Case Example: U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is a model for other government agencies seeking to support the development of implementation capacity in human service systems. In 2006 OSEP was the first federal agency to recognize the potential benefits of implementation science for improving student outcomes. Since 2006, OSEP has included implementation science in various approaches intended to improve services to and outcomes for students with disabilities. Through a RFP process, OSEP invested in the State Implementation and Scaling up of Evidence-based Programs Center (SISEP) that began in October 2007.

OSEP: A New Approach

In 2012 OSEP announced its approach to Results Driven Accountability that intends to change the relationship between a federal agency and state education systems.   Since 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has required each state to establish a State Performance Plan (SPP) that describes a state's efforts to implement the requirements of IDEA. Based on their SPP, each state submits an Annual Performance Report (APR). OSEP evaluates each state's efforts on the basis of 10 compliance targets and 10 performance targets. These targets are operationalized as "indicators" that focus states on specific issues such as graduation and dropout rates and the amount of time students with disabilities spend in general education settings.

After reviewing their data from 2004 - 2012, OSEP found **little evidence to show monitoring compliance improves student outcomes**. Thus, the shift to **Results Driven Accountability**. A new performance indicator, Indicator 17, was developed to enable the new relationship between OSEP and states. As part of the SPP, Indicator 17 calls for a comprehensive, multiyear plan – a **State Systemic Improvement Plan** (SSIP) – that focuses on "improved educational results and functional outcomes for students with disabilities while considering compliance as it relates to those results and outcomes".

The new relationship being initiated by OSEP is to turn compliance into support. Indicator 17 promotes a systemic approach to improving education outcomes and OSEP offers more support for those states that have difficulty. For support, OSEP is funding Technical Assistance (TA) Centers specifically to assist states in their efforts to make systemic changes. Other currently funded TA Centers are strongly encouraged by OSEP to work together in unprecedented ways to add more support. In effect, OSEP is holding itself accountable for supporting states as states, in turn, are held accountable for creating systemic changes to improve education for students with disabilities and for all students.

The organized and focused approach taken by OSEP allows OSEP itself to learn from the experiences of states and to adjust its own approach to states as the states work to meet the requirements of Indicator 17. **A presentation by Gregg Corr**, at that time the Director of the OSEP Division of Monitoring and State Improvement Planning, provides an instructive example of a federal agency as a learning organization.

OSEP's State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP)

In keeping with implementation best practices, the SSIP is being accomplished in stages.

Phase I (2015; Exploration Stage) required states to report on:

1. data analysis to identify and document areas that need improvement,
2. identification of the specific area targeted for improvement,
3. infrastructure to support improvement and build capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain the use of evidence-based practices, and
4. a theory of action that identifies changes in state systems, districts, and schools that will lead to realizing the intended outcomes.

Phase II (2016; Installation Stage) asks states to focus on:

1. infrastructure development to enable the state to implement and scale up evidence-based practices, align the practices with other initiatives, and improve activities once they are underway,
2. development of implementation supports for the selection and use of evidence-based practices in schools and districts to achieve the intended outcomes, and
3. evaluation of the implementation of the SSIP, implementation of evidence-based practices, and outcomes of the use of evidence-based practices.

Phase III (2017; Initial Implementation Stage) will focus on:

1. evaluation of SSIP strategies,
2. evaluation of implementation supports,
3. progress toward achieving the identified goals, and
4. improvements made based on results obtained.

The OSEP Guidance and Review Tool operationalizes the SSIP and provides further guidance for state education systems. A more specific implementation science view of the Indicator 17 guidelines is available.

SSIP and Implementation Science

Implementation principles (*named in parentheses below*) are employed throughout the OSEP Results Driven Accountability requirements:

- focus on systemic change (*Enabling Context*),
- choosing one well-documented need as the target (*Transformation Zone*),
- developing system capacity for implementation so that evidence-based practices related to the need can be used with fidelity and good outcomes (*Implementation Drivers; Implementation Teams*),
- using data to make purposeful changes (*Improvement Cycles*), and
- phasing in the new requirements over a number of years (*Implementation Stages*).

In effect, OSEP is holding itself accountable for supporting states as states, in turn, are held accountable for creating systemic changes to improve education for students with disabilities and for all students. OSEP is moving from compliance to support as they review SSIP documents submitted by states. SISEP has developed implementation-specific "Look Fors" to provide further guidance to states.

All Related Files

- Getting To Results-Driven Accountability In Special Education
- U.S. Department of Education Letter to Chief School Officers (Re: Results-Driven Accountability)
- Results Driven Accountabilty (Presentation)
- https://www.activeimplementation.org/resources/osep-guidance-and-review-tool/
- https://www.activeimplementation.org/resources/implementation-capacity-look-fors/