Qualified Personnel 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 qualified personnel. For the purposes of this guide, “qualified personnel” is defined as teachers and related service personnel with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively serve children and youth who are deaf-blind. A separate guide covers intervener services.

This document 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 the educational needs of students who are deaf-blind in your state, learning about agencies and organizations responsible for training and providing qualified personnel, and identifying opportunities for change

- **Building Partnerships** – Developing partnerships with individuals and organizations that share your goals related to qualified personnel for students who are deaf-blind or have other low-incidence disabilities

“System” refers to a collection of agencies and individuals and the regulatory structures and processes that guide how they function. In the area of qualified personnel for children and youth who are deaf-blind, multiple systems are typically involved.

Qualified personnel systems-change efforts may target aspects of training, service delivery, or both. Efforts to improve training typically involve embedding deaf-blind content within:

- Existing professional development opportunities (e.g., offered by SEAs, LEAs, and professional organizations) for educational administrators, teachers, and related service providers
• Personnel preparation programs that train teachers likely to serve students with deaf-blindness (e.g., teachers of students who are visually impaired, have severe/multiple disabilities, or are deaf/hard of hearing).

When content to build knowledge and skills related to deaf-blindness is provided by university and/or professional development programs, state deaf-blind project staff can focus their limited time and resources on assisting IEP teams in the application of knowledge and skills to meet the unique needs of each child.

**Service delivery** refers to how educational services are provided. This includes effective models of services delivery—particularly a regional low-incidence model that uses itinerant teachers with expertise in deaf-blindness to provide consultation to multiple teams—as well as such things as certification and licensure requirements, position incentives for teachers and related service providers, and IEP guidance for families and teams of students with deaf-blindness.

**EXPLORATION**

**Initial Needs and Resources Assessment**

You likely already have a significant amount of existing data about qualified personnel 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 to help you determine where to focus your efforts. Here are some questions to consider in order to determine personnel preparation program training and professional development content and service delivery models:

- How many students are on your child count? In what regions of the state do they live?
- Which students have intervener services and which do not? The teacher role may be more direct if there is no intervener and, if there is an intervener, supervision skills are important.
- What are the personnel implications of the geographic locations of children on your count (e.g., lack of reliable internet access to train personnel, limited access to a regional low-incidence infrastructure)?
Are there trends related to characteristics, such as age of initial referral to your project or common etiologies, that could help you determine professional development needs in your state?

Technical Assistance Data

Documentation from previous TA (e.g., training, facilitation, consultation) provided to families and service providers can be used to identify common training and service delivery needs. Documentation 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:

- What percentage of students on your child count have at least one professional educator trained in deaf-blindness on their teams?
- What are the desired educational team (including family) outcomes for students who are deaf-blind?
- What common challenges do families and schools report as they plan individualized educational services?
- What barriers to student success have you observed?
- What is the level of awareness of the unique competencies needed by teachers of students who are deaf-blind among family members, local IEP team members, and local and state Part B administrators?
- Are there areas of your state that have fewer training opportunities than others—for example, due to lack of resources (e.g., funding, trainers)?

State and Local Systems

The challenge for each state deaf-blind project is to learn how the following entities in their states are or could be involved in: (a) recognizing the importance of teachers with knowledge and skill competencies in deaf-blindness, (b) providing training and professional development in deaf-blindness, and (c) improving how educational services for children with deaf-blindness are provided:

- State Education Agencies (SEAs)
- Local Education Agencies (LEAs)
- State Professional Development Grants (SPDGs)
- State Systematic Improvement Plans (SSIPs)
- State Special Education Administrators
- Schools for the Deaf and the Blind
- District Education Administrators and Special Education Directors
- Local IEP Teams
In addition, there are other key agencies and organizations that are not responsible for providing funding for services or professional development, but who may influence the policies and services of the agencies above. These include:

- Parent Groups
- College or University Personnel Preparation Programs
- University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs)

**STATE SYSTEMIC IMPROVEMENT PLANS**

State Systemic Improvement Plans (SSIPs) are SEA efforts to improve results for children with disabilities. Most SSIPs focus on early childhood and family outcomes, but some address professional development and service delivery related to qualified personnel. Learn more about your state’s SSIP. If there are components that could be applicable to teachers serving students who are deaf-blind, look for access points (e.g., governance, quality standards, professional development, data, technical assistance) where your project could become involved.

**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.

**STATE CERTIFICATION/LICENSURE**

- What types of certification or endorsements exist within your state? Is deaf-blindness included?
- Is deaf-blindness a component of certificates for teachers of students who are visually impaired, have severe/multiple disabilities, or are deaf/hard of hearing?
- What are your state’s processes for developing and disseminating information about certification/licensing?
- Is there a state-level organization or professional board that oversees professional standards and teacher certification/licensure?
- Are there ongoing reform efforts regarding certification for special educators?

**TRAINING SYSTEMS – PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Are there statewide or local professional development programs that currently (or could) include content for teachers who work with students who are deaf-blind?

Are there state chapters of national organizations (e.g., American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired) that provide professional development?
How does your state address professional development for special education teachers and related service providers?

- What standards are used?
- What requirements are set for teachers’ professional development plans?
- What are the minimum levels of professional development required for license renewal?
- What are the processes for developing and disseminating information about professional development?
- Are there supports and incentives for professional learning?
- Which agencies administer professional development (e.g., local districts, SEA, independent providers)?
- How is it funded?

In addition to professional development related to increasing knowledge and skills regarding assessment, planning, and instruction, is the following available?

- Training on how to supervise interveners or paraprofessionals
- Mentoring programs for beginning teachers
- Coaching for teachers who are new to working with students who are deaf-blind

**TRAINING SYSTEMS – PERSONNEL PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

- What personnel preparation training programs exist to train teachers in your state who may end up serving students with deaf-blindness (e.g., teachers of students who are visually impaired, have severe/multiple disabilities, or are deaf/hard of hearing)? If so, do these programs have deaf-blind content that leads to certification, licensure, or endorsement?
- How is personnel preparation that does or could include deaf-blind content supported financially?
- Do programs include training on coaching and supervising paraeducators?

**SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS – STATE**

- Do you have a low-incidence advisory group in your state (e.g., state sensory or deaf-blind task force or advisory council)? If yes, what is the structure and who participates? Is your project connected to it? (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)?
- Does your SEA have specific policies and regulations regarding services for low incidence-disabilities? For example:
  - IEP guidance for educational teams on how to develop appropriate IEPs
○ Guidance for LEAs on providing ongoing high-quality services
○ Salary or other incentives for teachers and related service providers who work with these students

● What are your state’s processes for developing and disseminating information about regulations?

SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS - LOCAL

● Do any LEAs in your state have policies and regulations regarding services for low-incidence disabilities, including deaf-blindness? If so, how could they be used as models for other LEAs?
● Are there teachers with knowledge and skills in deaf-blindness who provide services for students who are deaf-blind in local school districts? If so, could they be used as models?
● Are there teachers with knowledge and skills in deaf-blindness providing supervision for interveners? If so, could they be used as models?
● Do any LEAs have policies and procedures in place for intervener supervision by teachers with expertise in deaf-blindness? If so, how is supervision funded?
● What funding sources are available for teacher salary incentives (classroom-based or itinerant)?

Advocacy Groups

Systems change activities for students with low-incidence disabilities, in which your project could participate, may already be occurring in your state. Are there individuals, agencies, or organizations engaged in advocacy to:

● Increase or improve the availability of qualified teachers and related service providers?
● Increase or improve the availability of qualified para-educators, including interveners?
● Develop or improve a regional service delivery system?

These may be conducted by family members, family organizations, personnel preparation programs, or University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs). If you have UCEDD in your state, contact it to learn about the types of systems-change projects in which they are engaged.

If previous efforts have or are occurring:

● How do they influence the state and local systems referenced above?
● 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, as well as change related to 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 to learn more

The following questions 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?
Qualified Personnel Systems Capacity

The following questions will help you gauge your current level of knowledge about systems responsible for training and providing qualified personnel to serve children and youth who are deaf-blind. 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 qualified personnel needs for students with low-incidence disabilities, including deaf-blindness, in your state and nationally? Areas include:

- Recognition of the role of teachers and related service providers with knowledge and skills in deaf-blindness
- Professional development to increase knowledge and skills in deaf-blindness
- Regulation adoption
- Service delivery models
- Personnel preparation
- Training incentives
- Incentives for working as an itinerant teacher
- Incentives for supervising interveners

Do you have project goals (e.g., in your grant application) related to systems-change regarding qualified personnel?

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 qualified personnel?

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 qualified personnel 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. Consistent adoption of educators on IEP teams who have knowledge and skills in deaf-blindness has been unsuccessful due to a lack of understanding by families, IEP teams, and administrators regarding the benefits of personnel with these competencies. As a result, families are unable to engage in advocacy for qualified personnel for their children, and IEP teams and administrators do not provide these personnel.
2. Systematic training in deaf-blindness for teachers and related service providers is not currently available and IEP teams and administrators have limited understanding of how knowledge and skill competencies in deaf-blindness can be addressed through training.
3. There is no funding available for teacher training in deaf-blind competencies.
4. There is no regional service delivery model for students with low-incidence disabilities, including deaf-blindness.
5. There is no low-incidence advisory task force or council for low-incidence disabilities, including deaf-blindness.

Typically, systemic issues involve multiple needs that must be addressed to bring about desired change. Ultimately, it may be necessary to address all of 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 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:

- Collaborate with your state’s SPDG or SSIP to improve the provision of services to children with deaf-blindness through increased availability of qualified personnel and effective service delivery. For example:
  - Develop tools, products, or services that facilitate the effective use of data to improve instructional practices and learning for students who are deaf-blind
  - Collect data to (a) determine the root causes of student low performance and (b) measure outcomes of qualified personnel used with an effective service delivery model
  - Increase SEA infrastructure (e.g., funding, hiring practices) to build LEA capacity to improve results for students who are deaf-blind through qualified personnel working in an effective service delivery model
- Participate in UCEDD systems-change efforts related to qualified personnel to address the needs of children who are deaf-blind.
- Increase SEA and LEA’s understanding and beliefs (for example, through awareness training and pilot programs) about the importance of teachers and related service providers with knowledge and skill competencies in deaf-blindness.
- Build families capacity to advocate for the role of teachers and related service providers with knowledge and skills in deaf-blindness.
- Develop policies and regulations that formalize the provision of teachers and related service providers with knowledge and skills in deaf-blindness (e.g., training and certification requirements, IEP guidance, incentives) at state, regional, and local levels.
- Work with personnel preparation programs to provide coursework covering knowledge and skill competencies in deaf-blindness and teacher internship options.
- Embed deaf-blind content into professional development systems and establish a system for ongoing professional development in deaf-blindness within the state’s existing professional development processes.
- Provide funding for personnel preparation training and professional development in deaf-blindness.
● Develop processes at the local level (e.g., IEP team guidance regarding selection of qualified personnel, supervision of interveners) to support the provision of services by qualified personnel for students who are deaf-blind.

● Establish a task force or council for students with low-incidence disabilities that can support the development of a regional service delivery model.

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:

● SEA and LEA personnel report an increased understanding of teachers and related service providers with knowledge and skill competencies in deaf-blindness (short)

● SEA and LEA personnel report an increased understanding of the need for interveners to be supervised by teachers with knowledge and skill competencies in deaf-blindness (short)

● A low-incidence advisory task force or council is in place to advise the development of a regional service delivery model (medium)

● Personnel preparation programs for training teachers and related service providers to work with students who have low-incidence disabilities include coursework that addresses knowledge and skill competences in deaf-blindness (medium)

● Funding for professional development has been provided (medium)

● Programs for providing professional development in deaf-blindness to teachers and related service providers have been implemented (medium)

● A regional service delivery model is in place and effective (long)

● Part B administrators are committed to ensuring that teachers and related service providers of children who are deaf-blind have the knowledge and skills required to deliver high-quality deaf-blind instructional strategies (long)

● Teachers and related service providers of children who are deaf-blind have the knowledge and skills required to deliver high-quality deaf-blind instructional strategies (long)
BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Existing Partners/Relationships

Use existing relationships to gain access to a system or connect you to other entities in that system. Many of your current partnerships may be with agencies or organizations listed at the beginning of this document. Here is that list again:

- State Education Agencies (SEAs)
- Local Education Agencies (LEAs)
- State Professional Development Grants (SPDGs)
- State Systematic Improvement Plans (SSIPs)
- State Special Education Administrators
- Schools for the Deaf and the Blind
- District Education Administrators and Special Education Directors
- Local IEP Teams
- Parent Groups
- College or University Personnel Preparation Programs
- University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs)

For each partner, capture:

- Who they are (name, role, agency)
- Opportunities they offer
- 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 in your state and nationally? What type of support can they offer?
- 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?
- Is there a low-incidence infrastructure or key individuals in your state (e.g., low-incidence advisory or interagency group, disability-specific consultants in your department of education) that you could reach out to?
- Are there opportunities to begin or strengthen partnerships with university personnel preparation programs or UCEDDs to address personnel training needs?

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 memorandums 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 that are 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**

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**National Center on Deaf-Blindness, January 2021**

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The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, #H326T180026. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officer, Susan Weigert.