redesign its high school assessment program*).

Since its inception in 2005, the SWCC has distributed information on best practices, assisted in the development and implementation of systems of support, shared information on what states are doing in implementing NCLB, assisted in developing strategic plans, and reviewed state policies and practices. We have also helped states gather data on the effectiveness of their services and assisted them in revamping their information technology systems. Through using a process improvement approach, we have helped state agencies strengthen their systems and processes for working with schools and districts.

Our relationship with a state agency is that of a provider/client partnership. We work together to identify needs, to determine what services best address these needs, and to evaluate the impact of our services. Our commitment is to assist states in strengthening their capacity to serve the districts and schools throughout their states.

### Our Guiding Principles

The SWCC has a set of principles that underlie its service. Our technical assistance:

- » Follows federal and state mandates;
- » Is based on sound research or practice with demonstrated effectiveness;
- » Takes into account organizational change theory;
- » Aligns with the SEA vision and mission;
- » Is customized so that it meets each state's needs;
- » Is collaborative in nature, involving key stakeholders that have a vested interest in achieving outcomes;
- » Is carried out with an understanding of the state's context (costs involved, available staff resources, support of leadership, political climate, etc.); and
- » Focuses on the root causes of problems rather than symptoms of problems.

### How Our Services Are Evaluated

The SWCC is committed to high quality services provided in a timely manner in partnership with a state agency. To that end, we have a team of internal evaluators who regularly assess our services through surveys, interviews, review of documents, and other data gathering activities. In addition, there is a national evaluation of all the 16 comprehensive centers. We take information from these evaluations and adjust our services accordingly.

1 *No Child Left Behind (Public Law 107-110).*  
 2 *Education Sciences Reform Act (20 U.S.C. Section 9602).*  
 3 Northwest Regional Education Laboratory's "Technical Assistance Guidelines" (<http://www.nwrel.org/nwreport/2004-11/>)  
 4 Special Provisions Cooperative Agreement Between the U.S. Department of Education and WestEd, November 7, 2005).

### Our state agency receives inquiries from different technical assistance agencies? How do we know who's doing what, and which group is best for us?

This straightforward question has a very complicated answer. We'll try to make sense out of complex system of technical assistance providers funded by the federal government.

First, here are the players:

- » Entities funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
  - Sixteen Comprehensive Centers
  - Five Content Centers
  - Ten Equity Assistance Centers
- » Entities funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs
  - Six Regional Resource Centers
  - More than 40 Content Centers
- » Entities funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences
  - Ten Regional Education Laboratories

Each organization has a particular service region as well as mission.

If this sounds overwhelming, it is. A suggestion: If you need more than one technical assistance provider, and you're not sure how to proceed, let either your Comprehensive Center or your Regional Resource Center serve as your broker. These organizations can help you get the best service available. See the enclosed sheet for a list of the major technical assistance centers serving your state.

For more information on these and the other technical assistance organizations, go to [www.rrfcnetwork.org](http://www.rrfcnetwork.org) and click on "TA&D Services."



### How does a state education agency request technical assistance services?

The chief executive officer in each state education agency (or his/her designee) is our official liaison. The SWCC relies on the chief executive officer to identify the SEA's priorities and determine needed assistance. This is the individual who can request services. Others within the SEA may do so, but their requests must be approved first by the SEA's chief executive officer or the designee before a request can become part of the SWCC's work plan.

### How does the SWCC respond to a request?

Once the SWCC receives a request, we prepare a prospectus. This prospectus outlines the purpose of the technical assistance, its desired result, the responsibilities of the SWCC and the SEA, and a timeline. Developing the prospectus requires discussion between the SEA and the SWCC staff. Goals and objectives need to be realistic, credible, supported by key stakeholders, and likely to achieve the desired result. Once the draft is reviewed and both the SEA and SWCC have clearly defined the scope of work, the prospectus is finalized. It then becomes part of the SWCC work plan and work begins.

### Does the SWCC accept all technical assistance requests?

Usually, but acceptance is not automatic. The nature of the request, resources required, availability of staff, connection to the agreed upon goals for the state, and potential for achieving desired outcomes influence whether the response is a "Go," "No Go," or "You're in the queue." Our intent is to respond positively to as many requests as possible.

### What costs are involved?

Since Comprehensive Centers are federally funded, our services are free to a state agency. However, SEAs will incur costs involved in whatever intervention we are jointly pursuing. For example, the SEA covers costs ranging from their staff time for meetings to costs for new hardware or software.

# Getting the Most From Your Comprehensive Center

A Guide for State Education Agencies

## INTRODUCING THE Southwest Comprehensive Center

### Who We Are

The Southwest Comprehensive Center (SWCC) is a federally funded organization established to assist State Education Agencies (SEAs) in implementing *No Child Left Behind*.<sup>1</sup> The SWCC is one of 16 Comprehensive Centers around the country. It serves the states of Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah.

The Comprehensive Centers were authorized under the *Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002* and administered by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education.<sup>2</sup> The SWCC's main office is in Phoenix, Arizona. Federally funded, SWCC services are provided without cost. Contact information is listed at the end of this document. Our organization's fiscal agent is WestEd, an educational research and development organization with its home office in San Francisco.

### What We Do

The SWCC provides technical assistance to state education agencies. Technical assistance is the timely provision of specialized advice and customized support.<sup>3</sup> The ultimate goal of our technical assistance is to help each SEA become a more effective and efficient organization that engages in cycles of continuous improvement. More specifically, we help to increase state capacity to assist districts and schools in meeting their student achievement goals. The SWCC helps states in (1) assessing the improvement needs of districts and schools, (2) developing solutions to address those needs, (3) building and sustaining systemic support for district and school



improvement efforts related to closing achievement gaps and improving achievement outcomes, and (4) improving the tools and systems for school improvement and accountability.<sup>4</sup>

### Our Focus Areas

The SWCC provides technical assistance to SEAs related to areas outlined in *No Child Left Behind*: assessment and accountability, school support, district support, teacher quality, high school redesign, and technology. These areas are broadly defined. If districts and schools in a state are not meeting annual yearly progress (AYP) under NCLB, chances are that many of their needs – and those of the state agency – fall under one or more of these categories.

### How do the SWCC and SEA work together?

As mentioned earlier, the SWCC partners with a SEA to plan, carry out, and evaluate our technical assistance. Here are some of the tasks that the SWCC and SEA do jointly:

- » Determine state needs;
- » Review data related to establishing needs;
- » Identify the root cause of problems;
- » Help formulate solutions to problems and bring relevant resources to bear;
- » Explore web-based applications of chosen solutions;
- » Help design plans to standardize new procedures;
- » Coordinate SWCC services with those of other technical assistance providers, as necessary;
- » Assist in institutionalizing new systems; and
- » Engage collaboratively in reflection on the services provided and their impact.

Here are some responsibilities that we ask state education agencies to assume:

- » Handle logistics for all meetings;
- » Make sure that the “right” people are at the table with continuity;
- » Adhere to the agreed upon timeline or renegotiate if a problem arises;
- » Set aside time on a regular basis to reflect on how the work is progressing and what changes might need to be made; and
- » Participate in evaluating SWCC services.

The SWCC has numerous responsibilities including providing expert staff; coordinating with the Content Centers; keeping SEAs informed of what other states, especially those in the five-state service region, are doing; ensuring the quality of services; and evaluating services.

### What happens if the SEA has some concern about the partnership?

On-going communication, such as meeting notes, quarterly reports of services, periodic briefings, and sessions reflecting on progress and problems, helps ensure that the partnership is proceeding smoothly and on target. However, if an issue arises, we welcome an inquiry from anyone in the state education agency that has a concern. Often a telephone call or face-to-face conversation can resolve an issue. Or perhaps the scope of work in the prospectus needs to be adjusted.

What is most important is that you let us know when the partnership is not proceeding the way you envisioned. We can't fix a problem if we don't know that it exists.

### How and when does a service the SWCC has been providing end?

When the SWCC has completed the specific tasks listed in the prospectus, we evaluate the progress. If the state agency staff can monitor and maintain the change, we may declare that set of goals accomplished. If some goals have not been met, if new problems have emerged in resolving the former ones, or if the staff cannot yet sustain the change, we'll write a new prospectus and continue the work if that is the desire of the chief executive officer. We strive for institutionalization of new systems and processes, and we'll stay with an SEA until that happens.

