Coaching LEAs to Write Quality Objectives and Outcomes

Coaching Guide

Introduction

The purpose of this coaching guide is to provide Title IV, Part A (Title IV-A) State coordinators (SCs) with strategies and resources to consider for use in training and technical assistance outreach to local education agencies (LEAs). The guide provides information and strategies that focus on ensuring that LEAs write high-quality objectives and outcomes for their Title IV-A program. Included for consideration are references to statutory requirements, non-regulatory guidance, topic-specific examples, and related resources in one easy-to-access location.

Defining Objectives and Outcomes

In the field, objectives and outcomes are often used interchangeably, but programs sometimes define them differently. For the purposes of this coaching guide, objectives and outcomes are defined as follows:

- **Outcomes** are typically the long-term, big-picture end results that local education agencies (LEAs) expect their programs to accomplish. That is, begin with the end in mind. Outcomes are generally broad statements of impact. Outcomes may also be written as short-term or intermediate impacts, but they still refer to an end point that describes what the program (or an aspect of the program) expects to achieve.[2,3]

- **Objectives** are the smaller, incremental steps that lead to the achievement of the intended outcomes. Objectives have a narrow focus and are both actionable and tangible. Most importantly, objectives must be measurable. It is best to write objectives using the S.M.A.R.T. acronym so that they are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound. Some organizations adopt an expanded version of S.M.A.R.T. goals that incorporate additional indicators for inclusivity and equity (i.e., S.M.A.R.T.I.E. goals). For more information, see the Title IV, Part A Technical Assistance Center's (T4PA Center) Evaluation Guide.[2,3]

Title IV, Part A Statute

Two sections of the Title IV-A statute of the Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) program address the topics of objectives and outcomes, state use of funds, and LEA applications:

- Under Sec. 4104, State Use of Funds, states may use a small percentage of administrative costs to report how LEAs "have made progress toward meeting the objectives and outcomes."

- In addition, under Sec. 4106, Contents of the Local Application, LEAs must describe "the program objectives and intended outcomes for activities" and how they will "periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the activities…"[1]

Writing Objectives and Outcomes

Writing and reporting on objectives and outcomes are both foundational Title IV-A program requirements. Moreover, writing high-quality objectives and outcomes helps LEAs determine whether the program activities they are implementing have the intended and expected impact.

Measuring objectives and outcomes provides evidence of effectiveness, bolstering LEAs' confidence that the activities or interventions they offer are of high quality. Furthermore, the process may alert LEAs to important and necessary programmatic changes. For example, some activities may not have the intended impact, so continuously measuring progress allows for timely adjustments to improve the interventions or activities. As LEAs measure progress, they may also choose to report to their stakeholders — which is a good practice that ensures awareness of program successes among those who are directly and indirectly affected by these activities.

T4PA CENTER Tips

The process of developing quality objectives and outcomes works best when LEAs engage in backwards planning. That is, they begin with the end in mind by envisioning expected outcomes. Once LEAs know the intended outcomes, they can create measurable objectives and develop activities or implement interventions to help achieve them.

Four-Step Process for Implementing and Attaining High-Quality Objectives and Outcomes

Implementing — and ultimately ensuring the attainment of — high-quality objectives and outcomes can be a daunting process. However, there are a few easy-to-follow steps that describe the process, which State education agencies (SEAs) can use to help guide LEAs. One of the most important aspects of this process is that it is continual, not just a one-time event. It involves an iterative cycle of identifying needs, developing responsive objectives and outcomes, measuring progress toward objectives, and sharing the outcomes with stakeholders. The four steps of the process, as shown in Figure 1, are

- Step 1: Determine Activities Based on Identified Needs;
- Step 2: Write High-Quality Objectives and Outcomes;
- Step 3: Continuously Monitor Objectives; and
- Step 4: Publicly Report Outcomes.

Figure 1: Four-Step Process for Implementing High-Quality Objectives and Outcomes

Step 1 Determine Activities Based on Identified Needs	Step 2 Write High-Quality Objectives and Outcomes	Step 3 Continuously Monitor Objectives	Step 4 Publicly Report Outcomes
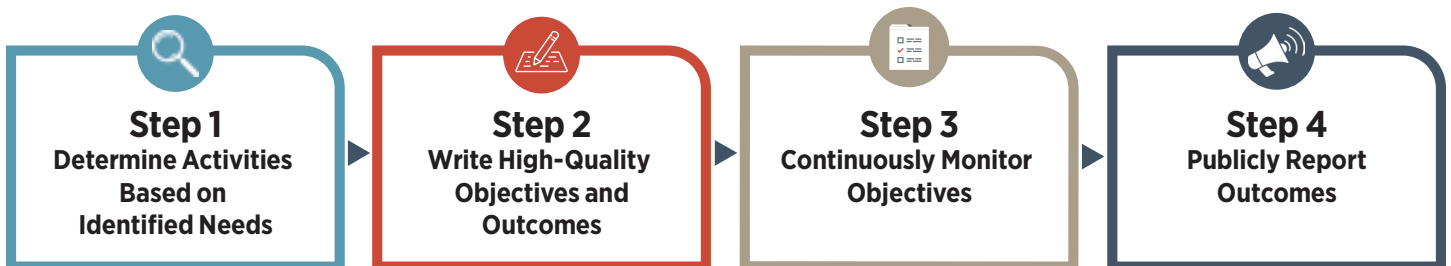
Step 1: Determine Activities Based on Identified Needs

Starting a project can be a difficult task. However, it is always important to look to the requirements of any Federal grant program, such as Title IV-A, as a starting point. The Title IV-A statute, Sec. 4101. [20 U.S.C. 7111] specifies that the purpose of the program is

"To **improve students' academic achievement** by increasing the capacity of States, local educational agencies, schools, and local communities to —

(1) provide all students with access to a **well-rounded education**;

(2) **improve school conditions for student learning**; and

(3) **improve the use of technology** in order to improve the academic achievement and digital literacy of all students." [4] [emphasis added]

Knowing the purpose of the program helps serve as a guide for LEAs to narrow the focus of the programs they will provide. This section describes two valuable tools for LEAs to use to start the process of developing high-quality objectives and outcomes for their Title IV-A programs: needs assessments and logic models.

Needs Assessment

An LEA must first conduct a needs assessment to determine the foundation and structure of its Title IV-A program. Oftentimes, SEAs and LEAs conduct consolidated needs assessments for many of their Federal programs. LEAs may use the information from these more robust needs assessments to align the Title IV-A program purpose more specifically to the community.

According to the *Non-Regulatory Guidance for Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants* (2016), LEAs that receive at least $30,000 in Title IV-A funds are required to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to inform their funding application. Although LEAs that receive less than $30,000 are not bound by this requirement, it is a best practice to identify needs before determining how to use funding. The needs assessment becomes a driver for developing outcomes and objectives, as well as determining program design and informing the selection of specific activities and interventions.

Conducting a needs assessment and gathering stakeholder feedback will tell the LEA the

- Areas of greatest need;
- Underlying causes of the needs; and
- Types of activities to offer.

LEAs can use this insightful information to create measurable objectives and outcomes.[5] For example, if an LEA's needs assessment indicated, on the basis of academic data, that fourth-grade students were behind on reading comprehension, but the LEA decided to use Title IV-A funds to provide after-school tutoring for third-grade math, the activity would not be aligned to the need. Thus, the LEA would not be able to embed effective measures of the objectives and outcomes into the activity. Although the third grade math tutoring program may have been successful, it would not meet the identified need. Conversely, if the LEA used Title IV-A funds to provide after-school tutoring for fourth-grade students with a specific

focus on decoding, fluency, and vocabulary (i.e., skills related to reading comprehension), the LEA would more accurately be able to determine outcomes based on objectives tied directly to the need. For example, a high-quality objective could be that 95 percent of fourth-grade students attending the after-school tutoring program will increase their decoding, fluency, and vocabulary skills by 10 percent by the end of the fall term, as measured by the pre-post assessment.

Logic Models

Another way for LEAs to determine a starting point for developing program objectives and outcomes is to refer to (or create) logic models for their Title IV-A program. According to the U.S. Department of Education, a logic model, or theory of action, is a "framework that identifies key project components of the proposed project (i.e., the active 'ingredients' that are hypothesized to be critical to achieving the relevant outcomes) and describes the theoretical and operational relationships among the key project components and relevant outcomes."[6]

Logic models show the relationships between all critical elements of a program — from the needs assessment to the planning, implementation, and improvement of program elements through continuous monitoring and evaluation. They lay out the vision and provide useful tools to help LEAs write high-quality objectives and outcomes. Logic models can help LEAs determine where their Title IV-A programs will go by describing the course of action. They do this by helping LEAs think logically about which activities would best meet student needs. Using the logic model as a springboard, LEAs can then write the objectives to attain intended outcomes. Finally, the process of creating a logic model helps LEAs determine how they will know that their programs have achieved the expected end results.[7]

Logic models are iterative and can be modified as needed.[8] According to the National Student Support Accelerator, logic models can help LEAs achieve the following:

- **Organizational alignment:** A logic model helps align your entire organization around a shared understanding of what you are trying to achieve and how to go about achieving it. A high level of clarity and detail in the logic model ensures that everyone knows what the organization is working toward and moves in the same direction.

- **Goal setting and progress monitoring:** A clear logic model allows you to set goals for program impact and easily monitor if you are on- or off-track to reaching those goals. More importantly, the fleshed-out causal relationships can help explain why your program is on- or off-track and where to target improvement efforts.
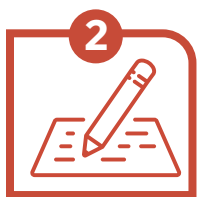
T4PA CENTER Tips

LEAs describe their program objectives and expected outcomes in the Title IV-A application. This is where they must demonstrate alignment of objectives and expected outcomes to needs and show how they will measure results. Several states have found creative ways to collect data that ensure consistency and efficiency in LEA processes. Some states have created sophisticated and comprehensive data systems, dashboards, and spreadsheets that help LEAs submit well-thought-out, high-quality applications to serve students' needs and meet program requirements. Moreover, these SEA data collection systems help LEAs better report outcomes and share them publicly.

- **Alignment with external stakeholders:** A clear logic model allows you to easily provide concise explanations of your program's design and intended impact to students, families, schools, and prospective funders.

- **High-impact investments:** A clear logic model allows you to annually assess whether your investments are leading to impact. If you find that they are not, you can see where to adjust and improve.

- **Guidance for improvement, innovation, and expansion:** A clear logic model helps you set up routines to regularly reflect on your program's impact and improve it. It can also make innovation and expansion much smoother. When LEAs have a clear understanding of what drives their program's impact, they can make better decisions around innovation and growth.[9]

If an LEA has not created a logic model for its Title IV-A program, SEAs may help guide the LEA in creating one. Figure 2 describes how SEAs can help LEAs visualize the process for developing high-quality objectives and outcomes based on the processes discussed here. The process begins with needs, moves to inputs, then activities, then objectives, then outcomes, and connects all of them to one specific purpose of the Title IV-A program — to improve school conditions for learning.

Now that two invaluable tools, needs assessments and logic models, have been discussed, it is time to review how to write high-quality objectives and outcomes for the Title IV-A program.

T4PA CENTER Tips

Program-specific logic models are especially helpful if LEAs consolidate applications and needs assessments with other Federal programs. Logic models allow LEAs to be more intentional and specific when developing the activities, objectives, and outcomes for their Title IV-A programs. Logic models serve as the blueprints that LEAs can use to help build the structure of their programs. Logic models include all the necessary components that go into program implementation — such as the tools, supports, and stakeholders needed to bring the vision to life.

Step 2: Write High-Quality Objectives and Outcomes

LEAs need to consider many important questions when crafting objectives and outcomes, such as how many objectives and outcomes are sufficient? When guiding their LEAs in this step, SEAs can provide several helpful considerations. Different LEAs will use various processes to develop objectives and outcomes based on the information they have. For example, an LEA may have a district wide needs assessment and logic model, which offer information that it can tailor to meet the specific needs of the Title IV-A program. In contrast, some LEAs may not have any information and will need to develop objectives and outcomes from scratch. There is no right or wrong way to engage in this process, but, as previously stated, it is easier to start from the end and work backward. In this case, determining outcomes is the first step, followed by writing objectives, then developing the activities that the LEA will implement to improve outcomes.

Outcomes are the broad, big-picture end results that LEAs expect their Title IV-A programs to accomplish. If objectives are the incremental steps that LEAs take toward achieving the end results, then outcomes are the top of the staircase. Although outcomes can be broken down into short- or long-term outcomes, they still encompass the overall impact the program expects to achieve. High-quality outcomes tie back to the needs identified in the needs assessment. Additionally, outcomes should be actionable and easily convey the change or effect the LEA expects to see.
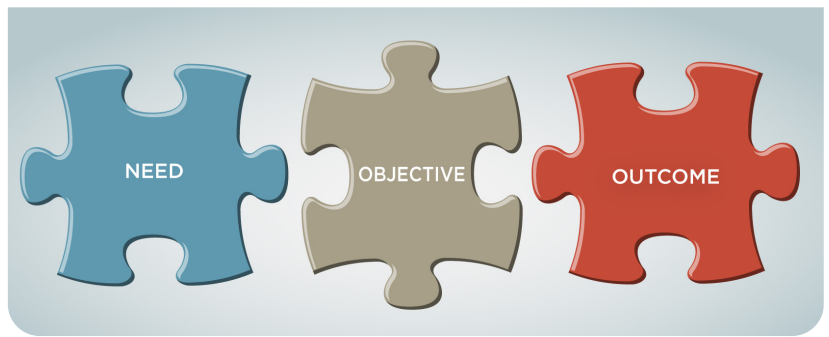
Sample Outcomes

Review this section to see examples of aligned and misaligned outcomes.

Need: Middle and high school students in a Sample LEA reported an increase in anxiety, depression, drug use, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors on the midyear school climate survey.

✓ **Aligned Outcome:** Increase the accessibility of school-based mental health services in the Sample LEA.

✓ **Aligned Outcome:** Decrease the number of students at Sample LEA reporting an increase in anxiety, depression, drug use, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors on the next administration of the midyear school climate survey.

✗ **Misaligned Outcome:** Improve state assessment reading scores for K-12 students.

Note: In the above example, the misaligned outcome does not match the identified need. Although increasing reading scores is a desirable outcome that may well fit within the Title IV-A program goals, it does not directly relate to increasing mental health services for secondary students.

Objectives are the actionable, incremental steps that LEAs take toward achieving their outcomes. Once LEAs identify outcomes tied directly to needs, they can create high-quality objectives that align with the needs and outcomes. However, objectives must also be measurable to determine whether the outcomes are met. Therefore, when writing high-quality objectives, it is best to use the S.M.A.R.T or S.M.A.R.T.I.E. acronym so that they are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound or, additionally, inclusive and equitable.

Sample Objectives

Review this section to see examples of measurable and non-measurable objectives.

Need: Middle and high school students in a Sample LEA reported an increase in anxiety, depression, drug use, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors on the midyear school climate survey.

Activity: Provide on-site counseling and mental health services to students on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday before, during, and after school hours.

✓ **Measurable Objective 1:** The Sample LEA will increase access to on-site mental health counselors for 8th- to 12th-grade students at 80 percent of its Title I campuses no later than the start of the school year, August 30, 2022.

✓ **Measurable Objective 2:** The Sample LEA will increase awareness of mental health issues and substance use among middle and high school students by offering at least six student assemblies and presentations on this topic to all campuses before the end of the school year, May 30, 2023.

✓ **Aligned Outcome:** Increase the accessibility of school-based mental health services in the Sample LEA.

✗ **Non-Measurable Objective:** The Sample LEA will add mental health counselors.

Note: The non-measurable objective provided in the example is not specific because it does not identify the population that would benefit from the services. It is not measurable because there are no specific numbers or quantities mentioned and the data are not identified. It may be attainable, but, again, because it is not quantified, it is unknown whether the LEA has the capacity to hire the counselors. Although adding mental health counselors may be relevant to the needs, the objective is not time bound, so it would be difficult to measure any level of success. Knowing what to measure and the type of data needed is critical to be able to report on the outcomes.[9]
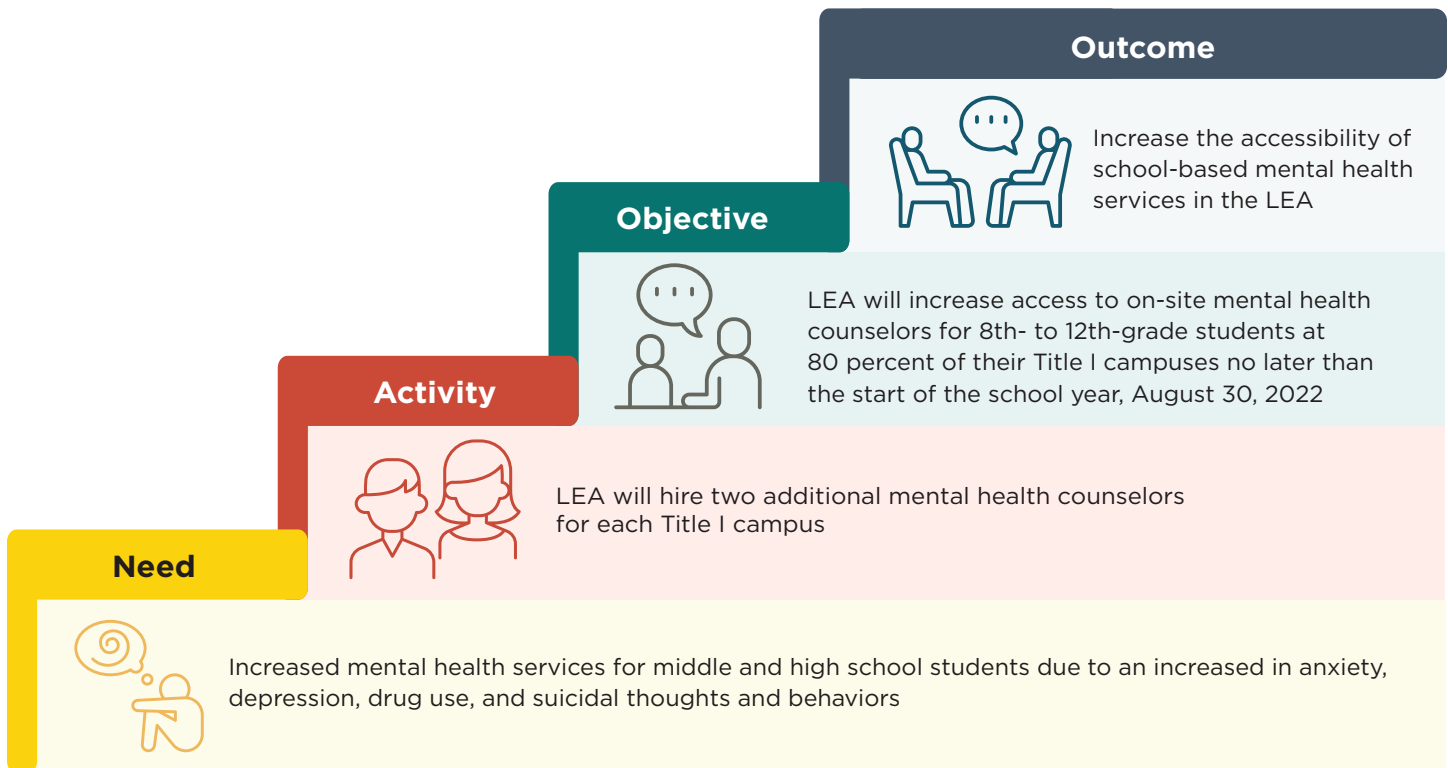
Activities are the specific tasks, interventions, or events the LEA will implement for its identified stakeholders, such as students and educators. As previously stated, the process of developing objectives, outcomes, and activities involves some backwards planning. Once LEAs know the focus of their outcomes and objectives, they can create the specific program activities that align with the needs in order to meet the program outcomes and objectives.

The *Non-Regulatory Guidance for Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants* provides examples of activities for which LEAs can use Title IV-A funds under three content areas:

- Well-rounded educational opportunities (WRE);
- Safe and healthy students (SHS); and
- Effective use of technology (EUT).

Activities can provide direct services for students, professional development for teachers and administrators, salaries of personnel to carry out identified programs and services, and supplemental educational resources and equipment. Evidence-based activities are more likely to improve outcomes. Figure 2 shows how the activity offered leads to the measurable objective, which aligns to the outcome — all of which occur as a direct result of the demonstrated need.

Figure 2: From Needs to Outcomes

Outcome
Increase the accessibility of school-based mental health services in the LEA

Objective
LEA will increase access to on-site mental health counselors for 8th- to 12th-grade students at 80 percent of their Title I campuses no later than the start of the school year, August 30, 2022

Activity
LEA will hire two additional mental health counselors for each Title I campus

Need
Increased mental health services for middle and high school students due to an increased in anxiety, depression, drug use, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors

How Many Objectives and Outcomes for Title IV-A?
LEAs often ask SCs: What is a suitable number of objectives and outcomes to include in a Title IV-A application? There is not a straightforward answer to this question, beyond that the number of objectives and outcomes will depend on several variables. Most importantly, the needs identified in the needs assessment will be the main indicator of the number of expected outcomes. However, SCs should help LEAs understand that it may not be feasible for them to address all the needs with the Title IV-A program alone. SCs can help LEAs by encouraging them to focus on the needs most aligned to the purpose of Title IV-A.

The Number of Title IV-A Objectives and Outcomes Should

- Reflect the level of needs identified but also align with the Title IV-A program purpose;

- Fit with the size and resources available to the LEA;

- Focus on data and stakeholder feedback to determine priorities;

- Align to one of the three content areas: WRE/SHS/EUT; and

- Link with an overall need rather than each specific activity offered.

Other variables that will affect the number of objectives and outcomes that LEAs include in their applications are the size of the LEA, the amount of funding, and available resources — including staff to monitor implementation and reporting of outcomes. One to three objectives could be sufficient for small LEAs, whereas some larger LEAs may have more. Thus, it is difficult to quantify the number of objectives and outcomes that LEAs should write because it is dependent on the findings of the needs assessment. Where needs outweigh resources, LEAs can focus on data and stakeholder feedback to determine priorities to measure through objectives and outcomes.

Writing too many objectives and outcomes can be cumbersome to implement, monitor, and report. On the other hand, not having enough objectives and outcomes may not make use of the full benefit of the Title IV-A program and the funding. SCs can guide LEAs to focus on writing objectives and outcomes around the purpose of the Title IV-A program or the intent of one (or all three) of the priority content areas (i.e., WRE, SHS, EUT).

T4PA CENTER Tips

In the *Non-Regulatory Guidance for Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants*, the U.S. Department of Education "encourages coordination and integration" with other funding sources and programs. Therefore, LEAs may want to consider the local, state, and Federal sources that are used or combined with SSAE funds when determining program or activity development. This can also help LEAs determine if they will write objectives and outcomes for the Title IV-A program as a whole or more narrowly focus on one of the content areas. Most importantly, LEAs should ensure that they write objectives and outcomes aligned with SSAE purposes, even if funds are combined with other sources.[5]

SEAs can further guide LEAs to focus objectives on higher-level needs rather than writing objectives and outcomes for every activity offered. Although each activity offered should work toward meeting the overall outcomes, writing objectives and outcomes for each activity can make it difficult to collect data to report on outcomes. Instead, LEAs should summarize how each activity is intended to meet the expected outcomes and focus their objectives on this summary.

Step 3: Continuously Monitor Objectives

Once LEAs have identified and written high-quality objectives and outcomes, and provided activities and interventions, it is important to use data to continuously monitor program implementation. Therefore, LEAs must monitor objectives and outcomes on an ongoing basis to determine if issues arise and make course corrections to keep the intended outcomes on track.

Monitoring is not a one-time process, but should occur at the beginning, middle, and end of an activity. If the activity implementation is going well, track the reasons for success — for example, staff, resources, and implementation hours. If implementation is not going well, determine what needs to be improved and what adjustments need to be made to resources, timelines, inputs, and other factors. To monitor continuously, LEAs need to collect the correct data, so they must ensure that measurement is built into the process. These data are critical information, in that they will ultimately be used for reporting outcomes.

### Step 4: Publicly Report Outcomes

The Title IV-A statute requires LEAs to report program outcomes. This transparency is important to ensure effective use of Federal funds. Second, it is critical that LEAs create a communication plan to share outcomes with the stakeholders the program serves and to inform them about the services it seeks to improve.

Outcomes can be reported in several ways, and a solid communication plan will help identify the most efficient methods for disseminating information to the target audience. A communication plan serves as "a strategic blueprint for delivering consistent, coordinated, and targeted messaging to achieve specific goals."[10] Below are considerations for LEAs to develop effective communication plans:

- Align communication goals directly to the Title IV-A program goals;
- Target program-specific stakeholders;
- Clearly identify the specific information to share and how it will be shared; and
- Designate a timeline for communication.

Once a LEA develops its communication plan, the LEA can more efficiently say how it will report its outcomes. The format for dissemination depends on the LEA's target audience and can include the following:

- Website/data dashboard
- Infographic
- Social media
- Part of a comprehensive program evaluation
- Executive summary/summary of outcomes
- Training/conference/webinar
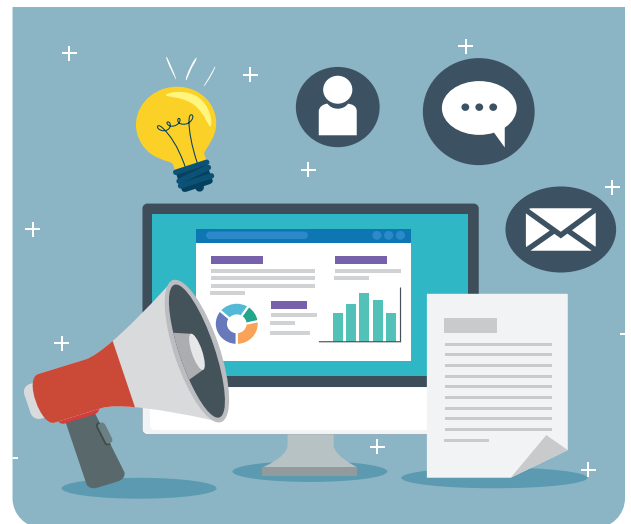
Conclusion

The purpose of this coaching guide was to provide Title IV-A SCs with strategies and resources to offer training and technical assistance to the LEAs they oversee with writing high-quality objectives and outcomes. A four-step process for implementing and attaining high-quality objectives and outcomes was introduced that focused on key elements such as a needs assessment, continuously monitoring objectives, and publicly reporting outcomes. This guide also advocated for the creation of logic models to help with developing objectives and outcomes and with ensuring that both objectives and outcomes follow the S.M.A.R.T or S.M.A.R.T.I.E acronym. It is also important to show how the needs assessment informed the development of Title IV-A program activities, which in turn affect the program objectives and outcomes. SCs are encouraged to use this coaching guide and the strategies found within it as tools to help train and support LEAs as they seek to improve their Title IV-A program objectives and outcomes.

Resources

SCs can use the resources below as part of their overall process for providing guidance to LEAs on writing high-quality objectives and outcomes:

- Title IV, Part A Evaluation Guide
  This evaluation guide serves as a companion piece to the Title IV-A LEA Needs Assessment Tool. The Tool prompts LEAs to think first about the desired outcomes, then work backward to identify the programs, projects, or activities (interventions) that will best serve those outcomes under the Title IV-A statute. This guide offers a high-level overview of the evaluation cycle and can assist LEAs in evaluating whether a selected program is meeting the needs and desired goals identified in the Tool.

- Title IV, Part A LEA Needs Assessment Tool
  The U.S. Department of Education has developed this comprehensive LEA Needs Assessment Tool, which SEAs can share with LEAs. SCs may opt to adopt the tool for their use, offer the tool as an option for LEAs, or offer an alternative tool or resource. The tool includes outcome-focused indicators. Collecting and analyzing outcome data during a needs assessment can help LEAs identify where their schools are facing challenges and stay focused on those outcomes as they implement their Title IV-A program.

- Developing a Communication Plan
  The Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest created this resource, which identifies seven steps to developing an effective communication plan. The resource provides examples of how to identify target audiences, determining communication strategies, and creating an outreach plan for dissemination.

Endnotes

1 Title IV, Part A — Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, §§ 4104(a)(2) and 4106(e)(1)(E). Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). https://t4pacenter.ed.gov/T4PAStatutes.aspx

2 Bossier Parish Community College. (n.d.). How to write goals and objectives for grant proposals. https://www.bpcc.edu/institutional-advancement-grants/how-to-write-goals-and-objectives-for-grant-proposals

3 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (n.d.). Evaluation guide: Writing SMART objectives. https://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/docs/smart_objectives.pdf

4 Title IV, Part A — Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, §§ 4104(a)(2) and 4106(e)(1)(E). Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). https://t4pacenter.ed.gov/T4PAStatutes.aspx

5 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2016). Non-regulatory guidance: Student support and academic enrichment grants. https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essassaegrantguid10212016.pdf

6 Definitions that apply to all Department programs, 34 C.F.R. Subtitle A, Part 77.1. (2022). https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/subtitle-A/part-77

7 Shakman, K., & Rodriguez, S. M. (2015). Logic models for program design, implementation, and evaluation: Workshop toolkit (REL 2015–057). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Publication/3670

8 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, Title IV, Part A Technical Center. (n.d.). Evaluation guide. https://t4pacenter.ed.gov/Docs/ProductResource/EvaluationGuide508C.pdf

9 National Student Support Accelerator. (2021). Toolkit for tutoring programs. https://doi.org/10.26300/5n7h-mh59

10 Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. (n.d.). Developing a communication plan. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/publications/pdf/5.2.10-comm-plan-508.pdf

For more information about Title IV-A, please visit the T4PA Center Website.

CONTACT US

Help Desk Toll-Free Number: (833) 404–4845

Help Desk Email: info@T4PACenter.org

T4PA Center Website: https://t4pacenter.ed.gov

@T4PACenter