

MACC Advisory Board Meeting Summary
Aligning School Improvement Efforts with ARRA Assurance Areas
June 8–9, 2009

On June 8–9, the Advisory Board of the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC) met in Washington, D.C., and Arlington, Va., to review its Year 4 (2008–09) work, share plans for its Year 5 (2009–10) work, and gather comments on future directions from board members.

June 8th

In the opening presentation, **Roberto Rodriguez**, Special Assistant to President Obama for Education Policy, reported on the Obama administration’s accomplishments to date and priorities for the future in education.

The **American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009**, enacted in February, allocated more than \$100 billion for education, a “huge investment” that includes \$5 billion for early childhood education, \$70 billion for K–12 education, and \$30 billion for higher education. The White House and U.S. Department of Education are focused on making sure this funding is used to leverage meaningful reform and close achievement gaps. Specifically, states must address four assurance areas:

- Making progress toward rigorous college-and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments that are valid and reliable for all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities
- Establishing pre-K-to-college-and-career data systems that track progress and foster continuous improvement
- Making improvements in teacher effectiveness and in the equitable distribution of qualified teachers for all students, particularly students who are most in need
- Providing intensive support and effective interventions for the lowest-performing schools

To date, he said, 33 states have submitted applications for ARRA funds, which are intended to stabilize budgets and provide a “down payment” and a “foundation” to shape both the anticipated reauthorization of the **Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)** and the Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 and 2011 federal budgets for education. President Obama in March set these priorities for education:

- **Raising quality in early childhood education.** The administration envisions developing a coordinated system of pre K–5 education, starting with a blueprint for all states to move forward. ARRA funding through the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services is providing planning grants for state advisory councils to begin this work.

The FY 2010 budget calls for \$500 million in matching funds for states that choose to use ARRA funds to invest in early childhood education and Title I schools. The budget also establishes a challenge fund to improve the quality of care in early learning centers, so that the most disadvantaged children to be ready for success in kindergarten.

- **Encouraging innovation and rigor in K–12 education.** The administration supports the Common Core Standards in English language arts and mathematics under development now by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. Forty-six states, the District of Columbia and two territories have joined this initiative, which will shape a reauthorized ESEA. This initiative will encourage states to work together on common assessments, curriculum and professional development. (After this meeting, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that the administration would dedicate up to \$350 million to develop assessments aligned to the Common Core Standards.)

ARRA also includes a \$5 billion “Race to the Top Fund,” details of which will be released in July. This fund will encourage states to improve rigor and relevance in standards and assessments, develop tools to improve classroom teaching and learning, differentiate instruction, and improve curriculum. Rodriguez noted that the administration does not intend to develop curriculum, but it will provide incentives to improve 21st century learning, especially in math and science.

- **Improving statewide data systems.** The administration is committed to helping states collecting data to improve policy and instruction. Already, the majority of states participate in a U.S. Department of Education program through the Institute of Education Sciences to develop better data systems. ARRA includes \$250 million in new funding for this purpose, which will be allocated via state grants. Another priority for Secretary Duncan is linking data to teacher performance.
- **Reinvigorating the teacher profession.** The administration is interested in providing teachers with more support and developing professional careers ladders. In exchange for more support and compensation, teachers would take on more responsibility. For pre-service preparation, ARRA includes \$100 million for teacher quality enhancement, which will be used to promote collaboration among districts and postsecondary colleges of education.
- **Improving the lowest-performing schools.** ARRA dedicates \$3 billion to helping states address the needs of schools in need of improvement, corrective action and restructuring.
- **Addressing high schools and the dropout crisis.** The administration wants to focus more attention on secondary education, particularly on improving high schools, reducing the dropout rate, and closing the African American achievement gap, in future budgets. Rodriguez noted that 50 percent of high school dropouts come from 2,000 high schools. One initiative that has had success in New York City’s Harlem, Promise Neighborhoods, couples school reform with comprehensive services for students and families from community-based organizations. If funded in the FY 2010 budget, this initiative would begin with 20 planning grants. In response to a question, Rodriguez said he is not sure if reducing the high school dropout rate will be another assurance area, but the issue is important.

- **Increasing support for postsecondary students.** ARRA provides \$17.1 billion for Pell grants, \$200 million for federal work–study programs, and extra tax relief for tuition and related expenses. The administration views this funding as a “down payment” on increased aid for students to attend college. In response to a question about funding for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Rodriguez said that the U.S. Congress had provided a one-time infusion of funds—\$85 million a year for two years—into HBCUs in 2007. The FY 2010 budget *sunsetting* this funding stream, but the administration will continue to support HBCUs through the Higher Education Act and other initiatives.

June 9th

Welcome, Introduction, & Overview

Charlene Rivera, Executive Director of The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (GW-CEEE) and MACC Director, highlighted the goals of the Advisory Board meeting:

- To summarize MACC’s Year 4 projects
- To share plans for Year 5 projects, especially in terms of aligning it with ARRA
- To discuss lessons learned over the past four years of operation of the Comprehensive Centers and the ongoing work

She noted that she has been impressed with Obama administration’s start, especially the energy and collaborative style of the education team. She also said she was impressed with the administration’s focus on classrooms, not on governance structures. However, she said that this is a time of uncertainty and ambiguity. The impact of many new and planned initiatives, including ARRA, the development of the Common Core Standards and the reauthorization of ESEA, is yet to be seen. It is not clear whether or how the Comprehensive Centers will fit into the mix.

Rivera said MACC is interested in the Board’s impressions of how the Comprehensive Center has assisted their work and their recommendations for a future iteration of the Center.

Marilyn Muirhead, Associate Director for MACC, said that a meeting planned for June 22 with the U.S. Department of Education would provide an opportunity for MACC to share the Board’s perspectives about the lessons learned over the past four years.

MACC Regional Projects

Rivera shared a MACC document, *Building State Capacity to Support Districts and Schools: Highlights of Three Years of Progress in the Mid-Atlantic States*. Board members had the opportunity to review the document and provide feedback on their state’s sections. Muirhead said that the feedback received would be used to revise the document and that the board members would have an opportunity to see it again afterwards.

Rivera shared other documents that MACC produced over the past year which represent a compilation of MACC's work and accumulated policies and practices from the field: *Strengthening the Transition from Middle Grades to High School*, *Patterns of Practice: School Review Process*, *Consolidated Planning for School Districts: Developing a Planning Process*; and *Tier 1 Literacy Instruction and Classroom Assessment Strategies for Adolescent English Language Learners: An Annotated Bibliography*. The latter document will complement two RTI Info Briefs (under development) on instruction and assessment.

MACC State Projects

Each of the state groups met in a break-out session to discuss their planned projects for the coming year, and then presented them to the whole group. This gave the state groups an opportunity to hear about work planned in other states. (See the MACC Year 5 Project Plans section of the Meeting Binder for the project descriptions.)

Disbursing ARRA Funds: How the Comprehensive Center System Can Help

Muirhead and Marilyn Murphy, Communications Director of CII, facilitated a discussion of the role that Comprehensive Centers can play in states' planned uses of ARRA funds.

Muirhead, Murphy, and Rivera highlighted three online tools that are publically available, which could help them make the best use of these funds.

- **Online Support for School Improvement (SSI)** helps states use technology to collect, manage and analyze data and build district capacity to provide leadership in implementing effective school improvement strategies.
- An interactive mapping tool, **Using ARRA Funds to Improve Teacher Effectiveness and Equitable Distribution**, can be used to guide conversations between comprehensive centers and SEAs on the strategic use of ARRA funds to improve teacher quality through the entire professional development pipeline, from pre-service education to recruitment, retention and ongoing training.
- **ELL Accommodations Toolkit** which was developed to support SEAs in refining assessment policies for ELLs. This toolkit, based on research in all 50 states, will be supplemented with further work on implementation policies and practices, Rivera said.

Discussion

The Mid-Atlantic States are taking different approaches to using ARRA funds—and they reported debate and confusion on funding allocations and tracking within their states. Following are some areas identified by the Board as potential areas that MACC or the CC Network could provide assistance.

- **Guidance.** Many states are still developing their spending plans, and they need help deciding whether and how to combine the stimulus funding with other spending, including Title I, Individuals with Disabilities Act, and homeless programs. “We need as much guidance in terms of small pots of money as with the larger pots,” such as the state fiscal stabilization funds in ARRA. MACC can help states ensure that the ARRA funding is used to shape district and school actions in ways that will improve student achievement.
- **Benchmarking.** Many states are interested in other states’ plans for stimulus spending and components of school improvement, especially standards and assessments. The CC’s could assist in the development of policies and practices.
- **Evaluation and reporting.** ARRA requires separate federal reporting, which could be burdensome to states. Plus, the public will be focused on ARRA spending and results. In some states, accountability could be complicated even further. New Jersey, for example, has been selected by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) for a thorough evaluation of its ARRA spending. New Jersey officials are concerned about this. MACC could potentially assist states in meeting their evaluation and reporting requirements, and in states like New Jersey, with interactions with outside evaluators.

MACC Evaluation Highlights

Lori McGee, Evaluation Coordinator at GW-CEEE, shared the results of MACC’s annual national evaluation, which is based on state surveys, interviews and document reviews. According to the evaluation;

States are satisfied with MACC’s contributions to state work in its three goal areas:

- **Goal 1.** SEAs will foster relationships, resource sharing, and comprehensive planning across divisions for the purpose of meeting the technical assistance needs of schools and districts identified for improvement (81 percent client satisfaction).
- **Goal 2.** SEAs will use data to identify and differentiate the needs of schools and districts identified for improvement so that appropriate assistance can be delivered to address these needs (64 percent client satisfaction).
- **Goal 3.** State support system staff will design and use ongoing, job-embedded professional development that helps district instructional leaders build effective practice in schools identified for improvement (61 percent client satisfaction).

States are very satisfied with MACC services overall:

- 96 percent of respondents to the annual client survey agreed that MACC services are of *high quality, highly relevant and highly useful*

In these three areas, MACC exceeded its target of 80 percent satisfaction and posted gains over previous-year results.

Comprehensive Center Design and Next Steps

During this final session Muirhead asked the Board for their insight about the CC networks' work and lessons learned that might impact the design of the network beyond 2010.

The Board suggested that they would like to see the Comprehensive Centers;

- **Continue the current work.** States find MACC's support and services valuable in rethinking and reformulating their role as statewide systems of support. They value the opportunities MACC provides for them to network with other states. They value MACC's informed outside perspective and role as a critical friend. And they value the resources MACC creates or collects.
- **Focus on the four ARRA assurance areas.** States believe the four assurance areas will become priority areas in the ESEA reauthorization and future federal education budgets. They especially want MACC to focus on preschool, middle and high school improvement, along with separating and distinguishing support for struggling students and struggling schools.
- **Improve connections and alignment to the Content Centers.** By design, states are supposed to go through their regional comprehensive centers to access the five national content centers and labs. States sometimes find this system unwieldy and find it hard to get the content centers and labs to respond to their needs.
- **Expand connections to districts.** By design, MACC provides assistance to states. But districts and, in Pennsylvania, educational service agencies known as intermediate units could benefit from the "fantastic" services and resources MACC offers as well. More direct communication with districts and regional agencies would improve states efforts.

Support charter schools. Delaware and the District of Columbia both have large numbers of charter schools, which turn to their SEAs for support. Rivera said that there is nothing in MACC's current mandate that would prohibit this focus. However, MACC's capacity and resources could be overwhelmed if the center tried to provide services to individual schools. MACC could consider helping SEAs create state initiatives that would support charter schools. Murphy added that CII does have a charter school initiative that could support such a project.