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ABSTRACT

This report presents a plan of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education's Project FORUM to establish and implement the on-going process of identifying national program information needed for improving the management, administration, delivery, and effectiveness of programs and services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The report identifies issues and considerations for such a plan and explains the process used to develop this plan, including selection of strategies, the involvement of stakeholders, and determination of the activity's scope. Specific results of meetings and interviews to obtain stakeholder input into the plan are outlined. Key features of the plan, which is based on a marketing model, are described, including: (1) creation of a polling panel to provide initial and ongoing consumer input; (2) creation of an initial list of national program information needs (based on those identified by a 2-day focus group of experts); (3) verification of the list of identified needs by the polling panel; (4) prioritization of the categories of identified needs by a selected subgroup of the polling panel using a Delphi process; and (5) periodic re-evaluation of the proposed process for identifying national program information needs. Also noted are additional recommendations for consideration by the Office of Special Education Programs. Appendices include a paper by Cynthia L. Warger entitled "A Draft Background Paper Outlining a Process for Identifying Information That is Needed To Improve Programs for Students with Disabilities"; background information for meeting participants; a meeting agenda; and an initial list of national program information needs. (DB)

A PLAN FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF NATIONAL INFORMATION NEEDED FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

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A PLAN FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF NATIONAL INFORMATION NEEDED FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

Background and Introduction

The critical importance of information in decisionmaking and policy development has long been recognized, and contemporary technology has made the identification, tracking, and analysis of information in a timely fashion a critical necessity for organizations in our society. It is impossible for individuals who are responsible for the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to access and read all of the ever-growing array of information that could be useful in helping them make decisions that would improve the system and yield better results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. Recognizing the implications of this situation prompted Congress to amend Section 618(c)(3) of the IDEA to assure that information would be gathered and analyzed that was "necessary for achieving program and system improvements at the State and local levels".

The statute directs the Secretary of Education to develop and implement "a process for the on-going identification of national program information needed for improving the management, administration, delivery, and effectiveness of programs and services under the Act." The process is to be conducted in cooperation with State Education Agencies (SEAs) to insure broad Statewide input.

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) under its Project FORUM Contract No. HS92015001 with the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has the task of assisting OSEP with this effort. In this report, Project FORUM presents a draft plan to establish and implement the on-going process called for in the Act. This report includes descriptions of: issues and considerations central to the design process; the process used to develop this draft plan; the input of stakeholders; the proposed draft plan; and additional recommendations for OSEP's consideration.

Issues and Considerations

Careful consideration must be given to both *content* and *process* in developing the plan for identification of information needed for program improvement. There is a substantial body of information on needs analysis research. Making choices about the strategies to use in developing this draft plan requires an understanding of the range and implications of each of the options. The nature of the task demands active participation from a wide variety of stakeholders in order to ensure that, once implemented, the plan accurately identifies information that is truly of value in achieving program improvements. This is characteristic of a process that begins with grassroots orientation.

Information is needed for program improvement at all levels of the education delivery system (e.g., Federal, State, district, building, classroom) and other human services enterprises (e.g., community mental health agencies, hospitals) that also support infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families. Furthermore, at any level, program improvements can be achieved by making changes in policies (e.g., regulations governing placement), programs (e.g., clearinghouses, research), or practices (e.g., techniques for teaching specific skills).

Since information is needed at all levels of the educational delivery system, OSEP must carefully craft its strategy for initiating the changes needed for program improvement. Given the limited resources at its disposal, OSEP must leverage program improvement by targeting activities that result in Statewide improvement efforts. This top-down approach contrasts strongly with the grassroots orientation that is most preferred by practitioners who are charged with improving programs. The two must be accommodated within a single coherent plan. It is also important to consider how to make maximum use of existing information sources and how to fit Project FORUM's effort into OSEP's overall strategy for information gathering and data collection through other OSEP sponsored projects. Much discussion with the stakeholders and OSEP personnel participating in this activity focused on determining the appropriate level and scope for the information needs identification process including how to balance the grassroots orientation with the practical necessity of implementing strategies from the top down.

In addition, there are certain elements the completed design must contain to yield the kinds of information Congress intended. The plan for the on-going identification of national program information needed for program improvement for the next five years will have to include:

- Strategies for obtaining input from the widest possible constituency;
- Procedures for identifying the implementation areas where information for program improvement is needed;
- Techniques for systematically organizing the identified information needs;
- Procedures for clustering specific information needs within the broader implementation areas or categories;
- Procedures for confirming the accuracy of the identified categories of needs;

- Ways to retrieve information in the form of reports that OSEP and others can use to facilitate the flow of information to individuals who will use it for program improvement; and

- An evaluation plan that monitors the effectiveness of the information needs identification process and yields data for use in improving the process.

Process Used to Develop This Draft Plan

Selecting Strategies

Project FORUM contracted with a consultant with expertise in special education and in information identification, tracking, and dissemination to assist in establishing a sound theoretical framework for this task. Dr. Cynthia Warger, of Warger, Eavy, and Associates, drafted a background paper outlining (1) basic approaches to need analysis, (2) a conceptual framework for Project FORUM's task, and (3) recommendations for the proposed design. The full text of Dr. Warger's paper is attached to this report as Appendix A.

Dr. Warger discussed three major approaches to needs identification -- the discrepancy model, the market analysis model, and the decisionmaking model.

- In the *discrepancy model*, an expert definition of desired goals and objectives is developed. An assessment of the current state of affairs is then performed, and the gaps between "what is" and "what should be" are identified. This model is common in education and in strategic planning efforts.

- In the *marketing model*, need analysis focuses on the needs of the "client population." In this sense, it is an attempt to know the needs and desires of the target population who constitutes the "market" for the activity.

- The *decisionmaking model* involves developing a model or construct that is based on multiple indicators of need. These indicators of need and the decisionmaker's values are quantified so that an index that reflects both indicators and values can be developed. The process bears some resemblance to the "decision-tree" approach used in economics and business that is intended to guide decisionmaking according to both expected value and the probability of realizing each of several identified options.

The advantages and disadvantages to each approach were discussed with the consultant resulting in a preliminary decision to rely primarily on techniques grounded in the market analysis model. The major factor influencing this decision was the lack of a clear consensus on values and desired outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities in the current education environment. The discrepancy model presupposes a clearly identified set of desired outcomes; the gaps between "what should be" and "what currently exists" can then be identified. The decisionmaking model similarly involves developing a consensus on values and priorities regarding identified outcomes. The market analysis approach requires planners to adopt a customer service orientation in that they learn about the perceived needs and desires of their client populations generally through surveys or structured interviews.

Involving Stakeholders

Both fiscal and temporal realities constrained the process of identifying the "right" group of stakeholders to involve in the design phases of the on-going plan for the identification of national program information needed to improve the management, administration, delivery and effectiveness of special education programs. Since the scope of the activity would, in part, be defined by the stakeholders' input, it was important to represent the widest possible range of perspectives and roles as well as differing levels of responsibility. In consultation with OSEP staff, Project FORUM used its Contact Network to select specific individuals, predominately from the vicinity of Washington, D.C., who were well informed about the kinds of information sources most widely available and used by specific constituencies, the most pressing issues faced by these groups, sources of data about them (e.g., demographics, interests, needs assessments), and existing vehicles for obtaining input from substantial numbers of constituents. Identified individuals were contacted by phone to confirm their interest and willingness to participate in this activity.

During December 1992, Project FORUM convened a series of three stakeholder meetings to obtain their input into the design of the information needs identification process. Participants were given a briefing paper (a copy is attached as Appendix B) outlining the task before attending the informal half-day meetings. A copy of the Agenda used for these meetings is attached as Appendix C. Telephone interviews were conducted with stakeholders who could not attend any of the meetings. In all, 19 stakeholders were contacted, 13 attended the stakeholder meetings, and 3 were interviewed by telephone.[1] Representatives from the following organizations were involved in meetings and interviews:

- National Education Association (NEA)
- Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)
- National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education

[1] Three additional organizations that were contacted were unable to attend the meetings or arrange for the telephone interviews in time for their input to be used to draft this report. They did, however, express an interest in becoming involved in future phases of this project.

- Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE)
- National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System (NEC*TAS)
- Learning Disabilities Association (LDA)
- HEATH Resource Center
- National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)
- American Association of School Administrators (AASA)
- National Information Action Center at NASDSE
- National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)
- Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN)
- South Atlantic Regional Resource Center (SARRC)
- Center for Minority Special Education
- National Association of State Mental Health Representatives for Children and Youth (SMHRCY)

Determining the Scope

The identification of national information needed for program improvement is a new type of activity for OSEP. While needs assessments are commonly used to assist in education decisionmaking processes, there is little experience with this kind of activity on a national level from which to seek guidance to determine what strategies are effective and efficient. A wide range of contracts, grants, projects, and activities are currently funded by OSEP. The work scope for many of these includes information tasks very similar to this one. However, each of these projects has a different orientation and will be able to tap a different segment of the population and is likely to approach the task at a different level in the system.

Project FORUM, after consultation with OSEP staff, proposes that the focus of its efforts should be on the identification of information needed for State-level policy setting and establishing Federal program priorities rather than on information needed to improve classroom-based practice. The "national" focus of the statutory language and the Congressional directive that States provide input guided this decision. In addition, the primary purpose of this activity is to provide the Department of Education with information on which to base internal strategic decisions about deployment of its own resources. Congress intended that stakeholders' information needs be considered in this process. Stakeholder input supported this focus.

Stakeholder Input

Discussion with stakeholders at the meetings and during telephone interviews focused on three questions: (1) What are the ways decisionmakers determine what their information needs are? (2) What might policymakers not know about their information needs? (3) What are some viable ways to gather input and feedback from information users on a regular basis? (These questions were included on the Agenda; see Appendix C.) The meetings and interviews were conducted in a "semi-structured" manner; that is, participants were reminded that specific objectives had to be accomplished, but were encouraged to explore the broader, conceptual issues associated with the overall task of identifying and tracking information for program improvement. For example, when responding to the first question, participants were encouraged to describe the types of information their organizations gathered about their constituents, and to discuss the factors involved in deciding what information was necessary to collect. In the stakeholder group meetings, interaction among participants and discussion of different approaches and strategies for developing the plan were actively encouraged.

In both meetings and interviews, specific feedback from stakeholder representatives was sought to assist Project FORUM staff in evaluating the content, process, strategies, and scope previously considered as central to developing the proposed process for identifying information needed. Stakeholders were also asked about ways information might be delivered in order to increase the likelihood that it would actually be utilized to implement program improvements. The themes emerging from these meetings and interviews are summarized below.

- Stakeholders supported the conceptual framework of the marketing model for the task of identifying and tracking the information needed for program improvement. Stakeholders felt that this model was consistent with the goal of identifying information needs that are "close to the consumer" thus allowing for the variety of constituency perspectives on the desired program improvements to be considered.

- Stakeholders expressed the need for Project FORUM to continue efforts to clarify what is meant by **program improvement.** Project FORUM should not prematurely narrow the task to the technical process of information identification and organization too rapidly. Further dialogue and discussion about the range of outcomes different groups expect from program improvement was felt necessary before broad categories could be appropriately identified.

- While recognizing that there are real constraints, stakeholders felt that there are good reasons for building a variety of data gathering strategies into the plan. Focus groups, for example, are useful for either generating ideas regarding information to be collected through another means (e.g., a survey) or for discussing the implications and meaning of the results of information previously collected. They run the risk. however, of not truly representing the information needs of stakeholders not present.

- Stakeholders supported the use of a "polling panel" or "communication network" to generate, validate, and prioritize information needs. Stakeholders in meetings and interviews expressed interest in participating in such processes.

- It was suggested that students with disabilities themselves be included as a stakeholder group.

- Stakeholders have a variety of preferences regarding methods and formats for communication. Some prefer to respond to print material; others prefer to communicate over the telephone or in face-to-face meetings. These communication preferences should be identified and respected as individuals are asked to participate in future phases of this project.

- Stakeholders reported that many agencies are experiencing "information overload". Therefore, rather than generate new sources of information, an emphasis should be placed on strategies for making effective use of existing information sources wherever possible.

- In communicating about information needs once they are identified, consideration should also be given to providing a "framework" or "interpretation" to ensure that users can relate it to their needs.

- Because of the information overload phenomena, maximum consideration should be given to the time constraints of stakeholders when asking for their participation or input. Additionally, communications with stakeholders need to be carefully structured and brief.

- Stakeholders suggested a possible meeting of all OSEP grantees whose workscope includes the identification of information needs, the collection of information, or information dissemination related to improving the management, administration, delivery, and effectiveness of special education programs. These activities should complement one another and OSEP's overall strategy for meeting the information needs of a broad range of constituencies could then be coordinated and comprehensive.

- In addition to representing the perspectives of their particular group, association, organization, or agency, some participants in the group meetings felt it was important that they have the opportunity to let us know what they thought other groups of stakeholders needed to know in order to implement program improvements that would be responsive to the goals of their own constituents.

- Stakeholders felt strongly that the plan be drafted "in pencil" - particularly at the beginning stages. It was suggested that the first year of the plan could be considered a pilot test of the process with the plan being open to modification and revision.

In summary, stakeholders suggested that the process allow input from a broad spectrum of stakeholders, be time and cost efficient, and include a variety of strategies for identifying and verifying information needs. Stakeholders also underscored the need for coordination of efforts, brief and clear communication, and continuing refinement and improvement of the plan. Finally, stakeholders suggested that the efforts of all OSEP sponsored information needs identification tasks be coordinated and that the parameters of each project's work, including Project FORUM's, be complementary and clearly defined.

The Draft Plan

Following the stakeholder group meetings, Project FORUM staff began utilizing their input to verify the initial decision to rely primarily on information gathering techniques borrowed from the *marketing model*. Stakeholders supported use of this model -- particularly favoring the concept of stakeholders as "customers." They supported using the strategy of polling "real" stakeholders, not just "experts", to find out what they perceive to be their information needs. This approach would be time and cost effective if the stakeholders had an interest in the outcome of the process and the information being requested. Some stakeholders acknowledged that not all clients have accurate insight into their own needs. Nevertheless, respecting stakeholder views and perceptions as offered has the potential to contribute to their willingness to participate in the process and to support the decisions made using the information gathered.

Creation of a Polling Panel

The marketing model relies on using a group or groups of consumers as informants. For the purpose of identifying national information needed for improvement in the management, administration, delivery, and effectiveness of programs and services for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, Project FORUM proposes to form a polling panel to function in this role. We propose to use the polling panel in several ways. The full panel would be used in the earlier stages to react to and revise working lists of potential information needs for program improvement. Smaller groups of polling panel members would be involved in processes designed to verify and prioritize the lists. Others could assist in collapsing the lists into broader categories of information. Finally, we propose to involve polling panel members in reassessing the process for identifying national program information needs on an annual basis.

While, as discussed earlier, Section 618 of the IDEA specifically requires input only from States, the feedback from the stakeholder group meetings strongly suggests that other constituencies need to be represented on the polling panel. Special education programs and services do not exist in a vacuum. Providing a free, appropriate, public education for children with disabilities involves the collaboration of parents and advocates, policymakers and administrators, general and special educators, and a host of professionals from a wide range of disciplines. In order for States and the Department of Education to set sound policy and establish appropriate priorities these 'other' groups must be given the opportunity to express their views concerning what improvements are important to them and how States and the Department of Education can best help them make use of information about program improvements.

Suggested criteria for selecting panel members as well as identifying the stakeholder groups that need to be represented have been generated by Project FORUM. Panel members need to be individuals who are regularly and systematically 'in touch' with substantial numbers of others who similarly serve the needs of children and youth with disabilities. They also must have a vision of the future in which infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities experience better outcomes as a result of improvements in the systems that serve them. In addition, the members of the polling panel have to see a role for States and the Department of Education in realizing that vision. Polling panel members will be asked to make a long term commitment to participate in this activity, even though their involvement will be sporadic. Polling panel members will be given formal recognition for their participation and reimbursement for their expenses.

Identification of key stakeholder groups began with the process for development of this draft plan. We propose that the individuals who represented key stakeholder groups at the initial planning meetings and telephone interviews be asked to join the proposed polling panel with the expectation that it will gradually be expanded to approximately 35 to 40 members. Specific groups that will be added include students with disabilities, experts on the process of transition from school to adult life, advocates and professionals with a primary focus on one specific disability category, local school board members, and groups representing constituencies with political and fiscal authority (e.g., the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Conference of State Legislatures, etc.). This list is not intended to be all inclusive. We propose that it be revised on an ongoing basis with new groups and constituencies being invited to participate as their interest in improving the education of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities becomes evident.

Creating an Initial List of National Program Information Needs

The *marketing model* requires that consumers react to a 'test product'. In the case of this task, the 'test product' proposed will be an initial list of national program information needs. There are an unlimited number of ways of generating such a list ranging from pure speculation to elaborate scientific surveying. Given the limited resources available for this effort, plus the relatively urgent need OSEP has for the information and in keeping with the advice of stakeholders, Project FORUM proposes to derive this list from existing information sources.

For the first year, Project FORUM proposes that the panel be asked to respond to a list that includes information needs generated in January of 1992, when Project FORUM convened a two-day Focus Group of experts to assist OSEP in identifying information needed for program improvement under Section 618 of the IDEA. Using its current Issues Tracking Database, Project FORUM would identify additional topics of high interest to States. Other existing information that would be used to generate the initial list include results of the annual survey of State Directors of Special Education that is conducted by the National Information Action Center at NASDSE as well as similar material that can be supplied by other national associations such as NASBE and CCSSO. The national clearinghouses, such as NICHCY and ERIC at CEC, maintain databases about the inquiries they receive and have agreed to share this information with Project FORUM in order to identify possible topics for inclusion on the initial list of national information needs. A tentative initial list of national information needs is attached as Appendix D for the purpose of illustration only.

Project FORUM proposes that in subsequent years, the initial list of national program information needs be based on the validated list from the prior year. To this, Project FORUM will add new information from its Issues Tracking Database, NASDSE's and other association membership needs surveys, and clearinghouse databases on inquiries received and other sources that had been used during the first year. Stakeholder input supports our belief that this approach can yield realistic results given the resources available to devote to this activity.

Verifying the List of Identified Needs

Regardless of whether it is the first or subsequent years of this activity, it is proposed that all members of the polling panel receive the list through the mail and have the opportunity to react to it. They would be asked to add items that they believe represent their constituency's critical information needs. Edits and revisions to the list would also be encouraged. They would be asked to identify the most important information needs and indicate those that are not of interest to their peers. Polling panel members would be asked to evaluate the extent to which the items on the initial list represent information needs where leadership from States or the Department of Education is necessary to insure that their constituency can successfully implement program improvements.

Project FORUM staff would be responsible for analyzing the polling panel's feedback. The goal of this phase would be to reorganize the list of identified needs by placing similar and related items into broad categories and synthesizing the stakeholder input for each category into a single but comprehensive information needs statement. Project FORUM staff might use a conference call strategy to involve several members of the polling panel to clarify issues raised and to discuss options for organizing the list concisely.

Prioritizing the Categories of Identified Needs

Project FORUM proposes to employ a Delphi process, as deemed appropriate, to rank the relative importance of the broad categories of national program information needed. A sub-group consisting of 10 to 12 carefully selected members of the polling panel would be asked to participate in this phase of the process. These members would be chosen to represent the groups with the most at stake (e.g., parents, student, State and local administrators, advocates, teachers). It is suggested that the individuals selected also bring expert knowledge of trends and emerging issues in the field of special education. This select sub-group of the polling panel would rank, on a scale of *1* (low) to *5* (high), the categories of information needed relative to both the **impact** of the information need on improving programs for students with disabilities, and the **likelihood** of obtaining sufficient information to leverage program improvement in the not too distant future.

Using feedback from the Delphi process, information needs could then be ranked according to stakeholder ratings, and the results be presented to OSEP for use in its program planning. Project FORUM also proposes to make the results available to all the stakeholder groups participating in the process. The results of this process would be used by Project FORUM to organize a wide variety of information of potential use in achieving program improvements that it will be identifying and tracking through its information organization system.

Periodic Re-evaluation of the Proposed Process for Identifying National Program Information Needs

Since information needs change, some more rapidly than others, a process will be developed for periodic updating and verifying the list of identified national program information needs. In addition, the effectiveness of the process used to identify national program information needed to achieve better outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities should be determined. Project FORUM therefore proposes an annual re-evaluation of its plan for identification of information needed for program improvement.

We propose that the list of information needs always be open to revision. For this reason, the members of the polling panel will be invited to edit, revise, and reconfirm the most recently verified list of categories of information needs whenever they feel it is necessary. The polling panel members should also be given the opportunity to assess the usefulness of results as well as the extent to which they felt their input was considered and how comfortable they found participating in the process. For this purpose, a one page evaluation form could be sent to them with the results of the Delphi process.

Project FORUM recognizes that even though the proposed process for identification of national program information needed to improve outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities taps a wide range of stakeholder groups, it does not include strategies for broadly sampling individual stakeholders throughout the country. One possible way to overcome this weakness would be to publicize the final list of information needs on SpecialNet or through a national publication such as *Counterpoint*. The announcement could include an invitation for readers to send their reactions and comments to Project FORUM. It is not possible to predict the number of responses or how valuable they might be. If the number were manageable, a condensed version or summary of these responses could be prepared by Project FORUM and made available to the polling panel at the time they receive the initial list for the next cycle. Project FORUM suggests that consideration be given to attempting this strategy once and evaluating its usefulness and cost effectiveness before making it a regular feature of the annual cycle.

Time Line - Year 1

February	• Polling panel members selected and confirmed
March	• Initial list of information needs sent to polling panel
April	• Feedback analyzed and synthesized into categories - possible conference calls with panel members for clarification and further validation
May	• Sub-group selected for Delphi • Delphi process for prioritization conducted
June	• Delphi results analyzed and final list prepared
July	• Report on results of process to OSEP
(Summer)	• (Publicize final list)

Additional Recommendations for OSEP's Consideration

Project FORUM suggests that OSEP give serious consideration to the stakeholders' recommendation that a meeting of all OSEP funded projects that involve similar information utilization tasks be convened. This meeting would serve the purpose of encouraging grantees to share successful strategies for information identification, organization, tracking, and dissemination. It could provide a vehicle for grantees to share what they have learned and to coordinate their respective activities. Such an approach would avoid duplication of effort and help to fit each of the grantee's activities into OSEP's comprehensive strategic plan. One option for achieving this objective is to incorporate such a forum into the annual OSEP project director's meeting.

Project FORUM suggests that OSEP consider ways to coordinate its information utilization planning activities with its other planning processes - both internal and external. For example, in January, OSEP will be convening a National Agenda Forum that involves expert stakeholders in the development of national goals for the improvement of outcomes for children and youth with disabilities. The results of this activity could have a bearing on potential information needed for program improvement. One option is for OSEP to routinely provide Project FORUM and other grantees with similar information tasks with the results, outcomes, and products of its other planning activities. Another would be to offer them the opportunity to attend the meetings as a non-participating observer to gather information first hand.

Conclusion

The proposal described in this report is a draft developed with expert consultation and input from a wide group of stakeholders. It will be revised, before implementation, incorporating feedback from OSEP staff through the COTR and stakeholders who participated in the discussions leading to the development of this design. As was stated by many of the individuals who were interviewed or who participated in stakeholder group planning meetings, the process for identification of national program information needs should be flexible and should be revised on a periodic basis. Project FORUM staff will use feedback from the polling panel, as well their experience with the initial implementation of the process, to evaluate and study the results and to propose revisions to OSEP on an annual basis.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

A Draft Background Paper Outlining A Process for Identifying Information that is Needed to Improve Programs for Students with Disabilities

By

Cynthia L. Warger, Ph.D.
Warger, Eavy and Associates

Introduction

In the context of current special education reform, decisions about program improvement can be enhanced with sound and relevant information. From a national perspective, making such information available to the special education community is critical for improving the management, administration, delivery, and effectiveness of programs and services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Information that is useful, and therefore usable, must be directly relevant to the needs of those who are charged with program improvement. The task at hand is to craft a process for identifying the needs (or problems) which impede program improvement, and which can be alleviated or solved with information. Put another way, the task is to determine what kinds of problems -- related to program improvement -- people want to solve and the kinds of information they need to help them solve those problems.

We are starting with the assumption that special education stakeholders do, in fact, have a good idea as to: (a) what outcomes they want, (b) what their needs are in relation to achieving those outcomes, and (c) what information, if they had it, would help them eliminate their needs and enable them to be successful. Operating at a national level requires that we acknowledge the multitude of educational goals and outcomes in each state and locality.

Given our national focus, we must assume that the program improvement information that is needed by any given constituent will be directly related to what that constituent has identified as the goal or "ideal" program state. The information can be viewed as knowledge about what it will "take" to get a given program from where it is to some improved state. Seen from this perspective, our task is **not** to create a typical environmental scanning process implemented in the context of local strategic planning; rather, it is to develop a generic process whereby individual constituents' information needs can be identified so that we can provide information that best satisfies those needs.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a backdrop by which to discuss the development of a process for identifying information needs. Because the first step is to craft a process at the national level for assessing needs, needs assessment will be briefly reviewed. A generic process for conducting needs assessment will then be presented. Included in this discussion is a review of standard need identification techniques and models for need assessment. The paper will conclude with suggestions for how a process might be conceptualized for identifying and tracking information needs related to program improvement in special education.

Background: Needs Analysis

Need has been defined by various authors as a gap between current and required/desired ends or results. There is an explicit assumption that the needs reflect a gap between "what is" and "what should be." In the context of program improvement, need is the gap between what one currently achieves in one's program in relation to what one desires or wants to achieve. This outcome focus is distinguished from what has been termed "quasi-needs" (Kaufman & Herman, 1991), which are defined as desired *means* rather than ends. For instance, the desire to implement an instructional innovation such as cooperative learning might be considered a quasi-need when it is used as a means to meet the need of producing students who have demonstrated skills working in cooperative groups.

Need analysis is a tool for decision making where it has been determined that a target group has a problem that can be solved. In this context, the term problem is synonymous with need. Decisions that can be helped by need analysis include those where a judgment must be made as to the adequacy or inadequacy of services to a target population, and those where specific actions are sought to correct inadequate situations.

There are three types of problems that can be identified by needs analysis:

- Discrepancy (i.e., problems are revealed by comparison of expectations with outcomes);

- At-Risk (i.e., at risk groups possess characteristics that either directly predict poor outcomes or, because of inaction, do so indirectly);

- Maintenance (i.e., poor outcomes can be realized for a group if services that are presently offered are withdrawn or altered).

In the case of program improvement, we might be concerned with all three types of problems. We are concerned with discrepancy problems when we have expectations that outcomes could be better for students with disabilities if certain aspects of their educational programs were improved. For example, we might expect that upon graduation, students will become gainfully employed, but discover that, overall, this is not the case. In this example, we would say that gainful employment is a need and then look to information that would help us address that need within the school program.

We also might be concerned with at-risk problems. For instance, in the case of new curriculum initiatives in the general education program, we might determine that due to special learning characteristics, a significant population of students with disabilities might be at-risk for failure when expected to participate. In this example, the need would be to prevent failure and ensure success. Information would be needed to help develop support structures that addressed the unique learning needs of this target population.

Thirdly, we would be concerned with maintenance problems in the context of program improvement when services that were previously offered were withdrawn. For example, schools wishing to move to full inclusion might identify the needs that would arise should all pull-out services be eliminated or significantly reduced.

Through the process of need analysis, problems and solutions are identified and evaluated for a target population. In practice, needs analysis is an iterative activity. The cycle of decision, data gathering, and data analysis repeats until further study is deemed unnecessary. Regardless of the approach undertaken, the goal of any process is to apply sound research procedures to the task of identifying and verifying responses.

There are five generic steps to needs analysis:

Step 1.) Identify Users and Uses of the Analysis: In the case of program improvement in special education, we have a number of different stakeholder groups. As a first step, it is important to identify the users and uses of the analysis, as neglect at this stage often leads to unread and unused reports.

Step 2.) Describe Target Population and Service Environment: This step involves being very clear about the characteristics of the target population and the present context in which they are served. In this case, the target population are individuals charged with program improvement.

Step 3.) Identify Needs: The goal of this stage is to identify problems of the target population and possible solutions. At this stage, needs are not evaluated or prioritized; rather, expectations for outcomes, current outcomes, and the impact/cost of solutions are identified.

Any one or more traditional need identification techniques can be used at this stage:

- **Resource Inventory**: This is a compilation of the services and/or programs available to a target group. The basic question asked by a resource inventory is "who is doing what for whom?" Usually included in the inventory is information regarding service typology, client functioning, and eligibility requirements. By itself, a resource inventory does not indicate need -- just because solutions are available does not mean they are needed. What the resource inventory can do is describe the services available to a target group, reveal gaps in services and point out groups or regions where individuals are at risk, and point to underutilized services. For example, an analysis of state resource guides might indicate a lack of services for children who were born drug dependent. Given what we know about the learning needs of these children, and given the statistics which show birth rates, it could be deduced that certain areas of the country will be experiencing a great need for program information in that area. Similarly, a definition change in the SED area might prompt a look at available services for those students who would then be served as a result of the change.

· **Social Indicators**: These are aggregate statistical measures that depict aspects and historical trends of the social situation. The major source of social indicator information is public records or reports, such as population census data. Social indicators tend to reveal problems or potential problems rather than solutions. One of the most commonly used social indicators is risk analysis. An example might be the demographic data that indicate a large number of families who do not speak English as their native language moving into an area. We might deduce from this that unless there are bilingual programs that are culturally sensitive, a large number of students might in fact become at risk for failure. Program improvement needs could be predicted in these areas.

· **Use of Service Indicators**: The emphasis in this approach is on determining utilization of services. The notion is that the greater the use of service, the greater the need for it. A major weakness of this approach is that use, as it is defined here, is an indicator of the status quo -- knowing about who uses current services does not tell us about who might use those same services under different circumstances. In the context of identifying information needs, we might choose to monitor requests for information (i.e., to a Clearinghouse or via electronic mail), drawing conclusions as to needs based on number of requests.

· **Surveys**: Typically, there are three different types of surveys used in needs identification -- face-to-face interviews, phone interviews, and mailed surveys. Surveys allow for direct feedback from clients, key informants, and target populations about specific issues. Although surveys often yield information about wants rather than needs, they can provide quantitative information about the needs of a particular target group. Polling panels are often used in this context for collecting ongoing information about needs for a group.

· **Structured groups**: Often considered the easiest method for assessing needs, these groups bring together stakeholder and/or expert groups and charge them with identifying the needs of the target population. Structured groups are used when more qualitative data is desired. There are several different types of structured groups: (1) focus groups, which are typically used to gauge the target population's perspective on needs; (2) nominal groups, in which the result is a priority ranking of answers to various need analysis questions; (3) Delphi panels, in which individuals (usually experts) estimate the prevalence of a problem, use of a service, or impact of a program; (4) public forum (e.g., public hearing, town meeting, community forum), in which it is important to not only gather information from the community at large, but also to build support for identifying needs.

Another technique, which is derived from the environmental scanning literature, is "trend tracking." Trend tracking involves monitoring key periodicals, journals, news releases, speeches, and other printed and/or multi-media sources for information that suggest needs. Information is compiled and sorted according to key issues that have been identified as emerging or current trends.

In all of the needs identification approaches, the goal is to reduce the uncertainty with which a decision is made that a need, and solutions to it, exist. Whenever possible, multiple methods should be used to identify needs, as this will allow for increased accuracy and decreased bias. Increased accuracy increases the possibility that the information identified will be appropriate and eventually used.

<u>Step 4.) Assess Needs</u>: At this stage, the importance of the identified needs is determined. Needs assessment seeks to reduce the uncertainty about what, if anything, should be added, reduced or eliminated to address the identified need. At this stage, analysis involves deciding the **best** actions or nonactions to be taken. Models of needs assessment define "best" in different ways, by maximizing different values. A summary of the three most common needs assessment models follows:

> · **Discrepancy Model:** Also called the "gap model," it is the most widely used approach in education. The model emphasizes normative expectations -- these normative expectations are based on an expert definition of adequate levels of performance or service. Because of the reliance on expert opinion, normative expectations can be elitist and can lead to programming that the target population does not use.

In the Discrepancy model, there are usually 3 phases: (1) goal setting or identifying what ought to be; (2) performance measurement or determining what is; and (3) discrepancy identification, ordering differences between what ought to be and what is. Strategic planning models often utilize a discrepancy model for identifying needs. A vision of what "ought to be" is agreed upon, a performance audit is performed to determine the status quo, and a needs assessment (or gap analysis) is undertaken to identify the problems to be eliminated in reaching the desired state.

> · **Marketing Model:** Also called a "feedback" process, it is used by planners to learn more about and adapt to the needs of their client populations. These needs are then satisfied through design, communication, pricing, and delivery of appropriate and competitively viable products and services. Needs are often

defined in this model as "wants" or "desires" felt by the target group, and reflect what the target group is willing to do to get the need met. In this model, a need is not so much a deficit in performance as an expectation of the target population for satisfaction.

When applied to a service (such as education), felt needs depend on the insight the target population has to its own problems. If a need for a service is not felt by the target population, it probably will not be used. On the other hand, expectations can be unrealistic. This model also assumes that the planners can provide the target population with what it wants.

A marketing strategy of needs analysis has three components: (1) selection of target population -- those eligible for the service/product and who are able to make the necessary exchanges; (2) choice of competitive position; (3) development of an effective marketing mix, selecting a range and quality of services/products that will maximize utilization by the target population. A major difference between the marketing model and the discrepancy model is that the latter relies on experts to determine needs, whereas the former relies on the target population.

- **Decision-Making Model:** This approach is an adaptation of "multiattribute utility analysis" to problems of modeling and synthesis in applied research. It is a **complex** approach which assumes that multiple indicators of need are more likely than single indicators to present accurate measurement of a construct.

The decision-making model has three stages: (1) problem modeling -- the decision problem is conceptualized by options and decision attributes. Options are the choices confronting the decision maker. Attributes are the measurements gathered for the need identification (e.g., the results of a social indicator analysis, a survey, an analysis of the cost of program implementation); (2) quantification -- measurements obtained are transformed to reflect the decision-maker's values and interests. Raw measurements are transformed into utilities, and the decision-maker's values are quantified by assigning each attribute a weight of importance; (3) synthesis -- this provides an index that orders options on need. The overall need index is computed by multiplying weights and utilities, and summing the products across attributes.

Values and their role are made explicit in this analysis, unlike the other two models.

<u>Step 5.) Report/Communicate Findings</u>: Information that is identified must be packaged to facilitate the flow of information to individuals who will use it for program improvement. The literature suggests that a need analysis report include the following sections: executive summary; scope and methods used; results of the study; and implications. However, the format for communicating the results should be appropriate for the users.

Considerations in Crafting a Process for Identifying Needed Information Specific to Program Improvement for Students with Disabilities

In developing a process for identifying needed information for program improvement for students with disabilities, certain factors must be taken into consideration. These factors should reflect the special education context. Examples of key factors follow:

- Special education stakeholders are a diverse group, including special and general education teachers, students, administrators, special service providers within and outside the school district, parents, advocates, teacher educators, researchers, and other community members.

- Within the field, there are unique issues as they relate to different classifications and characteristics of children.

- Given the reality of program accountability, there is an implicit value on information that is relevant, practical, and focused on outcomes.

With these factors in mind, a process needs to (1) identify needs as they relate across and within each stakeholder group; (2) identify needs that cut across disability areas, as well as those that are germane to a particular population; (3) identify information needs that can be immediately addressed, as well as those that require further study.

Anther important consideration concerns the purpose of the needs analysis. Our purpose is to identify information that people think they need in order to achieve better outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. It is important to position our process in relation to one of the standard needs analysis models. Although, on a philosophical level we can assume that there are similar concerns that form the basis for stakeholders' visions of what ideal outcomes for students with disabilities might be thus suggesting a discrepancy model, the task is not to identify a base of knowledge that will enable people to reach a universally agreed upon state of being. As the ultimate goal is to identify information needs that are accurate, timely, and relevant, the needs assessment model which best fits this task is the **marketing model**. In a marketing model, perceived needs of the target population are directly assessed. The focus is on identifying what the target population perceives their information needs to be, and the relative importance attributed by the target population to those needs.

Given the marketing model's emphasis on direct assessment, techniques such as structured groups and surveys (e.g., telephone interviews) are most useful as they provide vehicles for directly tapping the target population's perceptions. This is particularly so when applying a marketing model to need identification. In selecting need identification techniques, we would be most concerned with hearing **directly** from the target population. Structured groups and surveys are most commonly used for this purpose, as they provide a direct means of questioning the target population.

Finally, there are certain practical concerns with setting up a process based on a marketing model for identifying information needs as they relate to program improvement. Given the above mentioned considerations, the following attributes should be considered when making a decision about which needs identification method to use:

· **Cost:** Large surveys can be expensive. Sampling is critical to cost. The goal is to reduce the sample size while still maintaining the integrity of the group representation. One approach to increase response rate is to identify a polling panel that formally commits to the process. Another is to rely on other groups for information identification (e.g., trade associations for individual groups). Similarly, given the abundance of printed material in the special education area, library research and monitoring of trends can also be costly in terms of staff time. Costs can be contained by identifying top issues in advance, and having criteria for sorting through the non-essential information. Finally, travel and other expenses for focus groups can also prove cost-prohibitive. Use of local representatives and telecommunications can help to defray some costs.

· **Time:** Depending on how a survey is designed, the time factor can be considerable. Similarly, planning for a structured group, and analyzing the results can also prove costly from a time perspective. On the other hand, capturing up-to-date needs information may not be possible by relying solely on pre-existing data.

· **Skill:** Different needs assessment techniques require different staff skills to carry them out. Most of the structured groups require specific training in the group process. The same can be said for surveys -- without careful design, the information received may have little content validity. Finally, use of pre-existing data requires that the staff be well versed in the subject area of what they are monitoring.

· **Credibility:** In a marketing model of need assessment, the goal is to identify the wants and needs of the target population directly from them. Techniques in which assumptions are drawn (e.g., analyzing use of services), are not as credible as a face-to-face interview with a target subject. To enhance credibility, multiple approaches should be used.

· **Prerequisites:** Some approaches assume certain information. For example, trend tracking techniques assume the tracker to have an understanding of the field and an ability to discern important information. A Delphi panel assumes that a questionnaire has been developed and a representative group of experts identified.

The impact of different techniques obviously has to be balanced with the cost and feasibility of undertaking them. Within the marketing model there is a basic assumption that there is much to be gained from listening to consumers (i.e., target population) describe a need in their own vernacular. Data from such discussions can bring insight to potential problems and opportunities, as well as identify possible strategies for ensuring use of information which might never have occurred to the assessor.

Suggestion: A Process for Identifying Needed Information Specific to Program Improvement

Up to this point, we have provided a brief review of the needs analysis literature and several major considerations when applying a needs analysis approach to identifying information needs related to special education improvement. In this section, specific suggestions are made for crafting a needs assessment process that take into consideration the aforementioned considerations.

The identification of the stakeholder group(s) is a prerequisite to this or any process. I suggest identifying a "polling panel" or network of key stakeholders who will work with you to keep you apprised of current, emerging, and waning needs. To manage this process, some "cut" must be made to identify stakeholder groups. For example, we might make that "cut" by disability area. Within each disability area are additional stakeholders -- practitioners, researchers, parents, advocates, teacher educators, etc. -- who can be identified and tapped as resources. (Note: This core group would also have its own network of stakeholders, who could feed into the process, as well.)

Once this stakeholder "polling" group is selected, a system for encouraging ongoing input can be developed. The following represents a framework for developing a process that will identify and track needs over time. The steps correspond to the basic need analysis process outlined in an earlier section, but tailored to the task of identifying information needed for special education program improvement.

<u>Step 1: Identify information need</u>: There are several ways that information needed for program improvement can be identified. Using the marketing model of need analysis, the process should include more human-focused techniques such as structured groups and face-to-face/phone interviews. Structured group techniques can be used to identify needs quickly and efficiently. These groups should meet periodically over time. As a "jumping-off point," I suggest that Project Forum draw upon their previous work in identifying broad areas where information is needed for program improvement. For example, in January 1992, Project Forum convened a Focus Group meeting of various stakeholders in order to assist OSEP in its planning for the identification of information needed for program improvement.

A less direct technique, which should be seen as supplementing the more direct approach, is to institute a scanning system. Through such a system, scholarly journals, periodicals, media, electronic bulletin boards, key reports, and conference proceedings would be scanned for data regarding information needs in the field. A scanning process should be developed which allows for a variety of sources to be tapped. At a basic level, standard Federal and State documents should be monitored for social indicators, service use information, and available resources. Stakeholder groups should be able to identify key publications which should be monitored for timely news and commentary, research developments, and trends in program improvement. For example, once an area is identified, a literature search on both DIALOG and ERIC can be run. An analysis of the need for the article, in addition to the conclusion where the need for further research/answers is discussed can be scanned.

Finally, a procedure that monitors "future" trends should be built into the system to keep track of environmental conditions that could have a potential impact on program effectiveness. For example, changing demographics, technological advances, medical advances, and societal norms are all areas which could affect education.

At this stage, a procedure should also be applied that "defines" the context for the need. For example, even though the need is critical, it might only affect a small number of people, or a given geographic region. It might only be seen as a need under certain circumstances.

<u>Step 2: Confirm information need</u>: Once an information need is identified, confirmation is needed as to its accuracy and relative importance. Structured processes should be undertaken to both validate and "rank" needs. There are several ways to achieve this stage. First, a process can be built into the need identification stage. For example, a structured group might be asked to undertake an ideawriting process in which the impact of each need is assessed as part of the process. Or, a nominal group process might be undertaken to both identify and evaluate identified needs.

After information needs are identified, a Delphi process could be undertaken to both confirm and rank the importance of each. Targeted surveys, either written or verbal, could also be used to confirm presence of the needs.

A less direct approach might utilize review of printed documents. For example, if a need for information regarding authentic assessment of students with disabilities is identified, then confirmation might be assumed in light of a number of front page articles in recent periodicals, number of research articles published, number of sessions on the topic presented at recent conferences, etc.

<u>Step 3: Monitor information need</u>: Once an information need has been identified and confirmed, how that information is "shaped" is important. In a scanning approach, these focus areas are monitored by noting all references to the topic. Files are kept on the topic areas, with particular attention being given to how the target population is defining the key questions requiring information.

Additionally, a sample of the target population is periodically asked to define their needs specific to that area -- e.g., what one specifically needs to know about technological capacity. A structured group or survey can yield information of this type.

A routine process for contacting secondary sources for information (e.g., a professional association) should be established.

Step 4: Analyze information need: On an ongoing basis, needs should be analyzed and reanalyzed to determine if they continue to be valid or if they have shifted in terms of priority. For example, the relative importance of a need over time might be undertaken by comparing the results of structured group deliberations or by stakeholder rankings. Informal communications with key stakeholders should be utilized whenever it is suspected that a need is dwindling, to ascertain the exact nature of such a shift. For example, several years ago, many educators identified a strong need for information that would help them improve their student's ability to think analytically and creatively. Over time, this "need" shifted from one of information about basic instructional approaches and available curriculum, to how to assess higher level thinking skills, how to develop inquiry-based, integrated thematic units, and how to help students generalize their skills in a variety of settings.

Considerations for implementing this process. In addition, there must be built into the process different reporting mechanisms. The actual approach used to present the information should be tailored to the preferences of the target group who is receiving the information.

There are several considerations basic to implementing this process. The process:

- requires direct and ongoing involvement of stakeholders to provide information
- is enhanced by a truly representative sample of stakeholders across the U.S.
- assumes a high level of skill and knowledge on the part of the implementing staff
- allows for flexibility when selecting need identification techniques, although it does rely heavily on direct communication techniques with the target population
- assumes staff access to a wide variety of documents
- requires a system that will catalog and update information on an ongoing basis

Cost and time-effectiveness with the process will depend heavily on the staff's ability to discern categories of information needs -- much as was done in the Project Forum Focus Group -- that have universal appeal in the field.

Summary and Conclusion

The focus of this task was to suggest a process for determining the information needs related to program improvement. The need for quick, accurate, and high quality information is increasing. Knowledge about what the target population wants with regard to program improvement information, rather than what experts think they need, can assist policy makers and information system managers in providing them with useful and relevant information.

Appendix B

Background Information for Participants: Identification of Information for Program Improvement under the IDEA

The critical importance of information in decision making and policy development has long been recognized, and contemporary technology has made the identification, tracking, and analysis of information in a timely fashion a critical necessity for organizations in our society. It is impossible for individuals who are responsible for the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to access and read all of the ever-growing array of information that could be useful in helping them make decisions that would improve the system and yield better results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. Recognizing the implications of this situation prompted Congress to amend Section 618(c)(3) of the IDEA to assure that information would be gathered and analyzed that was "necessary for achieving program and system improvements at the State and local levels". NASDSE under its Project FORUM contract with OSEP is developing and will be implementing a process for the on-going identification of national program information needed for improving the management, administration, delivery, and effectiveness of programs and services provided under this Act.

Improvement of services provided under the IDEA is of great interest to a very wide range of individuals, agencies, and organizations that use information about special education. Therefore, both the system used for the identification of information needs and the process used to develop this system must provide for input from a variety of constituencies. While specific details will be developed as the design process evolves, in order for the completed design to yield the kinds of information Congress intended the plan for the next five years will have to include:

- Strategies for obtaining input from the widest possible constituency;
- Procedures for identifying the implementation areas where information for program improvement is needed;
- Ongoing procedures for identifying specific information needs;

- Procedures for confirming the identified needs;
- Techniques for organizing the identified information needs;
- Ways to retrieve information in the form of reports that OSEP and others can use to facilitate the flow of information to individuals who will use it for program improvement; and
- An evaluation plan that monitors the effectiveness of the information needs identification process.

Since the accuracy and usefulness of data about the information needed for program improvement is dependent upon the nature of the process used to collect the data, Project FORUM is convening a series of meetings of representatives of a wide range of interested constituencies to assist in the design of the information needs identification process including identifying patterns in the way information needs are identified by information users. Based on participants' comments and feedback, a draft plan will be developed by the end of December. Because of the need to consider limited human and fiscal resources, consideration will be given to developing a plan that is both comprehensive and cost-effective.

We can anticipate that the five-year plan will require modification and revision in order to stay attuned to the informational environment. Therefore, the plan will be reassessed on an annual basis. We envision a limited but important role for stakeholders in assisting us in the implementation and revision of the plan for identifying and tracking the information needed for program improvement for students with disabilities.

Appendix C

Agenda For Meeting on

INFORMATION NEEDED FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT UNDER IDEA

NASDSE Conference Room

December 21, 1992 (1:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.)

1:00	Purpose of Task 2 and Stakeholder Meetings/Introductions
1:15	Priority Questions to Address:

A. **What are the ways decisionmakers determine what their information needs are?**

B. **What might policymakers not know about their information needs?**

C. **What are some viable ways to gather input and feedback from information users on a regular basis?**

2:30	*Break*
2:45	Next Steps:

1. **How can we incorporate these ideas into our five-year plan?**
2. **Who should be involved?**
3. **What process should we use to involve them?**

3:45	Future Involvement of Group Members
4:15	General Discussion/Feedback on Process
4:30	Adjournment

APPENDIX D
Initial List of National Program Information Needs
(illustrative listing only)

- *Program Management and Regulatory Flexibility.* Currently, many stakeholders express interest in information about how regulations may "enable" rather than "impede" the development of creative educational approaches that will facilitate successful outcomes and still preserve due process rights for students with disabilities.

- *Accountability for Outcomes.* Accountability for outcomes for students with disabilities has, arguably, been limited to monitoring procedural compliance and Federal data reporting. Many stakeholders have expressed a need for information focusing on defining learning outcomes and developing authentic ways to measure their achievement.

- *Community Supported Schools.* Given the changing demographic conditions of American society, and the concomitant diversity of needs among students, stakeholders have expressed the need for information on how the school can become a focal point for the delivery of comprehensive services to students and their families.

- *Personnel Development.* For real and substantial change in our educational system, training and ongoing retraining of teachers is clearly essential. Stakeholders have expressed the need for information regarding how to reconfigure the relationships and responsibilities of staff and redesign programs that train personnel for work in future school environments.

- *Interagency Collaboration.* Stakeholders report that fragmentation in the delivery of services by social service agencies continues to be problematic. Stakeholders further report information needs relative to the development of a consistent system of service delivery based on well managed tracking systems that support a follow-along service model that will reduce gaps in services and lessen burdens on families.

- *Technological Capacity.* According to stakeholders, the accelerating pace of technological change is posing unique challenges for school systems. The implications of technological change embrace the areas of instruction, assessment, and administration; changes in technology will impact on the information needed for program improvement and on the development and analysis of policy.

- *Alternative Assessments for Eligibility.* Considerable controversy currently exists over the process of determining eligibility for special education. Information is needed regarding how to best conduct assessments that are reliable, valid, cost effective, and useful for decisionmaking regarding eligibility determination as well as IEP development, program design, and outcome evaluation.

- *Over Representation of Minorities in Special Education.* Information is needed about determining instances of over representation of minority students in special education. Stakeholders are interested in knowing what kinds of actions are effective in changing these patterns once cases of over representation are confirmed.

- *Children on the "Boundary".* It is currently recognized that many at-risk children are "falling through the cracks" between regular and special education. Sometimes these children are considered socially maladjusted or ADD; sometimes these children may be eligible under Section 504 but not under the IDEA. Stakeholders need information to develop policy that fairly addresses these students' needs.

- *Options for Evaluating Program Effectiveness.* Previous work of Project FORUM indicates that States could benefit from information about alternative strategies to consider in evaluating program effectiveness. Information is needed concerning this specific area of State policy.