Indicators of Effective Technical Assistance Practices

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Effective technical assistance (TA) is a collaborative, coordinated effort to facilitate change in systems, build capacity, improve practices, and reach agreed-upon outcomes[1, 2]. Specifically, effective TA provides a pathway to improvement through activities and materials that promote new behaviors, practices, beliefs, and understandings of staff in the systems served[3]. The purpose of this resource is to present the indicators of effective TA practices to facilitate TA provider understanding, use, evaluation, and improvement of those practices.

The Trohanis Technical Assistance Projects at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina established nine practices of effective TA to support state and local agency staff (client) who provide IDEA Part C early intervention and Part B, Section 619 early childhood special education to young children with, or at risk for disabilities, and their families. The practices are based on more than 50 years of stellar TA provision, ongoing collection and use of evaluation data, and existing literature.

The following nine key practices ensure that TA successfully supports state and local leaders to bring about the desired changes in systems and practices. These practices include:

1. Trusting relationships;
2. Effective communication;
3. Collaborative partnering;
4. Differentiated support;
5. Adult learning strategies;
6. External leadership for change;
7. Partnerships for resource integration;
8. Use of implementation, improvement, and systems change frameworks; and
9. Ongoing evaluation.

The TA referred to throughout this document is the kind that is delivered more than once and at a frequency where a relationship can be established between the TA provider and client. Some examples include the facilitation of a cross-state cohort, ongoing contact with a state coordinator and/or other state staff to support compliance, and implementation and scale-up of evidence-based practices to improve results for children with disabilities and their families.

These indicators illustrate how TA providers can be most effective in each of the practice areas, including promoting equity in TA implementation.
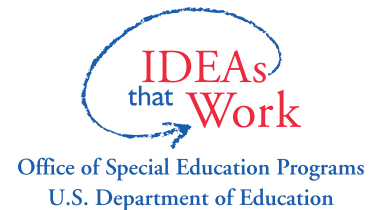
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1. Trusting relationships

In TA, trusting relationships are those in which the client believes that the TA provider has the best of intentions for the client's system and staff. Trust is established in TA by maintaining confidentiality, demonstrating respect and honesty, and confronting issues of bias as they emerge[4]. Trusting relationships are critical to TA. They lead to information sharing that establishes context; support collaborative partnership, reciprocal respect, and co-learning; increase the likelihood that the client reaches out for future TA support; and increase the likelihood that the client will use TA-identified resources and expertise to inform decision making at the policy level[5, 6].

Indicators

The TA provider will:
    A. Remain current on changes in national and state context including, but not limited to, the IDEA Part C state lead agency/State Education Agency (SEA), state early childhood initiatives and priorities, and federal developments impacting state IDEA early childhood programs
    B. Communicate understanding of the state and national context to the client
    C. Share timely and relevant information with the client
    D. Review TA center policies on confidentiality and share state-identified information only with permission from the client
    E. Reach out to the client regularly
    F. Respond to questions or requests for support in a timely manner
    G. Acknowledge and actively address bias (both implicit and explicit)
    H. Maintain a positive, supportive tone
    I. Empathize using strategies like modeling vulnerability, interpersonal check-in, and actively valuing lived experience
    J. Create opportunities to discuss challenges and identify assumptions when conflict emerges
    K. Prioritize client concerns
    L. Make referrals and facilitate transition to other TA providers or organizations as needed

2. Effective communication

Communication is the means through which TA providers build relationships and provide effective support to clients. Effective communication helps to identify, clarify, and address barriers to a high-quality system improvement[7, 8]. Effective communication is timely, consistent, and adaptive to different communication styles, preferred language and accessibility needs.

Indicators

The TA provider will:

A. Articulate how the TA center(s) can support client objectives/priorities
B. Respond promptly to all client communication efforts
C. Identify and use the client's preferred mode(s) for communication, including the need for interpreter and/or translator support
D. Identify the desired frequency of communication
E. Identify who will coordinate, schedule, and host meetings
F. Create opportunities to solicit input and exchange feedback to demonstrate respect for all perspectives
G. Identify and use client's preferred facilitation practices to support effective meetings
H. Summarize and identify action items to ensure shared understanding
I. Pause to check in on terminology and acronyms

3. Collaborative partnering

Collaborative partnering is a process in which the TA provider partners with the client in the systems they serve to discuss desired outcomes of the TA and associated strengths, needs, or barriers to the identified issue. Together, and with stakeholders, they co-create or identify strategies to achieve the desired outcomes[9]. Some benefits of effective collaboration include shared understanding, joint problem-solving, respect for community (state context, history, culture and priorities), enhanced individual commitment and capacity, efficiency, deepened relationships, and heightened morale[1, 7, 10, 11].

Indicators

Together, the TA provider and client will:

A. Cultivate and engage in discussion to support decision making
B. Demonstrate respect for each other's knowledge
C. Identify needs of and barriers to achieving the desired outcomes
D. Identify strengths that can be leveraged to improve the desired outcomes
E. Define the goals, actions, and strategies needed to support the desired outcomes
F. Demonstrate responsibility in achieving the desired outcomes by establishing and fulfilling roles and responsibilities
G. Have a professional investment in the outcomes of the TA

4. Differentiated support

Effective providers adjust TA delivery according to each system's strengths, needs, resources, and desired outcomes. Also taken into account is the skill level, experience, knowledge, and desire staff in the system bring to the change effort. The level of TA ranges from brief information, support tailored to client needs, to sustained TA engagement intended to facilitate systems change[6, 12]. Differentiation allows TA centers to align staff resources with client capacity to engage in TA activities. Differentiated support promotes equity by offering effective TA for all states based on client need and the capacity to create opportunities for participation for each client.

Indicators

The TA provider will:
A. Assess client capacity and needs
B. With the client, select the appropriate level of TA based on the identified outcomes of the request
C. Deliver TA honoring identified preferences, strengths and needs of the client

5. Adult learning strategies

TA providers incorporate adult learning strategies that are likely to increase individual's content knowledge[13, 14, 15, 16]. TA includes opportunities for ongoing support to help adult learners apply new information to their individual context. Ongoing support includes strategies such as: making information relevant to the learner's language, context, incorporating prior learning and experience, peer sharing in small groups, and the use of evaluation to gauge learners' understanding that is likely to affect individual change.

Indicators

The TA provider will:
A. Engage client in reflection about their relevant knowledge and experience
B. Provide timely information relevant to client's current work and articulate the intended benefit
C. Provide support and positive feedback on client use of new information and resources within their system context
D. Support client assessment of their application of new information and resources
E. Reflect with client on their understanding, implementation, and sustained use of the new information and resources
F. Identify next steps with the client to extend their application of the new knowledge

6. External leadership for change

Effective TA providers play a key leadership role in guiding activities required for systems change. A trusted person from outside the system can be a catalyst for change through deep understanding and facilitation of the change process[10, 17].

Indicators

The TA provider will:
   A. Bring topical knowledge, expertise and resources to inform the change effort, including ongoing training and guidance
   B. Explore data with the client to identify systemic strengths and assets as well as issues or challenges, that impact the current system and how the change effort can sufficiently address them
   C. Support the client in using strategies that promote active participation and build consensus across diverse stakeholders involved in the change effort
   D. Facilitate the development of an action plan, including the identification of common themes in the action-planning process
   E. Demonstrate an understanding of how the change effort can fit within system timeframes/timelines
   F. Facilitate regular check-ins on client perception of progress being made in relation to the action plan and if modifications are needed
   G. Respond promptly to facilitate difficult conversations that address conflict or resistance to the change effort

7. Partnerships for resource integration

Effective TA means partnering with the various organizations that comprise a system, as well as those that support and govern it. The TA provider works across federal and state public agencies, with professional development organizations and TA partners, professional associations, and consumer groups. This partnership provides a unified network of resources and supports available to both the TA provider and client for the desired outcome[18]. These resources and supports represent a wide breadth of expertise and knowledge providing clients and TA providers with effective strategies and tools that are coordinated, comprehensive and efficient.

Indicators

The TA provider will:

A. Consider client requests, priorities and objectives and determine if TA partners are needed (e.g., additional topical expertise)
B. Identify TA partners that are representative of the client programs being served
C. With client approval, actively seek and engage identified potential partners
D. With client approval, identify and share knowledge on state context and current requests with TA Partners
E. Co-develop and confirm methods for communicating within the TA partnership and with the client
F. Define and come to agreement on roles and responsibilities for individuals within the TA partnership and communicate those roles to the client
G. Ensure that each TA team member has equal opportunity to contribute using their preferred method of communication
H. Ensure diverse voices, particularly those who are not often engaged, meaningfully participate on TA partner teams
I. Increase the capacity of individuals to use TA products and resources from across the TA partnership, when applicable
J. Contribute to a climate in which all TA partners feel comfortable sharing their ideas
K. Demonstrate accountability for assigned role(s) and responsibilities within agreed upon timelines

8. Use of implementation, improvement, and systems change frameworks

Research has expanded the understanding of factors that lead to successful implementation of new policies and practices for improved equitable systems[19, 20]. Effective TA incorporates implementation, improvement, and systems change frameworks. Implementation science focuses on sustainability of evidence-based practices[13, 21, 22]. Improvement science focuses on ongoing evaluation and adjustment of change efforts[23]. Systems change frameworks focus on the effect of change on multiple components and levels of complex systems[10, 11, 24, 25, 26].

Indicators

The TA provider will:
A. Demonstrate knowledge of implementation, improvement and systems change frameworks
B. Support client to identify and use relevant key framework resources based on the TA request(s), priorities, strengths and needs
C. Facilitate needs assessment processes, as needed
D. Support client in identifying gaps and opportunities based on framework tools
E. Embed frameworks in planning and providing TA
F. Support client to address historical and current disparities in program resources
G. Support client to identify and use effective data collection and analysis tools to facilitate ongoing assessment of implementation
H. Support client to identify power differentials and resolve bias and equity disparities present with implementation of their systems change efforts

9. Ongoing evaluation

A critical component of effective TA is the ongoing collection and use of evaluation data to guide the work of the TA provider and the client. Evaluation data give the TA provider and the client regular feedback on what is and is not working and where course corrections can be made to more successfully achieve mutually agreed upon desired outcomes[11, 24, 27, 28]. Evaluation may occur at multiple time points, be revised as needed to reflect changes in state context or client priority, and involve staff outside of the TA team.

Indicators

The TA provider will:

    A. Understand the logical relationship between TA activities and intended outcomes and communicate that relationship to the client

    B. Collaborate with Center evaluators to develop or select evaluation tools that elicit information that informs TA delivery

    C. Gather regular feedback from client on what is working well and what could be improved in relation to client learning, needs, and priorities

    D. Review client feedback to identify where improvements to TA can be made

Jointly with the client:

    E. Identify short-term and long-term goals and desired outcomes of the TA to guide evaluation

    F. Develop a plan to collect and review ongoing evaluation data to inform TA delivery

    G. Use evaluation data to discuss TA processes including what is and is not working and revise TA activities accordingly

    H. Review the goals and outcomes of TA activities periodically, and revise as needed

    I. Identify and use system self-assessment tools, like the system framework self-assessment, to track system improvements over time

    J. Implement TA improvements identified through the review of the evaluation data

    K. Share TA improvements identified through the evaluation data with the client to demonstrate responsiveness to their feedback

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