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# EVALUATING SPP/APR IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITIES



NECTAC and RRC Program  
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### Purpose and Target Audiences

This document is intended to assist State Education Agency (SEA) and Lead Agency (LA) staff and technical assistance providers in designing a meaningful evaluation for the State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR) improvement activities. It provides 1) information about the relevance of evaluation in the context of improvement planning and strategic systems thinking; 2) guidance on selecting an appropriate design for evaluating different types of improvement activities and; 3) additional resources and tools that support the overall design, implementation and evaluation of the SPP which may serve as a State’s blueprint for systems improvement.

### Systems Change and the SPP/APR

“A system is a group of interacting, interrelated, and interdependent components that form a complex and unified whole.” (Coffman, 2007, p. 3). A system’s overall purpose or goal is achieved through the actions and interactions of its components. The Part C and Part B Programs are complex systems with interrelated and interdependent components. These systems have multiple policies, agencies, and strategies at the national, state and local level with varying outcomes at each of the different levels but with the common goal of achieving improved outcomes for children with disabilities and their families.

Given that systems are interrelated and interconnected, “systems change involves changing the capacity, interrelationships and interdependencies among parts, levels and stakeholders of a system with the consequence that desired changes in one part and level are accompanied by changes in other parts and levels to reach an idealized and sustainable vision of the whole.” (Olsen, quoted in Hurth & Goode, 2009, p. 1) To illustrate these complex systems, one might use a ‘theory of change’ model to show the process by which change is expected to occur and the responsibility that a particular initiative plays in producing that change. Sometimes illustrated through a visual depiction or logic model, a ‘theory of change’ shows how the inputs (resources) and processes (activities) connect to outputs (products or units produced, such as number of staff trained) and outcomes (intended results). Complex programs typically describe the intermediate outcomes (systems changes, including improved policies, procedures, and practices) and subsequent longer-term impacts (the goals of the program, such as improved outcomes for children). While the system is focused on the ultimate goal—better impacts for the system’s beneficiaries— it is just as important to identify intermediate outcomes that set the stage for longer-term impact. These intermediate outcomes relate to the system and are important measures of progress along the way. (Kahn, et al, 2009)



It is important to note that a ‘theory of change’ model enables stakeholders to understand how initiatives are doing in relation to their intended outcomes and impacts; and thus, can be used to inform the development of strategies or activities, as well as designing the evaluation. Sustainable

systems change requires developing “a comprehensive, long-term plan for implementing change and strengthening the infrastructure needed to sustain change at all levels of the system (supportive leadership, policies and procedures, funding mechanisms, accountability measures).” (Hurth & Goode, 2009, p. 2)

One might view a State Performance Plan as a long-term plan for systems change. Because the system components support the existing or current state and are interrelated, a change in one component is not likely to be sustained unless accompanied by supportive changes in all related components. Therefore, a combination of strategies addressing multiple levels of the system is more likely to lead to sustainable change and the desired outcomes. Given this, a State’s improvement activities must be viewed as interconnected, supporting changes to the infrastructure that work together to achieve the desired outcomes rather than functioning as separate activities. For example, the Part C SPP/APR indicator 7 (45-day timeline) investigative questions illustrate the interconnectedness of the systems that ensure that IFSP meetings are conducted within 45 days -- what systems supports are in place and what additional infrastructure is needed to support the change?

- Do we have clear policies and procedures in place that support quality provider practices and efficiency in meeting the 45-day timeline? Do we have policies and procedures that interfere with meeting the 45-day timeline?
- Do we have efficient and effective procedures for serving children in foster care, protective services and homeless children -- including the timely sharing of information, obtaining consents and scheduling?
- Are our agreements/contracts with other agencies and providers effective in ensuring the 45-day timeline is met?
- Do we provide opportunities for providers to receive professional development on this requirement?
- Is our monitoring and supervision adequate for this requirement (e.g., are we efficiently tracking caseloads and timelines in order to manage assignment of service coordinators/evaluation teams and scheduling and filling cancellations to ensure that we meet the 45-day timeline)?
- Do we have adequate numbers of providers to conduct evaluations and service coordinators to coordinate the IFSP process? If not, what are we doing to recruit and retain qualified personnel?

Adapted from: <http://spp-apr-calendar.rrfcnetwork.org/explorer/view/id/345>

Through these types of questions, a state can identify and implement a combination of improvement activities that collectively will strengthen the infrastructure and lead to sustainable change.

## **Types of SPP/APR Improvement Activities**

Suggested types of SPP improvement activities are offered for consideration to guide the SEA/LA in designing priority activities that will ultimately yield improved student achievement and child and family outcomes. Data based decisions should drive the selection process and activities targeted should represent improvements the state believes will have a significant impact on improving indicator data. An SEA/LA might choose one or more activities that fall within a specific category. When determining the organizational structures, protocols and technical assistance and training necessary to support the improvement planning process, actions may be designed within the following categories:

- a. Improve data collection and reporting
- b. Improve systems administration and monitoring
- c. Build systems and infrastructures of technical assistance and support
- d. Provide technical assistance/training/professional development
- e. Clarify/examine/develop policies and procedures
- f. Program development
- g. Collaboration/coordination
- h. Evaluation
- i. Increase/Adjust FTE

Following the implementation of SPP improvement activities, it becomes necessary to evaluate the extent to which the activities were implemented, whether or not the appropriate audience was reached, and the extent to which the activities achieved what was intended. Ultimately, what was their impact on achieving or maintaining compliance or improving results relative to the indicator(s)? Results of these data will drive decisions regarding which improvement activities need to be maintained, revised, eliminated or added.

## **Selecting and Reviewing a Set of Improvement Activities**

States have developed a 6-year SPP and annually revisit those plans and revise as needed. This allows for an opportunity to step back to look at the existing set of improvement activities and judge the extent to which a specific combination of activities can reasonably be expected to result in the desired systems change or improvements to the indicator. The following guiding questions are intended to help a state select or review their existing set of improvement activities and determine if they are appropriate, comprehensive, and specific enough to address all relevant system components to improve the indicator and ensure sustainability. The focus of the questions is to encourage thinking of the improvement activities from a systems thinking approach. The following section outlines the specific steps in designing the evaluation.

1. Was a root cause analysis conducted to drive the selection of the improvement activities?

2. Was a logical linkage established between the root cause(s), data collection, analysis and proposed improvement activity outcome(s)?
3. Do the activities reflect evidence-based practices (e.g., from other states, from TA&D Centers)?
4. Does the improvement activity address more than one indicator? Is it linked to other SEA/LA improvement initiatives/priorities?
5. Have partners been identified to assist in improvement activity implementation?
6. Have specific action steps been developed to complete the improvement activity (e.g., task, activity, person(s) responsible, resources needed, timeline, etc.)?
7. Have personnel been identified who will develop, implement, monitor and evaluate the improvement activity?
8. Are the short-term and long-term outcomes identified for the improvement activity?
9. Have methods to collect the outcome data been identified?
10. Have data sources been identified?
11. Has a data collection timeline been developed?
12. How will the outcome data be reported? To whom?

### **Steps for Evaluating Individual Improvement Activities**

Several key aspects of evaluation should be considered when planning the evaluation of state improvement activities including goals, methods, timelines, baseline data, planned data analysis, planned data use and individual responsibilities. Consider the following seven steps to help guide your evaluation planning:

1. What is the goal or purpose? Or what question(s) will your evaluation be trying to answer? Is it process oriented? Or outcome/impact oriented?
2. What methods will you use for data collection? What are the primary data sources? How should data be collected? Is sampling required? If so, how will you sample? How will data quality be ensured? Choose an appropriate method(s): focus groups, observation, surveys, interview, existing data, etc.
3. What are your timelines for collecting, analyzing and reporting the data? When would the results of the evaluation be most useful?
4. What is your baseline data that you will monitor for improvement?
5. How will the data be analyzed? What analytical techniques are available and most appropriate?
6. How will the evaluation results be used? How should the findings be packaged and shared in order to be most useful?
7. Who will be responsible for the various aspects of the evaluation?

## Scenario

Imagine your state is missing a considerable amount of data for the child outcomes C3/B7 indicators. In your analysis of the system, you discover that a number of local programs are unclear about who is responsible for collecting outcomes data, when the data should be collected, when the data should be reported, which children should be included in the data, etc. Upon further exploration, you conclude that some of the written policies and procedures are unclear and not all local administrators and staff have been trained on the process. One specific procedure that is unclear relates to the roles and responsibilities of Part C staff and Section 619 staff when a child turns age 3 years and is transitioning from Part C to Part B special education services.

Your state determines that three key improvement activities should collectively address these issues—1) collaborate across State Part C and Section 619 agencies to clarify roles and responsibilities of local programs at the data collection point when the child exits Part C and enters Part B, 2) revise written policies and procedures about child outcomes data collection in order to add new details and to clarify the existing information (including roles and responsibilities of Part C and Section 619 school district staff), and 3) provide additional training on the child outcomes data collection and reporting process (to include the revised written policies and procedures).

### Improvement Activity 1: Collaboration

Collaborate across State Part C and Section 619 agencies to clarify roles and responsibilities of local programs at the data collection point when the child exits Part C and enters Part B.

1. What is the goal or purpose of the activity? What question(s) will the evaluation be trying to answer? Is it process oriented? Or outcome/impact oriented?

Goal: To clarify roles and responsibilities of Part C and Section 619 school district staff in the collection and reporting of child outcomes data, specifically at the shared data point when a child turns age 3 and transitions into Part B services.

Questions: To what extent did the collaboration result in clear descriptions of roles and responsibilities for Part C and Section 619 staff?

Type of evaluation: This is an outcome evaluation

2. What methods will be used for data collection? What are the primary data sources? How should data be collected? Is sampling required? If so, how will the State sample?

Methods: Focused discussion: small group of local staff review the written roles and responsibilities for clarity. If needed, the group provides additional ideas for clarification.

Data sources: Local staff feedback gathered during the discussion.

Sample: 8-10 staff from local programs willing to review and provide feedback on the written roles and responsibilities.

3. What are the timelines for collecting, analyzing and reporting the data? When would the results of the evaluation be most useful?

Timelines: Prior to the dissemination of revised policies and procedures and the provision of training.

4. What is your baseline data that you will monitor for improvement?

Baseline: Local reports that roles and responsibilities are unclear. Absence of written roles and responsibilities for Part C and Section 619 staff.

5. How will the data be analyzed? What analytical techniques are available and most appropriate?

Analysis: Notes/transcript from the reviewer discussion will be analyzed to determine whether or not the roles and responsibilities for Part C and Section 619 are clear and, if not, how they could be improved.

6. How will the evaluation results be used? How should the findings be packaged and shared in order to be most useful?

Use: Feedback from reviewers will help ensure written roles and responsibilities are clear. The written roles and responsibilities will then be incorporated into the overall policies and procedures related to collecting and reporting outcomes data and will be incorporated into the training agenda/materials.

7. Who will be responsible for the various aspects of the evaluation?

Responsibilities: Part C Lead Agency and 619 State staff will identify a set of local providers/program staff to participate in the review, and subsequently discuss the reviewer feedback and implications for additional clarification of roles and responsibilities.

## **Improvement Activity 2: Policies and Procedures**

Revise written policies and procedures about child outcomes data collection in order to add new details and to clarify the existing information.

1. What is the goal or purpose of the activity? What question(s) will the evaluation be trying to answer? Is it process oriented? Is it outcome/impact oriented?

Goal: To improve the written policies and procedures so that local program staff find them clear and comprehensive regarding collecting and reporting child outcomes data.

Questions: To what extent do local programs find the policies and procedures clear and comprehensive? Do staff understand their role in collecting and reporting child outcomes data? Do staff understand when to collect the data? Do staff understand when to report the data? Do staff understand what children are eligible for participation in data collection? etc.

Type of evaluation: This is an outcome evaluation

2. What methods will you use for data collection? What are the primary data sources? How should data be collected? Is sampling required? If so, how will the State sample?

Methods: Ask local program staff to complete an online questionnaire after disseminating the revised policies and procedures to see if they find the revised policies and procedures to be clear and complete and also to measure their understanding of the policies for collecting and reporting child outcomes data.

Data sources: Program survey.

Sample: No sampling. Collect data from all programs.

3. What are your timelines for collecting, analyzing and reporting the data? When would the results of the evaluation be most useful?

Timelines: Gather program survey data in the month immediately following the dissemination of the revised policies.

4. What is your baseline data that you will monitor for improvement?

Baseline: Reports from local programs that policies and procedures are unclear.

5. How will the data be analyzed? What analytical techniques are available and most appropriate?

Analysis: Descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, median, mode, standard deviation, range) can be used to show programs' feedback on whether the revised policies and procedures are clear and complete. Descriptive statistics can also be used to show programs staffs' understanding of the data collection and reporting policies and procedures.

6. How will the evaluation results be used? How should the findings be packaged and shared in order to be most useful?

Use: The questionnaire data should be used to help determine whether the policies and procedures are clear and complete and whether program staff are understanding the data collection and reporting policies. If the data show that programs still do not find the policies clear, they may need additional revisions.

7. Who will be responsible for the various aspects of the evaluation?

Responsibilities: State Part C Lead Agency and Section 619 staff will be responsible for the development and dissemination of the survey. State office(s) will process the data and share results back with the stakeholder group that revised the survey. Stakeholder group will discuss the results and determine if additional revisions need to be made to the policies.

### **Improvement Activity 3: Training and Technical Assistance**

Provide training on the child outcomes data collection and reporting process (including the revised policies and procedures).

1. What is the goal or purpose of the activity? What question(s) will the evaluation be trying to answer? Is it process oriented? Is it outcome/impact oriented?

Goal: To increase local provider/program understanding of the child outcomes data collection and reporting process and specifically their roles and responsibilities in related to collecting and reporting the data.

Questions: To what extent did the training result in staff being knowledgeable about their roles and responsibilities?

Type of evaluation: This is an outcome evaluation

2. What methods will the State use for data collection? What are the primary data sources? How should data be collected? Is sampling required? If so, how will the State sample?

Methods: Ask training participants to complete a questionnaire at the end of the training in order to measure their knowledge of the child outcomes data collection and reporting process, and specifically, their roles and responsibilities related to collecting and reporting the data.

Data sources: Participant survey.

Sample: No sampling. Collect data from all training participants.

3. What are the State's timelines for collecting, analyzing and reporting the data? When would the results of the evaluation be most useful?

Timelines: Gather participant survey data immediately following the training.

4. What is your baseline data that you will monitor for improvement?

Baseline: Data about programs/staff not yet trained. Reports from local programs about not understanding the child outcomes data collection process.

5. How will the data be analyzed? What analytical techniques are available and most appropriate?

Analysis: Descriptive statistics can be used to show participants' knowledge of child outcomes data collection and reporting process.

6. How will the evaluation results be used? How should the findings be packaged and shared in order to be most useful?

Use: The training questionnaire data should be used to help determine how much the participants learned/understand the child outcomes data collection and reporting process. If the initial training results are poor, additional supports will need to be provided, additional trainings may be needed and/or the training agenda, materials, etc. may need to be revised.

7. Who will be responsible for the various aspects of the evaluation?

Responsibilities: State staff and trainers will be responsible for the development of the training survey. Trainers will disseminate the questionnaire, analyze the data and share results back with the State staff. State staff and trainers will discuss the results and determine if additional follow up with the program is needed.

## Across All Improvement Activities – Long term outcomes

1. What is the long term goal of all the improvement activities (collectively)? What question(s) will the evaluation try to answer? Is the evaluation process oriented? Is the evaluation outcome/impact oriented?

Long term goal: To increase statewide reporting of child outcomes data (and decrease the missing data in the child outcomes indicator)

Questions: To what extent did the statewide reporting of child outcome data increase (the missing data decrease)?

Type of evaluation: This is an outcome evaluation

2. What methods will the State use for data collection? What are the primary data sources? How should data be collected? Is sampling required? If so, how will you sample?

Methods: Calculate the percentage of missing data for the Annual Performance Report for C3/B7 to see if the amount of missing data has decreased since the previous year.

Data sources: Data system/monitoring data.

Sample: No sampling. Collect data from all programs.

3. What are the timelines for collecting, analyzing and reporting the data? When would the results of the evaluation be most useful?

Timelines: Programs will collect and report child outcomes data for the months following the dissemination of the revised policies and procedures. At the end of the year, the State will calculate the missing data for the Annual Performance Report and compare it to the previous year's percentage of missing data.

4. What is your baseline data that you will monitor for improvement?

Baseline: % of missing data for C3/B7 for the previous year.

5. How will the data be analyzed? What analytical techniques are available and most appropriate?

Analysis: A comparison of the overall percentage of missing data before and after the revised policies and procedures and trainings can be used to demonstrate improvement in staff implementation of the child outcomes data collection and reporting. Further analysis by programs that participated in the training is an additional level of analysis.

6. How will the evaluation results be used? How should the findings be packaged and shared in order to be most useful?

Use: Results will be reported in the next APR. Additionally, the overall improvement on missing data will be shared with the local programs to discuss improvements and discuss potential for more improvement. Local programs that continue to have missing data will receive additional TA.

7. Who will be responsible for the various aspects of the evaluation?

Responsibilities: State staff will calculate the percentage of missing data for the months following the dissemination of revised policies and procedures and compare the statewide data with the previous year's data. State staff will share the data with the local programs and discuss improvement and potential for additional improvement.

**Conclusion**

The above guidelines and examples provide the reader with an overview of systems change thinking as related to the selection and evaluation of SPP/APR improvement activities. The final section of this document lists additional resources and guidance documents that provide greater depth into the topic.

## **Additional Resources/Tools**

**SPP/APR Calendar Investigative Questions.** States are encouraged to answer the investigative questions for each SPP/APR Indicator to assist with determining their technical assistance needs. Use this link to select an indicator to review its investigative questions: <http://spp-apr-calendar.rrfcnetwork.org/techassistance.html>

**State Systems Improvement Self Assessment and Planning Guide.** [<http://spp-apr-calendar.rrfcnetwork.org/getfile/view/id/562>] Mid-South Regional Resource Center developed this 15-page document, designed to be used as an assessment of State systems by State Part B and Part C staff and their stakeholders. It provides a detailed process for State Education Agencies (SEA) and Lead Agencies (LA) to follow that will guide improvement efforts relative to the APR indicators and other statewide initiatives. Its purpose is to assist States in 1) implementing a systematic approach to designing and refining improvement activities; 2) aligning improvement activities with State priorities; 3) allocating funding and human resources to State improvement efforts which are most effective; and 4) implementing, tracking, documenting and evaluating improvement efforts designed to achieve or maintain compliance and improve performance that lead to better results.

**A Systems Framework to Guide Improvement Planning and Technical Assistance to States: Considering Multilevel Influences for Successful and Sustainable Implementation of Improvement Activities.** [<http://spp-apr-calendar.rrfcnetwork.org/getfile/view/id/688>]

The purpose of this guide is to assist states and TA providers in making improvement planning and technical assistance decisions within a systems context as it applies to the SPP/APR development.

**NCRRC SPP/APR Improvement Activity Review Form.** [<http://spp-apr-calendar.rrfcnetwork.org/getfile/view/id/647>] This form is intended for states to broadly assess quality of improvement activities for SPP/APR indicators.

**NECTAC TA Model** [<http://spp-apr-calendar.rrfcnetwork.org/getfile/view/id/642>] This 18-page document describes components of a state's Systems Change Plan. The content is presented in bulleted format for ease of use by TA providers working with an individual state on a process for improving the state system of services.

**How to Develop a SPDG Evaluation Plan.** [P. Gonzalez, 2009]  
[[http://www.signetwork.org/Docs/CallNotes/2009/FY09SPDGNoticeBiddersWebinar/PG\\_EvaluationPlanApr09.ppt](http://www.signetwork.org/Docs/CallNotes/2009/FY09SPDGNoticeBiddersWebinar/PG_EvaluationPlanApr09.ppt)] Although this PowerPoint focuses on State Personnel Development Grants, it does provide concrete steps in developing an evaluation plan.

**University of Wisconsin – Extension Program Development and Evaluation Sample Logic Models.** [<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/evallogicmodel.html>]

**W.K. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide.**  
[<http://www.wkkf.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1185&NID=140&AddToCart=2813669;0&Language=0&ReturnURL=%2fdefault.aspx%3ftabid%3d101%26CID%3d281%26CatID%3d281%26ItemID%3d2813669%26NID%3d20%26LanguageID%3d0&LanguageID=0>] This guide was

developed to provide practical assistance to nonprofits engaged in the process of outcomes-based evaluation in orienting them to the underlying principles of "logic modeling".

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