



# External Evaluation of the Special Education Resources Leads Within the California Statewide System of Support

Year 1 (2023–2024)

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## Introduction

As part of the 2022 Budget Act, the California Legislature<sup>1</sup> authorized the California Department of Education (CDE), in collaboration with the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), to select applicants to be Special Education Resource Leads. Applicant criteria were the following: grantees must be a county office of education (COE), special education local plan area (SELPA), or an appropriate partnership or consortia of COEs and/or SELPAs; and they must demonstrate how they will build capacity in regional and local entities throughout the state to improve outcomes for students with disabilities (SWDs).

The statute outlined the process to select grantees. Specifically, the selection process was to ensure that

- ▶ no more than 10 special education resource leads are selected to provide specific expertise on special education issues within the statewide system of support (SSOS);
- ▶ at least three resource leads shall be selected in a manner to ensure statewide representation and focus directly on building local and regional capacity to support local education agencies in achieving the goals, actions, and services identified in their local control and accountability plans (LCAPs);
- ▶ at least one resource lead shall be selected to support the development and implementation of high-quality individualized education programs (IEPs); and
- ▶ at least one resource lead shall be selected to—in partnership with a family support organization that provides support to families of pupils with disabilities or a coalition of such organizations—provide capacity building, training, and technical assistance on family support for families of pupils with disabilities and conflict prevention and alternate dispute resolution (ADR) in special education.

**Exhibit 1** shows the seven selected Leads awarded grants as Special Education Resource Leads for the 2023–2028 cycle. Two of the seven Leads (Open Access and MUSE) were selected as part of a statewide needs assessment.

<sup>1</sup> California Education Code sections 52073 and 52073.2 California Education Code sections 52073 and 52073.2

**Exhibit 1.** Special Education Resource Leads’ focus areas and the associated grantee, SELPA program office, and partners

Focus Area	Grantees and Partners
Alternate Dispute Resolution, Pathways to Partnership (ADR-P2P)	Ventura COE (Ventura County SELPA); Partners: Tehama County Schools, Rainbow Connection Family Empowerment Center (Community Partner), Tehama County SELPA, and Ventura County SELPA
California Collaborative for Inclusive Practices (CCIP)	Santa Clara COE
High-Quality IEPs (HQ IEP)	San Diego COE (East County SELPA); Partners: East County SELPA and Santa Clara SELPA
Multilingual Students with Exceptional Needs (MUSE)	Imperial COE (Imperial County SELPA)
Special Education Resource Lead (SERL) EmbraceAbilities	Los Angeles COE (Los Angeles County Office of Education); Partner: Special Needs Network
System Improvement Lead (SIL)	El Dorado COE (El Dorado County SELPA); Riverside County SELPA
Open Access and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	Placer COE (Placer County SELPA); Partners: Antelope Valley SELPA, Humboldt COE, and North Inland SELPA

Of the seven selected Special Education Resource Leads, three were Leads in the previous grant cycle (2019–2023) funded by the 2019 Budget Act: **Open Access**, **MUSE**, and **SIL**.<sup>2</sup> These continuing Leads had experience as Leads prior to the 2023–2028 Special Education Resource Leads grant. Therefore, the report references the additional Leads as starting implementation of capacity building in Year 1, while the four new grantees began their capacity building by conducting a gap analysis and implementing initial capacity-building activities. This distinguishes continuing and new Leads in applicable results.

This report is the first interim evaluation report of the Special Education Resource Leads grant (2023–2028). The report describes the technical assistance with the Leads on their goals and logic models, the design of the external evaluation and data collection approach for Year 1, results about successes and challenges in the Leads meeting their Year 1 goals, and recommendations for Years 2–5.

<sup>2</sup> The previous grant cycle was part of the 2018 Budget Act (California Education Code sections 52073 and 52073.1). The California Legislature authorized the CDE, in collaboration with CCEE to select SELPAs or a consortia of SELPAs to serve as special education leads, called SELPA Leads. The final evaluation of the SELPA Leads is located here: <https://ccee-ca.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SELPA-Lead-Final-Evaluation-Report-2023.pdf>.

## Lead Goals and Logic Models

LCAPs provide a way for local education agencies (LEAs) to plan continuous improvement by describing goals, actions, and services for all students across student groups. Therefore, the Special Education Resource Leads developed goals, activities, and monitoring measures to create a through line from how the Leads’ activities effect LEA improvements and measurable student impact. State agency partners provided technical assistance to the Leads on goals and action plan development. RTI International provided technical assistance on logic model development based on the goals and action plans aligned to student outcomes.

Each Lead developed two goals. The first goal was how the Lead will **connect** with other Leads, SSOS partners, and other partners across the state in the Lead’s focus area to support or increase positive outcomes for SWDs. The second goal was how the Lead will **build capacity** of COEs, SELPAs, and LEAs in the Lead’s focus area that can support or increase positive outcomes for SWDs.

The 2022 Budget Act<sup>3</sup> set forth the responsibilities within each of these two goals. **Connections responsibilities** are to (a) develop, support, and participate in a robust communication network among all entities in the SSOS, including the state agencies and other leads; (b) participate in a network with other agencies serving in the SSOS and serve as a conduit in connecting LEAs to the other branches of the system; and (c) facilitate integration and partnerships across all levels of the system (SELPA, COE, LEA, individual classrooms). **Capacity-building responsibilities** are to (a) effectively build the capacity of LEAs to improve outcomes for SWDs and support their families; (b) extend equity of access to high-quality technical assistance and resources statewide; and (c) provide support to both LEAs with identified needs, including LEAs identified by CDE as needing assistance through Compliance Improvement Monitoring (CIM) and Differentiated Assistance (DA), and LEAs that opt in for continuous improvement support.

### Exhibit 2. Special Education Resource Leads’ Year 1 goals that guided logic models

Lead	Connections Goal	Capacity-Building Goal
ADR-P2P	Increase collaboration among at least three SSOS partners and the Family Empowerment Center Network for the purpose of determining the continuum of supports available for ADR across the state.	Create Communities of Practice with educators and parent/family groups to increase knowledge and skills of participants while decreasing power differentials.
CCIP	Collaborate with other Leads and identified LEAs to strengthen and leverage their expertise to enable the integration of evidence-based inclusive practices across California.	Conduct a gap analysis of inclusive practice initiatives for SWDs to identify promising practices and gaps to inform system improvement.

<sup>3</sup> As shown under CDE’s purpose of the Special Education Resource Leads: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/serl.asp>

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Lead	Connections Goal	Capacity-Building Goal
HQ IEP	Develop and facilitate a network of educators and family resource centers to give input on evidence-based practices and develop resources for assessment and present levels, goals, and services on California Individualized Education Programs.	Conduct a gap analysis of resources within the SSOS that help LEAs, parents, and students engage in the IEP process.
MUSE	Collaborate with other Leads about shared areas of focus and leverage those connections to scale delivery of evidence-based practices to meet the needs of multilingual students across the state.	Provide technical assistance to build capacity in supporting implementation of district initiatives intended to improve outcomes for multilingual students with exceptional needs.
Open Access	Collaborate with other Leads about shared areas of focus to leverage those connections to scale delivery of evidence-based Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices across the state.	Provide technical assistance to build capacity in supporting implementation of UDL in district initiatives focused on student access and outcomes.
SERL	Provide ongoing collaboration with COEs and their corresponding regionalized programs for students with significant support needs.	Identify best practices, conduct a gap analysis, and identify areas for system improvements to support students with significant support needs.
SIL	Build partnerships with COEs, SELPAs, districts, charters, SSOS Lead agencies, California Department of Education, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, and the State Board of Education so that LEAs have access to a coherent network of accessible resources and supports.	Build capacity of COEs, SELPAs, districts, and charters in continuous improvement cultures, methodologies, and mindsets.

As shown in Exhibit 2, Leads’ **connections** goal in their first year included the development of strategic collaboration plans with other Leads and SSOS partners for the purpose of increasing impact of the Leads’ activities on LEAs and students. Examples of outputs included peer learning sessions to find out the focus of partners’ work, process maps to facilitate and track conversations, and hubs to curate shared materials with links to partners’ websites. All Leads implemented their collaboration plans in Year 1 with the expectation of deepening these relationships in Years 2–5.

Also shown in Exhibit 2, each Lead had a **capacity-building** goal in Year 1. Among their outputs for capacity building were capacity assessments, action plans, implementation manuals, and analyses of gaps in topic area offerings. Gap analyses were focused on identifying statewide resources and supports currently available to educators in the Lead's specified content area as well as identifying topics/resources/support needed as opportunities for future focus and goals. Gap analyses resulted in information about current supports available and opportunities for improvement. All Leads implemented capacity-building activities, with new Leads piloting initial implementation.

Each Lead identified metrics to measure the tools or deliverables (“outputs” in the logic model) and the results of the outputs’ effectiveness (“outcomes” in the logic model) aligned to the connections and capacity-building goals. Logic model development included multiple iterative meetings between RTI and the Lead to refine goals and measurements for LEA and student impact. Examples of impact measures on Lead logic models were district capacity assessments, student surveys related to belongingness, interviews related to use of data and improvement science approaches, and indicators such as graduation rate, attendance, and appropriate eligibility determination for special education among specific student populations (e.g., English Language Learners).

Leads provided feedback on the usefulness of the logic model process on measuring student impact in emails, meetings, and informally as part of the external evaluation focus groups. Leads shared that the logic models provided a common language of success and visual depiction of incremental progress on how to achieve success. Leads referenced that the selected metrics for the logic models informed their capacity-building planning and real-time capacity-building implementation.

RTI’s external evaluation explored implementation and impact of the connections and capacity-building goals in Year 1.

## External Evaluation Design

RTI’s external evaluation for the 5 years of the Special Education Resource Leads are guided by three primary evaluation questions. These questions address Leads’ **connections** within the SSOS, their **capacity-building** activities, and the **impact** of their activities:

1. What are the **connections** among Special Education Resource Leads and within the SSOS, and for what purpose?
2. What are indicators of Special Education Resource Lead **capacity-building** scale, replication, and sustainability?
  - a. What is the quality<sup>4</sup> of the Special Education Resource Lead capacity building?
  - b. What are differentiated features among Special Education Resource Leads?
  - c. How are features adapted per context?
  - d. What structures and processes are present for sustainability?

<sup>4</sup> RTI conceptualizes quality as per CCEE’s Quality, Relevance, Usability (QRU) Rubric, which defines high quality as resources that are engaging, well-designed, easy to navigate, and have development methods grounded in research and/or evidence-based practices.

3. What is the **impact** of the Special Education Resource Leads on SWD?
  - a. What actions did participants take?
  - b. What influences did the actions have on schools and students?
  - c. What changes or trends in indicators occurred?

To explore these areas of focus in Year 1, RTI used a mixed-methods approach to collect and analyze data from focus groups and surveys.

**Qualitative data collection and analysis.** RTI conducted seven focus groups, one for each of the seven Leads, with 17 Lead staff participants. The evaluation team used a semistructured protocol to guide focus group discussions. The evaluation team recorded the focus groups with permission from staff, and a third party transcribed the audio. The team indexed transcribed data in a qualitative analysis program using codes aligned to the focus group protocol. The team also added analytic codes based on emergent themes within the data. The evaluation team composed analytic memos for codes salient to the first year of the evaluation, identifying themes and representative excerpts within each set of data. The team also analyzed themes from responses to open-ended questions on the participant survey (described below). Open-ended response analysis identified themes commonly cited by participants and indexed relevant excerpts that supported each theme.

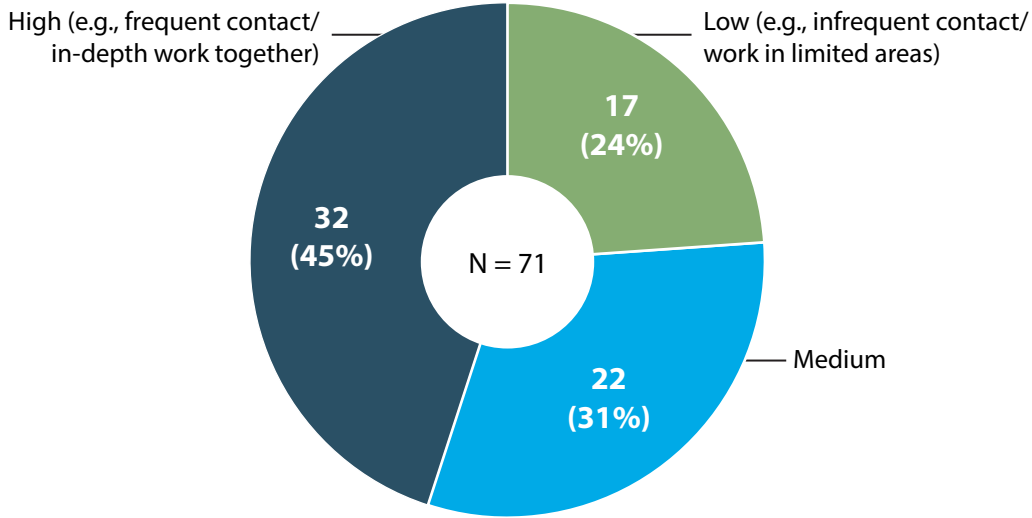
**Quantitative data collection and analysis.** RTI's survey administration for Year 1 was considered a pilot administration to understand (a) the best way to collect data from individuals participating in Leads' capacity-building activities and (b) a baseline description of activities, their usefulness, and their anticipated impact on participants' regional and local work to increase outcomes for SWDs.

RTI administered 630 surveys, with a 16.2% response rate. The primary factor that influenced the response rate was the incremental rollout of Lead capacity-building activities over the course of Year 1. The three continuing Leads implemented capacity-building activities starting in fall 2023. Participants in these activities received the survey. Three of the new Leads initiated pilot capacity-building activities in spring 2024. Participants in these activities received the survey late in the survey administration cycle. The RTI team partnered with Leads to increase response rates; the overall low response rate is attributed to the administration timing of the later participant additions.

Of the respondents, 76% reported medium or high levels of involvement with their Special Education Resource Lead, and 24% reported that they had only a low level of involvement. Respondents reporting a low level of involvement are not included in the analysis, which is focused on the Lead's capacity building. See **Exhibit 3** for level of involvement responses.

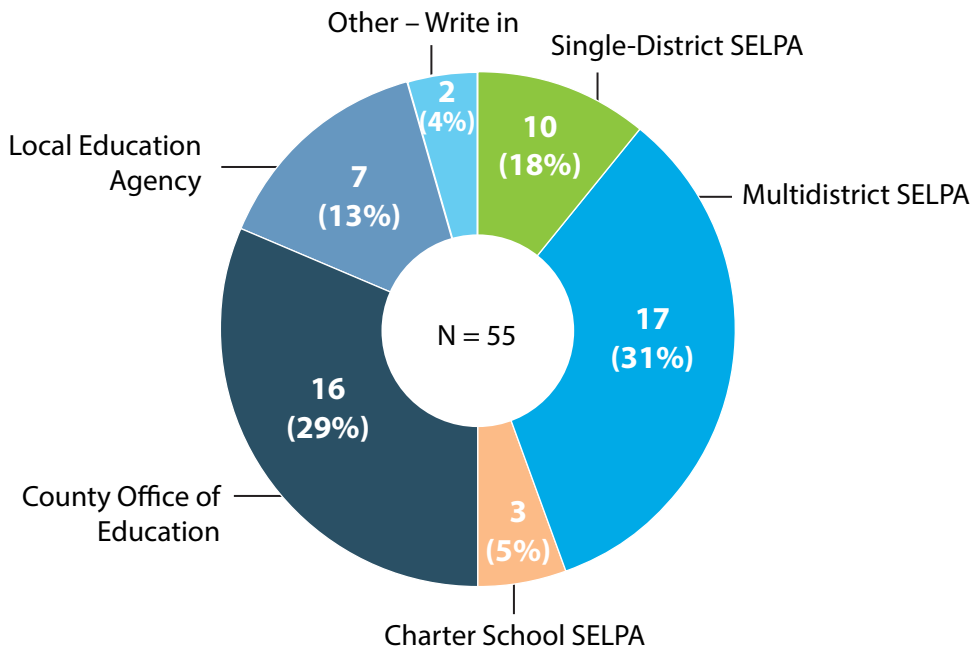


**Exhibit 3.** Survey responses about level of involvement in working with your Special Education Resource Lead



Survey respondents represented a variety of organizations, including multidistrict SELPAs (31%), LEAs (29%), single-district SELPAs (18%), and county offices of education (13%). See **Exhibit 4**.

**Exhibit 4.** Survey respondents' description of employer organization



## Findings

This findings section is divided into three categories of findings aligned to the three evaluation questions. The questions follow:

1. What are the **connections** among Special Education Resource Leads and within the SSOS, and for what purpose?
2. What are indicators of Special Education Resource Lead **capacity-building** scale, replication, and sustainability?
3. What is the **impact** of the Special Education Resource Leads on SWDs.

## Special Education Resource Lead Connections

Our first evaluation question addressed the **connections** of the Special Education Resource Leads among themselves and connections within and beyond the SSOS. For Year 1, all Leads developed a goal for connections (see **Exhibit 2**). Focus groups of leads and participant survey questions addressed successes and challenges of making connections. Participant surveys also asked about collaboration opportunities in the Leads' capacity-building sessions and participant awareness and use of SSOS resources.

### Successes of Connections

When asked in general about their Year 1 successes, new and continuing Leads most frequently spoke about the connections they were forging with other Leads, other initiatives in the SSOS, and partners external to the SSOS like organizations and contracted consultants. In the words of one new Lead, "With all of our connections up and down the state, and across the state lines, I think that is helping build our capacity...." Connections helped Leads share information and tools and learn from one another's expertise while also avoiding unintentional duplication of the work.

**Connections to other Special Education Resource Leads.** Leads described relying on and collaborating with other Leads, both new and continuing, to share advice, resources, and connections with other agencies and organizations in their topic area. A continuing Lead reported that "there isn't a week that goes by that we don't have a collaboration meeting on our agenda to meet with a number of the projects out there, whether it be ADR-P2P, High-Quality IEPs, project [MUSE]." A new Lead described appreciating the support of continuing Leads during their collaboration meetings.

The Leads might not have experienced this kind of support consistently (see “Challenges of Connections”), but several described reaching out to other Leads to leverage the expertise that came from their specific “lenses” on how to support SWDs. Multiple Leads mentioned that the continuous improvement and process/collaboration map work with the System Improvement Lead was very helpful to them as a form of planning.

**Other connections within the SSOS.** SSOS huddles facilitated by state agencies and other opportunities to connect to initiatives within the SSOS helped Leads forge connections with other Special Education Resource Leads and with other statewide initiatives. One continuing Lead mentioned that it was helpful to have opportunities to come together as special education projects that were not necessarily all part of the same funding stream but were within the SSOS.

Connections helped Special Education Resource Leads learn about what Geographic Lead Agencies and the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy were doing, as well as what was happening in the realms of Universal Prekindergarten and Multitiered Systems of Support. One Lead described learning about and using resources from another initiative by applying a lens in serving SWDs.

Another continuing Lead also expressed appreciation for the cadence of SSOS meetings and for the support they received from colleagues in the SSOS. They reported the “frequent Statewide System of Support meetings, where we meet together, and just learn from each other what other people are doing, what’s working for them” helped them improve their own work. They found that “whenever we’ve reached out to any partners with questions, everyone’s ... been a great support.” They described learning from another Lead about how that Lead used social media: they “gave us some ideas that we could start with and [build] off of.”

Other connections within the SSOS included Family Empowerment Centers, Seeds of Partnership, the California Transition Alliance, the California Coalition for Inclusive Learning, and the Regional English Language Lead.

“ I find the regular meetings and huddles with the other System of Support providers to be critical because we’re not going too long without seeing one another. And so just that structure of, if there’s a question that came up, there’s a place to land it. Or, ‘I’m working with a district who has a need in this area. I know I’m going to see that person, you know, on that project.’ That has been really helpful to work through because increasingly as we’ve worked with more and more districts with different needs, we need to tap the expertise of many, many [partners in the]...System of Support. [Continuing Lead about the consistency of the SSOS huddles]

## Challenges of Connections

**Coordination and communication.** Leads occasionally described challenges related to coordination and communication within the statewide system that involves so many partners tasked with ambitious work.

Leads spoke about the need to understand what others within the SSOS were doing—in terms of their expertise and services, as well as data they were collecting. This understanding could help ensure that partners would avoid unintentional duplication of work while leveraging each other’s project-related expertise. It could also lead to streamlined data collection efforts, which would reduce burden on participants. As one new Lead said, “We all are doing surveys, right? Everybody’s doing a survey as a Statewide System of Support [initiative].”

Leads noted that clarity in communication about the work of special education–focused initiatives (as well as coherence in messaging around special education–related approaches and tools) could help prevent confusion for LEAs. A new Lead reported, “Some of the districts are asking, well, what is the difference between you and [another initiative], or what’s the difference between you and [another Special Education Resource Lead].” Although Leads reported the need for enhanced coordination and communication, several also expressed appreciation for the efforts that were already underway to accomplish these goals:

“*Doing the communities of practice has been really beneficial and helpful and kind of eye-opening on what the needs are and what people are already doing. To kind of get a pulse for what the grant needs to focus on and what’s already there has been really helpful just to talk to our partners all around the state.*” (New Lead)

“*I think there’s more intentional conversation around how to collaborate and what everyone’s shared focus is. And there’s certainly still more work to do ... aligning on our shared outcomes. I think all of those projects are critical, so we’re not just bumping into each other. We have to know when to tap others and when to bring folks in, and it feels like we’re getting more clarity in that area.*” (Continuing Lead)

“*We really appreciate CCEE’s genuine intent to ensure that these projects are not going in each other’s lanes, ... not going to step on [other resource Leads’] toes.*” (New Lead)

Leads who were tasked with gap analysis mentioned the gap analysis as a tool helped show where partners could be leveraged to address needs.

**Capacity and support.** Two issues around support for Leads emerged as themes in the data. The first was challenges around competing time demands. The other theme that emerged indicated that Leads and other technical assistance providers focused on similar efforts/areas

of expertise had room for improvement. Specific improvements mentioned were how to foster collaborative, noncompetitive relationships that would facilitate transparent communication about (a) what each Lead was doing and not doing, (b) where participants might need additional or different types of help, and (c) systematic coordination leading to student success:

As a Statewide System of Support, there should be no beginning and end or any walls to prevent us from supporting the districts that are in need of help because our students are benefiting from the support. The staff are benefiting from the trainings and support. And so that's the thing that I think would be the most powerful is to figure out how new grantees or existing grantees can partner to scale the work. (New Special Education Lead)

Future years of the evaluation will examine the scaling of Leads' work and will continue to track successes and challenges around connections, which play a significant role in the success and expansion of this kind of work.

### Participants' Perspectives on Collaboration and the SSOS

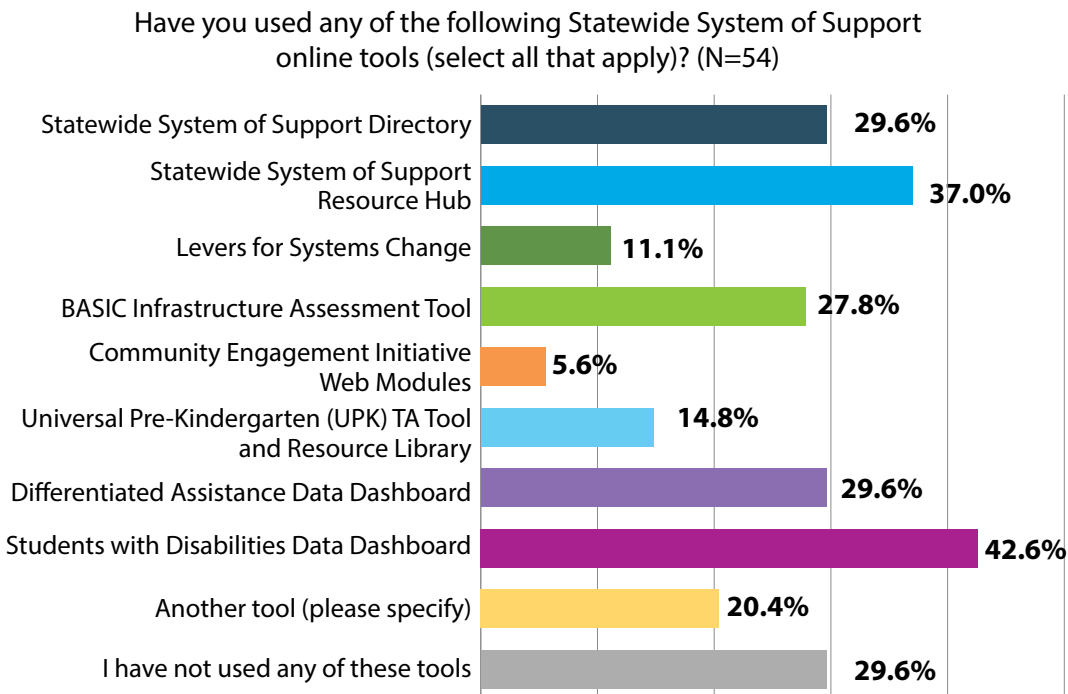
Almost all survey respondents (over 90%) agreed they had been able to collaborate with others on their team in the capacity-building sessions and that they had received tools and resources to support their implementation strategies. Although fewer, most also agreed they had had the opportunity for collaboration with educators beyond their school or district (80% agreed or strongly agreed). See **Exhibit 5**.

**Exhibit 5:** Participants' perceptions of collaborations [Table]

	Disagree	Neither agree not disagree	Agree
I was able to collaborate with others on my team in the capacity-building sessions. (N=54)	2%	7%	91%
I was able to collaborate or network with others from outside of my school or district. (N=54)	9%	11%	80%

The survey also included a series of questions designed to assess respondents’ level of familiarity and engagement with the SSOS (see **Exhibit 6**). The first question asked respondents to indicate which SSOS online tools they had used. The most commonly used tools were the Students with Disabilities Data Dashboard (43%), SSOS Resource Hub (37%), SSOS Directory (30%), and Differentiated Assistance Data Dashboard (30%). The least commonly used were the Levers for Systems Change (11%) and Community Engagement Initiative Web Modules (6%). (The Levers for Systems Change and the Community Engagement Initiative Web Modules were released in Spring of 2024 so limited knowledge of these tools is likely a factor in the lower percentages.)

**Exhibit 6:** Survey respondents’ indications of Statewide System of Support online tool use (respondents selected all that apply)



Respondents also reported on their level of awareness of the SSOS and the degree to which it serves their needs (**Exhibit 7**). Over half (59%) of respondents were aware of the services and resources available through the SSOS; just over half (51%) knew how to access those services and resources. About a fifth of respondents (21%) did not know how to access the services and resources available through the SSOS. About half of respondents agreed that the SSOS Leads provide adequate services and resources to help their COE provide universal and supplemental/targeted supports to their LEAs.

**Exhibit 7:** Survey respondents’ agreement with Statewide System of Support awareness, access, and satisfaction.

	Disagree	Neither agree not disagree	Agree
I was able to collaborate with others on my team in the capacity-building sessions. (N=54)	17%	24%	59%
I was able to collaborate or network with others from outside of my school or district. (N=54)	20%	28%	52%
The Statewide System of Support provides adequate services and resources to help my COE to effectively provide universal supports to our LEAs. (N=53)	10%	42%	49%
The Statewide System of Support provides adequate resources to help my COE to effectively provide supplemental/targeted supports to our LEAs. (N=52)	6%	44%	50%

## Special Education Resource Lead Capacity Building

### Successes of Capacity Building

Continuing Leads spoke about their capacity-building work, including coaching and other forms of technical assistance, and about the approaches and features of the work that were successful. One continuing Lead reported that, in their approach to capacity building, it was helpful to leverage the existing expertise and capacity participants had. They told participants, “We’ll walk alongside you. We don’t have all the answers, but we have a process that we can help support you through.” Continuing and new Leads described **strong and trusting relationships with COEs and LEAs** that were facilitating (or would facilitate in the future) successful capacity-building work. Leads were also proud of the capacity building they were doing to center family and student voices and supporting them as informed decision makers and leaders.

Leads also spoke about the importance of **continuous improvement** in terms of processes they supported in their capacity-building work and used themselves. A new Lead described supporting a COE to establish procedures to collect data that they would analyze and use to determine next steps. Another spoke about regularly getting feedback from participants on resources, using that feedback to revise supports and resources, and encouraging participants to engage in similar cycles of feedback with students and parents. When designing supports, Leads also left room for revisions so the supports could be **adapted to meet the needs of local contexts**. For example, a continuing lead said, “if we can have multiple tiers of support available ... [because] this state is so massive that we have to be mindful of the different entry levels for different teams and where they're at.”

Another Lead spoke about how helpful it was to have protocols and procedures that provided structure but that could be adapted to guide their capacity-building work. Other successes that Leads mentioned included showcase sites for the demonstration of best practices in inclusive education and the development of an accessible website.

### **Challenges of Capacity Building**

Leads commonly experienced challenges around the interrelated issues of **limited staffing, capacity, and time** to carry out and scale their work. In the words of one continuing Lead, “There’s obviously a current limitation around staffing ... without those limitations, I think we would launch additional networks and focus on additional problems of practice that we see emerging from the field.” In addition to scaling, elements of the capacity work that were challenging to accomplish with limited time and staff included adjusting to changes and learning curves that came with staff changes; navigating how to build capacity around an area as complex as special education; and organizing and analyzing all the data collected. One continuing Lead stated, “I think I can do a better job at organizing all of these connections and projects. ... We're so excited about the work. Rarely do we say no. [But there are] just not enough hours in the day.”

Leads spoke about the need for time to accomplish their goals. In the meantime, they described strategically prioritizing what they were working on, delegating (or needing to delegate) some tasks, and keeping work to a small scale where resources were limited. Another continuing Lead planned to create systems for centralizing data and carve out dedicated time to prepare for (not just implement) capacity-building activities.

Although Leads reported that they were developing strong relationships with COEs and LEAs, more than one mentioned that overcoming sites’ hesitation about “having them come in” takes some work. Leads made efforts to dispel fears by taking the time to convey their role as supportive partners



## Participants’ Perspectives on Capacity Building

Survey respondents were positive in their assessment of the format, content, and learning environment of their capacity-building activities (**Exhibit 8**). Over 90% agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced a positive environment for their learning, that the time spent in capacity building had been sufficient, and that the Lead had been responsive to their questions. Of the three-quarters of survey respondents who had participated in individualized coaching, approximately 95% reported that the coaching had enhanced their learning. Respondents reported agreement that the trainings had been tailored to their needs (86%) or that they had opportunities to practice new strategies (82%).

Respondents reflected on other elements of their experiences in capacity-building sessions. Almost all respondents (around 90%) agreed that they had received tools and resources to support their implementation strategies, while 80% agreed that their training had given them evidence-based practices for school improvement or instruction. Almost all respondents (93%) reported observing their Special Education Resource Lead demonstrating a continuous improvement mindset.

**Exhibit 8.** Participants’ perspectives on capacity-building features

	Disagree	Neither agree not disagree	Agree
I experienced a positive environment (trust, safety) for my learning. (N=55)	5%	2%	93%
The length of time spent in capacity building was sufficient (including all sessions, trainings, coaching). (N=54)	4%	4%	93%
Individualized coaching/support from the Special Education Lead enhanced my learning. (N=40)	3%	3%	95%
The trainings were tailored to my needs. (N=53)	6%	8%	87%
The Lead was responsive to my questions (within and outside of sessions). (N=54)	4%	4%	93%
I had opportunities to practice new strategies during sessions or with my Lead. (N=55)	6%	13%	82%
I received tools and resources for implementation strategies that I learned. (N=54)	9%	2%	89%
I received evidence-based practices (EBPs) for school improvement and/or instruction. (N=55)	9%	11%	80%
The Special Education Resource Lead Agency I worked with demonstrated their own continuous improvement mindset. (N=54)	6%	2%	93%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

## Impacts of the Special Education Resource Leads

The capacity-building supports provided by Special Education Resource Leads are intended to impact participants in offerings, the systems/organizations and educators they support, and ultimately the educators and students within those systems. In this sequence of outcomes, we expect to see potential impacts on participants' knowledge and skills, their actions in their respective organizations, changes in their organization and staff as a result of their actions, the experiences of SWDs in school, and students' ultimate achievement.

In this section, we share themes around anticipated and reported impacts within these levels from the perspectives of Leads and participants.

### Leads' Perspectives on Impact

Leads described several **impacts on participants and organizations** that were resulting from their capacity-building activities and supports. For new Leads, impacts included an understanding of approaches to a train-the-trainer model and LEA practices related to inclusive education. For continuing Leads, impacts included (a) the cocreation of a communication plan with district staff to identify an implementation team; (b) districts' uptake of data collection activities (e.g., empathy interviews) that could help to strengthen understanding of students' experiences and supports to address their needs; and (c) improved interdepartmental collaborations among special education and general education staff.

One Lead described that LEAs were observing and celebrating their **impact on student outcomes** as a result of the work with the Lead:

“ It's been really thrilling to get to continue to work with those districts as they develop plans, and then another set of districts as they work to implement and to see them getting measurable improvement for their kids and to see that kind of light up in them when they see, 'Oh, we are changing things for our students.' ”

**Factors that Special Education Resource Leads associated with impacts** included that they provided continuous improvement trainings with individualized follow-ups and that they aligned work to current initiatives in participants' contexts to reduce burden. Leads also shared that, when participants were given time to huddle and become reenergized about their work, they learned from each other and worked to translate those learnings into impacts. As one continuing Lead noted about improving IEP writing for measurable and attainable annual goals:

“ People are tired and burnt out ... give them that space ... with other folks facing the same challenges and tap into that passion and that shared learning. It fuels people. ”

## Participants' Perspectives on Impact

### Reported Impacts

When asked in an open-ended survey question to write about **school- or district-level changes or improvements** they were seeing, participants most often described using resources and professional development materials they had learned about from Leads in their local contexts; making changes to IEP practices and/or processes; and observing increased awareness and implementation of inclusive practices. Participants reported that:

“ We have already used many of their resources and strategies in building a community of practice amongst our Program Specialist team.”

“ We focused heavily on writing and review[ing] high quality goals this year, running PDSAs [Plan Do Study Act cycles] around this and sharing out high quality resources to our teams around goal quality. This is having an impact on the quality of IEPs we are writing.”

“ Teachers across a couple schools within the district are working hard to become UDL [universal design for learning] schools where everyone works to include all students by meeting the various instructional needs.”

Some participants also spoke about seeing increased collaborations in their sites, strengthening supports for families, and collecting and analyzing data to make informed decisions about areas of focus to support SWDs.

### Anticipated Impacts

Most survey respondents strongly agreed that the capacity-building activities had been positive, effective, and responsive to their needs. They were optimistic about how they expected that their schools, staff, and students would improve due to their participation in Special Education Resource Lead capacity building.

Around 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their schools would (a) better integrate special and general education, (b) improve IEP writing, and (c) use data to identify areas for improvement. Just under three-quarters of respondents (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that their schools would engage families more effectively or develop and implement more effective instructional strategies. Around 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they were confident that their schools would strengthen their use of continuous improvement strategies (**Exhibit 9**).

**Exhibit 9.** Participants’ anticipated impact as a result of Special Education Resource Lead capacity building

	Disagree	Neither agree not disagree	Agree
My school will get better in integrating special and general education. (N=52)	8%	12%	81%
My school will get better at IEP writing, especially at aligning services and student goals. (N=52)	6%	17%	77%
My school will get better at using data effectively to identify areas for improvement. (N=52)	8%	10%	83%
My school will get better in the use of continuous improvement strategies. (N=52)	8%	6%	87%
My school will engage more effectively with families. (N=52)	8%	19%	73%
My school will develop and implement more effective instructional strategies. (N=52)	8%	19%	73%

In open-ended question responses about anticipated impact, participants also wrote about anticipated **student-related impacts**. Common responses included improved conflict resolution/discipline processes, greater access to general education classes, and adoption of Universal Design for Learning and other practices that would more effectively meet students’ needs. Other respondents spoke about anticipated positive impacts on attendance and/or seat time, with one participant reporting, “We have already started to see a bump up in our SWD [students with disabilities] attendance.”

### Confidence in Leadership and Strategy Implementation

The survey presented respondents with a series of general strategies for improving special education. We asked the 74% of survey respondents who identified themselves as professional development (PD) providers how confident they felt in leading or guiding teams in implementing those strategies on a scale of 1 (“not at all confident”) to 7 (“fully confident”). Of those who did not identify as PD providers, we asked how confident they felt in implementing those strategies themselves.

Respondents who provided PD in their individual contexts were even more confident in their ability to support LEAs in implementing these strategies, rating their confidence level closer to 6 on average. Those tasked with implementing the strategies themselves (i.e., non-PD providers) felt confident in their ability to do so, rating their confidence level between 5 and 6 on average. Specific to strategies around social and emotional learning, respondents from both groups were least confident in their ability to implement or support implementation.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations address how RTI and CCEE, in collaboration with state agency partners, can support the Special Education Resource Leads in evaluating progress and impact of their connections and capacity-building goals. The recommendations address a focus on continued alignment and documentation of how the work of the Special Education Resource Leads impacts student achievement.

- 1. Align logic models and reporting.** In Year 1, Leads developed logic models and metrics to evaluate their activities. Leads plan to refine their logic models for Year 2 as a tool to plan, measure, and identify continuous improvement strategies all focused on the connection between the Lead's goals and impact on student achievement. With RTI's support, CCEE, in collaboration with state agency partners and Leads, should align the Leads' reporting with the activities, outputs, outcomes, and metrics of the logic models. This includes revising the reporting template to match the logic model structures and adjusting how progress is documented. RTI and CCEE, along with state agency partners, can support Leads in prioritizing measures and data to collect to demonstrate student impact.
- 2. Track offerings for survey administration.** The purpose of the survey is to integrate and leverage the work of statewide partners. RTI piloted survey administration procedures in Year 1 to understand the best survey administration approach. Lead offerings varied in hours, objectives, participant roles, and timing during the year. New Leads were in a process of piloting and initiating offerings. It is recommended for state agencies to collaborate with Leads to create a process and procedure to curate professional development offerings, dates, hours, and participants. RTI and CCEE should work with Leads to administer the survey near the end of offerings, focus on capacity-building offerings, and support Leads in their monitoring of universal technical assistance (e.g., website resources, one-time webinars).
- 3. Increase impact documentation.** In Year 2, RTI and CCEE, in collaboration with state agency partners, should help each Lead identify at least one exemplar to describe activities and how participants impact their schools, staff, and students. This includes designing student achievement data collection. RTI should also continue to collect data about descriptive impact, specifically participant actions and the influences of participant actions on schools, staff changes, and student engagement.

- 4. Support Lead capacity building for implementation.** Leads shared challenges to capacity building, which included time, workload, and building trust with participants. They also made suggestions to address these challenges to include (a) prioritizing their time by narrowing the scope of their activities to their specific area of expertise, (b) dedicating time for capacity-building preparation, (c) delegating work to and collaborating with others within the SSOS who are working on similar topics, and (d) conveying their role as a supportive partner to participants. CCEE's SSOS Huddles, SWD Collective meetings, individual Lead feedback and check-ins have been a value to Leads and should be continued..
  - 5. Continue making connections within and external to the SSOS.** The Leads made suggestions about how to increase connections, which included sharing and using gap analyses to collectively determine where supports and services are needed, to minimize service duplication, improve intentional and consistent communication with partners, and leverage connections with other Leads to help them scale and spread the capacity building. CCEE, in collaboration with state agency partners, can support the Leads in continuing to provide system structures and processes for Leads to share this information among each other and with the greater SSOS.
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