

Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center Advisory Board Meeting Summary

June 9–10, 2008

On June 9–10, the Advisory Board of the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center met in Washington, D.C., and Arlington, Virginia, to review its Year 3 (2007–08) work, share plans for its Year 4 (2008–09) work, and gather comments on future directions from board members.

Joel Gomez, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Interim Associate Dean for Research at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University, welcomed participants to the meeting. Gomez noted that the university has strong programs in human and organizational studies and the culture of change, which dovetail well with MACC’s mission of supporting state education agencies (SEAs).

In the opening presentation, **Roberto Rodriguez**, Senior Education Advisor to U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Massachusetts), gave board members a progress report on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate have been working for two years now on reauthorization. Still, he said, “reauthorization last year had a rosier picture than it does now.”

More than 125 stakeholder organizations, including the education, civil rights, business, research, and higher education communities, have made recommendations for the reauthorization. “We’ve heard a whole variety of perspectives about what to do,” Rodriguez said. “One current that runs through all of them is that this law is not perfect and needs serious changes. But the core tenets of NCLB—standards-based reform, accountability, measuring achievement gaps, and leveraging resources to close achievement gaps—are principles that many have urged Congress to uphold.”

Among the key issues that are under scrutiny now:

- **Aligning ESEA Title I, Title II, and Title III.** Title I promotes improved educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged students, while Title II focuses on improving teacher and principal quality, increasing the number of highly qualified educators and holding local education agencies and schools accountable for improved student achievement. Title III covers language instruction for limited English proficient and immigrant students.

“School improvement begins with leadership and teaching,” Rodriguez said. To that end, there is interest in reframing Title II to better support teacher preparation, professional development, and career advancement strategies to strengthen and retain talented educators. “There is a lot of debate around merit pay for teacher performance and providing some incentives to get teachers into high-needs schools.” There is also interest in building more accountability into Title II.

- **Improving accountability and assessment.** While there is still strong support for the principle of requiring all students to meet academic standards, there is interest now in differentiating accountability into a more nuanced and sophisticated system than the current Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements, using growth models of student progress and different kinds of assessments, and focusing on comprehensive vs. targeted school improvement needs.



Congress is also interested in better measures of progress for two populations of students—English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities.

“We want to provide room for all states to differentiate their accountability systems,” Rodriguez said “We’re envisioning a two-tier model that looks at multiple indicators beyond test scores. How can we [develop] more meaningful indicators beyond reading and math scores at the state and local levels?” Congress also is considering how schools are labeled—because of the stigmas attached to the current “needs improvement,” “corrective action” and “restructuring” labels—and how much time underperforming schools have to improve.

- **Increasing support for underperforming schools.** Currently, some 10,000 schools nationwide are not meeting AYP; many of them have not met accountability measures for years. Congress is considering resources and strategies to support school improvement, with a \$500 million appropriation in the pipeline. “We want a federal framework at the state and local level—catalysts with institutions like the Regional Education Laboratories to bring research into the field—to help the turnaround process,” Rodriguez said. “That’s the real work behind NCLB, not building assessment or accountability systems.”
- **Improving secondary schools.** NCLB is “very much an elementary bill,” Rodriguez said, but there are deep challenges that need to be addressed in the nation’s middle and high schools as well. The dropout rate, especially in city schools, is approaching crisis proportions, he said, which requires measures to improve school safety and prevent students from dropping out, along with dropout recovery programs for young people who already have exited the public education system. There is interest in investing in middle and high school improvement and in improving adolescent literacy.
- **Broadening the support system for students.** Congress is interested in leveraging comprehensive and integrated supports for students facing physical, social and emotional challenges that impact their ability to succeed in school, Rodriguez said. Specifically, Congress is considering partnerships with community-based service providers and innovative collaborations with parent and community groups to address issues such as safe and drug-free schools, migrant education, homelessness, and hunger. Boston Public Schools, for example, has an innovative model for parent involvement.

Questions and Comments

Q. Can you talk more about the parent involvement program in Boston?

A. The Boston Parent Organizing Network is a coalition of community groups, intermediary organizations and foundations that engages families and parents in the city’s schools. Developed in collaboration with parents and teachers, the network trains Family Community Outreach Coordinators to develop strategies for parents to become engaged in standards-based classroom support. Title I supports parent engagement. Congress wants to encourage more innovative parent practices.

Q. Will there be amendments to NCLB in the absence of reauthorization?

A. We have been deliberately holding back on amendments in the Senate. The first bill to end NCLB was offered about three or four months after it was passed. Since then, there has been a pretty constant barrage of little tweaks. But piecemeal doesn’t help. A draft Senate bill is in the works. The House has a draft now. The U.S. Secretary of Education recently proposed draft regulations that try to play within the confines of the existing law.

Q. For urban and high-poverty schools, I'm glad that Congress sees that some investment needs to be made to prevent dropouts. What about support for middle and high schools? What might actually get passed?

A. If we had our druthers, there would be a separate title or part of ESEA dedicated to middle school in the form of improvement grants, and a separate system for accountability for secondary schools. The danger would be to focus solely on high schools, but not on the middle schools that feed them. It's important to do both, and even include the latter elementary years.

NCLB had a deliberate focus on K–3 or K–5. There is a real recognition that we need to do more. Areas needing more attention include dropout recovery for over-aged and under-accredited young people who need new pathways to high school completion.

Q. Can you talk more about Title II? In Maryland, we have very deep efforts in teacher preparation, but we don't even come close to preparing the numbers of teachers we need. What are we going to do to prepare and keep them? What about funding?

A. There is a bill called the Teach Act in the House that addresses pre-service and in-service preparation as well as recruitment. We need grants to get the most talented students into graduate programs as well as tuition reimbursement if they agree to teach in a high-need subject and/or school. This is a piece of the school improvement solution. We're also working in Title II on a bipartisan, more modest proposal to provide incentives to schools to provide bonuses to teachers in high-need subjects and schools.

Another piece around preparing teachers is investing in preparation programs that partner higher education institutions with LEAs, leveraging Title II LEA and higher education agency (HEA) dollars. This is a new model that is owned and operated by school districts, in cooperation with higher education, which provides an alternative pathway to accreditation for teachers. In this model, which has been successful in Chicago, the LEA provides mentors for future teachers and supports them through their second and third years of teaching.

Congress is also interested in refreshing Title II, Part D, Enhancing Education through Technology, to improve the use of technology in teaching and learning. One proposal is to build a national center for technology in teaching.

Statewide Systems of Support and SEA Functions

Charlene Rivera, GW-CEEE Executive Director, and MACC Director, asked participants to advise MACC on its efforts to assist SEAs in improving their statewide systems of support (SSOS) for districts and schools.

She noted that every state in the Mid-Atlantic region sent representatives to this Advisory Board meeting. "We realize that there are schools in this region in the status of restructuring," she said. "When we started in 2005, there were none. Now there are many. This is an opportunity to discuss restructuring, and provide support to schools in restructuring and advise the Comprehensive Center."

Marilyn Muirhead, Associate Director of Field Services for MACC and a staff member of GW-CEEE, highlighted a key challenge that MACC faced during 2007–08, Year 3 of its work.

MACC held two regional events and a Web conference to encourage states to conduct a self-assessment, using a process developed by the Center on Innovation & Improvement. This process, *Strengthening a Statewide System of Support*, enables an SEA to self-assess its organization, policies and practices, and

empowers it with substantive ways to plan for improvement. All of these events, however, suffered from low attendance and a seeming reluctance by states to go through this process. In the Mid-Atlantic region, only Delaware has completed a self-assessment.

“The only thing we seem to be able to generate interest around is for states talking to one another,” Muirhead said. “Why are we persisting with the self-assessment? MACC’s mission is around building capacity. With the numbers of schools being identified for improvement increasing, we believe the self-assessment tool can provide baseline data that SEAs need to improve their statewide systems of support.”

Marilyn Murphy, Director of Communications at the Center on Innovation & Improvement, explained that the self-assessment process enables SEAs to reflect on the incentives, opportunities and capacity they provide—or could provide—to support districts and schools. “This is not compliance or assessment—it’s an inventory of what you know of your system,” she said. Twenty states nationwide now are undertaking the process with their Regional Comprehensive Centers, which facilitate the process, write the self-assessment report, and assist SEAs in implementing recommendations. “The onus of the responsibility is on the Comprehensive Centers,” Murphy said.

State teams then participated in an activity in which they discussed and completed one page from the self-assessment inventory. They then offered the following reflective feedback on the activity:

New Jersey—Our discussion went very well and was valuable. It was interesting to discuss our understanding of the terms and how each member of the team defined them. We have many systems of support in New Jersey. Our biggest challenge has been to link these systems. We have 15 districts that have piloted the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability System and a new division to provide a statewide system of support. We have not had an unwillingness to do the self-assessment, but we’ve been in a different state of readiness. I think we’re at that state of readiness now. This would advance the work we’ve been doing. We would like to see that answering these questions would lead us in the direction we want to go.

Muirhead responded that it is up to states to prioritize the recommendations that come out of the self-assessment.

Pennsylvania—There are two challenges in Pennsylvania. The first is that it is a very large state and highly locally controlled, with a hands-off attitude by the state for curriculum and assessments. The second is that, while the state provides a lot of technical assistance, the statewide system of support is not very coherent. The state is now trying to prioritize, streamline, and align critical program areas.

Muirhead responded that the Priority Opportunity Index in the self-assessment would help with this situation.

District of Columbia—The new state department of education has been engaged in establishing itself and reviewing full formative assessments which are given to students three times a year, plus a summative assessment. The understaffed department has a full plate right now. But the self-assessment activity was useful in examining human capital in terms of using vendors.

Muirhead responded that many states believe they have something that works well and, therefore, resisted the self-assessment process. However, they find that on reflection they could build on what they have started. Plus, it is valuable to have an impartial organization like MACC to translate and make observations.

Maryland—One of our challenges is that we’ve been at this work for 15 years. We have players who say that we’ve been there, done that. We’re doing similar things as Pennsylvania—we have lots of systems and programs, but are they aligned and coherent? We’ve partly gotten comfortable with continuous improvement. We liked what you said about reasons for resistance to the self-assessment. If you turn that on its head, it may be the reason to do it. We would need this to be thoughtfully facilitated—the conversation across departments may be more important than the instrument.

Douglas Mac Iver, Principal Research Scientist at Johns Hopkins University, responded, “I know some of the resistance in Maryland is that the state has been there so long. A lot of issues have changed, though, and there are a lot of new challenges that didn’t exist. It would be worth discussing in some systematic way.”

Muirhead said that MACC is ready and willing to facilitate the self-assessment during a full-day set-aside for people to talk to their colleagues and to know and appreciate what they’re doing.

A Pennsylvania participant said that, from a district perspective, one of her middle schools had to submit a planning document because it did not meet AYP. She said the self-assessment process that led to the plan was very valuable.

Muirhead responded that an optional part of the self-assessment is interviews with principals and superintendents, which gives states a perspective on how the statewide system of support is perceived.

Barbara Hicks, Delaware Coordinator for MACC, explained that state’s experience with the self-assessment process. “Delaware wanted a way to capture its statewide system of support now, a way to build it and to continue smoothly to the next administration.” MACC offered three two-hour introductory sessions to the process and two sessions, totaling about 16 hours, with Delaware’s cross-department self-assessment team to facilitate the self-assessment inventory and consensus. A professional writer wrote a report of the findings and recommendations, which MACC presented to SEA officials. With these recommendations, the SEA created a Strategic Project Management Plan, developed tasks to achieve goals and assigned staff to this work.

Murphy said that Illinois, North Dakota, and South Dakota are finishing the self-assessment process now, and like Delaware, are planning to use the final report as a planning document.

Comments on MACC’s State Projects

State teams met to review MACC’s planned projects with their states. Muirhead asked them to consider whether the projects would help SEAs strengthen their statewide systems of support and consider additional projects that might be included. All state teams agreed that the projects are valuable and aligned with the statewide systems of support. Suggested new projects include:

Delaware—An examination of how districts do strategic planning and consolidated planning, and the links between these plans and state data collection.

District of Columbia—Helping the state committee charged with operationalizing the statewide system of support develop a mechanism to communicate across departments.

Maryland—Helping the state to broker services to districts that have not had as much success as others in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, an add-on to work already under way to develop breakthrough centers to support innovation.

Pennsylvania—A two-page list of projects to support continuing work on school improvement, response to intervention, voluntary state curriculum, algebra readiness, high-quality teaching and coaching, among others.

State Systems of Support Framework Overview

Muirhead reviewed the research-based framework for statewide systems of support developed by the Center on Innovation and Improvement, which has been presented in detail at previous meetings.

The framework outlines incentives, opportunities, and capacity as the three critical ingredients for fostering school improvement and improving student achievement.

Beyond Compliance to Technical Assistance

Robert Tobias, Director, Public Service Executive Programs, and Director, Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation at American University, presented parallels between the Internal Revenue Service’s (IRS) transition from a compliance-driven agency to one focused on technical assistance.

From its creation in 1913 until 1998, the IRS’s mission was primarily tax enforcement, Tobias said. The increasing complexity of the U.S. tax code prompted calls for a greater focus on assisting taxpayers who want to comply with the law. Advocates for this shift in mission argued that more services, information and resources would mitigate the need for more enforcement. In 1965, the IRS added a toll-free telephone assistance program, but there was little attention paid to the quality or quantity of this service—and no funding dedicated to taxpayer assistance.

In 1998, however, in response to rising complaints about overzealous enforcement, Congress directed the IRS to balance enforcement with assistance. The agency developed a new mission of providing top-quality service to the large majority of compliant taxpayers and enforcement for the few who fail to pay their fair share. The IRS reorganized its operations from a geographical to a functional structure, with four divisions focused on taxpayers with distinct characteristics and needs: individuals with relatively simple returns (70 percent of all taxpayers), small-business and self-employed taxpayers, large and mid-sized businesses, and tax-exempt and government entities governed by distinct sections of the tax code.

The realignment has helped clarify accountability and responsibilities for improving taxpayer services. Staffing and budgets now are focused on increasing voluntary compliance. And, by incorporating better technology, including a more responsive toll-free telephone system and a more useful Web site, customer satisfaction with IRS information and services now stands at 94 percent, he said.

“The IRS experiences might apply to the problems and issues you’re facing,” Tobias said. “SEAs are being challenged to change their roles and responsibilities from 1990s-style compliance to building statewide systems of support under NCLB and to do what they have not done in the past—create an environment where classrooms, schools and districts choose to change. You can’t force them to change. How do you get them to choose to change?”

Like the IRS, SEAs must tackle this challenge with few new funds, he said, which requires improving services by making budget allocations based on results. Following are some lessons learned from the IRS transformation that could help SEAs.

- Set goals
- Measure service performance
- Plan to achieve goals
- Organize and train people to achieve goals

- Communicate goals, plans and achievements internally and externally
- Learn about the incentives, opportunities and capacity that lead people to change their behavior to meet new challenges

Gene Wilhoit, Executive Director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, made the following three observations about shifting from compliance to technical assistance.

1. A statewide system of support should not be undertaken in an isolated way. It's an issue across departments and agencies.
2. A statewide system of support is a major shift in thinking for an SEA, which cannot be achieved without top SEA leaders at the table and without incentives for change.
3. Be prepared for major resistance. If the work is going too smoothly, something is wrong.

In Wilhoit's view, the goal of this work is not simply assisting a few schools. The goal is that every school and every district will have higher performance than ever before and reduce achievement gaps. "NCLB is an inadequate measure of success," he said. "NCLB is a *minimal* compliance standard."

Therefore, he said, if the goals for achievement are the marching orders, SEAs need to redefine and transform themselves. "We have to put achievement first," he said. Dick Elmore advocates what he calls a "reciprocal accountability system." "The *quid pro quo* is that the state declares the standards and the locals implement them. No. If we expect schools and districts to achieve, we have the responsibility to support them in making changes."

True transformation cannot be implemented in isolated ways. Changes need to be systemic, coherent and balanced. The realities—but not excuses—are that SEAs are underfunded and understaffed. There is not a culture in many states that supports these kinds of changes. To succeed, every SEA needs programs in four broad areas:

- Clear, doable and rigorous **standards**
- Aligned summative and formative **assessments**
- Appropriate, sufficient **accountability** measures, including rewards and sanctions, and robust data systems
- **Conditions** for student learning

Wilhoit offered these lessons learned during his tenure as Kentucky's Education Commissioner.

- **Pay attention to people, processes and organizational structure.** Are people on mission or off mission? In Kentucky, Wilhoit shut the SEA down for three weeks to discuss organizational change and followed up with staff training. The state created a new decision-making structure organized around priority student, school and district needs, not agency needs. "You have to jettison ineffective programs regardless of individuals and the history of programs."
- **Align financial allocation with goals.** Resources must be based on new roles and functions. Sometimes, funding shifts required legislative action. Professional development often represents the largest funding pool, but it is the most disconnected. "You need to understand where that money is going."
- **Modernize business processes.** Technology, rather than paperwork, should be used to manage student and teacher data and support services.

- **Pay more attention to stakeholders.** A statewide system of support is as much about the community as it is about schools. It's the SEA's responsibility to make sure to communicate to stakeholders.

SEAs need to work at five levels to provide effective support to districts and schools.

1. **Align state and federal program requirements.** Develop a decision-making tool, beyond student results, for identifying school and district needs and status. Develop an adjudication process to defend these decisions.
2. **Provide a self-help system and capacity-building opportunities** for all districts and schools, built into their day-to-day work activities.
3. **Offer optional, coordinated support** to district and school leaders who ask for it. Peer-to-peer support is particularly effective.
4. **Develop interventional strategies for underperforming schools** with more defined rules and a commitment of state resources.
5. **Get serious about restructuring.** With options such as charter schools and faculty reconstitution available, SEAs can no longer defend long-term failure.

Questions and Comments

Q. What are the data sources for decision making around reallocation of resources?

Wilhoit: Direct customers—districts, schools and educators—will make strong judgments about program effectiveness and image. Some services they don't even know about, but others they value to a high degree. The barriers to making changes are agency resistance and, sometimes, legislators who want to retain a pet program. In districts, the resistance isn't as great. They know what needs to be done.

Q. How were the IRS geographic centers reorganized?

Tobias: The Commissioner invited representatives of 10 congressional committees to assist with the reorganization. The initial discussion began around data. Who are the taxpayers? How do they break around groups? What are their needs to close compliance gaps? How do we use this data to achieve our goals? For schools, the broader question would be, how can we maximize every child's ability to achieve in the public schools?

The federal government did a survey of 250,000 employees with 10 indicators of employee engagement. Employees who believed their skills matched their agency's mission were more engaged.

Q. Can you talk about sustainability of systemic change?

Wilhoit: Sustainability is dependent on successes and early successes. The public is probably not going to tolerate change without progress. You need evidence. D.C. is one of the most apt resisters in place. The SEA is critical. For the first time, there is someone assigned the responsibility of making sure goals are met. D.C. probably has the largest percentage of charter schools. It's a good place for an experiment. You need to provide a strong structure, not necessarily for accountability, but for information. This work is important to the nation. There are so many political actors. You need a strong communications process so their concerns are being addressed—and very strong communications to the general public.

Tobias: We often use the term accountability, which has assumed a hectoring quality. What if we used the term performance management systems? It's not about beating you up.

Muirhead: In education, we do not have those kinds of metrics in place. We have student performance measures, but very few measures of what has to happen, what supports have to be in place. How can we develop them without being overly burdensome? Could we use scholastic audits that include critical indicators?

Wilhoit: We have to determine what's important beyond student performance—common indicators that indirectly affect student performance or impact delivery of intervention strategies, such as diagnostic assessments and other elements from research and best practices. SEAs also need to have very robust data systems to use data effectively and anticipate the use of data to answer policy questions.

Sandra Angius, Vice President of Programs at Edvantia and Principal Investigator of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC), asked participants to advise MACC on possible technical assistance in states across the region around these issues. Responses:

- There are many commonalities in our state plans. How can we do more of this together? The IRS is a national effort. We have to have a better way of doing this together.

Tobias: The tipping point for Kentucky occurred when the SEA took a timeout and actually listened to the people it was supposed to serve and put together a plan to serve their needs. Maybe MACC could be the leader in facilitating these kinds of plans. More than research or data, it's about use of data and implementation with strategic plan.

- In Pennsylvania, it's a huge effort to have a recommended statewide curriculum. We can't all be spending time on this.
- The IRS is governed by federal statute. There is not an education parallel. We could have a voluntary state curriculum times 50 or a national curriculum and assessments.

Hicks: If MACC noticed states working on the same thing, would states be willing to collaborate?

- States have done that with consortia. It depends on the project. There are models. What about SEA contractor evaluations? It makes no sense for each state to do these separately.
- I like the idea of the skills/mission match. What skills are needed for MACC and for SEAs?
- We need conversations with legislators, workforce development, economic development, health care, and education systems around the context of school improvement.

Evaluation: Internal and National Highlights

Lori McGee, Evaluation Coordinator at GW-CEEE, provided an overview of MACC's evaluation process. Data sources for MACC's internal evaluations include;

- An annual client survey combined with an SEA practices survey;
- State team interviews;
- State project document reviews; and

- SEA primary contact interviews.

In the annual client survey, 97 percent of respondents said that MACC delivers high-quality services, 100 percent said that these services are highly relevant, and 100 percent said they are highly useful.

For the national evaluation conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, MACC prepares project inventories and portfolios highlighting MACC's value-added for a combination of projects selected by IES, and projects nominated by MACC. Staff interviews are part of this process as well. The response to these portfolios has been positive, although IES is looking for more scientifically based research to support projects.

Next Steps

Several states said that they are interested in new work with MACC that will support their statewide systems of support, based on the information from this meeting.

- An analysis of the inventory of services provided in New Jersey
- Coordination of MACC meetings/services when states are in Washington, DC
- Creation of standards for service providers that all states can use
- MACC meetings in states to engage LEAs and create a sense of urgency about the work of statewide systems of support
- Developing a list of topics for regional events, board meetings or Web spotlight series (several participants noted that Web conferences are not very engaging, however, and sometimes difficult for people to participate in from their workplaces)
- Collaboration with other states, with MACC facilitation (Already, MACC has facilitated such collaboration, with the District of Columbia visiting New Jersey to learn about that state's Collaborative Assessment for Planning and Achievement (CAPA) initiative, Pennsylvania working with Maryland to learn about that state's voluntary state curriculum, and Pennsylvania visiting Ohio to learn about that state's Title II plan.)

Closing

Dr. Rivera thanked all of the participants for their valuable input and for their insights on MACC's Year 3 and 4 work.