Scaling-up Brief
Intensive Technical Assistance (TA)
Dean Fixsen, Karen Blase, Rob Horner, Barbara Sims, & George Sugai

Introduction

A key distinction between Basic TA and Intensive TA is the degree to which the TA providers take responsibility for outcomes. Basic TA relies upon recipients to make good and effective use of the information and training provided to them. Intensive TA takes responsibility for providing information and necessary supports and for doing whatever it takes to assure intended outcomes occur in a timely and effective manner.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (TA) is designed to build the capacity of individuals and organizations to achieve desired outcomes. During the past decade technical assistance, like many educational initiatives, has been reconceptualized as a multi-tiered approach along a continuum from basic to intensive. Basic technical assistance is the most efficient foundation for facilitating change, and includes providing documentation of evidence-based options, disseminating both examples of success and materials that facilitate success, and providing overview workshops that may assist others in the planning, implementation and use of existing tools to achieve desired change. Basic TA is effective in many contexts, but like other multi-tiered models is recognized as insufficient to achieve systems change in all contexts. When the scale or depth of change is more extensive, Basic TA efforts need to be supplemented with more Intensive Technical Assistance.

The purpose of this Brief is to define "Intensive Technical Assistance (ITA)" and briefly illustrate its use in education. The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs defines Intensive TA as: Technical assistance services that require a stable, on-going negotiated relationship between the TA Center staff and the TA recipient, and should include a purposeful, planned series of activities designed to reach an outcome that is valued by the host organization. Intensive TA typically results in changes to policy, program, practice, or operations that support increased recipient capacity and/or improved outcomes at one or more systems levels. Iterative evaluation and feedback strategies are a requisite of Intensive/ Sustained TA. Using the federal definition as a foundation, "Intensive TA" means TA done with a sharp focus on purpose and outcomes as well as considerable depth, breadth, coherence, and energy in relation to achieving those outcomes.

Basic TA

Many issues encountered in education can be solved by providing Basic TA via information and supports to already knowledgeable and skilled teachers, administrators, and policy makers. Basic TA efforts to improve education practices are useful when the capacity to achieve such improvements is within the current skills and abilities of educators and when structures and policies already are in place to support the improvements. That is, once educators know WHAT needs to be done, they are ABLE to do it. Basic Technical Assistance (TA) is most useful under these circumstances, and these circumstances are encountered frequently in education.

Intensive TA

There are other innovations (e.g. use of science-based programs; use of whole new approaches to solve persistent problems) that are a poor fit with current skills of educators and current system configurations. Full, effective, and continued use of these innovations requires more Intensive Technical Assistance. More extensive and novel changes in education typically require new knowledge, skills, and abilities among educators and require related changes in school, district, state, and federal education systems to support educators. That is, educators need to learn **what** to do and **how** to do it, and structures and functions in schools and education systems need to be **aligned** to support the new educational methods. Intensive TA includes all elements of Basic TA, but adds considerable on-site direction, collaboration, coaching, and evaluation strategies needed to achieve systemic changes. Another key distinction between Basic TA and Intensive TA is the degree to which the TA providers take responsibility for outcomes. Basic TA relies upon recipients to make good and effective use of the information and training provided to them. Intensive TA takes responsibility for providing information and necessary supports and for doing whatever it takes to assure intended outcomes occur in a timely and effective manner. Intensive TA starts with the end in mind and works persistently to assure desired outcomes. Some core features of Intensive Technical Assistance are the clarity, frequency, intensity, duration, integrity, and accountability with which technical assistance is provided.

Core Features of Intensive Technical Assistance

	Description	An Illustration
Clarity	• Purposeful activity to understand, but not be "consumed by," the current context (e.g., reviews of system strengths, stressors, policies, regulations, data). • Mutually established clear needs, roles, and responsibilities among the TA entity, the TA recipients, and other partners. • Agreement about how to create the new structures needed to support educators employing the new methods (e.g., points of contact, communication routines, feedback methods, workgroups).	A seven-month process was used to facilitate state decision-making about the current "fit" of the initiative with the goals of States. Communications and on-site visits during this time provided opportunities for SISEP and the States to assess current efforts and establish mutually informed agreements to move into capacity building.
Frequency	• Regular (daily, weekly, monthly) on-site and in-person communication and shared activities to initiate and mange change • Regular (daily, weekly, monthly) use of planning, execution, evaluation, and next step cycles to quickly correct errors and solve problems	To carry out Intensive TA, one or two SISEP staff members visit each State each month for meetings with the State Management Team and with leadership and stakeholder groups. Between visit communication and activities help to maintain focus and activities.
Intensity	• Prompting and creating opportunities for collective reflection to inform and guide "next steps" (e.g., planning retreats; use of learning communities) • Creating opportunities to infuse into the system relevant skills (e.g., training and coaching events) and knowledge (e.g., use of technology to provide didactic information) • Regular on-site coaching and assessments of skill development and overall progress based on active participation and direct observations supplemented with long-distance planning and work sessions (e.g., video and telephone meetings)	Key individuals participating in the capacity development process are mutually selected by the State and SISEP, and trained, coached, and evaluated by SISEP and the State to establish key linkages between policy and practice and between implementation infra-structures, schools, and teachers.

Core Features of Intensive Technical Assistance

	Description	An Illustration
Duration	• Doing whatever it takes to create desired changes and resolve issues in ways that help to develop and expand capacity • Systematic, focused, and sustained change efforts carried out over a period of several years (2 to 5 years may be typical)	Over a four-year period, SISEP staff work simultaneously at policy, practice, organization, system, and political levels.
Integrity	• Focus on integrating current activities, roles, and functions to create more effective and efficient education systems • Comprehensive work with whole systems instead of piecemeal activities that may contribute to further fragmentation • Collecting and using reliable and accessible data for decision-making at local and system levels	The goal is to establish expectations, skills, infrastructure, organizational and system alignment, roles, and functions to create effective and sustainable methods to achieve important education goals. Integrating education system initiatives, integrating current (multiple) implementation efforts, systematizing initiatives (less person dependent), and improving overall effectiveness and efficiency are side benefits of SISEP's work to help States scale up evidence-based practices.
Accountability	• Responsibility for actively providing information and necessary supports for assuring that intended outcomes occur in a timely and effective manner • Using negative feedback and setbacks as opportunities to create new methods, bring in new partners, and develop new knowledge, skills, and abilities to adapt to challenges and continue to make progress toward agreed-upon goals • Benefits to students, families, teachers, and education systems define the success of an Intensive TA effort	State leadership teams are provided with fidelity measures to assess SISEP activities and outcomes each month, implementation of evidence-based practices at the school level, implementation of support systems at the district level, and implementation of policy and quality improvement systems at the state level. These measures are used within a progress monitoring framework to hold SISEP accountable. In addition, they provide information on the extent to which Intensive TA efforts are producing change in the breadth, quality and efficiency with which evidence-based practices are being implemented. The use of these quality practices is then evaluated in terms of functional educational outcomes for children.

Intensive TA Assumes:

The work will be done only if there is well-informed agreement about the need, vision for change, and methods to initiate and manage the change process. Intensive TA only makes sense when the recipient and the TA provider have had the opportunity to fully explore the relationship to assure that the task is within the abilities of the Intensive TA provider, the intended strategies and activities are aligned with the recipients' goals, and that there is a good chance that the strategies and activi-ties will help achieve desired outcomes.

The goal is to help education systems "make changes that break with the past, operate outside of existing paradigms, and conflict with prevailing values and norms," and conduct TA activities that are "emergent, unbounded, and complex" (see www.centerii.org).

The work will be done in conjunction with a variety of people who are proponents, opponents, and interested observers of the intended changes that are envisioned for the education system. Surprises are expected and valued as part of the process.

Planning and preparation are always required and always entail working with and through a variety of people inside and outside the particular component of the education system that is the subject of change.

The use of any innovation is not only a design effort but an organization and system re-design effort from the beginning, involving changes in policies, practices, and system functioning.

System capacity purposefully must be developed to reach a significant propor-tion of those who can benefit (e.g., at least 60% of all intended beneficiaries; students, teachers, building administrators, parents) in order to achieve academically and socially significant benefits to students and society.

Comprehensive assistance will be pro-vided for an extended period of time (e.g., 2–5 years) to help bring about change and install and stabilize the new ways of work as standard practice in education organizations and systems.

SISEP
State Implementation and Scaling-up
of Evidence-based Practices

State Implementation & Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center
sisep.fpg.unc.edu

Page | 5

Conclusion

In this time of high-stakes testing, declining resources, and rising expectations, Intensive TA is needed to help States make more comprehensive and meaningful changes in education practices and education systems to support those practices. The definition, dimensions, and assumptions underlying effective Intensive TA have only recently been revealed in a growing literature across education and human ser-vices. Armed with this bank of new knowledge, skills, and abilities, Intensive TA Centers can more reliably help States create their capacity for academically and socially significant improvements in education statewide.

About SISEP

Effective implementation capacity is essential to improving education. The State Implementation & Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center supports education systems in creating implementation capacity for evidence-based practices benefitting students, especially those with disabilities. For more Information visit us on the web at:
https://sisep.fpg.unc.edu

References

Felner, R. D., Favazza, A., Shim, M., Brand, S., Gu, K., & Noonan, N. (2001). Whole school improve ment and restructuring as prevention and promotion—Lessons from STEP and the project on high performance learning communities. Journal of School Psychology, 39(2), 177-202.

Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation Research: A synthesis of the literature. Tampa: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231).

Greenhalgh, T., Robert, G., MacFarlane, F., Bate, P., & Kyriakidou, O. (2004). Diffusion of innovations
in service organizations: Systematic review and recommendations. The Milbank Quarterly, 82(4), 581-629.

Morgan, G., & Ramirez, R. (1983). Action learning: A holographic metaphor for guiding social change. Human Relations, 37, 19-43.

Rhim, L. M., Kowal, J. M., Hassel, B. C., & Hassel, E. A. (2007). School turnarounds: A review of the cross-sector evidence on dramatic organizational improvement. Lincoln, IL: Public Impact, Academic Development Institute.

Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. Policy Sciences, 4, 155-169.

State Implementation & Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center
sisep.fpg.unc.edu
Page I 7