

Building Coherence, Collaboration, & Capacity

A Report on the Delaware Consolidated District Planning and Application Project



The Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center
at The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education

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About the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center

The Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC) at The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (GW-CEEE) is one of 16 federally funded regional comprehensive centers charged with providing support to state departments of education (SEAs) to implement No Child Left Behind (NCLB). MACC serves the mid-Atlantic SEAs in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Through its state and regional work, MACC identifies, develops, and delivers services to SEAs based on their needs and aligned to MACC's three goal areas:

Goal 1. SEAs foster relationships, resource sharing, and comprehensive planning across divisions for the purpose of meeting technical assistance needs of districts and schools identified for improvement.

Goal 2. SEAs use data to identify and differentiate the needs of districts and schools identified for improvement so that appropriate assistance can be delivered to address these needs.

Goal 3. SEAs design and use ongoing, job-embedded, professional development that helps district instructional leaders build effective practice in schools identified for improvement.

These goals summarize MACC's theory of action about the organizational strategies that are essential if SEAs are to provide effective support to districts and schools in need of improvement.

About MACC's Work

Through its work, MACC assists mid-Atlantic SEA staff in refining and developing new knowledge and skills necessary to deliver coordinated and coherent technical assistance customized to meet the needs of schools and districts identified for improvement.

MACC's work in Delaware, as in other states, is initiated and driven by SEA staff. Thus, SEAs set the parameters of their state projects. However, there are some activities within each project that MACC initiates. MACC's role is to provide assistance within state parameters and, when feasible, initiate activities that will enhance project outcomes. Finally, while MACC often assists states in analyzing existing data to determine district and school needs, MACC does not conduct research.

Building Statewide Systems of Support

MACC's primary mission is to build the capacity of each SEA in the mid-Atlantic region to implement NCLB. Specifically, MACC focuses on empowering SEA officials with the knowledge and skills they need to implement an effective statewide system of support, in the form of differentiated technical assistance (TA) for districts and schools in need of improvement.

The framework MACC uses for this work is based on research conducted by the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII), one of five federally funded national content centers that support the work of the regional comprehensive centers in states.

CII's [*Framework for an Effective Statewide System of Support*](#) (Redding, 2009) is a theory of action for ways SEAs can encourage and support change in districts and schools. The CII framework recognizes that schools and districts are social systems made up of people who perform roles to fulfill the purposes of their subsystems and the system as a whole. The framework identifies three elements of an effective statewide system of support, which address continuous improvement and coordinated roles within district and school systems. These elements are as follows.

- Providing **incentives** for change. Incentives are state pressures, rather than mandates, that motivate district and school personnel to change or improve. Incentives may encourage or discourage certain district or school actions.
- Providing **opportunities** for change. States provide opportunities for districts and schools to change or improve by removing obstacles to improvement (with waivers, exemptions from rules and regulations, or alternate routes to certification, for example) and creating new space for schools (charter schools, pilot schools, or schools-within-a-school, for example).
- Building **capacity** for change and improvement both systemically and locally. Building system capacity includes creating and disseminating knowledge on improvement processes or effective teaching practices, enhancing the supply of personnel, and developing a strong data system. Building local capacity includes coordinating capacity-building structures and roles for the statewide system of support, differentiating support to districts and schools, providing and delivering services to districts and schools, and allocating resources for services.

States can address the first two elements of the framework—incentives and opportunities—through policies and procedures.

Capacity building—and, specifically, *local* capacity building—often requires *organizational changes at the SEA level* to enable SEA staff to perform this function. Organizational changes include redefining existing SEA structures and defining new SEA roles and responsibilities so a capacity-building service delivery system can be put into place. Many states attempt to build local capacity for school improvement without making these organizational changes, which often results in uneven TA services to districts and schools.

The Format for This Report

This report describes MACC's experiences with the Delaware Department of Education during its major, multi-year Consolidated District Planning and Application Project, which is aimed at ensuring continuous improvement in all districts and schools. The report chronicles two stages of the project, which began in MACC's Year One (2005–06) and continued through MACC's Year Four (2008–09):

- Stage 1: Focusing on Student Needs in Consolidated District Planning
- Stage 2: Planning Strategically for District Success

This report describes the work MACC conducted with the SEA in each stage and the driving questions for this work, along with reflections from MACC and SEA staff. Each section concludes with thoughts from MACC staff regarding the challenges of providing technical assistance to an SEA.

New Beginnings

In the fall of 2005, the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center was beginning its first year of a new five-year grant to support the implementation of NCLB. GW-CEEE had just completed a nine-year period as the administrator of the Region III Comprehensive Center, MACC's predecessor under the previous cycle of comprehensive centers established under the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. Thus, GW-CEEE brought a wealth of experience and knowledge in providing technical assistance to states and districts.

One of the key lessons from this earlier work was that projects with SEAs often lacked a framework or theory of action to guide the activities. Thus, the work tended to be driven by various—and often disconnected—requests and needs of the SEAs and was not coherent. The new comprehensive centers were tasked with building the capacity of each SEA to implement NCLB. Within this context, MACC's specific mission focuses on building SEA capacity to operationalize a statewide system of support that provides differentiated technical assistance (TA) for districts and schools in need of improvement.

To guide this new focus of work with states, MACC leadership reviewed the available research on state capacity to improve low-performing districts and schools and identified three need areas in which MACC could support SEAs.

Goal 1. SEAs foster relationships, resource sharing, and comprehensive planning across divisions for the purpose of meeting technical assistance needs of districts and schools identified for improvement.

Goal 2. SEAs use data to identify and differentiate the needs of districts and schools identified for improvement so that appropriate assistance can be delivered to address these needs.

Goal 3. SEAs design and use ongoing, job-embedded, professional development that helps district instructional leaders build effective practice in schools identified for improvement.

These three goals have guided MACC's work in Delaware, including the Consolidated District Planning and Application Project.

Stage 1

Focusing on Student Needs with Consolidated District Planning

Guiding Question

- *How can the SEA develop a coherent and integrated system of supports for districts and schools?*

Moving from Compliance to Relevance

In the past decade, SEAs across the nation have begun to take on a new and important role in education that is unprecedented in their history. Beyond assuring compliance with state and federal regulations, SEAs were tasked under NCLB to provide differentiated technical assistance for districts and schools in need of improvement.

The Delaware Department of Education has made steady progress in establishing an effective statewide system of support, known as the Delaware Education Support System (DESS). Establishing this system, however, required a close examination of every aspect of departmental practices. By the fall of 2005, in fact, as SEA officials were planning and organizing DESS, they realized that Delaware's district planning process was of limited usefulness to this endeavor.

SEA officials viewed the annual district planning and application process largely as a compliance activity, rather than as part of a true district and school improvement exercise or tool. Many district plans demonstrated neither a thoughtful, collaborative planning process nor a realistic set of activities that would lead to improvement. To enable the SEA to effectively meet its obligation of providing differentiated technical assistance to districts and schools, SEA officials believed the planning and application process needed to be *relevant* to the goal of district and school improvement.

A leadership team of SEA officials, with representatives from across programs and divisions in the department, was tasked with developing a more effective district planning and application process. The challenges that SEA officials recognized touched on every aspect of the planning and application process.

- **Multiple applications.** School districts were required to file separate applications annually to report their plans and funding requests for both school improvement and IDEA. These separate applications encouraged a siloed approach to district planning.
- **Lack of coherence and collaboration in district planning.** Although the SEA encouraged district officials to work together to develop their plans and funding requests, many districts did not seem to approach the planning and application process collaboratively. Instead, individual program officers typically developed separate plans for their own programs—even though there is a good deal of overlap in students served by different programs. There was little evidence of a comprehensive, shared vision for school improvement that integrated all programs and services for students.
- **Inadequate documentation of student needs.** In an era of accountability and data-driven decision making, understanding student needs is essential for providing differentiated technical assistance to districts and schools, professional development for

school leaders and teachers, and supports for students. District plans did not include a deep enough analysis of district and school needs, SEA officials believed.

- **Lack of connection between plans and activities.** SEA officials noticed that some districts viewed the planning and application process as an end itself. Once funding was secured, the plans sat on a shelf. Instead, continuous improvement requires living documents that link to specific actions and change as situations evolve.
- **A static electronic application.** The application itself was in need of a makeover to bring it into the 21st century. The SEA envisioned replacing the separate school improvement and IDEA plans with a web-based application that would allow progress updates and ongoing changes.

To address these challenges, the SEA team had begun to revise the district planning process, following the lead of other states that had combined the IDEA and consolidated applications. The aim would be a comprehensive application process that resulted in more deliberate district planning for school improvement and resource allocation—based on identified student needs. This process would also enable the SEA to improve its evaluation and monitoring activities.

Building State Capacity to Effect Change

At this point, with the challenges identified, SEA officials invited MACC to assist with developing a solution to the planning and application process. The project had been progressing slowly, because many other SEA priorities and obligations took precedence. MACC added value at this stage of the project in three ways.

- **Creating momentum for moving forward.** MACC's consistent presence and expertise at leadership team meetings helped SEA officials focus on the tasks required to implement a web-based, consolidated school planning application. MACC served as a critical friend, compiling meeting notes, keeping track of decisions, and offering informed advice.
- **Investigating consolidated district planning in other states.** MACC conducted extensive research and in-depth analysis of other states' planning and application processes, as well as how other states and their districts actually *use* their consolidated plans for school improvement. MACC reported how seven states—Georgia, Kentucky, Idaho, Maryland, Ohio, Tennessee, and West Virginia—approached consolidated planning, with information about their rationale; policy and procedural steps; key processes, tools, and strategies; and lessons learned. This work also addressed how states make funding allocations and how districts are expected to justify their funding requests.
- **Bringing the perspective of districts to the table.** MACC guided the SEA to broaden stakeholder input to ensure that the application and planning process were as useful as possible to all users. MACC participated in a series of day-long meetings with district officials and, after the online application was launched, in focus groups of districts officials to gather their feedback and improve the system.

MACC also recommended organizing project activities to support the main goals of the project, which were to encourage district-level:

- Collaboration in developing a consolidated application;
- Analysis of data to uncover areas of need; and
- Development of measurable goals and alignment of resources to provide strategies to address identified needs.

The Delaware Department of Education launched its web-based consolidated district planning application in 2008. Known as the Education Success Planning and Evaluation System (ESPES), the system supports district planning and funding requests for all federally funded NCLB Title programs, special education and career and technical education programs, and state-funded programs, in one application. The system makes it easier for districts to connect their plans and funding requests to data and identified student needs. The system also supports evaluation and monitoring activities.

Reflections on Stage 1

The MACC Perspective

This project is well aligned with MACC's Goal 1—helping SEAs foster relationships, resource sharing, and comprehensive planning across divisions for the purpose of meeting technical assistance needs of districts and schools identified for improvement.

The SEA Perspective

MACC “really kept the group focused on how to get districts to plan collaboratively,” particularly on their NCLB and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) programs, and on “how we might be helpful and realistic in what we are able to offer” to districts. MACC staff members fostered communication and collaboration between the SEA and districts—and also across districts. The relevance, quality, usefulness, and timeliness of MACC's work on this project were outstanding.

—From an internal evaluation of MACC's services by Edvantia

Challenges of Stage 1

Just as some school district officials had strong allegiances to specific programs and a level of comfort with the existing district planning and application process, some SEA officials were similarly inclined. Not all SEA team members for this project were initially convinced that change was necessary, particularly when previous practices had been considered effective in the past.

MACC responded to this challenge with research and best practices from other states that showed the improvements, including strategic thinking about how to improve student learning, that resulted from consolidated district planning. And it helped that one member of the MACC team was a former district Title I director with a deep understanding of planning and funding traditions and innovations in federal and state programs.

Stage 2

Supporting Districts in Planning for Success

Guiding Question

- *How can the SEA help districts develop a strategic planning process that informs school improvement?*

The process of developing and launching a statewide, web-based consolidated planning and application system was a critical milestone for the Delaware Department of Education and its statewide system of support. But in terms of district and school improvement, this system was only a solid foundation upon which to build. For the implementation to be successful, districts would need substantial support to actually change their planning—and improvement—processes.

MACC was instrumental in creating the environment for these improvements to occur. Working in partnership with SEA leaders, MACC assisted with the outreach, support, and resources that would empower districts to plan for success. As part of this effort, MACC coordinated the creation of guiding questions and rubrics to help districts assess their own level of implementation of inclusive planning. The SEA provided technical assistance and professional development for navigating the new system, while MACC helped SEA officials focus on building districts' capacity to plan for success.

MACC's theory of action for this work is that districts should use strategic planning to guide the development of the consolidated application. For districts, the strategic plan would be most effective if district leadership strongly supported it from its inception and if the planning involved a broad range of stakeholders, who would share ownership and responsibility for its effective implementation. MACC's contributions at this stage of the project included:

- Planning the **rollout campaign** to build district awareness and understanding of the consolidated application;
- Developing **guidance and guiding questions** for districts to conduct consolidated, collaborative, and strategic planning; and
- Creating **self-assessment rubrics** for districts to reflect on their success in developing strategic plans that included collaboration among district, school, and community stakeholders and decisions informed by data.

MACC supported the SEA and districts in practicing continuous improvement of the planning and application process during the first-year rollout of the system. MACC developed a number of strategies and tools to gauge how well the system was working, including:

- **Web-based meetings and a blog** to encourage broad collaboration for developing and improving the guidance, guiding questions, and self-assessment rubrics;
- Protocols for **surveys and focus groups** for district and SEA officials (A section of the online survey for districts is shown in Figure 1.); and
- **Independent reports** that analyzed the findings of the feedback instruments and made recommendations for improvements to the system.

1. Plan Process, Plan Development, and Implementation

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

1. The online LEA Success Plan helped my LEA prioritize its needs and develop goals, objectives and strategies.

☐ 1 Strongly Disagree ☐ 2 Disagree ☐ 3 Agree ☐ 4 Strongly Agree

2. The online LEA Success Plan allowed for better linkages between data and proposed strategies.

☐ 1 Strongly Disagree ☐ 2 Disagree ☐ 3 Agree ☐ 4 Strongly Agree

3. The DDOE Common Measures were helpful in focusing the priorities of my LEA's Success Plan.

☐ 1 Strongly Disagree ☐ 2 Disagree ☐ 3 Agree ☐ 4 Strongly Agree

4. The online LEA Success Plan and Consolidated Grant Application will assist in a better implementation of the LEA Success Plan.

☐ 1 Strongly Disagree ☐ 2 Disagree ☐ 3 Agree ☐ 4 Strongly Agree

Source: Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center

Figure 1. A Sample Section of a District Survey on Delaware's Consolidated Planning and Application System

SEA leaders and staff members subsequently used this valuable information to incorporate revisions to the online system to make it easier to use. The SEA also stepped up its technical assistance, professional development, and use of resources to support districts with their planning and application processes.

While the SEA continued to improve the web-based system, it also began to use the improved information and data from the district plans to support districts and schools in need of improvement. MACC assisted SEA officials in streamlining a new protocol by collecting implementation data after the pilot process. The new protocol was designed for conducting Focus Monitoring visits to districts and schools whose student performance was significantly below state targets.

For this component of the statewide system of support, MACC again created a survey for SEA, district, and parent representatives who participated in the Focus Monitoring visits, and for school staff members who were observed. The survey was administered online using Survey Monkey. MACC developed a report and recommendations from the survey results, which the SEA used to improve this process as well.

Challenges of Stage 2

Leadership changes and staff turnover have stalled this project at times, as the Delaware Department of Education reevaluates its priorities. In this context, it has been a challenge for the SEA to focus on providing the professional development and technical assistance necessary to improve strategic planning and improvement. MACC has responded to this challenge with its

consistent presence, serving as a critical friend to provide continuity and renew the sense of direction for this and other projects in Delaware.

Reflections on Stage 2

The MACC Perspective

This stage of the project continued to address MACC's Goal 1—fostering relationships, resource sharing, and comprehensive planning across divisions for the purpose of meeting technical assistance needs of districts and schools identified for improvement. The project expanded with work on Goals 2 and 3 as well. For Goal 2, Delaware is using data to identify and differentiate the needs of districts and schools in need of improvement. The SEA is also providing ongoing technical assistance as a result of the new web-based plans. For Goal 3, Delaware is designing and using ongoing job-embedded professional development that is helping district instructional leaders build effective practices in schools identified for improvement.

The SEA Perspective

MACC helped the Delaware Department of Education “improve the coherence of the Education Success Planning and Evaluation System and to identify the weak components to be reengineered with LEA input.” The guiding questions and rubrics MACC developed for the system were “extremely helpful as a guide to the strategic planning process.” MACC helped the SEA collect and focus on indicators and measures of district and school progress—new kinds of data that help the SEA specify district and school needs and provide appropriate technical assistance. MACC staff members have been “thought partners” during key stages of this project.

“All of our contacts at MACC have been so responsive. We know they are there to support us, which hasn't always been the case with comprehensive centers in the past. They are a quality shop.”

—A Delaware Department of Education staff member

Conclusion

This project with the Delaware Department of Education exemplifies the value that MACC brings to SEAs in the Mid-Atlantic region. In Delaware, the focus is on strengthening coherence, collaboration, and capacity in the statewide system of support.

At the state level, MACC supported the SEA in building a new consolidated district planning and application process that addressed shortcomings of the existing system. MACC encouraged SEA officials to collaborate across divisions and departments, and with districts, to incorporate multiple points of view. Year by year, SEA capacity to support districts and schools in need of improvement grows.

At the district level, success planning is a more coherent process grounded in student needs and systematic use of data. A robust planning process encourages and supports collaboration among many district and school stakeholders, including district leaders, program specialists, staff, and community members. This collaboration fosters thoughtful planning, integrated approaches to

district and school improvement, meaningful goals, and realistic activities. Technical assistance and professional development are increasing districts' capacity to improve school and classroom practices.

This work requires deep expertise in strategic planning at both the state and district levels. It requires an understanding of the research on various topics in education, including the effective collection and use of data to inform decisions and effective professional development for district leaders and school staff.

The work also requires an understanding of the nature of SEAs, large organizations that develop and implement policies and practices that affect students statewide. The work requires an understanding of a framework or theory of action that helps SEAs to reshape their roles and responsibilities to schools and districts. Finally, the work requires a long-term commitment to improve practice on the part of the SEA and the comprehensive center, regardless of turnover in SEA and comprehensive center staff.

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