Focused Monitoring

Focused Monitoring Explained

During this era of increased accountability and enhanced educational expectations for infants, toddlers and students with disabilities, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is using a new compliance and technical assistance model- focused monitoring. Focused monitoring is part of the Continuous Improvement and Focused Monitoring System (CIFMS). CIFMS is designed to be both a performance measurement and a compliance tool to ensure that states are effectively implementing requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It is one component of a four-part accountability strategy being used by OSEP.

According to the National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring, focused monitoring involves the selection of a limited number of priority performance areas, accompanied by a limited number of indicators (objective measure of a goal), benchmarks (expectation of performance) and triggers (level at which OSEP intervention occurs). Priority areas are based upon an analysis of information contained in the Annual Performance Report that states are required to submit to OSEP. If fully implemented, priority areas would make a significant difference in the lives of infants, toddlers and students with disabilities.

Principles of Focused Monitoring

An effective focused monitoring system is driven by a number of principles. These include ensuring that the information system is data based and can be verified. It involves providing technical assistance without watering down the monitoring and enforcement process or the ability of OSEP to impose sanctions or corrective actions against states. The system must be clear, use standard benchmarks and have known "triggers" for interventions or sanctions at the state level.

The monitoring process should be systemic and there should be a link between monitoring and corrective actions. Families should have an opportunity to provide regular input to OSEP. States must have an effective complaint process and state education agencies should be monitoring local school districts in the priority areas, at a minimum. When states are performing at levels exceeding the national benchmarks, they should be recognized and rewarded.

Priority Performance Areas

OSEP has chosen four critical performance areas to focus on, at this time.

These areas are:

· Exiting and school completion rates;

· LRE setting;

· Identification rates of infants and toddlers with disabilities receiving early intervention services; and

· Settings and natural environments where infants and toddlers receive early intervention services.

Based on information submitted by states, OSEP has reported a national average and a state ranking in each of these areas. This information was provided to state education agencies, state early intervention coordinators, IDEA technical assistance and dissemination network and the Technical Assistance ALLIANCE for Parent Centers via memorandum in April 2004. It is expected to be provided annually to all of these parties. Similar information is also available in the Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2002)

The OSEP Memorandum includes a variety of information tables for each of these areas. In its table footnotes, OSEP encourages readers to use caution in interpreting these results, due to variations with how states report certain data.

What the Current Data Indicates

Exiting and School Completion Rates

State rankings are made based on the number and percentage of students exiting special education with a diploma and on the number and

percentage of students ages 14-21 who leave school. During the 2001-02 school year, the national baseline for exiting special education with a diploma was 51%, and for those leaving school it was 38%.

LRE Settings Where Students Receive Services

State rankings in this area are based on the percentage of time students spend outside of the regular education classroom. Categories considered include those outside of the regular education classroom less than 21% of the time; more than 60% of the time; and those in separate public/private schools. The national baseline for each of these categories was 48%, 19% and 2.9% respectively.

Identification Rates of Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities Receiving Early Intervention Services

OSEP ranks states in this area, using a number of tables. These tables identify the number of children ages birth-three who are receiving early intervention services and measures it against the state population of all children from birth to three. Tables also identify state performance based on the state definitions of eligibility criteria. Trend data over five years is also included. National baseline data indicates that 2.25% of all children, ages birth to age two years old, receive early intervention services. For children ages birth to one year old, the national baseline data of percentage of children served is .99%

Settings and Natural Environments Where Infants and Toddlers Receive Early Intervention Services

To rank states in these areas, OSEP analyzed the percentage of children who receive early intervention services in the home, in typically developing programs and in natural environments (combination of home and typically developing programs). Trend data was also highlighted. The national baseline for each of these areas was 78%, 4.16% and 82%.

How This Information Can Be Used by Parents and Advocates

Information of this nature can be difficult to review and to understand. Through reviewing this data, parents and advocates should be able to develop a snapshot impression of the strengths and weaknesses of their states, relating to these four priority areas. Since one of the purposes of focused monitoring is to improve outcomes for infants, toddlers and students with disabilities, parents and advocates may want to use this information as a way to develop a dialogue with other key stakeholders in the education system. If for no other reason, such a dialogue is important to determine whether all parties are interpreting the information in the same manner.

Ideas for pursuing such a dialogue include:

- Meet with the SEA Director to review the tables and the state's ranking in these areas. Discuss potential reasons for a state being ranked above or below the national baseline. If improvement is needed, discuss potential strategies and the role of parents and advocates in the process. Seek the local district reports, which generated the state report to determine strengths and weaknesses of local districts.

- Visit with the state association of local special education directors to obtain its perspective on the report. Discuss how the local district information is generated and reported to the state. Determine whether there are state policy issues, which impact the local districts and state's ranking.

- Meet with other parent and advocacy organizations to share the information and discuss opportunities to impact changes in the system.

- Develop workshops for parents dealing with how to read and interpret the data and on possible ways to improve outcomes at local school districts.

- Visit with state or local district collaborative committees dealing with these priority areas to share performance information and develop strategies for improving outcomes.

- Incorporate some of this information in workshops for parents so they understand current outcome data and can seek to improve it for their children with disabilities.

- Organize a state or local conference to share the information across stakeholder groups and to develop action plans for improvement.

- Share the information with policy makers at the state and local levels so they understand how their local district or state education agency stacks up with the rest of the state or country.

Bibliography

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