The mission of the National Center to Improve the Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities (also known as the Personnel Improvement Center or PIC) is to identify, disseminate and assist state agencies in implementing evidence-based practices to meet the need for well qualified special education, early intervention (EI) and related services personnel. The primary work of the PIC has been to provide targeted technical assistance to state agencies in order to increase their capacity to:

- develop and implement personnel data management plans;
- assist in the development and implementation of personnel preparation program partnerships between high-need local education agencies (LEAs) or local EI programs and institutions of higher education (IHEs); and
- assist targeted high-need LEAs or local EI programs in attracting, developing and supporting new and existing personnel.

The PIC is based at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and has been funded for the past five years through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). During the past five years, the PIC has provided services to 20 different state agencies.

This document is intended to serve as a set of guidelines for state-level leaders in conducting work that results in increased state capacity for addressing special education-related personnel needs. The document is divided into two parts. First, we identify six essential elements that provide a necessary foundation for a comprehensive approach to building personnel capacity. Second, we provide the three key components of the capacity-building process that are considered by the PIC to be best practices in the field of state-level personnel development.
Essential Elements

In order to ensure a successful, state-level capacity building process, several essential elements should be in place before an agency begins this work. The PIC has developed a readiness rubric that identifies those elements (see page 10) and state agencies are encouraged to use the rubric to gauge their own readiness. The sections below provide information on the importance of addressing these elements in order for state agencies to better prepare themselves to begin a comprehensive personnel development capacity-building process.

State Leadership

Commitment and support from the state director of special education is absolutely necessary in order for a state’s capacity building process to be successful. The special education director’s leadership and support will ensure necessary cross-departmental and/or cross-agency collaboration. The state director should be actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation process on a regular basis. The directors’ presence at planning and stakeholder meetings is essential to communicating the message both internally and externally that this is critically important work and will ensure continued and meaningful involvement of local program administration and IHE faculty.

State Agency Staff Assigned to the Project

Identifying the correct state-level lead staff to spearhead the capacity-building process is critical to the success of states’ efforts. At least two state-level leads should be assigned oversight for the three major components of the capacity-building process:

- personnel data management;
- personnel preparation program partnerships; and
- targeted work with local programs in attracting, developing and supporting personnel.

State leads should have a clear vision of how the capacity-building process will benefit the state, as well as the ability to effectively communicate this vision to other key stakeholders. State leads should have strong connections to leadership at the state, local and IHE levels, or be able to establish such relationships. Because state leads will facilitate the capacity-building process, it is important to select individuals who are committed to collaboration and able to engage stakeholders in honest, open dialogue about existing challenges as well as creative solutions. State leads should be knowledgeable of relevant state and local resources, including financial, informational and technological resources. For example, in terms of data management, the state lead needs to be familiar with personnel data sources available throughout the state, including where data sources are housed within various agencies related to higher education, certification and employment. In terms of targeted work with local programs/districts, the state agency lead should be well-informed about various evidence-based strategies for building capacity to recruit and retain personnel.

Resources Available to Use with this Work

State leads will want to take advantage of already available resources that can contribute to the capacity-building process.
For example, in terms of data management, most states already gather data in the form of supply and demand reports, annual data collected for the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) personnel reports, Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title II higher education completers’ reports and information available via state certification and employment databases. In terms of personnel preparation program partnerships, states should take stock of the preparation programs already available at IHEs throughout the state, as well as the availability of virtual and/or other alternative means of course delivery. Local funds may be available to support tuition assistance, and existing IHE coalitions within the state can also be used to move the capacity-building process forward more quickly. In terms of targeted work with LEAs, state leads can promote existing, high quality, professional development offerings such as those found at the IRIS Center (Vanderbilt University), Modules Addressing Special Education and Teacher Education (MAST) (East Carolina University) and Project Connect (University of North Carolina). State-level information technology (IT) staff can also be enlisted to support the use of new social media for recruitment and retention, such as setting up Facebook and Twitter accounts and/or online communities of practice.

Other Related Initiatives

State leads should think creatively about how to link the special education personnel capacity-building process to related initiatives that already exist within the state. For example, states may have applied for federally funded P20 Exploratory Grants to consolidate education data within a single warehouse and SPDG funds are often already being used to address recruitment and retention initiatives. States can also work collaboratively with programs such as Troops to Teachers, using military bases in high need locales as a way of recruiting new special education personnel, and Transition to Teaching Grants that support career changers moving into the field of special education.

Time to Do Work

State leads not only need to be committed to the capacity-building process, but also have time within their schedules specifically dedicated to facilitating this process. Although needs differ significantly from state to state, and the intensity of involvement will fluctuate throughout the year, state leads should plan to devote a minimum of at least 20-30% full-time equivalency (FTE) to this process. Also, the more time a state invests in building personnel capacity, the greater the overall benefit. States should clearly articulate their capacity building goals and objectives, making sure that sufficient staff time is dedicated towards meeting these targets. Securing support from higher-level state administrators for a state lead’s work in this area can be done by arguing that the work relates directly to improved student achievement for the state’s most high-risk students.

Key Components of the State-level Capacity Building Process to Address Special Education-related Personnel Needs

Although this section is divided into three separate key components, the PIC recommends that state agencies take a comprehensive approach to capacity building that addresses all three components simultaneously, rather than a piecemeal approach addressing each one separately.
Key Component #1: Increase Capacity for Use of Personnel Data to Address Ongoing Personnel Needs

The capacity building process is twofold: 1) determining personnel needs; and 2) implementing best practices based on those needs. The PIC recommends that the first part of the process include a comprehensive needs assessment based on careful analysis of existing data on state- and local-level personnel, specifically data related to personnel recruitment, preparation and retention. This needs assessment should be conducted over the course of several meetings that are ideally conducted in person, but some of which can be conducted via conference calls or webinars. The following activities are all necessary parts of the personnel data analysis process that will lead to the determination of state-level personnel needs.

- **Review personnel data sources at the state agency, LEA/program and preparation program levels.** First, state leads will need to identify key stakeholders to participate in the meetings. Representatives from teacher certification, the employment or school staffing database and the higher education commission or division within the department of education that gathers higher education data should be included.

- **Review current reporting practices/reports being generated routinely.** The next step is to take stock of the state’s current data collection/reporting practices. This includes identifying all relevant data reports currently generated on a routine basis, including Title II and IDEA data reports, SPDG reports and educator supply and demand reports. Questions to ask include: How often does the state gather specific data? How does the state analyze and report these data? Which questions do current data answer and which questions remain unanswered? For example, IDEA reports may provide information on the percentages of highly qualified personnel, but not on the percentages of fully certified personnel.

- **Generate personnel data reports.** The team can now identify which information to examine, including:
  - program completer data over the past five years by IHE, and employed by which local program/district;
  - fully certified and not fully certified over the last three years by local program/district; and
  - retention rates for the last three years by local program/district.

- **Convene relevant stakeholder groups to review all available personnel data.** Having all key stakeholder groups present will allow the team to better identify issues related to the accuracy and/or completeness of existing data. For example, representatives from state-level agencies can speak to the reliability and/or limitations of state-level data sources and local program/district representatives can provide insight into how to read and interpret local data. Additional stakeholders should include personnel preparation program chairs, local human resources (HR) personnel and special
education directors, and school principals. Participation by individuals responsible for preparing the state personnel data reports, most commonly staff from the state’s IT and/or research division, is also critical as their involvement will ensure that data are analyzed and reported in a manner agreed upon by the entire stakeholder team.

- **Examine data reports to inform needs at the state agency, LEA/program and preparation program levels.** Team members should review all current data and objectively interpret what these data say about state and local personnel needs. Some of the questions the team should try and answer include: Are program completion rates going down for some/all IHEs? Which local program/districts are depending on high levels of noncertified personnel to staff special education programs? Are rural programs/districts finding it harder to fill vacancies? Do some have lower retention rates than others?

- **Identify additional needs for data collection, synthesis and analysis.** Based on the examination of data reports, teams can now determine which data elements should be added to routine data collection and how frequently data should be collected and reports generated. For example, the team can decide whether to run annual reports on certification by LEA/local EI program or personnel preparation program completers by disability area and/or employment rates. The team may also decide to conduct independent attrition surveys in order to better understand why some local program/districts have more trouble than others retaining qualified special education personnel.

Desired outputs and outcomes for this component of the capacity building process include:

- increased awareness and utilization of personnel data being collected, synthesized and analyzed;
- increased use of data reports to inform state, local and preparation program decision-making regarding recruitment, preparation and retention; and
- increased knowledge and skills of state staff in planning and implementing similar work to address ongoing data needs.

**Key Component #2: Increase Capacity to Implement Preparation Program Partnerships that Address Local Personnel Needs**

Once critical personnel needs have been identified throughout the state, key stakeholders at the state agency, local program/district and IHE levels work together to develop and implement best practices based on those needs. The PIC considers the development of preparation program partnerships designed to address local personnel an important best practice. The following activities are necessary to implement this best practice at the state level.

- **Use state, local and preparation program data sources to identify the highest need LEAs/programs in the state.** The first step in this process is to use personnel data analysis to prioritize which local program/districts are most in need of targeted support in the form of partnerships with local IHEs. Critical
information includes both IHE production data, or the number of new professionals being prepared each year by in-state IHEs, and hiring data, or the number of professionals being hired within each local program from those IHEs. It is also important to keep track of demographic information on preparation program participants (e.g., what in-state communities they are coming from and whether they are paraprofessionals), as well as which programs/districts are hiring completers and from which IHEs. Those that have hired the fewest in-state graduates in the past five years would likely benefit most from in-state preparation program partnerships specifically designed to meet local needs.

- **Share LEA/program needs/current practices and specific preparation program resources available.** Virtual or face-to-face meetings between local program and IHE representatives help ensure that partners are aware of the resources available upon which to build, including the local programs’ funding and support for tuition assistance and the IHE’s faculty and preparation program areas of emphasis. For example, related to ‘para-to-teacher’ partnership initiatives, district resources might include the hosting of a paraprofessional recognition night, while IHE resources might include an event enabling their representatives to meet with interested paraprofessionals and talk about opportunities for career advancement through enrollment in their preparation programs.

- **Create partnership plans between LEA/programs and preparation programs.** Formalizing the partnership via a written document helps ensure accountability by identifying each task or activity, the individuals responsible for implementation and deadlines for completion. This formal document or memorandum of understanding should also articulate proposed partnership outcomes and how/when each outcome will be measured. This information will be critical for measuring program success.

- **Implement plans with state staff support.** The most important key to successful program implementation is ongoing communication among partners. It is the state agency’s responsibility to monitor implementation. The state lead needs to make at least monthly contact via email or conference calls with the IHE and local contacts for each program partnership in order to track partnership progress and/or help facilitate the resolution of unanticipated problems. In states with multiple preparation program partnerships, opportunities should also be created for all partners to share ideas on a regular basis. In some states, these meetings can take advantage of existing infrastructures such as state-sponsored communication councils that focus on personnel needs. In other states it is helpful to create a community of practice for this purpose.

Desired outputs and outcomes for this component of the capacity building process include:
increased number of preparation program partnerships with LEAs/programs being implemented in the state;

- increased number of local community members entering partnering preparation programs;

- increased numbers of preparation program completers from partnership locales;

- increased number of licensed new hires from within local communities;

- increased five-year retention rates for preparation program completers; and

- increased knowledge and skills of state, local and preparation program staff in planning and implementing similar work with additional preparation programs and locales.

Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDEO) says:

Through the support of the PIC, the OSDEO identified that we did not have a data tracking system to determine teacher preparation program production rates for local school districts, nor did we have an existing partnership with our teacher preparation programs. Thus, a work group was formed, called Preparation Program Partnerships, that is comprised of state and local educational agency personnel as well as preparation program faculty and the OK Commission for Teacher Preparation. This group is currently working to increase the production rates of personnel for OK’s students with disabilities.

Key Component #3: Increase Capacity for Local Districts/Programs to Recruit, Hire, Develop and Support New and Existing Personnel

The third key component recommended by the PIC is recruitment and retention plans that are based on identified personnel needs and consider local contexts and promote best practices in the field. The following activities are necessary to implement this best practice at the state level.

- Identify highest need LEAs/programs using state and local personnel data. The state contact person should review LEA-level data in order to determine which LEAs have the most significant problems staffing special education programs with highly qualified and fully certified personnel. Critical information includes vacancy data, percentages of highly qualified and/or fully certified personnel and retention rates over a three-to-five year period.

- Select local LEAs/programs for inclusion in the work. Selected local programs/districts should not only have high needs, but also have local human resources (HR) and special education directors committed to the work of building personnel capacity. In order to secure buy-in at the local level, the state lead should be prepared to present a menu of options via phone or face-to-face meetings so that local staff understand what they will be receiving in exchange for their commitment of time and resources. They can demonstrate their commitment by delegating someone from HR or special education with sufficient knowledge, authority and leadership potential to implement local recruitment and retention efforts.

- Engage selected local HR/special education/EI administrators in reviewing current local personnel
development plans/practices. The first step in improving recruitment and retention of qualified special education personnel at the local level requires an objective review of existing local procedures and practices. For example, the state lead should assist local contacts in reviewing their application/hiring process and identifying any possible barriers. A survey of recent job applicants can be an effective means of gaining perspective. In addition to reviewing recruitment plans, helpful information can be gathered via working conditions surveys and feedback on administrative supports personnel are receiving. This will help local staff determine existing support needs for their current personnel and begin to address low retention rates.

- Engage local administrators in providing recommendations for changes in personnel development policy/practice. Although the state lead should be available to help facilitate this stage in the process, recommendations need to be generated primarily by local staff. As they identify their needs, the role of the state lead should be to provide information related to evidence-based strategies for addressing recruitment/retention. For example, in terms of recruitment, the state lead might discuss the importance of developing a marketing plan including talking points, brochures and the use of new social media. In terms of retention, the state lead can share cost/benefit analyses relating to the retention of instructional staff, as well as information on the four areas that have the greatest impact on teacher retention: improving working conditions, administrative support and leadership, effective induction and mentoring, and providing professional development focusing on evidence-based practices for improving student outcomes. The state lead can also share resources related to each of these areas and facilitate the process of identifying next steps, assigning roles and responsibilities and creating timelines.

- Engage local administrators in monitoring and supporting progress toward implementation of local recommendations. At least once per year, the state lead should meet with local contacts to review outcomes of local recruitment/retention efforts and assess the need for additional “tweaking” of personnel development policy/practice. It is critical that the state lead be seen as a mentor/facilitator rather than evaluator throughout this process.

Desired outputs and outcomes for this component of the capacity building process include:

- increased quantity and quality of policies and practices in selected locales with respect to hiring, developing and supporting new and existing personnel;
- increased quantity and quality of effective new hires in selected locales;
- increased retention of existing highly effective personnel in selected locales; and
- increased knowledge and skills of state and local program staff in planning and implementing similar work with additional locales.
West Virginia State Department of Education says:

The recruitment and retention of qualified special educators is a challenge for West Virginia. The rural nature of the state, high poverty, low salaries, and poor working conditions are significant barriers. Thanks to our partnership with PIC, WV now has a strategic plan addressing this issue at the local and state level.

**State Director Perspective**

**A Conversation with Dr. Bill East, Executive Director, NASDSE**

“State directors of special education strive to ensure that highly qualified teachers and related service providers are available for all students. Effective recruitment, preparation and retention efforts are essential to meeting this goal. State directors often face significant barriers, however, when it comes to increasing their states’ special education personnel capacity. For example, the downsizing of many state governments means that even if a state-level staff person is given official responsibility for recruitment and retention, he or she may have so many additional duties that the actual time available for personnel development activities is extremely limited. Frequent turnover in state leadership may also pose a challenge.”

"It is critical that responsibility for and knowledge of the work be shared by more than one person. This can be done by assigning the work to more than one state lead or by establishing a community of practice. A community of practice made up of state agency, local and IHE partners, as well as other related partners, can also be helpful when resources are scarce. This way, if one source of funding is eliminated, critical program activities may still continue. Perhaps most importantly, the state director must provide leadership and vision – making a convincing case to state and local leaders that building special education personnel capacity helps meet larger identified needs such as improving graduation rates, lowering dropout rates, and improving student performance."

**Summary**

This document intends to share many of the lessons learned from the Personnel Improvement Center’s work with state departments of education and Part C Lead Agencies to increase their capacity to address personnel needs for infants and children with disabilities. The essential elements and key components discussed here are necessary parts of this work. Led by state staff, local administrators, higher education faculty and other interested parties, such as parents, community organizations, teachers and related service providers, states should form teams that first identify needs through a comprehensive examination of personnel data and then develop work plans to implement the personnel preparation program partnerships and recruitment and retention strategies that reflect best practices in the field. Together, this work can make a difference in the outcomes for infants and children with disabilities by addressing both the quality and quantity of the personnel who serve them.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of readiness/ Critical elements</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. State staff assigned to project</td>
<td>Not ready</td>
<td>Somewhat ready</td>
<td>Ready</td>
<td>More Ready</td>
<td>Very Ready</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No person assigned to the work.</td>
<td>One person assigned to the work may be relatively inexperienced in personnel development work; time commitments and roles and responsibilities are undefined.</td>
<td>One person assigned to the work may be somewhat experienced in personnel development work; time commitments and roles and responsibilities are loosely defined.</td>
<td>One person assigned to the work well experienced in personnel development work; time commitments and roles and responsibilities are defined.</td>
<td>More than one person assigned to the work all are well experienced in personnel development work; time commitments and roles and responsibilities are very clearly defined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Resources available for use with this work</td>
<td>No resources are listed.</td>
<td>Communication networks are not firmly in place or well described; little to no additional funding is mentioned; collaborative work with others in the state is somewhat evident.</td>
<td>Communication networks are in place and described; additional funding is mentioned; collaborative work with others in the state is evident.</td>
<td>Communication networks are well developed; additional funding is adequate for the work; collaborative work with others in the state is strong.</td>
<td>Communication networks are very well developed; additional funding is more than adequate for the work; collaborative work with others in the state is strong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Other related initiatives involved</td>
<td>No other related initiatives are mentioned.</td>
<td>Other related initiatives are mentioned, but the connection to this work is not well developed.</td>
<td>Other related initiatives are mentioned and the connection to this work is evident.</td>
<td>Other related initiatives are mentioned and the connection to this work will strengthen the results.</td>
<td>Other related initiatives are clearly connected to this work and the impact of their contribution is evident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Time to do the work</td>
<td>No time commitments are mentioned.</td>
<td>Time commitment is mentioned but not clearly defined or are inadequate for the work.</td>
<td>Time commitment is loosely defined and appears adequate for the work.</td>
<td>Time commitment is well defined and adequate for the work.</td>
<td>Time commitment is well defined and more than adequate for the work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. State leadership</td>
<td>Not evident.</td>
<td>State administrator is aware of the proposed work.</td>
<td>State administrator is supportive of the proposed work and will be kept informed of its progress.</td>
<td>State administrator is very involved in the work and ongoing involvement is evident.</td>
<td>State administrator is leading the work and will continue ongoing involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Related work that has already been done</td>
<td>Little to none.</td>
<td>Related work is loosely described and mostly incomplete.</td>
<td>Related work is well described and partially implemented.</td>
<td>Related work is well described and mostly implemented.</td>
<td>Related work is well described and fully implemented.</td>
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</table>
Personnel Improvement Center
National Center to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities

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