



BENJAMIN K. MASTER, ELAINE LIN WANG, SUSAN BUSH-MECENAS, REBECCA L. WOLFE, SY DOAN

What State Education Agency Leaders Want from Federal Technical Assistance



For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/t/RR4822-1.

About RAND

RAND is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. To learn more about RAND, visit www.rand.org.

Research Integrity

Our mission to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis is enabled through our core values of quality and objectivity and our unwavering commitment to the highest level of integrity and ethical behavior. To help ensure our research and analysis are rigorous, objective, and nonpartisan, we subject our research publications to a robust and exacting quality-assurance process; avoid both the appearance and reality of financial and other conflicts of interest through staff training, project screening, and a policy of mandatory disclosure; and pursue transparency in our research engagements through our commitment to the open publication of our research findings and recommendations, disclosure of the source of funding of published research, and policies to ensure intellectual independence. For more information, visit www.rand.org/about/research-integrity.

RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© 2026 RAND Corporation

RAND® is a registered trademark.

Cover photo credit: FatCamera/Getty Images

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This publication and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited; linking directly to its webpage on rand.org is encouraged. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research products for commercial purposes. For information on reprint and reuse permissions, visit www.rand.org/about/publishing/permissions.

About This Report

Our study explores what state education agency (SEA) leaders find useful about federal technical assistance (TA), what barriers have limited effectiveness of TA, and how future investments could better address states' needs. We captured perspectives from 37 current and recent-former SEA leaders across 14 states and the District of Columbia.

This report contributes new insights about TA services to inform the redesign of the Regional Educational Laboratories and Comprehensive Centers. It also provides more-general information about states' TA preferences to federal education agency leaders, policymakers, and TA providers seeking to strengthen the design, delivery, and oversight of federal TA for states. The report may also interest SEA leaders who access and leverage federal TA to implement programs, build capacity, and improve outcomes for students.

RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure

This work was conducted in the Education and Employment Program of RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure, a division of RAND that aims to improve educational opportunity, economic prosperity, and civic life for all. For more information, visit www.rand.org/eei or email EEI@rand.org.

Funding

This study was funded by The Wallace Foundation.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the SEA leaders who agreed to participate in our interviews and to the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Consortium for State Education Support, who assisted in publicizing our research invitation. We thank Heather Peske and Julia Kaufman for peer reviewing the report and providing helpful feedback that greatly improved it; Jill Cannon for serving as quality assurance manager; and Monette Velasco for overseeing the publication process.

Summary

Top Recommendations Based on States' Feedback

- Federal technical assistance (TA) to state education agencies (SEAs) should prioritize specialized expertise (e.g., on specific instructional topics or student groups), research and evaluation support, and cross-state networking that tackles shared challenges.
- TA awards should aim to match SEAs with providers that know their state well and are well-positioned to support them over multiple years and projects.
- Federal TA should reduce administrative burdens on states by ensuring access to experts who can offer timely, authoritative, and collaborative guidance about allowable uses of federal grant funds and reporting and data-sharing requirements.
- Federal agencies should cut red tape by designing TA contracts and oversight processes that minimize the need for—or accelerate—federal agency approvals for initiating new TA projects and releasing finished work products.
- Federally funded TA should not only respond to requests from individual states but also proactively promote evidence-based solutions to the most urgent educational challenges that the United States faces.

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has historically played an important role in supporting states' improvement efforts, coordinating the use of federal resources, and developing the nation's education infrastructure—collectively referred to as *technical assistance* (TA). Since 2025, however, this TA has been significantly disrupted, in part because of the cancellation and subsequent reinstatement of contracts for the delivery of federal Comprehensive Centers (CCs) and Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs), which serve state education agencies (SEAs) and districts nationwide.

These interruptions offered an opportunity to reflect with and learn from leaders of SEAs about what aspects of TA they value most and what gets in the way of receiving it. To inform agency leaders and policymakers about states' priorities for federal TA in education, we interviewed 37 SEA leaders across 14 diverse states and the District of Columbia. We sought to better understand what forms of federal TA have been more or less useful for SEAs and how TA investments could better address states' needs. While the input we received is timely, a key limitation of our work is that our sample likely does not represent all SEA leader roles and perspectives on this topic.

SEA leaders shared their perspectives and recommendations related to a variety of TA supports, which is reflective of the diversity of federal TA provided to states. In broad strokes, the two main types of TA they described were related to school system improvement efforts informed by research and best practices and facilitation of compliance with federal laws regarding the use of grant funds or reporting of state-level data. Across both categories, leaders reflected frequently on the role of federal TA in making connections across states.

The feedback we received can help shape ED's recent proposed changes to the design of CCs, RELs, and federal TA coordination overall (ED, 2026; Northern, 2026). These potential reforms to federal TA design include a more client-driven “concierge” approach to triaging SEA and district requests for TA from CCs, the creation of a more coordinated system of providing federal TA of various kinds, and increased alignment of TA efforts around shared national priorities (ED, 2026; Northern, 2026). Although we did not ask about these specific reforms, SEA leaders' input on related topics generally reinforced the rationales underlying the proposals. We summarize our key findings and implications below.

Valued Elements and Pain Points of Existing Federal TA

SEA leaders expressed appreciation for the federal TA they received, identifying several strengths afforded by existing national and regional TA support structures for school system improvement. Across states, leaders highlighted the value of federal TA in facilitating access to specialized expertise, such as instruction for specific student groups, customized synthesis of recommended practices, and expanded evaluation capacity to support continuous improvement. These functions were particularly important for smaller SEAs in less populous states, in which internal staff capacity may be limited. Leaders described the most effective TA as occurring with providers that were deeply familiar with their state context and able to engage in sustained partnerships, including strategic planning and improvement efforts that span multiple related projects.

At the same time, leaders also identified factors that reduced the usefulness of improvement-oriented TA. Slow federal approval processes—for selecting providers, initiating projects requested by states, or publishing completed work—limited the timeliness of TA. In other cases, TA providers lacked the skill sets or flexibility needed to respond to evolving state priorities.

Federal TA also plays a crucial role in connecting states. Because SEA staff often work in isolation with limited bandwidth to monitor practices elsewhere, they valued TA that provides a well-structured process for cross-state knowledge sharing and coordination. Leaders described the advantages of TA that curates national and regional best practices, links states facing similar challenges, and organizes networks in which staff collaborate on specific problems of practice. Such exchanges help states identify solutions more efficiently, avoid duplicating work, and strengthen coherence across the education landscape.

Leaders described how federal TA, alongside its improvement and networking functions, provides essential support for compliance with federal laws. Their feedback highlights how adequate investment in this area could support a goal of “returning education to the states.” Clear, accessible guidance on allowable uses of resources and reporting expectations helps minimize regulatory burdens and enables effective implementation of federal programs.

Leaders shared that they valued direct access to knowledgeable agency staff and TA providers that can offer timely, authoritative answers to compliance questions. They said that hands-on collaboration was far more useful than generic written directives, particularly when federal experts helped them interpret guidance within their own governance structures, data systems, and resource constraints. However, some leaders warned that reductions in experienced federal staff and shifts in communication channels across agencies could increase compliance costs for states.

Strengthening Federal TA

Looking ahead, leaders suggested various ways to strengthen federal TA, many of which align with ED’s recently proposed reforms. Leaders stressed the need for timely and transparent processes that incorporate SEA priorities and local contextual knowledge when selecting TA providers. Their feedback suggests the importance of systems that allow quick project start-ups and streamlined approvals to release finished products. Continuous monitoring of the timeliness and responsiveness of federal agencies in the allocation of TA providers and projects to SEAs may be an important lever for improvement. SEAs may also benefit from more flexibility to discontinue work with individual TA providers that are not adding value and to double down on or extend work with other providers that are.

Despite concerns about current contracting processes, most leaders also raised doubts about a hypothetical alternative in which states would directly contract with TA providers using federal resources. A recent Institute of Education Sciences report noted that most state chiefs support this model (Northern, 2026), but leaders in our interviews cautioned that shifting all responsibilities to SEAs could introduce delays related to

strained state procurement systems, complicate coordination across states with differing legal requirements, and reduce efficiencies gained from using shared providers with national expertise.

Instead of a “do-it-yourself” model, the proposed concierge-style design for CCs may represent a happy medium, balancing a desire for more state voice with a continuation of process management on the federal side (ED, 2026). This approach envisions a National Center that coordinates TA requests, serving as a hub that assesses and directs inquiries to the appropriate providers. Even so, our findings suggest that SEAs may still need help designing their own learning agendas and navigating new TA request processes.

With regard to cross-state collaboration, leaders encouraged sustained federal commitment to managing or sponsoring role-alike collaboration on shared problems across SEAs. Our findings suggest that federal TA should continue to support cross-state networking structures even if client-driven TA models shift to focus on more locally defined priorities.

In the area of compliance, leaders welcomed expanded TA services that directly address compliance burdens and offer standardized solutions to common data and reporting challenges. Providers deeply familiar with state reporting and data requirements could take a more hands-on role in compiling data from SEA systems. Others suggested that template-based supports and protocols make compliance more manageable and consistent. Leaders also called for continued federal leadership in developing common, scalable data standards to simplify reporting and strengthen national education data systems.

More broadly, faced with a changing landscape of federal TA, SEA leaders emphasized the unique role of the federal government as a trusted source of guidance in best practices. They discussed the potential value of using federal TA to more proactively promote high-impact, evidence-based practices and support cross-state initiatives related to the most pressing educational challenges nationwide, a demand that echoes recent calls for more-aligned federal investments toward shared national priorities (Northern, 2026). Some leaders also suggested that federally funded TA incorporate closer monitoring of the intended outcomes of TA projects to more explicitly link TA investments to improvement goals.

Contents

About This Report	iii
Summary	v
Figure and Tables	xi
What State Education Agency Leaders Want from Federal Technical Assistance	1
Topic 1. Federal TA That Directly Supports SEAs’ School System Improvement Work.....	2
Topic 2. Federal TA That Facilitates Cross-State Engagement.....	6
Topic 3. Federal TA That Supports Implementing Legal Requirements.....	10
Topic 4. Areas for Improvement in Federal TA	14
Discussion.....	18
APPENDIX	
Study Methodology and Sample Characteristics	21
Abbreviations	23
References	25

Figure and Tables

Figure

1. States with SEA Participants Represented in Study Interviews	3
---	---

Tables

A.1. Study Sample Characteristics: Role	21
A.2. Study Sample Characteristics: Seniority.....	22

What State Education Agency Leaders Want from Federal Technical Assistance

Technical assistance (TA) to states represents a small but important component of the federal government’s investments in state educational systems and the national education infrastructure, with more than \$150 million budgeted annually to this space across various legislative mandates (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2024; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2020; GAO, 2021). The federal government directs much of these TA resources toward supporting state education agencies’ (SEAs’) improvement efforts or facilitating their compliance with federal requirements. This emphasis on assisting SEAs reflects state agencies’ significant responsibilities in managing federal and state funding streams and program implementation, as well as their increasingly central role in driving education reform efforts (Smarick and Squire, 2014).

Since 2025, ED has experienced rapid change. This includes the cancellation and then restoration of large-scale TA contracts that support SEAs and districts; reductions in ED staff; emerging interagency agreements that transferred program responsibilities to other federal agencies; and recently proposed changes to the provision and overall coordination of federal TA (ED, 2026; Meyer et al., 2026; Northern, 2026). These developments, frequently linked to the overarching goal of “returning education to the states,” suggest that major updates to the design of federal TA are imminent.

To help inform next steps by federal policymakers, federal agency leaders, and TA providers, we interviewed senior and mid-level SEA officials (hereafter *SEA leaders* or *leaders*) nationwide in winter 2025 to 2026. We aimed to better understand what aspects of federal TA are more or less useful for SEAs and how investments in federal TA could better meet SEA needs. To address these goals, we asked SEA leaders to reflect on their federal TA experiences—both historically and in 2025—and envision opportunities to enhance future supports.

Federal TA comes from both dedicated institutions that provide a variety of services and those that provide more narrowly scoped TA linked to individual grant programs or to specific compliance demands of states. In an internal review we undertook of every major federal education statute under Title 20 of the U.S. Code, we observed that all either mandate or authorize multiple forms of federal TA linked to statute goals, with focus areas including interpretation of statutory requirements, supporting management of grant resources, improving education quality, and responding to the expressed needs of states. ED faces a significant challenge in coordinating the provision of TA that is responsive to these wide-ranging legislative requirements. In doing so, ED has traditionally relied heavily on contracted support to offset long-standing structural limitations in the size of the agency’s staff (GAO, 2017).

In our open-ended interviews, SEA leaders shared perspectives about a variety of these TA supports, including TA provided by Comprehensive Centers (CCs), which focus on implementation of federal education laws and evidence-based practices; TA from Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs), which lead applied research and evidence synthesis; and TA provided by contractors and ED staff linked to specific grant programs or to ensure compliance with federal requirements for resource allocation or data reporting.

Our report builds on prior research studies that have examined SEA leaders’ feedback about specific federal TA programs (e.g., Daley et al., 2013; GAO, 2021; Poliakoff and Sturges, 2017; Weinstock et al., 2019). We add new perspectives grounded in the current moment.

We organize this report around four topics that emerged from our interviews with SEA leaders. The first three reflect the primary categories of TA that leaders identified as most valuable—aligned with common types of TA provided by ED—while the fourth topic highlights key pain points and areas for improvement:

- Topic 1: federal TA that directly supports SEAs’ school system improvement work
- Topic 2: federal TA that facilitates cross-state engagement
- Topic 3: federal TA that supports implementing legal requirements (i.e., around federal grants, data and reporting)
- Topic 4: areas for improvement in federal TA.

Topic 1. Federal TA That Directly Supports SEAs’ School System Improvement Work

A substantial portion of federal TA is dedicated to working directly with states to advance state and federal goals for education system improvement. In our interviews, SEA leaders most commonly discussed supports of this type as provided by CCs or RELs or as components of multistate federal grant-funded initiatives, such as Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) and Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS).

Most SEA leaders we interviewed expressed appreciation for the TA resources and supports they received related to education system improvement; such views were consistent with prior research on SEAs’ satisfaction with TA they received (Daley et al., 2013; Poliakoff and Sturges, 2017; Weinstock et al., 2019). However, leaders varied in the degree to which they perceived the assistance as being highly valuable or aligned with their main priorities for system improvement. Leaders emphasized TA’s capacity to provide them access to specialized and cross-state expertise that they could not maintain in-house. They also highlighted the value

Study Sample

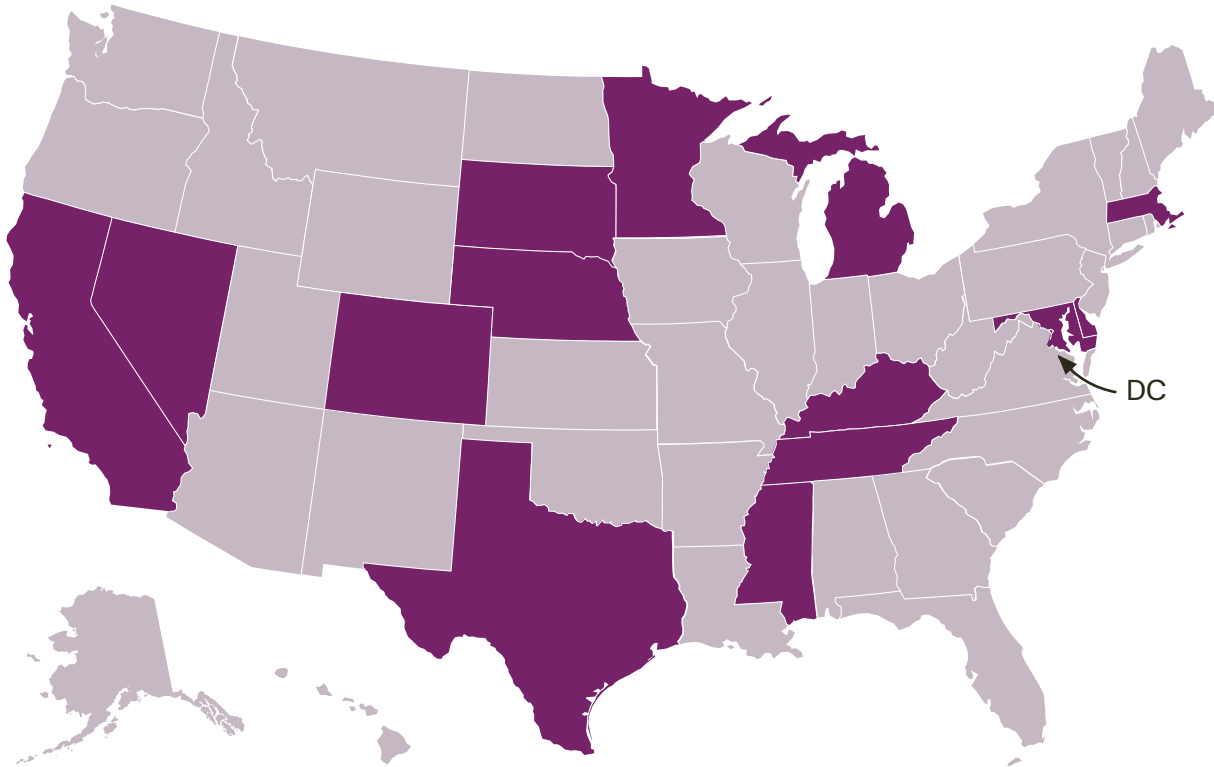
This report describes themes that emerged from our interviews with senior and mid-level SEA officials with experience working with federal TA providers. We invited agencies in 50 states and the District of Columbia to nominate participants and also contacted individuals recommended by our professional network.

Between September 2025 and January 2026, we spoke with 37 current and recent-former SEA leaders across 14 states and from the District of Columbia who accepted our invitation (see Figure 1). Our interview participants include individuals in executive leadership positions within SEAs and division or unit managers. Collectively, they worked as leaders in a variety of roles, including positions related to academics and instruction, assessment and accountability, student supports, and executive governance. We provide additional details about our study participants and methods in the appendix.

Our study sample is not random and does not represent a complete census of SEA leader perspectives nationwide. Therefore, our findings do not speak to all types of federal TA that SEAs receive or to all viewpoints about the value of federal TA. Nevertheless, our interviews offer timely feedback from the perspectives of recent TA recipients that may help to inform next steps in the design and delivery of federal TA for state agencies.

Throughout this report, we characterize the prevalence of perspectives either numerically or using the following conventions: *A few leaders* = leaders from two to three states; *some leaders* = leaders from more than a few to half of the states; *most leaders* = leaders from more than half of states. In this way, we sought to emphasize salience of findings across states rather than the number of respondents. For topics that were not discussed with leaders from all states in our sample, we disclose the total number of states in which at least one leader weighed in.

FIGURE 1
States with SEA Participants Represented in Study Interviews



NOTE: The states included in our study were California, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas. We also spoke with SEA leaders from the District of Columbia.

of federal TA as a trusted arbiter of evidence-based practices. Finally, SEA leaders described some of the most helpful TA supports as in-depth collaborations: well-matched, long-term partnerships with providers that were able to offer adaptive supports tailored to their state context.

Leaders Value Federal TA That Provides Capabilities That Are in Short Supply at Their Agencies

Federal TA that provides specialized expertise. Leaders—especially those from smaller SEAs—frequently described as important the ability of federal TA to provide access to expertise that they could not support in-house. In a few instances, SEA leaders shared how they turned to their REL or CC for support in compiling research and connecting with content experts to improve statewide guidance for supporting specific student groups. In other cases, leaders highlighted a desire for more of this type of TA. Examples of specific challenges in which this kind of TA was valued included supporting instruction for students with dyslexia, providing evidence-based literacy instruction, and providing effective instruction for multilingual learners. As one leader explained, federal TA “had more current research and a better understanding of high-quality instructional materials.” Explaining how they were “pleasantly surprised,” another leader described how federal TA provided their SEA with “a wealth of resources” on how to develop a state literacy plan, including how “to get it done from start to finish.”

“I can count on one hand the number of Ph.D.’s we have, and I think it’s two. We just don’t have the capacity to dig into the issues that we know we want to.”

—Interview participant

Relatedly, some leaders described federal TA as a valuable source of evidence-based practice guides. Sometimes assistance came in the form of navigating the vast number of existing resources to find state-relevant recommendations: “There are more tools and more frameworks out there than one could imagine. But trying to separate the wheat from the chaff, we kind of looked to the content centers as being sort of a clearinghouse for that type of information.” Other leaders emphasized the value of TA customizing and adapting practice guides for their states’ use. One

leader described the work product in this way: “We condensed them all down to three or four pages and branded them with [our state] branding and everything.”

Leaders also described valuing specific instances in which their state leaned on TA providers to help develop practitioner-facing tools that SEA leaders could use to implement evidence-based school improvement efforts. For example, drawing on feedback from principals, in one state, the REL created a “walk-through document” for every grade from kindergarten through 3rd grade to help principals identify high-quality literacy instruction. In another state, the REL developed a public intervention selection tool that educators can use to make informed decisions about literacy intervention programs. Leaders described the value-add of these efforts as “substantial.”

Federal TA that supports research on states’ improvement efforts. In some states, leaders noted that TA addressed a lack of capacity or opportunity to invest in research for continuous improvement. As one leader put it, “I can count on one hand the number of Ph.D.’s we have, and I think it’s two. We just don’t have the capacity to dig into the issues that we know we want to.” Leaders particularly highlighted federal TA that provided the types of expertise necessary to generate new evidence to help diagnose, problem solve, and evaluate solutions to educational challenges. For example, one leader described how, with their TA provider, they “were able to do a targeted qual[itative] study to gather syllabi information and interview faculty and had anonymized information about what candidates were learning in reading methods. [We] never would’ve been able to do that study without [the TA provider].” Leaders highlighted observational studies and “deep qualitative work” as being beyond their resource constraints or state budgeting priorities yet important to understanding whether instructional reforms were penetrating statewide. They described how they used such data to make decisions about professional learning for teachers and whether to continue various initiatives.

A few SEA leaders described TA’s ability to help “tell their story” as integral to justifying their school improvement work. In some instances, as one leader explained, SEAs “may not even know where to start.” Because of their large networks and capacity, RELs are able to coordinate projects that can demonstrate outcomes across multiple states, which may lead to efficiencies while also elevating experiences from smaller SEAs. In one notable example, a leader described how, in the absence of technical and content expertise, their state turned to a REL to support it with a project involving analysis to identify key factors influencing teacher recruitment and retention. In this instance, the REL coordinated a large-scale study across several states that “had the same needs,” resulting in a published report that SEA leaders could reference to inform their programming. As this leader explained, their partnership with a REL “provided an opportunity for a small state with a small staff and expertise to be able to be published, to have our story told in the national context of education.”

Federal TA as supplemental resources. Some SEA leaders described TA resources as useful not because they provided distinct expertise but simply as augmentation to limited state resources in general. One leader described enlisting TA support in these terms: “Those are skills that we have at [our] SEA, but it can be capac-

ity expanding to have someone else who can actually run on those priorities.” Another said, “We have seen our TA from those intermediary organizations or entities like the REL or the Comp Center [as] an extension of our capacity. There are a lot of things that we would like to do that we just can’t do, that are nice-to-haves.”

Given resource constraints, some leaders expressed concern about the disruption to federal TA contracts in 2025 in terms of the loss of supplemental resources that agencies had come to rely on. One leader said, “We’ve been talking about how none of these things are mission critical. . . . But at a certain point, it’s like death by 1,000 punches. Because so many of these added benefits to us have been chipped away, we do start to feel the added constraints and burdens.”

Leaders Seek Trustworthy, Evidence-Based Federal TA Guidance

States have limited budgets, and the stakes are too high to gamble on unproven instructional reform efforts. Leaders in most states described how they leveraged federal TA as a trusted source of evidence-based guidance to shape statewide programs and strategic planning, either in the form of guidance documents that ED developed or through partnerships with a REL or a CC. As one leader explained,

I will say around the support and the available resources with IES [the Institute of Education Sciences] . . . that any type of implementation that we’re trying to do at scale, I have to be sure as a state leader that it is evidence-based. And we’re not just whimsically trying something with hope that it lands in our ecosystem of an ever-changing landscape in public education across the K–12 [kindergarten through 12th grade] sector. Just the visibility, the transparency, the resources, things like that, I trust them as a source of good information and a backbone of qualified educational research.

In fact, some SEA leaders said that their agencies rely on IES guides and the What Works Clearinghouse as primary sources of evidence-based research to inform strategic planning. “What’s useful about [these sources],” one leader explained, is that “[we] can trust the research has been done, and that the recommendations being provided are based on evidence.” Another referred to IES guides “as one of our most valuable and useful tools that we have.”

At the same time, some leaders described the evidence that federal TA has compiled, including such resources as IES guides and the What Works Clearinghouse, as incomplete or outdated. One leader stated, “There is a lot of guidance on what is required and what should happen but not a lot of resources to say, ‘Here is what it could look like,’ or ‘Here is something you can use or modify for your needs.’” Leaders wanted more exemplars for putting federal requirements into practice and asked that TA and guidance documents be more responsive to new and emerging research in critical areas. As one leader explained,

I think about IES and . . . how much is happening right now in terms of research. I think about the emerging . . . science of math work that’s out there. And this corollary to the science of reading, and how there’s a lot of emerging new information and studies. I think it could be helpful to have someone who’s collecting that information, evaluating it, providing some centralized guidance. . . . It would be interesting to have a bit more analysis that is kind of federally done and disseminated. Who are the bright spots? What drove their success?

In line with leaders’ interest in guidance on emerging research, some leaders highlighted the value of working directly with experts to adapt that research to their local context. As one leader put it, “I want them to look at the documents and models and say, ‘OK, if I tweak it like this, do you think it would still have the impact?’”

Leaders Value Federal TA That Involves Long-Term, Collaborative Problem-Solving with Providers Familiar with Their State Context

Some of the best-regarded examples of school improvement–related TA went beyond stand-alone projects or access to expertise. Instead, these examples reflected sustained, collaborative engagement over time. For example, one leader described TA providers that “asked really difficult questions” and “pushed us to be intentional and to make data-based decisions.” Another leader described an impactful sequence of “development of instruments, data-gathering and strategic guidance telling us what other states had done” as part of a portfolio of projects over a five-year engagement with their REL partner.

Some states’ leaders described long-term engagements as supporting sustained improvement in SEAs’ capabilities. They highlighted how sustained engagement with a TA provider helped SEA staff gain “knowledge,” “technical skills,” or the capacity to replicate and extend work initially implemented collaboratively. Some also highlighted TA as helping them improve internal SEA processes. For example, one leader described some of the secondary benefits of engagement with their TA provider: “SEAs are typically siloed and focused on their thing. We’re designed that way. You stay in your lane. This process really pushed us into thinking about how our lanes intersected and ran parallel and sometimes ran opposite of each other.” Another leader described their experience receiving effective TA for building and implementing their SLDS. The TA helped the agency design a data governance framework and provided guidance on how to connect with other agencies and establish agreements to support data-sharing. The approach was encompassing and holistic.

Leaders in seven states emphasized the importance of TA providers that were—or ultimately became—very knowledgeable about their state context. They noted that individual states’ legal, regulatory, and educational contexts varied widely; TA providers needed to “be willing to become deeply familiar with varying contexts.” On this point, some spoke of the value of TA providers in helping them make key decisions about how best to “tailor” or “tweak” best practices to their context without sacrificing their “impact.” Leaders further indicated that providers could be most helpful when they were “embedded” and could provide “nimble” supports amid shifting conditions. As one leader put it, “[I] really have valued the, you know, the expertise paired with the, like, ‘How is this actually going to play out in your state?’ So it feels very tailored to our work.”

Topic 2. Federal TA That Facilitates Cross-State Engagement

Federal TA, through various streams and providers, creates opportunities for peer learning among SEA administrators in different states. In our study, leaders from ten states described participating in networking activities facilitated through federal TA. Three-fourths of these states networked with other states through grant-specific convenings, such as CLSD, SLDS, or IES grantee conferences. These events brought together SEA administrators annually or biannually in person to hear from experts, receive guidance from ED administrators, and engage in cross-state discussions. Leaders from half of these states met with other states in conferences run by their REL or a CC involving smaller groups of states from the same region. About one-third of the participating states described benefiting from being connected with another state via a coach or other support provider (from their REL or grant TA).

Across these activities, leaders noted the importance of meeting role-alike peers from other states to counter isolation in their roles and challenge their existing work structures. Networking activities also provided opportunities to generate best-practice guidelines from across all states and engage states in strategic learning around specific challenges or innovations. Federal grant programs offered opportunities to engage and collaborate in federal priority areas, and well-structured collaboration opportunities appeared to enhance learning. The peer learning opportunities offered by federal sources of TA were similar in nature to the peer

learning opportunities facilitated by other cross-state intermediary organizations.

Leaders Value Federal TA That Connects Staff with Cross-State Peers and Practices

SEA administrators often occupy a somewhat siloed or isolated role, as each administrator may be the sole person managing a particular body of work in their state (Hanna, 2014). Therefore, connecting to a network of knowledge, experience, and innovative ideas can be an important support for SEA staff. As one respondent summarized, “It is completely a siloed job out here in our region, and having access to people who are doing the work is the biggest benefit that I have found with that networking.” SEA staff said that opportunities to engage with peers in similar roles in other states can provide important opportunities to learn about promising practices, troubleshoot solutions, or understand how their SEA’s organizational structure or context influences their practice.

Respondents emphasized the importance of coming together with other states’ leaders around common challenges, especially given the lack of others in their states doing the same job or leading the same work. As one respondent shared,

I find a lot of value in when those [TA] entities bring together other state leaders because we are usually encountering the same challenges and can probably work through solutions. And so kind of more minds give us better answers usually.

A few respondents noted that they benefited from generally hearing about work processes in other states because this information challenged their understanding of accepted practice and helped them understand how their SEA context influenced their work. For example, one respondent, who attended a convening of SEA staff responsible for administering state data systems and generating reports for federal use, described their surprise at hearing that another state was able to complete its data reports much earlier because of enhanced staffing. In their words,

Related to the federal reports, I was surprised, one of the first times I went [to the convening], that one of the states said they were able to complete the [data report] submission in August. I was like, “In August? How are you able to pull that together?” . . . And then just learning that some of the states have different individuals working on those three reports, where here in . . . [our state], it’s just isolated to one individual. And then we have a worksheet to reconcile between the three to make sure we’re sending the same information for all three sources.

For this respondent, opportunities to collaborate with other states led them to question their processes and consider ways to more efficiently complete these necessary tasks.

In addition to accessing relevant experience and expertise, respondents also noted that getting advice from peer states also felt “safe,” given that they were not accountable to one another. One respondent said,

The in-person multiday kind of focused meetings are really important too, because of the collaboration and relationship building . . . Also across states and having kind of a safe space to talk about whatever it is that you’re running into. And it can be from state legislators making decisions on things . . . to, “I can’t seem to get a new computer ever. How are you guys getting new computers?” . . . So really a wide range of those

“I find a lot of value in when those [TA] entities bring together other state leaders because we are usually encountering the same challenges and can probably work through solutions.”

—Interview participant

“It is completely a siloed job out here in our region, and having access to people who are doing the work is the biggest benefit that I have found with that networking.” SEA staff said that opportunities to engage with peers in similar roles in other states can provide important opportunities to learn about promising practices, troubleshoot solutions, or understand how their SEA’s organizational structure or context influences their practice.

pieces. I appreciate those. And then the high-level kind of touch base . . . the peer-to-peer, sometimes those are good just to kind of listen in on.

As this example demonstrated, the safety of these peer learning opportunities helped allow SEA leaders and staff to compare everything, from high-level policy decisions to day-to-day work processes (such as procurement or hiring practices). Thus, these networking opportunities held potential to help support a wide variety of improvement activities with SEAs.

Respondents also noted that networking among states through federal TA provided an opportunity to generate best practices across the nation. In the words of one respondent, “The best TA was the ability for the feds to set something up where the states could all get together.” In a few states, respondents noted that they had been part of federal TA in which this was the task at hand: to examine practice across states and engage in “building and publishing best practices” (in the words of one respondent). These experiences were particularly valuable when organized by federal sources of TA. As one respondent shared,

Regarding the federal reporting requirements, you have an opportunity to connect with other states and see how they’re doing it and brainstorm as a mass about what’s not working over here, what’s working over there, and get ideas from other states.

Although leaders acknowledged that peer networks can be a helpful source for exchanging ideas about best practices, not every state has the time or expertise to participate actively in them. In these cases, TA that synthesizes lessons learned across states or even just presents promising approaches helps them avoid duplicating effort and could accelerate problem-solving. To this end, one leader expressed appreciation for their TA in helping them “do a state of the states, so to speak, on what other guidance existed across the nation around MTSS [Multi-Tiered System of Supports].” Another leader appreciated that their TA provider kept “a finger on the pulse” of how states in earlier cohorts of an initiative had approached a process, thereby helping “shorten our learning curve” and prevent states from “doing [the work] by themselves on an island.”

Leaders Value Federal TA Structures That Promote Meaningful Collaboration

Federal TA that structures networking around a focal topic or challenge. Facilitating networked learning opportunities involves more than providing time and space. Leaders described valuing networking opportunities that are thoughtfully structured and focused. For example, one respondent noted that some grant-related networking activities were particularly useful because the content of TA was more focused on federal priorities around specific programs. This respondent noted that clearer guidance regarding literacy priorities in CLSD grants, for example, provided opportunities for

much more connectivity outside of CLSD to some other moving pieces and parts across ED . . . [and] taking that opportunity back to our states and our teams to consider . . . repositioning how [ED] functions as a resource arm to ensure that all initiatives are evidence-based practices and that the research and resources are readily available and easy to access.

In this way, structure and clear guidance on the policies and practices of these federal programs may have helped facilitate ongoing networking among states and how they interact with ED.

A few respondents also identified times when networked TA fell flat because of a lack of structure. In one case, a respondent noted that an effort to engage states in identifying best practices “felt very much like a very unorganized group project” because of a lack of facilitation from the TA provider. In a case of grant-related

TA, a respondent noted that the broad variation of interventions used across states and limited facilitation impeded learning. As this respondent described,

All states that get CLSD grants do a wide range of activities with it. What we're doing with that money bears no resemblance across states. Information being shared across states ends up being necessarily very general, not specific enough to push us in new directions or enhance our plans at all. . . . It would've been more helpful if we had been going to events . . . more targeted to what we're doing, maybe with other states doing stuff similar to what we're doing.

As this example illustrates, useful networking activities may depend on either active facilitation to curate best practices across state contexts or selective matchmaking between SEA staff working on closely related issues.

Federal TA that makes strategic connections among selected states. Leaders in some states noted the importance of federal TA providers purposefully grouping states to support sharing around specific challenges or contextual issues. Coaches, or other TA providers with strong contextual knowledge of each state and their activities, played an important role in brokering these kinds of connections. One leader explained that it would otherwise be onerous for state administrators to identify state examples to learn from and to make these connections:

Those collaboration opportunities and the convenings and learning from one another, . . . online communities of practice and webinars and things like that, do really serve a valuable purpose . . . because I can't say that as a state agency leader, we always would have the time or the forethought to say, "Hey, Rhode Island is doing something really neat with instructional materials. You ought to get in touch with their CAO [chief academic officer]," or "Oregon is really trying to revolutionize RTI [response to intervention] You ought to reach out to them." I have found that [the TA provider's] involvement and ability to know [from a] bird's-eye view what's happening in other states and can provide good recommendations or good points of contact . . . does help progress our state-level work at a much more rapid pace rather than each one of us just staying in our silos and nose-to-the-ground focused on the work at hand.

Other leaders echoed this sentiment, saying that the matchmaking of states to "navigate difficult questions" or learn from successful solutions was "extremely helpful." A few states noted that these kinds of curated connections specifically helped enhance research capacities, particularly for states that did not already have either SEA research functions or university research-practice partnerships. In the words of one leader, these kinds of brokered connections among states "illustrate the power and extension of our capacity that these entities [federal TA providers] can provide."

State leaders also reported positive networking experiences through other intermediaries. Although we did not explicitly ask about networking supports provided outside federal TA, respondents from ten states brought up experiences receiving these supports through other organizations. They most often cited the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) collaboratives, which are structured, multistate working groups focused on specific policies and practices. Echoing their views on federal TA for networking, respondents reported that CCSSO collaboratives were particularly useful because of the structure and specificity of content focus, curation of identifying best practices across states, and brokering of state pairing to facilitate peer learning. A few respondents noted the usefulness of CCSSO

"[The TA] does help progress our state-level work at a much more rapid pace rather than each one of us just staying in our silos and nose-to-the-ground focused on the work at hand."

—Interview participant

supports in light of disruptions to federal sources of TA. One respondent said, “We’ve been using them [CCSSO collaboratives] for a long time, but in this time, it feels like, ‘Wow, at least there’s that lifeline; . . . at least some of that [TA/networking is] still happening.’” Despite their strong appreciation, a few respondents noted that the costs of CCSSO collaborative participation (which vary based on collaborative funding) might determine whether they could sustain engagement over time.

Topic 3. Federal TA That Supports Implementing Legal Requirements

For SEAs, maintaining compliance with federal requirements is not optional; it underpins their ability to access and effectively use federal funds. SEA leaders emphasized that compliance is a constant concern. Even absent explicit federal direction, states must interpret and implement requirements correctly. Therefore, SEA leaders consistently valued federal TA that guides compliance with laws, regulations, and grant conditions. Often, TA helps SEAs navigate and fulfill annual data reporting requirements to the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. These requirements include completing the Consolidated State Performance Reports and surveys on how states use Title II funds, among other submissions. SEAs also draw on TA expertise to prepare for Office of Special Education Programs monitoring visits to ensure compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In addition, TA supports SEAs with fiscal and program management of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) title programs (Pub. L. 114-95, 2015) and specialized grant programs, such as the CLSD program.

Compliance demands are complex and often evolve as federal priorities shift or as federal agencies introduce new reporting requirements. TA helps states interpret complex statutes, clarify expectations, and apply requirements in ways that align with both federal intent and state context. Leaders valued this support in light of limited staff capacity and turnover, which make it difficult for SEAs to maintain deep knowledge of federal compliance processes. Leaders also described effective TA as helping states use federal funds strategically while remaining compliant, offering practical solutions for data reporting, fiscal management, and accountability. It provides continuity, thought partnership, and reassurance that states are on the right path, helping them avoid problematic audit findings or monitoring issues. Leaders also described how TA could unburden them from compliance-related tasks while strengthening their infrastructure.

For this topic, we drew primarily on data from interviews with leaders in 11 states who were responsible for grant compliance, financial reporting, and reporting for national data systems. Such roles typically included fiscal data coordinator, analyst, or financial specialist and personnel in offices focused on data practices or accountability.

Leaders Value Compliance-Related TA That Provides Clear, Timely, and Precise Guidance

Federal TA that is responsive. At a basic level, most SEA leaders suggested that a key feature of compliance-related TA support is accessibility and responsiveness. This includes providing timely information and being on hand to answer questions about how to stay in compliance with various funding, data, and reporting requirements. Such support and communication could involve proactive planning, such as regular meetings or workshops that prepare states for upcoming changes. Some leaders described quarterly meetings and new fiscal coordinator trainings as particularly useful for previewing reporting updates, practicing data entry, and addressing common errors before deadlines. These structured touchpoints help states anticipate changes rather than react to them.

More often, however, SEAs rely on TA for on-demand support. Most of the leaders we interviewed described the importance of being able to reach someone quickly when a compliance question arises or a

reporting deadline is near. Leaders cited having a direct contact (rather than a general mailbox) as critical because timely responses often determine how work will proceed. One leader noted that their program officer's responsiveness, including same-day replies or offers to meet, was "the kind of support that has been so helpful." Another described the reassurance of knowing that when a deadline loomed, TA staff were available to troubleshoot last-minute issues, which "was crucial" to meeting requirements. This kind of support, while seemingly simple, is "definitely impactful," according to one leader.

Conversely, some leaders reported that undesirable effects resulted when TA was delayed or unavailable. Some leaders reported receiving guidance after deadlines expired or waiting weeks for responses that offered little clarity. One leader described their experience: "Generally, the questions that I would be dealing with [are] interpreting the law, and [TA was] next to not being helpful at all. If I sent an email, it would be several weeks, if not months, before I got an answer." Some others described the uncertainty that followed disruptions to TA services in 2025; they were unsure whom to contact, whether federal staff reviewed the submissions, or how to proceed with required amendments. They described being "definitely in a deficit" and "lacking comfort." In the absence of timely communication, states defaulted to prior guidance and operated under assumptions that might not have been accurate.

TA staff with specialized knowledge about requirements and who can provide authoritative answers. Most SEA leaders described the importance of having access to TA staff who are experts in federal law and compliance-related processes and can provide direct consultation rather than requiring states to rely solely on written resources. Leaders said that generalized documents leave too much open to interpretation, prompting requests for concrete, clarifying responses about what actions or parameters were acceptable under programs, such as ESSA. One common perspective was as follows:

The benefit of the TA from my perspective is helping us make sure our interpretation of how we implement is correct We don't necessarily have . . . the intel from those that drafted it, as far as what their interpretation is. . . . Obviously we've got enough collective wisdom to be in the ballpark . . . , but when you get in those nuances, . . . we might have differed [and needed guidance].

One leader appreciated their TA staff's specialized knowledge around and experience with compliance monitoring. Not only was the TA provider able to synthesize lessons learned from other states and prepare the state well, but the leader also credited the provider with being well informed about "current federal changes" and therefore helping them "sift out . . . rumor from reality." States themselves could not easily obtain or replicate this specialized knowledge. In short, most SEA leaders viewed regular consultation calls as the most effective way to obtain clarity and confirm that state practices were consistent with federal requirements.

When TA is unclear, the consequences are significant. Some leaders described confusion regarding vague terms in federal guidance, such as "intensified supports," and the anxiety of not knowing how to demonstrate compliance during audits or monitoring. Others cited frustration with instances of delayed or noncommittal responses that referred them back to the law without interpretation. One leader said, "The answer would tend to be vague and refer me back to the law, which I could read by myself. I . . . had the sense . . . they very seldom wanted to take [a] firm stance and . . . commit to something in writing. So . . . I quit asking after a while." The disruption to some TA services in 2025 similarly underscored how dependent SEAs are on this kind of specialized expertise. A few leaders reported broken links, missing documents, and uncertainty about how other states were interpreting or applying federal requirements. Without access to TA, they continued their work but with less confidence that their actions met compliance standards.

SEA leaders expressed concern about the potential loss of institutional knowledge if federal authorities reduced TA infrastructure or replaced staff with those in agencies less familiar with education. TA centers and ED staff have built a specialized understanding of federal programs over years that states cannot easily replace or replicate. In particular, some leaders noted that it is unrealistic to expect smaller states or SEAs

with limited staff to have such deep expertise: “I don’t know how you build that knowledge over time, let alone if you have turnover. . . . So I think that [TA] expertise as a leveler across states is really important.” As one leader observed, as long as federal statutes and oversight exist, there will be a need for TA to provide accurate interpretation and guidance.

Specific to the emerging prospect of distributing the education-related responsibilities that ED previously oversaw to other federal agencies (such as the U.S. Department of Labor), a few SEA leaders expressed concern that these shifts could fragment the coherence of federal guidance, increase administrative complexity for states, and unsettle existing SEA practices. One leader elaborated,

I’m concerned about the narrative of . . . farming out the work of the current ED to other entities What that is going to do is, instead of having five contacts at ED, we’re going to have two contacts at the Department of Labor that’s now doing all of our Perkins stuff. HHS [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services] is going to be in charge of our early childhood stuff. Commerce or whoever is going to be in charge of whatever. . . . I don’t actually think it’s going to create more efficiencies, and we are trying really hard internally to create coherence across all of these different initiatives. So making sure that schools that are identified . . . in special education under IDEA are also having conversations with school improvement folks If we . . . compartmentalize that . . . into other agencies, it’s going to just create even further splits between that work.

Other leaders said that changing the TA infrastructure could create confusion about lines of authority and disrupt funding flow. All together, these perspectives underscore leaders’ concerns about losing access to specialized expertise that compliance-related federal TA previously provided.

Leaders Value Federal TA That Provides Thought Partnership, Supporting Strategic Decisions in Working Toward Compliance

Federal TA that works collaboratively, in thought partnership. Some SEA leaders described effective compliance-related TA as not merely prescriptive and compliance driven; rather, it should function as a thought partnership, involving a collaborative process of co-thinking and problem-solving. Rather than simply explaining what the law requires, effective TA engages states in conversations about how to meet those requirements flexibly and meaningfully.

One leader described their TA provider as a “thought partner” that supported the state through a series of conversations to secure a reporting waiver following an extreme natural event. The TA went beyond procedural guidance to helping the state navigate complex requirements and identify a workable strategy. In contrast, another leader characterized their TA experience as “not collaborative. . . . It’s definitely more of a gotcha,” describing a relationship focused narrowly on compliance rather than support. They explained that effective TA should resemble the way SEAs work with their districts, “shoulder to shoulder,” listening and offering ideas as part of a shared journey. As the leader put it, “You can’t get away from compliance, I understand, but for something to change, people have to reflect on the practices they’re doing already. So, if ED really wants us to change, then they should help us as thought partners, more of a coaching-mentoring situation.”

Other leaders echoed this view, describing TA as a “sounding board” for thinking through challenges and compliance questions. One noted that their agency often begins by clarifying federal requirements and then engages in a conversation with TA providers about possible approaches: “Would this other thing be compliant? What would we have to do differently? . . . They’ve served as content experts for us as we have navigated improving our own systems.” These exchanges allow states to explore options and understand federal interpretations.

Federal TA that reflects state-specific context in supporting compliance. Most leaders expressed that when TA providers understand and respond to the specific governance structures, priorities, and systems of their state, the support becomes more credible, relevant, and ultimately more impactful. One leader described how their state’s distinctive governance structure required TA that could navigate multiple agencies and decisionmaking layers. They noted that generic guidance typically failed to account for the complexity of their system, whereas context-aware TA helped align efforts across departments and clarify roles. Another leader highlighted the value of a data strategy retreat designed around the state’s existing data systems and priorities. Because the facilitators understood the state’s infrastructure and constraints, the retreat produced concrete next steps rather than abstract recommendations. Similarly, leaders expressed appreciation for TA contacts who were familiar with the state’s operational details and who could anticipate local challenges.

“[TA] can’t just be, ‘Here’s what the law says.’ . . . It also has to be, ‘What is actually best for students?’”
 —Interview participant

Across interviews, some leaders distinguished between TA that feels “off the shelf” and TA that feels “for us.” The former may provide information, but the latter connects that information to the realities of the state’s context. As one leader put it, having a TA provider that understands “what we have, how that plays out, and how to tailor that to our individual needs rather than just [having] a standard national template that stays static” made the support far more useful. This kind of tailored guidance requires attentiveness and continuity from TA providers that stay engaged long enough to understand the state’s evolving conditions and that adapt their approach accordingly.

Federal TA that helps improve systems while solving for compliance. Some leaders offered examples of TA that strengthened their internal systems and processes while meeting compliance requirements. One state leader described how TA providers worked alongside them for several months to improve their monitoring protocols, helping the agency “shore up” its systems and draw on examples from other states to adapt what worked best for their own context. Another leader explained how TA from the ED helped the state improve its system for calculating funding allocations to their local education agencies, shifting internal practices and building capacity to manage the work more effectively. These experiences reflect TA that builds institutional knowledge and infrastructure, not just technical fixes.

Some leaders also described how effective TA integrates compliance with improvement, using federal requirements as opportunities to promote best practices. As one leader explained,

We interpret all of those [compliance requirements] as opportunities to really delve into what is best practice and how we support our school district leaders in doing best-practice work that is compliant. . . . It really does center on, “OK, let me deeply understand the requirement so that I can dovetail that with best practice and how districts actually function and work.”

Another leader noted that good TA “can’t just be, ‘Here’s what the law says.’ . . . It also has to be, ‘What is actually best for students?’” In short, leaders value TA that helps them improve systems for the sake of education rather than offering one-off technical fixes or compelling compliance for compliance’s sake.

Leaders Value Federal TA That Helps Reduce Their Compliance-Related Burden

Federal TA that tackles compliance-related tasks or reduces cognitive burden on SEAs. A few SEA leaders described how TA could be valuable when it directly helps states manage or complete compliance-related tasks rather than simply offering guidance. With limited staff and extensive reporting requirements, leaders

envisioned TA that could “minimize the burden” by taking on highly technical or time-consuming work. One leader suggested that TA providers could even prepare federal reports or data files on behalf of states: “Send your TA people who know what you’re looking for to do this stuff . . . That’s a perfect case for TA because it’s highly technical . . . [and] not something that states want to be doing.” These examples illustrate how TA can serve as an extension of state capacity, helping agencies meet requirements efficiently and redirect staff time toward higher-value work.

Beyond direct task support, a few leaders valued TA that simplifies complex processes and reduces the cognitive burden of managing federal requirements. A leader from one state preparing for monitoring appreciated TA that provided protocols, helping staff stay organized and informed. Another described TA for a data system project as “template driven,” noting that such tools “reduce the cognitive load of someone who’s going to implement [the system].” These examples highlight how TA can make compliance and implementation more manageable by providing structured tools and processes that lighten the mental and administrative loads.

Federal TA that promotes cross-state data alignment and comparability. A few leaders recognized that, beyond ED’s TA obligation to each state, it has the responsibility to offer clear, standardized solutions to common data and reporting challenges that states face. One leader described struggling to find definitive guidance on such issues as masking small sample sizes or handling community eligibility for free lunch, noting that “every single state has to figure that out. . . . That was the kind of thing you should be able to solve for all 50 states at once, and they didn’t.” They argued that, for some technical issues, TA should provide legitimate, ready-to-use options for data aggregation and reporting—guidance that supports comparability and consistency nationwide.

Some leaders echoed this call for alignment. One explained that having an entity “that understands the requirements of federal reporting” and can help states adopt “a common aligned and scalable data standard” is “the most fundamental thing that we could get as an agency from technical support.” Another added that such comparability “is incredibly valuable” for decisionmakers, even if states have not yet “leaned into it enough.” Similarly, another leader suggested that TA could help build “structural data-sharing and databases that collate data from states in different areas,” creating cross-functional datasets that would be “really insightful to have access to.” Others described how TA providers could adapt products developed for one state for use in another, saving time and effort. As an example, in one state, staff “started with a file that [the TA] had helped [another state] do . . . so we didn’t have to start from zero. . . . It was going to bring us into compliance, and we can do the work more efficiently.” Taken together, these perspectives position TA as a mechanism for enabling collective problem-solving, reducing redundant effort, promoting data comparability, and strengthening the coherence of national education data systems.

Topic 4. Areas for Improvement in Federal TA

Some Leaders Described Challenges with Federal TA Bureaucracy and with Selection of TA Providers

The most common negative experiences with TA stemmed from unhelpful interactions with individual providers or from bureaucratic limitations related to federal systems for TA scoping and delivery. In the first category, a few leaders described TA linked to specific grant programs as “superficial” or of limited use, such as

TA that provided generic recommendations designed to be uniformly applicable across many states. Another leader described their experience with RELs and CCs in this way:

We've had really mixed experiences with some of the projects, particularly those around convening or landscape studies being very successful and those around more technical work or work that's more site-specific being unsuccessful or incomplete.

Some of the negative feedback about TA related to interactions with specific contractors or agency staff. For instance, one leader described instances of TA that felt “very tactical, very kind of dissociated from the human aspect.” They noted that, in their experience, some TA providers or agency staff lacked sufficient real-world experience in education to be helpful. Another leader described a lack of responsiveness when trying to find appropriate contacts to answer questions at ED, in contrast to their positive experiences with regional TA providers.

With respect to broader, systemic limitations, some leaders described uncertainty about what TA providers could actually deliver to SEAs and “bureaucratic” delays in how federal TA projects were scoped, awarded, and implemented as being problematic. For example, one leader offered a mixed description of their initial engagement with CCs: “I think there was a lot of stuff in the beginning that we're like, ‘This didn't quite help us get there.’ . . . [It] can be hard to settle into . . . what's allowable from this workstream from the federal government.” Another leader described a protracted bidding process undertaken to award a REL contract. They observed that, by the time ED had selected a contractor, “70 percent of the [SEA staff]” who had initially engaged in need-sensing and project planning activities were no longer working at the agency. In this case, lengthy federal decisionmaking processes limited the benefits of what had initially been a robust attempt to align TA supports with SEA priorities. Some other leaders flagged related challenges of lengthy federal approval processes for initiating individual TA projects with providers and for publishing finished products, leading to support that did not feel “nimble” or “responsive” to state needs.

Given the transaction costs in initiating projects with TA providers that could flexibly address states' priorities and could be delivered in a timely fashion, a few leaders either narrowly scoped their TA projects or turned down TA opportunities. For example, one leader described their TA engagement process as looking for a relatively narrow set of tasks in which they perceived TA providers could add value:

We're not necessarily identifying areas of our greatest need for support from those centers. Instead, what we're trying to do is make sure that the end product is going to be something that we're able to utilize We have found the projects that are successful to be very time bound with very clear deliverables.

Another state leader said that, because of the likelihood of delays associated with federal agency approval processes, “We tended to take things on internally for our own internal research team that we could turn around more quickly.”

In a few states, leaders described struggling to understand what was possible across multiple potential sources of federal TA. One leader described their experience and hope for future improvements in federal TA in this way:

We almost needed like a navigator to be able to get through all of the bureaucracy. And so my hope . . . , as we're rethinking or considering a new structure or avenue, is that we could create a more nimble, locally controlled, but still connected to the larger network, organization or entity.

Leaders Expressed Uncertainty Around the Prospect of SEAs Directly Contracting for TA Using Federal Resources

Although ensuring alignment between federal TA providers and states' needs could be challenging, leaders expressed skepticism about a hypothetical alternative in which SEAs would use federal resources to contract directly for TA. Of the 11 states in which leaders weighed in on this topic, most leaders expressed concerns about the potential downsides of this idea, while a few were neutral or welcoming toward it. In particular, some leaders expressed concerns that their SEA contracting and procurement processes were cumbersome, and they were unprepared to take on the challenge. As one leader described,

It's a bad idea because if . . . I've got a million bucks, and I want to build this thing, [and] requests for information [go] out today, it's likely the first opportunity that that work begins is probably at least a year out . . . This isn't a [state redacted] thing. This is state procurement; that's the rule, not the exception.

Others expressed that, if direct contracting for TA became the model, states would need transitional structures or a ramp-up in staffing. For instance, one leader noted that they would “have to figure out how to really put manpower behind this and understand what our role now becomes in the absence of centralized coordination.” Moreover, in addition to flagging concerns about administrative processes, a few leaders noted that state laws on contracting varied widely, which could make coordinating joint solicitations with other states challenging.

While a few leaders noted that the idea of state-managed TA contracts had upsides—such as increased local control and the ability to use local vendors—others noted that federal vetting of TA providers also had advantages, which states might lose. These included both efficiencies from working across states and the federal role in prioritizing evidence-based supports. As one leader put it, “I think the RELs, the Comprehensive TA Centers, the . . . grant-level sort of content centers, there's the opportunity scale there.” Other leaders expressed concerns with resources “splintering” or a loss of “consistency” or “networking ability” in a scenario characterized as “every SEA for themselves.” Some leaders highlighted uncertainty about whether frequent shifts in leadership at the state level would make TA contracts less stable and more politically driven rather than evidence based. For example, two leaders noted that, as a point of comparison, when states used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds with little accountability or TA, the funds might not always have gone to the most effective educational supports. Overall, leaders' feedback in this area suggests that the devil may be in the details in terms of operationalizing alternative models to allow more-direct state control over the use of federal TA resources.

Some Leaders Would Appreciate More-Authoritative Guidance Taking a Position on Best Practices

Despite their differences, states face many common obstacles related to identifying best practices for promoting high-quality instruction. Yet SEA leaders whom we spoke with in seven states flagged that federal TA could provide more leadership on key topics. As one leader explained, “[ED] has never really put their stake in the ground on what is good instruction, what is good assessment, what are good materials, and [so on].” While a few leaders acknowledged that challenges to teaching and learning were a very large problem for federal TA to tackle on its own or that federal TA might not be nimble enough to offer solutions, others said that ED shouldered a responsibility to provide leadership in areas in which the science was settled. As one leader said,

If I am looking at evidence-based literacy, and our country continues to see [declining] NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] results, and ED is not taking a step in that space—that is a trav-

esty; that is an embarrassment. ED knows we have a major situation on our hands with literacy. They have not come to the table in any meaningful way with models that impact literacy opportunities for children. I think that is a real gap, and it's a real disappointment. Same thing with mathematics. There are key areas where [ED] should take a stand and show leadership. . . . You should not leave a state to flounder.

“There are key areas where the Department of Education should take a stand and show leadership. . . . You should not leave a state to flounder.”

—Interview participant

Leaders clearly value local flexibility. However, some SEA leaders suggested that federal identification of common pain points across states, coupled with a proactive agenda for supporting states in priority areas with guidance on best practices, could still be helpful. As one leader explained,

The problem is that we are telling [federal TA providers] what to do, and I think that is valuable, . . . but I think it would make sense for there to be a federal agenda that is shared and disseminated down to states so that states can come back and meet [the agenda] halfway in between. . . . Let's not recreate the wheel.

Pitching a similar idea, another leader described how ED could build a federal agenda for TA through ongoing collaboration among states through TA centers:

What do states all need? . . . Or what are they interested in? [Then] getting that information back to develop a sort of a consensus approach to what would those things be that then would benefit from the uniform [approach] because that's the benefit of having all of us . . . the uniform approach across all of the states to help [ED] advance their priorities.

SEA leaders acknowledged multiple barriers to federal TA providing SEAs with authoritative guidance on best practices, highlighting three in particular: limited federal capacity and content expertise, outdated research, and political jockeying at both the federal and state levels. As one leader pointed out, one critical source of tension is the political turnover continuously happening at multiple levels, which disrupts progress toward meaningful reform efforts. As this leader explained,

When you are talking about . . . reappointing and reappointing and reappointing, and we've had this ping-pong back and forth for the past couple of administrations, that causes a real strain when you are [trying to improve] in critical spaces around attendance, around nutrition, and around literacy rates.

Some Leaders Suggested That Federal TA Could Be More Accountable for Results

The state leaders we interviewed are not interested in investing federal money into ineffective TA structures; they want results. Along these lines, when we asked SEA leaders how they envision the future of TA, some discussed the importance of holding federal TA accountable to moving the needle on district practices and student outcomes. A few spoke about the importance of holding TA providers accountable for the work they agreed to do or to specific implementation-related outcomes, most often in the context of two-way partnerships with a REL or CC. As one leader shared,

[We need] some way of establishing kind of a uniform approach [to how we engage with TA] . . . that enables . . . the state to then say, “Okay, we can interact with that. Here are our priorities. Here is the . . . work plan. And then [that] enables the check-in. That's the accountability. Are we accountable as a state team for doing

our side of the work? Is the TA center accountable for their side of the work? . . . It does feel like there could be a little bit more accountability over the top of it.

Leaders who spoke about accountability for student achievement largely agreed that student outcomes, “not personal career or political aspirations,” should “drive every single activity and justification for any activity . . . we do,” a broad perspective that they said influenced their overall vision for effective TA. According to these leaders, *accountability* means being able to recognize when partnerships with TA centers “aren’t producing results” and being able to “honestly and candidly” address those situations. As one leader plainly asked, “Are we getting the value out of these things that we are paying for?” Most leaders in this group said that federal TA should be preceded by asking the right “questions about student change” and use student data as the measure of the TA’s merit. One leader suggested that ED could begin by examining its goals for students using standardized measures of success and, working with states, design TA that aims to achieve these goals. This leader elaborated on this point as follows:

No one should look at some of these state results and say, “Yeah, we’ve done our job here . . .,” and TA has to make that a super pressing problem. There are no excuses. Let’s do our best. It’s not gonna be solved tomorrow, but let’s set a high expectation and try to work towards it.

According to these SEA leaders, when TA involves support for implementing best practices, efforts to track changes in practice and student outcomes are often limited—complicating both accountability and states’ ability to improve ongoing reform efforts. As one leader explained, in the absence of tracking, “there is not really a strong link to the relationship between the offering of TA and concomitant increase in students’ capabilities or experiences.” At the same time, leaders in this group recognized that grant cycle requirements, which one leader said caused TA to function like “a revolving door,” along with the length of time it takes for large-scale reform to yield results, pose significant barriers to enforcing accountability. Summarizing the problem, one leader named “the five-year grant cycle” as a limitation. As this leader explained,

If you think that you only have five years or [if] you are changing recipients every five years, what it takes to get up to speed and [to] build that fluency and capacity, we are seeing the impact of that uncertainty I am not saying give people grants forever and not have accountability [However], if you are shifting every five years to a new recipient of an award or a center or something else, it is really hard to be effective and accountable.

In contrast, some leaders suggested that long-standing partnerships with a trusted TA partner, a shared commitment to results, and clear delegation of roles could result in self-reinforcing accountability over time, both up and down the network of participants. As one leader said,

This is a slow, steady build The question should be, “What’s the role you play at your level to make this happen?” And when I’m seeing success, I kind of view that like I’m sharing some of that success with my national partners, with my regional center partners, with [ED], like we’re all working towards the same outcome.

Discussion

ED’s recently proposed reforms to federal TA create a valuable window of opportunity to solicit states’ feedback (ED, 2026; Northern, 2026). Our findings suggest that moves toward a more coordinated TA infrastruc-

ture, including concierge-style systems for CCs in particular, have the potential to address key challenges with prior models of TA delivery. At the same time, we also highlight components of TA—such as structured cross-state networking and the ability to engage in sustained collaborations with TA providers—that will be valuable to retain.

In terms of addressing limitations with prior TA models, the devil will be in the details. Some of the most common pain points that SEA leaders cited were related to the lack of timeliness and flexibility of federal systems in interpreting the allowed scope of TA supports. Therefore, in addition to maximizing flexibility in TA award and approval processes, the new proposed TA hub and concierge-style systems should include mechanisms to continuously monitor and improve agency responsiveness to state- and district-level partners' feedback.

Meanwhile, shifts in federal staffing, contracting, and interagency structures have created uncertainty about the continuity of expertise needed to implement compliance-related TA effectively. We found that leaders would value federal TA that could take on a larger share of the burden of interpretation and provide more-definitive guidance to ensure compliance with existing federal laws and requirements. Greater clarity will become increasingly important if states gain more discretion in how to spend federal funds from various grant programs. Access to well-qualified staff at federal agencies who can provide expert, timely, and authoritative guidance to states will be key.

Finally, leaders' feedback reinforced the value of ED's proposed scope for a National Center taking a proactive role in addressing the high-leverage challenges that many states face (ED, 2026). Leadership around the most pressing challenges that states face may require federal TA that goes beyond curating available research evidence to translating that evidence into practical tools and customized guidance for educational leaders tasked with adapting best practices to their local context. Federally funded research projects should align with these high-priority areas and facilitate better tracking of whether progress is being made at scale toward intended changes in educational practice and student outcomes. By refining the design and delivery of federal TA in these ways, federal agencies could more effectively support states in meeting both existing demands and long-term educational goals.

Study Methodology and Sample Characteristics

In this appendix, we provide additional information regarding our study methodology and sample.

We conducted hour-long interviews virtually, mostly in researcher teams of two. We used a semi-structured protocol to guide the interviews while allowing our team flexibility to pose relevant follow-up questions. The protocol corresponds to the main goals of the research: Part 1 elicited what leaders found more or less valuable about the federal TA they had experienced in administering education programs and associated data and reporting systems. In part 2, we asked how, if at all, disruptions to TA services in 2025 affected state agency services and priorities. Finally, we engaged interviewees in envisioning more-effective federal TA supports.

Three author-interviewers iteratively coded transcripts or notes with Dedoose software. We generated and calibrated a coding scheme that captured leaders' reflections on historical and recent use of TA, future visioning, source of TA, TA support provided, and the nature of interactions with TA providers. Then, we coded and analyzed emergent themes related to the values and challenges of TA. We lightly edited quotes included in the report for readability.

We interviewed 37 current and recent-former (i.e., within the past two years) SEA leaders across 14 states. We talked with one to six leaders in each state. Specifically, in three states, we interviewed one leader each; in five states, we had two participants each. In two states, we interviewed three leaders each, and in two other states, we interviewed four leaders each. Finally, in one state each, we were able to interview five and six leaders.

The leaders held various roles and different levels of seniority within their SEA. Tables A.1 and A.2 provide detail about their positions within SEAs.

TABLE A.1
Study Sample Characteristics: Role

SEA Leader Role	Number of Participants
Executive governance	4
Academics and instruction	10
Assessment, accountability, and data	10
Student supports and special populations	6
Finance, operations, and grant management	3
School improvement, innovation, and strategy	4

TABLE A.2
Study Sample Characteristics: Seniority

SEA Leader Seniority	Number of Participants
Executive leadership	4
Executive cabinet	9
Division leadership	9
Unit directors or managers	9
Professional support staff	6

Abbreviations

CC	Comprehensive Center
CLSD	Comprehensive Literacy State Development
ED	U.S. Department of Education
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
GAO	U.S. Government Accountability Office
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IES	Institute of Education Sciences
REL	Regional Educational Laboratory
SEA	state education agency
SLDS	Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems
TA	technical assistance

References

- Daley, Tamara C., Thomas A. Fiore, Julie Bollmer, Tamara Nimkoff, and Chris Lysy, *National Evaluation of the IDEA Technical Assistance and Dissemination Program*, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, NCEE 2014-4000, October 2013.
- ED—See U.S. Department of Education.
- GAO—See U.S. Government Accountability Office.
- Hanna, Robert, *Seeing Beyond Silos: How State Education Agencies Spend Federal Education Dollars and Why*, Center for American Progress, June 2014.
- Meyer, Katharine, Rachel M. Perera, Sarah Reber, and Jon Valant, “FAQs: Checking in on the Department of Education,” Brookings Institution, February 20, 2026.
- Northern, Amber M., *Reimagining the Institute of Education Sciences: A Strategy for Relevance and Renewal*, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, February 2026.
- Poliakoff, Anne Rogers, and Keith M. Sturges, “Evaluating Technical Assistance to State Agencies: The Case Study Perspective,” *Practicing Anthropology*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2017.
- Public Law No. 114-95, Every Student Succeeds Act, December 10, 2015.
- Smarick, Andy, and Juliet Squire, *The State Education Agency: At the Helm, Not the Oar*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, April 2014.
- U.S. Department of Education, *Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Summary*, 2024.
- U.S. Department of Education, “Proposed Priorities, Requirements, and Definitions—Comprehensive Centers Program,” *Federal Register*, Vol. 91, No. 41, March 3, 2026.
- U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Department of Education: Staffing Levels Have Generally Decreased over Time, While Contracting Levels Have Remained Relatively Stable*, U.S. Government Printing Office, GAO-17-669R, 2017.
- U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Grants Management: Agencies Provided Many Types of Technical Assistance and Applied Recipients’ Feedback*, U.S. Government Printing Office, GAO-20-580, August 2020.
- U.S. Government Accountability Office, *K–12 Education: Observations on States’ School Improvement Efforts*, U.S. Government Printing Office, GAO-21-199, January 2021.
- Weinstock, Phyllis, Michaela Gulemetova, Raquel Sanchez, David Silver, and Ilana Barach, *National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Centers Program: Final Report*, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, NCEE 2020-001, October 2019.