Intervener Services Systems Change: Exploration and Building Partnerships

This document is intended as a guide for state deaf-blind projects as they engage in systems technical assistance (TA) planning and delivery related to intervener services for children and youth who are deaf-blind. It is part of a broader resource called Changing Systems: Moving Beyond Child-Specific Technical Assistance, which is where you will find specific systems-change activities. NCDB’s Interveners and Qualified Personnel Initiative page also has a wealth of resources to inform systems-change activities.

There are two main sections:

- **Exploration** – Gathering information about intervener services needs in your state, learning about relevant state systems, and identifying opportunities for change
- **Building Partnerships** – Developing partnerships with individuals and organizations that share your goals for improving intervener services

“System” refers to a collection of agencies and individuals and the regulatory structures and processes that guide how they function. In the area of intervener services, there are multiple state and local agencies that should be involved in assuring that qualified interveners are available for children and youth who are deaf-blind.

These include:

- State Education Agencies (SEAs)
- Local Education Agencies (LEAs)
- State Professional Development Grants (SPDGs)
- Schools for the Deaf and/or Blind

A challenge for state deaf-blind projects is to understand how these systems and their personnel (e.g., administrators, individualized education program teams) can be involved in the adoption of intervener services, support intervener training, and provide financial and human resources for the delivery of intervener services.

**Important note:** Although this document focuses on systems change related to intervener services, it’s important to keep in mind that interveners require coaching and TA from teachers with expertise in deaf-blindness. When working on systems-
change projects, it is essential to consider interveners in the context of the overall provision of qualified personnel for children with deaf-blindness.

**EXPLORATION**

**Initial Needs and Resources Assessment**

You likely already have a significant amount of existing data to inform intervener services systems change in your state but may also need to collect new information. This section provides recommendations about useful data sources and the type of information that can be obtained from each.

Be sure to discuss your findings with other staff members (if you have them) and possibly even your advisory board to obtain a broad perspective on what they mean.

**State Child Count**

Your state deaf-blind child count includes data that can help you think about how to focus your efforts. Here are some questions to consider:

- How many students are on the count?
- In what regions of your state do they live?
- How many have intervener services? Are there any characteristics (e.g., etiology, educational setting, region, presence of additional disabilities, age) associated with receiving intervener services?

**Technical Assistance Data**

Documentation from previous TA (e.g., training, facilitation, consultation) provided to families and service providers can be used to identify common needs. This includes individualized TA documents (e.g., intake and planning forms) and evaluations from workshops and other training events. The following questions can help guide your analysis:

- Does your documentation indicate that many children and youth who do not receive intervener services would benefit from them (e.g., lack access to information and communication, not meeting IEP goals)?
- Is it a challenge for the schools you work with to provide access to information, communication, and socialization opportunities?
- Do families report that their children do not have personnel with knowledge and skills related to deaf-blindness?
- What is the level of awareness of intervener competencies and services among family members, local IEP team members, and local and state administrators?
● How many students do not have intervener services but have other types of one-to-one support? How effective is that support?
● Do families and educators lack access to teachers with expertise in deaf-blindness who could supervise interveners?

**State and Local Agencies and Organizations**

Now explore state and local systems and how they might be involved in or support intervener services systems change.

**POLICIES**

Does your SEA or any LEAs in your state have policies and regulations on paraprofessionals, assistant teachers, or interveners? These might be related to:

● Training and certification requirements
● IEP guidance
● Service delivery
● Supervision
● Career ladder incentives

What processes do your SEA and LEAs have for developing and disseminating policies and regulations regarding paraprofessionals or interveners?

**TRAINING PROGRAMS**

● Are there existing state or local training programs for paraprofessionals or interveners? If so, how are they financed?
● Are there opportunities for paraprofessionals or interveners to receive coaching or mentoring?
● Is there a structure to provide ongoing professional development for paraprofessionals or interveners? If so, how is it funded?
● Would your SEA or LEAs be open to using an online national program for intervener training?

**STATE PERSONNEL DEVELOPMENT GRANTS**

State Personnel Development Grants (SPDGs) are intended to help SEAs reform and improve their systems for personnel preparation and professional development for individuals providing early intervention, educational, and transition services, in order to improve results for children with disabilities. To learn about SPDG activities in your state, see the [SigNetwork website](#).
LOCAL SERVICE DELIVERY

- Do any LEAs in your state currently have trained and/or certified or credentialed interveners?
- What funding sources are available to provide intervener services at the local level?
- Do LEAs have a structure for intervener supervision? If so, how is it funded?
- Are there certified teachers knowledgeable in deaf-blind practices who can supervise interveners?
- Are there funding sources (e.g., Medicaid) other than local education funds to support intervener services?

INFRASTRUCTURE

- Is there a low-incidence advisory group in your state? What is its structure (e.g., personnel/volunteers, location, mission, work scope)? (See more about low-incidence infrastructures and advisory groups in the “Building Partnerships” section below.)
- Is there a regional service delivery model for students with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., visual impairments, deaf/hard of hearing, deaf-blindness, multiple disabilities)? If so, does it include teachers with expertise in deaf-blindness who can supervise interveners?

Advocacy

Are there individuals, agencies, or organizations in your state engaged in advocacy for qualified personnel—including paraeducators—for children and youth with low-incidence disabilities? These may be conducted by family members, family organizations, personnel preparation programs, or University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs).

If so, how do they influence the state and local systems described above? Are there ongoing systemic efforts that you can join?

Have there been prior advocacy efforts to promote intervener services in your state? If so:

- What was done?
- Who participated?
- Was it successful?
- What did not work and why?
Ongoing Needs Assessment

At times, during systems-change activities, you may find that you need to gather additional information in order to move forward. When this happens, it’s good to pause and ask yourself the following questions:

- What additional information do we need?
- From whom (audience)?
- What tools or processes will it require?
- How in-depth should the data collection be (e.g., general information can be collected through a survey, while detailed information about how a particular system works may require interviews or possibly conducting a focus group with stakeholders)?

Project Capacity

An essential part of making decisions about how to approach systems-change TA is to evaluate your project’s experience with systems change in general and with the systems you are targeting. The knowledge and experience that your project staff have with the systems you are considering targeting can inform your decision-making in two ways:

1. You may decide to target systems with which you already have significant expertise
2. You may decide to target systems where you have limited expertise and will therefore need to identify specific topics and issues about which you need to learn more

The questions in the following sections can help you evaluate your staff’s current knowledge and expertise.

Overall Systems-Change Capacity

- Are you familiar with systems-change implementation strategies?
- Have you worked on developing or revising policies or regulations?
- Have you participated in advocacy efforts?
- Do you have experience influencing training systems?
- Have you had experience locating funding resources?
- Have you negotiated collaborative agreements or memorandums of understanding?

What support might you need from NCDB or other state deaf-blind project colleagues?
Intervener Services Capacity

The following questions will help you gauge your current level of knowledge about intervener services generally, as well as agencies and organizations in your state that would be responsible for providing them if adopted. You probably found answers to some of these questions during your needs and resources assessment. For others, you may need additional information and training.

What is your level of knowledge about:

- Agencies and organizations responsible for providing qualified personnel and services for children and youth with low-incidence disabilities in your state?
- State systems responsible for paraeducator training and services?
- Intervener services in your state?
- Intervener services generally, including national systems-change efforts, related to:
  - Regulation adoption
  - Recognition of the intervener role
  - Service delivery models
  - Training methods and programs
  - Professional development
  - Intervener training incentives
  - Intervener career incentives
- Do you have project goals (e.g., in your grant application) related to systems-change efforts for intervener services?

Your Project’s Location

Where your project is located (state education department, university/UCEDD, school or other agency) can influence your ability to carry out different types of systems work. Being at a state department of education may give you access to regulatory processes that allow you to inform and propose change. Being at a university may give you the freedom to organize grassroots efforts and build model programs.

What limitations and opportunities are associated with your project’s home agency with respect to the work you would like to conduct related to intervener services?

Problem Statements and Prioritizing Needs

Global needs or problem statements provide a clear definition of the problem(s) you want to address, not only for yourself but for partners you would like to recruit and stakeholders you hope to influence. Based on your needs assessment, what are the main areas of difficulty related to interveners for children and youth who are deaf-blind
in your state? What isn’t working? Do you have hypotheses for why something isn’t working? Clarity is critical for building engagement.

Example problem statements:

1. Adoption of intervener services has been unsuccessful due to lack of understanding by families, IEP teams, and administrators of the benefits of these services and why they are important. As a result, families are unable to engage in advocacy for intervener services for their children and IEP teams and administrators rarely assess the need for or incorporate intervener services into individualized education programs.

2. Administrators responsible for making decisions about intervener training have limited knowledge of the Council for Exceptional Children’s intervener knowledge and skill competencies and how they can be addressed through training.

3. Opportunities and funding for comprehensive intervener training opportunities are not currently available or encouraged.

4. There are no state or local policies and regulations in place to support intervener services (e.g., training and certification requirements, IEP guidance, supervision, career ladder incentives)

5. There is no infrastructure (e.g., advisory task force or council, regional service delivery model) for low-incidence populations to support the development of intervener services.

Typically, systemic issues involve multiple needs that must be addressed to bring about desired change. Ultimately, it may be necessary to address all the needs, but determining the order in which you address them is important. Prioritize needs in an order that seems logical. This may involve putting the most pressing issues first, but more likely will be an order that makes internal sense.

Solutions and Outcomes

There is overlap between solutions and outcomes, but in general, solutions are what you are proposing should be done and outcomes are what you hope will be achieved as a result.

Solutions

Systemic solutions for your problems/needs should be actions likely to create lasting change in entities external to your project. They typically fall into the following categories (a single solution may fit more than one category):

- Policies/regulations
- Programs (e.g., sustainable training program, community of practice)
- Activities/materials to change an agency or organization’s culture or norms (e.g., shift provider attitudes about children with deaf-blindness)
- Processes (e.g., referral or shared training agreements)
- Funding

As you identify potential solutions, it’s helpful to think about how they fit with the existing priorities and values of current and potential partners. This is essential for obtaining buy-in. Keeping in mind that your goals must align in some way with potential partner organizations’ goals, will guide your thinking about with whom to seek partnerships.

The following are examples of solutions to the problems listed in the previous section:

- Embed information about the role of interveners, intervener competencies, training needs, and supervision methods into existing programs that provide professional development for families, administrators, and educators.
- Embed information on partnering with early intervention agencies and schools to determine the need for intervener services into materials disseminated by family organizations.
- Develop policies and regulations that formalize the provision of intervener services—training and certification requirements, IEP guidance, supervision, career ladder incentives—at state, regional, and local levels.
- Develop and implement processes for intervener training, including who will provide it (in-state or national program), how it will be funded, and how coaching and supervision will be provided.
- Develop and implement processes for ongoing professional development for interveners.

**Outcomes**

Outcomes should align with your grant objectives and include short-, medium-, and long-term versions. Those that focus on immediate changes you would like to see are as important as medium- and long-term ones because they help you evaluate ongoing progress. You will likely have multiple outcomes, depending on the desired scope of change. As you set outcomes, make initial determinations about how you’ll measure them (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups).

**Examples of short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes:**

- A low-incidence infrastructure (e.g., task force or council) is in place to provide guidance related to intervener services policies and procedures *(short)*
- Existing programs for training interveners can be accessed or new programs are being developed *(short)*
- An increased number of individuals providing support to children with deaf-blindness are enrolled in or have completed intervener training *(medium)*
• An increased number of IEP teams include processes to evaluate whether their students with deaf-blindness would benefit from an intervener (medium)
• An increased number of children in the state receive intervener services (long)
• An increased number of interveners are certified or credentialed (long)
• An increased number of teachers are enrolled in professional development to learn how to supervise interveners (long)

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Existing Partners/Relationships

Use existing relationships to gain access to a system or connect you with other entities in that system. Many of your current partnerships may be with individuals, agencies, or organizations that you identified while exploring needs and resources as outlined at the beginning of this document, including:

• State Education Agencies (SEAs)
• Local Education Agencies (LEAs)
• State Professional Development Grants (SPDGs)
• State Special Education Administrators
• Regional Low-Incidence Programs
• Schools for the Deaf or Blind
• Local Education Administrators and Special Education Directors
• School IEP Teams
• Family Groups
• Personnel Preparation Programs (Institutions of Higher Education)

For each, capture:

• Who they are (name, role, agency)
• Opportunities they offer to contribute to intervener services or training
• Whether they possess enough authority to support systems-change efforts
• What your ask of them is and how it relates to your problem statement and potential solutions
• What you can you offer them

Potential Partners/Relationships

Look for gaps in your current partnerships. Who else do you need to recruit? They might be people with power and influence in the system you are targeting or who have knowledge, skills, and resources your current partners do not have.
Guiding questions:

- Who works on the issue nationally? What type of support can they offer?
- What task forces, councils, interagency groups, or other decision-making/advisory bodies are likely to be interested?
- Is there a low-incidence infrastructure in your state (e.g., low-incidence advisory or interagency group, disability-specific consultants in your department of education)?
- Who were the personnel or stakeholders involved in your state’s SPDG or SSIP (if it addressed qualified personnel) and what were their roles? Is there a possibility that your project could become involved as a stakeholder?

Potential national partners include:

- [Training Interveners Group (an NCDB Peer-Learning Community)]
- [PARaprofessional Resource and Research (PAR²A) Center]
- [Council for Exceptional Children Paraeducator Special Interest Group]
- [National Resource Center for Paraeducators]

Whether drawing on existing relationships or pursuing new ones, be mindful of what you ask for and what you can give back in terms of time, resources, and expertise.

**Developing Agreements**

Because systems-change efforts involve collaboration among agencies or organizations, written memorandum of understanding (MoUs) or collaborative agreements are essential. They outline what the work will entail and how responsibilities and resources will be shared. They are co-written between the entities involved.

**Low-Incidence Infrastructures and Advisory Groups**

Implementation teams should collaborate with low-incidence groups and structures as they plan, organize, and implement systems-change strategies and activities.

**Low-Incidence Infrastructures**

Low-incidence infrastructures refer to programs or groups within a state or region responsible for meeting the needs of individuals with low-incidence disabilities. They are not necessarily specific to special education but should have a clear low-incidence focus (e.g., deafness, visual impairment, deaf-blindness). Examples include:

- A state department of education’s regional service delivery system with specialized low-incidence disability consultants and services
- Statewide advisory or interagency groups
- Other advisory groups
- Schools for the deaf or blind outreach programs
- Commissions for the blind that provide services across the lifespan

Partnerships with individuals and agencies that operate within low-incidence infrastructures are essential for many systems-change efforts. Without them, it’s difficult to influence existing state and regional agencies, programs, and initiatives. Some type of low-incidence infrastructure at the state or regional level will be needed (or developed, if it does not exist) to engage in the exploration and planning phases of systems-change projects, in order to clarify the problem and identify solutions. If you have these types of groups in your state, you need to understand who they are and partner with them.

**Advisory Groups**

Many states lack low-incidence infrastructures or have ones that don’t adequately represent the interests of children with deaf-blindness and their families or are restricted in their ability to advocate for needed change and improvement. While it is critical to have representation for deaf-blindness inside existing structures, external entities are also critical because they can increase the visibility of children with deaf-blindness and their families. Groups such as deaf-blind task forces or advisory councils bring together stakeholders in a common cause to do just that.

Like infrastructure entities, task forces and advisory councils are not responsible for the implementation of solutions within systems. They serve a larger adaptive function of building an understanding of the needs of children and youth with deaf-blindness, pointing out systemic shortcomings, and suggesting systemic changes. In being tasked with exploration and planning, these advisory structures frequently employ facilitative processes that lead to the development of consensus on needs and solutions.

The following are examples of processes and tools that could be used with groups to support this type of work:

- [Leading By Convening](#)
- [University of Kansas Community Tool Box – Chapter 16: Group Facilitation and Problem-Solving](#)
- [NCDB Facilitation Factsheet](#)