



Key points:

- **Regional resource centers have been intermediaries between OSEP, states on technical issues**
- **Plan to close centers draws protest from special ed directors**
- **News comes as public comments are made on OSEP's State Systemic Improvement Plan proposal**

≤ OSEP to close regional TA centers, create 'systemic improvement' center

One of the ways OSEP has bridged the physical gap between it and states is by funding six regional technical assistance centers.

Recent activities of the [Regional Resource Center Program](#) include working with states on their ESEA waivers, according to the program's February [newsletter](#).

The waivers "hold important implications for students with disabilities," it said. "As a result, it will be critical that the RRCP and other federally funded TA centers offer support to states as they undergo these transitions and implement the redesigned accountability systems."

The centers also have been helping states write [State Systemic Improvement Plans](#), an attempt by OSEP to focus on student outcomes, not just state compliance with the IDEA.

On Sept. 30, however, the centers' grants will expire, and OSEP has no plans to renew them, according to a spokesman.

Instead, it will give at least part of the centers' work to a new \$9 million [Center for Systemic Improvement](#), he said. And that's too bad, according to Massachusetts special ed director Marcia Mitnacht.

"The regional centers have over the years become a place that doesn't make us fit what they're offering," she said. Rather, she said, they fit their activities to what each state needs.

"I might want assistance with the SSIP, [while] another state might want help with their post-school outcomes," she said.

Acting as a guide

The OSEP spokesman said the decision to let the centers' grants run out must be taken in context.

"The five-year awards that fund our existing regional resource centers are coming to an end, and we are considering the most effective and efficient ways to support states in improving outcomes for children with disabilities and meeting the requirements of IDEA," he said in an email. "One part of shifting to a results-driven system of accountability is differentiated technical assistance and support designed to focus limited resources on critical areas."

That's precisely the problem, Mitnacht said. Currently, states know their regional center is always there for them, but with one national center, she said, they will be "vying for attention."

Closing the centers will be a real loss, according to Nancy Reder, deputy executive director of the [National Association of State Directors of Special Education](#).

"They facilitate opportunities for the state directors to get together," she said. "Most recently, they've been helping the state directors think about the SSIP by holding regional meetings."

Most importantly, they're the place states turn when they don't know where to turn, she said.

"We always say in our training, 'There are so many TA centers out there, and you don't know what they all do. Let the RRCs help you find the support you need,' she said.

Seeing no substitute

Attempts to talk about the centers' demise with the centers themselves were unsuccessful; the heads of the Western and Northeast centers both referred inquiries to the Education Department, as did the coordinator of the national office at [Utah State University](#).

Nor is there any mechanism for making public comment on closing a technical assistance center, unlike when the department proposes to create one.

On April 23, however, OSEP was still soliciting a second and final [round](#) of comments on the SSIP idea itself. And so Mittnacht took the opportunity to say something about the regional centers.

"I also am not fond of the choice to not continue with regional TA centers," she said. "It seems as if, as OSEP gets ever more detailed, it also gets more distant."

In a comment dated April 24, NASDSE noted that OSEP also is creating a results-based matrix for determining whether states are meeting the requirements of the IDEA and an online system for submitting annual performance reports.

However, NASDSE said, "at the same time all of these initiatives are moving forward, OSEP is eliminating the primary support that has been provided to states as they move forward with their initial work in regards to the SSIP -- namely, the elimination of the regional resource centers."

Moreover, it said, "while a new center may be up and running this fall, it always takes time for a new center to establish itself."

But NASDSE isn't concerned just about timing, Reder said in the interview -- it's concerned about losing the human relationship.

"What our state directors liked from the RRCs is the personalized, onsite work," she said. "There's no substitute for that."

See also:

- [OSEP looks for technical assistance provider on PROMISE program](#) (April 22)
- [OSEP proposes additional technical assistance center for special ed data](#) (April 21)
- [OSEP moving on two tracks to hold states accountable for student outcomes](#) (March 26)

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