

Technical Assistance in Action Brief: Intensive TA Building Capacity for Systems Change

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Introduction

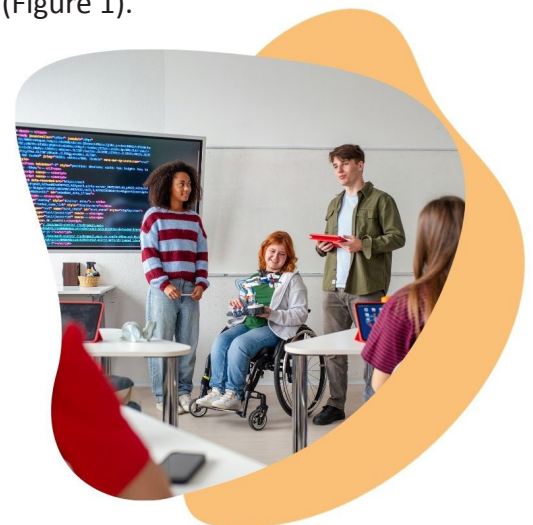
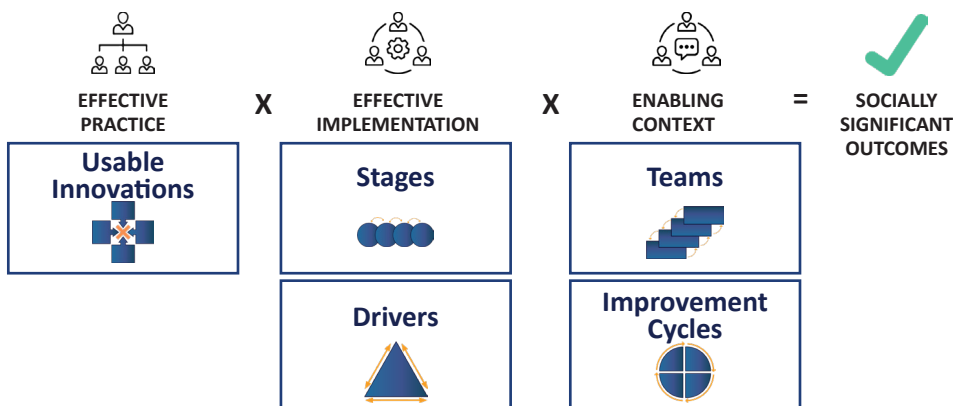
Despite the rapid growth of evidence-based practices in education, a substantial gap continues to exist between what research has identified as effective and what routinely gets put into practice in schools and classrooms (Bowen et al., 2025; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). Improving student outcomes requires more than initiating new programs; it demands systemic change within educational agencies concentrated on the effective, long-term use of evidence-based practices. The reality is that many educational agencies lack the knowledge and capacity for implementation needed for systemic change (Ward et al., 2024).

The State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices (SISEP) Center is a national technical assistance (TA) provider that supports state, district, and local educational agencies in developing the infrastructure and competencies needed to successfully implement and scale evidence-based practices.

SISEP's goal in providing TA is to bridge the research-to-practice gap—bringing together what we know is best practice in research to effectively implement it in practice. SISEP works with educational agencies to select, adopt, and sustain evidence-based practices, using implementation science to strengthen educational systems, support educators, and improve outcomes for all students, especially students with disabilities.

TA practices within SISEP are grounded in NIRN's Active Implementation Formula (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Active Implementation Formula & the Active Implementation Frameworks



The Active Implementation Formula contains core elements that must be in place to achieve desired outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2005). Starting with the end in mind, Socially Significant Outcomes represents the “why,” wanting to improve student outcomes. Effective Practice represents the “what,” the evidence-based practice implementation is built around. Effective Implementation is the “how,” the processes and structures needed to successfully implement. Enabling Context establishes the “who” and the linked implementation teams that support continuous improvement. The Implementation Frameworks are how we translate the formula into practice, supporting educational agencies in creating the structures and conditions needed to effectively implement and sustain evidence-based practices.

This brief examines how SISEP provides technical assistance to support education agencies in applying the Active Implementation Frameworks, with a particular focus on intensive TA practices that help build the organizational structures and systems necessary to improve student outcomes.

Overview of SISEP’s tiered approach

Technical assistance (TA) generally refers to efforts provided to an individual or organization to support capacity development (Katz & Wandersman, 2016; West et al., 2012) to adopt practices or to effect systems change (Dunst et al., 2019). TA within the SISEP Center focuses on capacity building, supporting state, regional, and local leaders and staff within educational agencies in building the systems, structures, and competencies needed to effectively implement, sustain, and scale evidence-based practices.

SISEP’s TA efforts are designed to:

- develop competency of leaders and educators as implementation practitioners
- develop implementation capacity of state, regional, and local agencies
- increase awareness and knowledge of implementation infrastructure development
- integrate implementation and improvement science practices in the program of study of OSEP-funded doctoral programs and TA delivery of OSEP TA providers

The SISEP Center engages a three-tiered approach in providing technical assistance (TA):



Universal TA

Dissemination of educational materials and resources that are publicly available on SISEP’s website and learning platform, newsletters, and publications. Can include short-term engagements specific to an implementation practice or resource.



Targeted TA

Communities of Practice, developed around a common implementation structure and practices, can include short-term engagements specific to an implementation practice or resource.



Intensive TA

A multi-year partnership involving time-intensive capacity building activities using implementation science frameworks, strategies, and tools in support of shared outcomes for students, specifically students with disabilities.

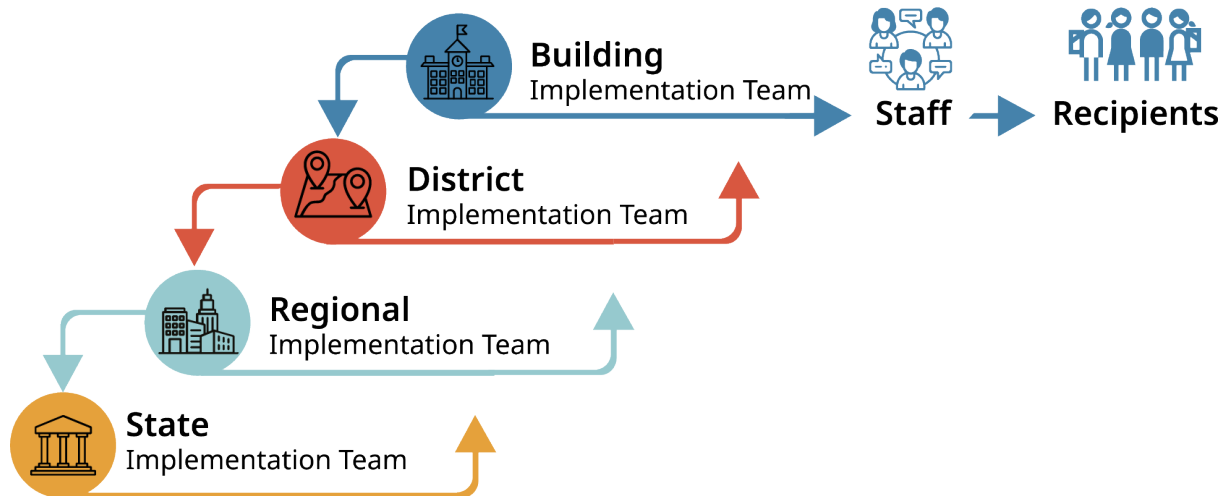


What is the goal of intensive TA?

Complex change within educational agencies requires learning new knowledge, skills, and abilities (Fixsen et al., 2009). Technical assistance is often provided in support of this change, with a higher dosage of TA associated with having a greater impact on implementation (Durst et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2022). The SISEP Center works intensively with a small number of State Educational Agencies (SEAs) through a multi-year partnership, providing high-dosage technical assistance focused on developing agency capacity to build and improve its infrastructure to implement and sustain a chosen educational practice. Given the intensity of the TA partnership, SISEP has established criteria for selecting potential states, which include a connection between SISEP's TA and the SEA's efforts to achieve outcomes, leadership commitment, and a willingness to establish a data system to measure adult behavior (i.e., fidelity, capacity).

Specific implementation activities within SISEP's intensive TA are designed to build the SEA's capacity needed for systemic change. The partnership between the SISEP Center and SEAs in providing TA develops through a stable, ongoing relationship. With an emphasis on building capacity, SISEP provides a series of trainings and embedded learning opportunities to support the development of leaders' and practitioners' knowledge, skills, and abilities, with attention to application through ongoing coaching. SISEP supports the development of implementation teams within the agency, creating a linked teaming structure that supports communication feedback loops, addresses implementation barriers, and uses data to facilitate ongoing implementation improvements.

Figure 2: SISEP's Transformation Zone & Linked Teaming Structure



As infrastructure and support are being co-created with SEA staff and partners, the center provides training and coaching to replicate implementation systems and structures within the state educational system, including Educational Service Agencies (ESAs), Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), and schools in each state. Activities at all levels begin with a focus on readiness, examining capacity and commitment to implement system change, conducting analysis of current initiatives and infrastructure, and action planning to tailor SISEP intensive TA approaches, services, and resources specific to the SEA's needs. This occurs while bringing in elements of Universal TA with guidance and support in applying tools and resources within their context.

How to be consistent as a TA team, but still meet your partners' needs

SISEP employs a systemic approach to providing intensive TA, guided by a State Capacity Development Plan (SCDP) developed around NIRN's Implementation Stages, the State Capacity Assessment, and embedding activities to support the development of all implementation frameworks within each stage. The SCDP serves as a roadmap, containing intentional activities designed to guide implementation. The structure of the implementation activities supports planning, developing implementation supports, ongoing monitoring, and data-driven decision-making. Implementation activities within the SCDP are tailored to align with and respond to an educational agency's specific context, needs, and desired outcomes. Let's explore some key considerations that drive SISEP's intensive TA practices.

■ Context

Context matters in implementation, so no two partnerships are the same. It interacts with all components of the formula: the “who”—those involved and impacted by implementation, the “what”—the evidence-based practice being implemented, and the “how”—the implementation strategies to support the practice in use. Understanding and working within a state's unique dynamics is at the heart of SISEP's intensive TA. Working with an SEA, SISEP invests time to develop a deep understanding of the state's implementation landscape to support each state in developing implementation practices matched to their context. This includes examining state leader and organizational structures, current and past initiatives, workforce stability, structural capacity, and the availability of resources to support implementation.

“Context is a set of characteristics and circumstances that consist of active and unique factors within which the implementation is embedded. As such, context is not a backdrop for implementation but interacts, influences, modifies, and facilitates or constrains the intervention and its implementation.”

Pfadenhauer et al., 2017

Although the SCDP follows a consistent scope and sequence designed to build state capacity for implementing, scaling, and sustaining evidence-based practices, its application is intentionally adapted to each state's context. For example, some SISEP partner states work through Regional Educational Agencies (REAs) or Educational Service Agencies (ESAs), while others partner directly with Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), requiring different implementation structures and approaches. By tailoring intensive technical assistance to each state's educational system while maintaining the core components of the SCDP, states are better able to build ownership, strengthen implementation infrastructure, and develop the capacity needed for long-term sustainability.



■ Partnerships

Intensive TA functions as a collaborative partnership between SISEP and the SEA, with shared ownership and accountability in implementation. Given the intensity and duration of the TA partnership, SISEP has established an intentional mutual selection process developed through a series of facilitated exploratory meetings with state leaders and key agency staff. This process allows both SISEP and the SEA to clarify goals, establish a shared understanding of the TA partnership, address readiness and commitment, and review ongoing systemic change efforts to identify areas of alignment and needed support. Engaging in this process provides both SISEP and the SEA with information needed to make an informed, mutual determination if the partnership is a good fit. Drawing on lessons learned during the selection process, a partnership agreement is developed, grounded in the state's priorities, needs, and desired outcomes. As the partnership begins, additional exploratory activities are conducted to gain greater perspective on the SEA's organizational structures, current improvement efforts, and overall implementation context. Purposefully investing in relationship-building establishes a foundation for trust and sustained commitment needed for the work (Metz et al., 2022; Yazejian et al., 2019).



Building relationships remains a central focus throughout the partnership. Two SISEP implementation specialists are assigned to work with each state. These specialists have a vested interest in accountability for the state achieving its desired outcomes. SISEP implementation specialists use the SCDP as a reflective tool to guide engagement and to customize support that matches the agency's needs and implementation journey. Using the SCDP as a roadmap ensures that educational partners are engaged throughout all stages of planning and implementation, supports capacity building within the agency, and ensures that the TA provided is responsive and aligned with their needs.

This type of partnership does not happen overnight. The SISEP implementation specialist works shoulder-to-shoulder with state partners to build the relationships, contextual understanding, and implementation capacity needed to move effectively through the stages of implementation. As the partnership progresses, the dosage, or number of hours of intensive technical assistance, shifts to align with the state's evolving needs.

Table 1 provides an overview of the typical dosage of intensive technical assistance across the stages of implementation.

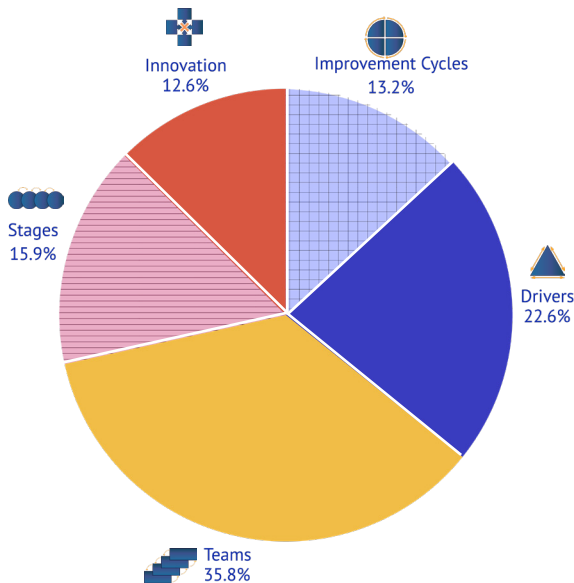
Table 1: State Partners’ Intensive TA Dosage (September 2024–June 2026)

State Partner	Stage of Implementation	Direct Contact (hours)	Indirect Support (hours)	Total Hours	Monthly Average (hours)
State 1	Exploration	82.58	53.00	135.58	6.16
State 2	Exploration/Installation	84.58	84.00	168.58	7.66
State 3	Exploration	112.60	116.17	228.77	10.40
State 4	Initial Implementation	333.17	59.25	392.42	17.84
State 5	Installation/Initial Implementation	97.92	47.25	145.17	6.60

■ **Build Capacity and Infrastructure**

SISEP employs a stage-based approach in supporting SEAs to build capacity for effective implementation. Capacity-building efforts within intensive technical assistance are centered on professional learning systems and the organizational structures and supports needed for sustainable implementation (Ward et al., 2024). To support states in building this capacity, SISEP has developed core content and learning activities grounded in NIRN’s Active Implementation Formula and Frameworks. Throughout the partnership, implementation specialists intentionally integrate these frameworks into coaching, facilitation, planning, and decision-making activities. While all frameworks are used across the implementation process, the frequency and emphasis of each varies depending on the state’s stage of implementation, priorities, and emerging needs. Figure 3 provides an overview of the relative frequency with which each Active Implementation Framework is incorporated into intensive technical assistance.

Figure 3 Active Implementation Framework Frequency		Percentage
	Improvement Cycles	13.2
	Drivers	22.6
	Teams	35.8
	Stages	15.9
	Usable Innovation	12.6



This core content ensures consistency in teaching and learning opportunities across SEAs, helping them develop their knowledge of implementation science. Professional learning structures within intensive TA are designed around current needs, beginning with more formal trainings during exploration to build a foundation and readiness for implementation. Additional “just in time” learning and coaching are provided to support application of implementation practices and concepts, contextualized to reflect each state’s unique structure and work within the stage of implementation.

Early in the partnership, SISEP implementation specialists work with state leaders to determine who can inform, develop, and refine work specific to each state’s practice. Identifying critical perspectives and what level of engagement is needed from each perspective supports developing implementation teams within the SEA. Implementation teams are intentionally structured and functionally designed to support efficient, high-quality implementation. The development of specific teams—such as Executive Sponsors, a State Management Team (SMT), and a State Implementation Team (SIT)—remains consistent across intensive TA efforts; however, membership on these teams is dependent on state structures and the initiative being implemented. Regular meeting structures are established, and communication protocols are created to link teams through ongoing feedback loops.

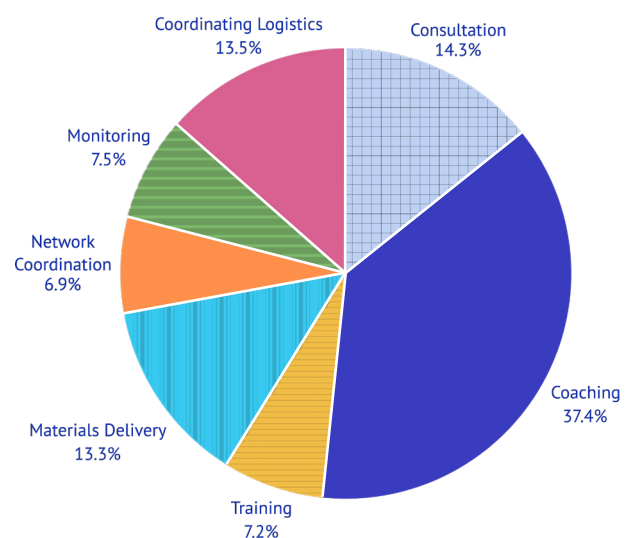
How teams are formed and operate can be contextualized based on the state’s capacity and organizational structure. Teams such as the SMT and SIT may begin as one team, who then separate to focus on different aspects of implementation, to come back together again at points to ensure alignment in planning and moving forward with implementation. Implementation specialists provide training and coaching specific to the roles and functions of teams. As work progresses, team membership is revisited to ensure needed critical perspectives are included and identify champions to support implementation. Building teaming structures, contextualized within the SEA, supports building system capacity for implementation. Focusing on teams and their roles, rather than working with individuals or groups, supports more robust implementation that can sustain the system and mitigate the impact of turnover or change within the system (Jabbar & Holme, 2025).



As teams are formed, SISEP supports the SEA in co-developing an implementation plan focused on building the infrastructure needed to implement an effective, efficient system. The plan contains stage-based goals and action steps contextualized according to the state structure, designed with joint accountability on the part of the SEA and SISEP. Implementation specialists operationalize this plan through seven complementary technical assistance activities: coaching, consultation, coordinating logistics, monitoring, network coordination, materials delivery, and training. These activities represent the primary mechanisms through which intensive technical assistance is delivered and are intentionally adapted to align with each state's implementation stage, priorities, and capacity-building needs. To better understand how intensive technical assistance is enacted in practice, SISEP tracked the frequency of each technical assistance activity across partnering states. Figure 4 summarizes the relative frequency of these activities, providing insight into how implementation specialists allocate their support throughout the partnership.

Figure 4
Technical Assistance Activities

	Percentage
Consultation	14.3
Coaching	37.4
Training	7.2
Materials Delivery	13.3
Network Coordination	6.9
Monitoring	7.5
Coordinating Logistics	13.5



A Focus on Organizational Drivers

While the technical assistance activities describe how SISEP supports states, the content of that support evolves throughout the implementation process. Early partnerships often emphasize planning, relationship building, and foundational implementation supports; however, as states progress through the stages of implementation, technical assistance increasingly focuses on strengthening the organizational conditions needed to sustain implementation. Guided by the Active Implementation Frameworks, SISEP partners with states to develop organizational drivers that support effective implementation, including decision-support data systems, facilitative administration, and systems interventions. These organizational drivers establish the infrastructure



necessary to support continuous improvement, align organizational systems, and sustain evidence-based practices over time. The following section examines the frequency with which organizational driver activities were incorporated into intensive technical assistance across SISEP partner states.

Data collection, analysis, and use are essential components of effective implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen et al., 2009). Implementation specialists use various forms of quantitative and qualitative data, including programmatic, implementation, and outcome data, to inform decisions and tailor TA approaches, services, and resources to the SEA's needs. Data sources include capacity assessments, Implementation Team Look Fors, surveys, and eventually fidelity data.



Additionally, because most implementation barriers identified by the SISEP Center are within the organizational drivers, the implementation specialists engage the SEA in collecting and analyzing various forms of data early in the Exploration Stage. These activities include analyzing outcome and programmatic data to determine areas of need, conducting capacity assessments to examine infrastructure, completing an Initiative Inventory to examine current initiatives, and completing a root cause analysis to identify underlying issues that impact the achievement of desired student outcomes. These data are used, along with additional SEA data, to assess the fit and feasibility of an evidence-based practice using the Hexagon Tool, supporting the SEA in choosing or refining the practice to implement.

Once the practice is chosen and implementation enters the Installation Stage, TA shifts its focus to supporting the SEA in building the infrastructure needed to effectively implement the practice. Implementation specialists work with the SEA to develop an implementation plan that includes the development of a data system. Intensive TA centers on developing a sustainable data system that ensures data is readily available and supports the SEA's capacity to make decisions, track progress, identify what's working, and adjust to address barriers along the way.

As implementation specialists support SEAs in using their data and building their data system, implementation specialists use SEA data along with observations and coaching logs to monitor progress and customize TA approaches guided by the SCDP, adapting TA support based on readiness and capacity, which can fluctuate as the SEA continues to move through stages of implementation (Domlyn et al., 2021).



Ownership in a Transformation Zone Model

A SISEP intensive TA partnership begins with the end in mind, building a system focused on building capacity and infrastructure within the SEA to support implementation at the classroom level. As capacity is built within the SEA, SISEP supports states in replicating implementation systems and supports within all levels of their state educational structure (Ward et al., 2024) within a transformation zone, starting with a representative group as initial implementors. Selection criteria are used to identify districts and schools that will serve as the first implementers. SISEP implementation specialists provide training and coaching, with state implementation specialists engaging teams with implementation activities at each level to support the development of a linked state structure.



As practitioners at the school level within the transformation zone begin using the practice with fidelity, SISEP intensive TA shifts to supporting states in planning for maintenance and scale across the state, while continuing to engage teams at all levels to lead the work towards reaching full implementation. There is no set timeframe; each partnering state has faced unique circumstances at some point in the implementation journey that have affected their capacity to move forward. The key is ownership: having state capacity to sustain and scale implementation to impact practices and student outcomes across the state. Once the state has developed this capacity, SISEP's TA transitions from intensive to targeted TA. SISEP, with the SEA, co-designs a plan for the transition of support. Implementation specialists meet with teams less frequently, shifting to indirect support, such as observing team meetings and providing feedback. SEAs that transition from intensive TA remain as SISEP long-term partners, with SISEP providing ongoing opportunities to learn and engage with other SISEP partnering states.

The Implementation Journey

One of the core beliefs of the SISEP Center is that implementation capacity is not built within a fixed timeline. A partnership with the SISEP Center is not defined by a beginning and end date, but by a long-term commitment to strengthening the system that supports effective implementation. While the intensity of the partnership naturally changes over time, building sustainable implementation capacity may take five, ten, or fifteen years. Lasting systems change requires persistence, continuous learning, and the willingness to adapt as new challenges emerge.



Every state partner experiences implementation barriers, leadership transitions, competing priorities, and unexpected setbacks. These challenges can slow progress, but they also create opportunities to strengthen infrastructure, improve support, and develop more resilient systems. The most important factor is that SEAs continue moving forward with their implementation effort by using data to learn from successes and failures, refine their systems, and invest in people who will sustain the work long after the SISEP Center is gone.

This is the true power of SISEP's intensive technical assistance. It is not about solving today's implementation challenges; it is about developing state leaders and systems that can sustain, adapt, and continuously improve over time while helping others to do the same. When states become both learners and contributors to the field of implementation science, the impact extends far beyond a single partnership.

*Note: The SISEP Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and is a project of the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN). As a center, SISEP's primary goal is to strengthen the educator workforce and improve cross-agency and community collaboration to enhance student outcomes through systemic change. Our work is driven by implementation science, using research-based methods and strategies in efforts to support educational agencies in the selection, adoption, and sustained use of evidence-based practices within educational agencies.

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