

# Implementing ESEA Flexibility Plans

## Using a Response to Intervention Framework to Improve Student Learning

*A Pocket Guide for State and District Leaders*



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The mission of the Center on Response to Intervention at AIR is to provide technical assistance to build the capacity of states and districts in implementing and evaluating proven frameworks for response to intervention (RTI). We help local educators learn how to develop a delivery system with multiple tiers of instruction for reading and mathematics and then coordinate that tiered system within a data-based framework for monitoring student progress and determining which students need more intensive or individualized instruction. We work closely with each state or district to develop a flexible plan for technical assistance that will best meet their identified needs.

Our services related to RTI involve the following: conducting in-depth needs analyses; creating and delivering customized professional development modules; and delivering individualized workshops, document review, and Web-based support. Given that RTI systems are intended to support all students, we ensure that all of our services address the needs of special populations, including students living in poverty, students learning English, and students with disabilities.

For additional information about the Center on Response to Intervention, please contact Stephanie Jackson, Ph.D., Managing Director, by e-mail ([RTICenter@air.org](mailto:RTICenter@air.org)).

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# **Using a Response to Intervention Framework to Improve Student Learning**

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May 2013

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# Implementing ESEA Flexibility Plans: Focus on Response to Intervention

The 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) contained provisions that expanded state and district accountability for improving all schools and increasing the learning and achievement of all students, including those who struggle to master basic skills in reading and mathematics. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education waived certain provisions of the law in exchange for reforms by states related to four principles: (1) achieving college- and career-ready expectations for all students; (2) developing differentiated recognition, accountability, and support systems; (3) supporting effective instruction and leadership; and (4) reducing duplication and unnecessary burden. As of December 2012, the U.S. Department of Education had approved the flexibility plans of 35 states (including the District of Columbia).

American Institutes for Research (AIR) has developed a series of Pocket Guides that provide research-based information to support state and district leaders in implementing ESEA flexibility plans. This particular Pocket Guide focuses on the implementation of reforms that feature applications of a research-based framework for response to intervention (RTI) to address the flexibility plan requirements.

RTI identifies students' learning and behavioral problems early so that educators can intervene with specialized instruction to improve academic achievement. RTI, when implemented with fidelity, improves instructional quality and increases students' chance of school success.

The majority of states have some form of RTI initiative in place already, often providing guidance and support to districts and schools on how to implement RTI. These states can leverage existing initiatives to bolster the statewide school improvement efforts spelled out in their ESEA flexibility plans.

RTI uses assessment data at the classroom and school levels to inform student movement within a *multi-tiered instructional system*.

In addition, local RTI initiatives can help districts and schools meet the demands of the changing accountability landscape and make progress on closing critical achievement gaps.

Although this guide focuses on using RTI to advance the school improvement component of Principle 2, RTI can reinforce other aspects of ESEA flexibility plans.

States and districts can employ a research-based RTI framework to help transition to college- and career-ready standards as required by Principle 1. RTI's focus on tailored supports can help diverse learners (e.g., students with disabilities and English language learners) access and meet the new standards.

Similarly, states and districts can use RTI as a framework for providing effective, individualized instruction to help address ESEA Principle 3. Specifically, RTI systems help to document and monitor instructional practices. In addition, the progress monitoring tools of RTI may be used to set targets for student growth as part of educator evaluation systems. However, the framework is directly relevant to the provisions of Principle 2 for “building state, district, and school capacity to improve student learning in all schools and, in particular, in low-performing schools and schools with the largest achievement gaps” (U.S. Department of Education, 2012, p. 17).

To prepare this guide, AIR researchers reviewed the 35 approved flexibility plans to identify policies and practices relevant to the use of a research-based RTI framework to improve student learning and achievement. In the following sections, we (1) explain the essential components of RTI, (2) describe the requirements for Principle 2, (3) discuss how applications of a research-based RTI framework address Principle 2 in approved plans, and (4) provide considerations, based on our knowledge of rigorous RTI research, for the implementation of research-based RTI frameworks to address the proposed reforms. The guide concludes by offering additional resources for states and districts that are interested in implementing a research-based RTI framework.

### ***Methodology***

AIR researchers reviewed relevant information about Principle 2 and RTI in each of the approved ESEA flexibility plans. The review focused on state plans for using a research-based RTI framework to address the Principle 2 requirements for building district and school capacity to increase student learning and achievement. The AIR review was not exhaustive. For example, it did not include historical information about the state's previous efforts to build district and school capacity. Instead, it focused on state plans to support a research-based RTI framework in all schools, especially low-performing schools, and plans to improve instruction for at-risk students, low-achieving students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. The team also did not review exhibits or appendixes that were not explicitly referenced in waiver statements about Principle 2 and RTI. *Note:* Any counts or summary statistics in the following sections of this Pocket Guide are approximations.

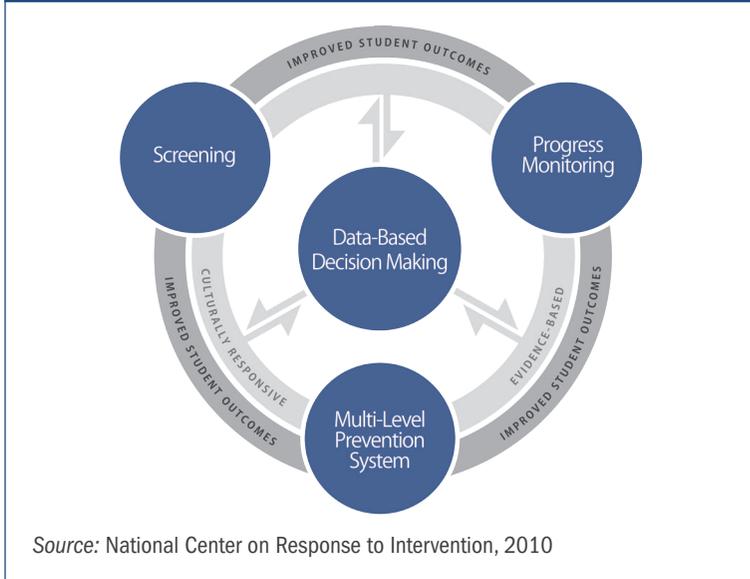
## **Research-Based RTI Framework as a School Improvement Strategy**

According to the National Center on RTI (2010), the essential components of a research-based framework for RTI are as follows:

- Data-based decision making (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012)
- Screening (O'Connor & Jenkins, 1999)
- Progress monitoring (Deno, 1985)
- Multi-level prevention system (Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006)

As shown in Figure 1, the multi-level prevention system uses data-based decision making that employs screening and progress monitoring data to prescribe supplementary interventions for students who do not respond to core instruction (Vaughn et al., 2010). RTI Tier 1 involves core academic instruction for all students in the school (Agodini et al., 2009). The foundation of an RTI framework is the provision of quality core instruction at this tier. The curriculum should incorporate concepts of universal design for learning so that all students have access to and can progress in the general education curriculum. Data from universal screeners should be used to identify at-risk students whose progress is then monitored. If progress is not sufficient, those students should receive Tier 2 supplemental interventions.

**Figure 1. Essential Components of a Research-Based Framework**



Teachers who systematically assess students' academic progress to determine their responsiveness to supplemental interventions contribute to a school's collective capacity to provide stronger instruction. The more frequent the progress monitoring, the more quickly students can receive appropriate instruction (Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2006).

*Fidelity of implementation* means carrying out a practice or set of practices as it was intended to be carried out.

Rigorous research clearly shows that implementing the four essential RTI components with *fidelity* is an effective strategy to improve schools and increase student learning. The four components provide a research-based framework for delivering high-quality instruction and interventions customized to individual student needs (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Their successful implementation embodies key characteristics of effective strategies to turn around low-performing schools (Herman et al., 2008). Furthermore, teachers who use the components with fidelity will improve their instruction and close achievement gaps for students with identified needs in reading (Gersten et al., 2008) and mathematics (Gersten et al., 2009).

RTI was codified into federal law as a method for learning disability identification through the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and has since become a major presence in education reform (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Currently, at least 47 of the 50 states are implementing some form of RTI (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). However, there is no single, commonly accepted model for RTI. Instead, states, districts, and schools implement different RTI frameworks based on their own unique service delivery needs, preferences, and capacity. Although each state's approach reflects the four components of RTI, individual states may adapt some aspects, such as the number of tiers that comprise their frameworks.

## Principle 2: Differentiated Recognition, Accountability, and Support Systems

### ESEA Flexibility Guidelines: Principle 2

Under Section G of ESEA flexibility Principle 2, states are required to describe their process for building state, district, and school capacity to increase student learning and achievement in all schools. The section emphasizes state goals and accompanying plans for increasing student learning in low-performing schools and schools with the largest achievement gaps. Section G further specifies three provisions for each state to ensure that school improvement goals and plans are successfully accomplished:

- i. States should ensure “timely and comprehensive monitoring of, and technical assistance for, LEA implementation of interventions in priority and focus schools.”
- ii. States should ensure that there is “sufficient support for implementation of interventions in priority schools, focus schools, and other Title I schools identified under the SEA's differentiated recognition, accountability, and support system (including through leveraging funds the LEA was previously required to reserve under ESEA Section 1116(b)(10), SIG funds, and other Federal funds, as permitted, along with State and local resources).”
- iii. States should ensure that it will hold districts “accountable for improving school and student performance, particularly for turning around their priority schools.”

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2012, p. 17

## Findings From the AIR Review of State Flexibility Plans: Principle 2

ESEA requires that each state education agency establish a rigorous system to differentially recognize, hold accountable, and support all districts and Title I schools in the state. Principle 2 applies to the flexibility with which states can diagnose districts and schools in need of improvement and allocate resources to meet their needs.

Of the 35 states with approved waiver requests, 32 mention using RTI or tiered instruction. States most commonly use RTI as a recommended or, in some instances, required intervention for focus and priority schools. For example, focus and priority schools in Florida are required to implement Florida's RTI model, and the LEAs that serve those schools are required to provide professional development on RTI (Florida Department of Education, 2012).

In South Dakota, priority schools must implement RTI within the first year of identification. The SEA contracts with RTI coordinators and data trainers to work with the schools. The coordinators work with administrators to develop an action plan for the district and meet at least two more times per year to check progress. Data trainers work with the staff at each school to understand and develop the data systems needed to monitor student progress and implement RTI. Schools also are required to submit fidelity reports to the SEA three times per year, reporting on gains each school has made (South Dakota Department of Education, 2012).

Other states view RTI as a way to complement the Common Core State Standards, allowing practitioners to know more readily when students are behind and when to provide targeted support and differentiated instruction.

In addition, approved flexibility requests featured statewide plans for using a research-based RTI framework to differentiate instruction and improve learning and achievement for students with special needs. Notably, 29 states mentioned using essential RTI components to meet the special needs of students with disabilities, and 14 states indicated the use of essential RTI components to meet the special needs of English language learners.

# RTI Implementation Considerations for Principle 2

The Center on RTI at AIR ([www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org)) incorporated rigorous research on RTI implementation into training modules. The following considerations are derived from those modules and are divided into two sections. The first offers general guidelines for implementing an RTI framework with fidelity. The second offers suggestions for how RTI can be used to support school turnaround.

## Considerations for Implementing a Research-Based RTI Framework With Fidelity

### 1. Districts and schools should implement a research-based RTI

**framework within a multi-level prevention system.** A research-based framework provides a structure for delivering instruction at different levels of intensity to meet the needs of each student in the school. This system should include three levels of prevention:

- **Primary prevention** involves the delivery of high-quality core instruction that meets the needs of most students in the class. Teachers deliver core instruction to all students each day.
- **Secondary prevention** involves the delivery of research-based intervention(s) of moderate intensity to address the learning or behavioral challenges of most at-risk students in the class. Secondary instruction is provided in addition to daily core instruction.
- **Tertiary prevention** involves the delivery of individualized intervention(s) of increased intensity for students who show minimal response to secondary prevention. Teachers collect and analyze progress monitoring data to determine when and how to provide more intensive intervention for nonresponsive students.

A multi-level prevention system represents a continuum of instructional supports. It provides for early identification of learning and behavioral challenges and timely intervention for students who are at risk for long-term learning problems. Many schools use more than one

intervention within a given level of prevention. However, at all levels, fidelity of implementation is critical, with consideration for cultural and linguistic diversity and recognition of student strengths.

**2. Universal screening should be conducted using brief assessments that are valid and reliable and that demonstrate diagnostic accuracy for predicting which students will develop learning or behavioral problems.**

All students in each class are screened, and these screening data can inform implementation at both the student and system levels. Screening data are used to identify at-risk learners and allow teachers to intervene early when remediation can be most effective. Screening data can indicate whether individual students receive benefits from the provided curriculum or intervention, and, through the aggregation of screening data, can determine whether the system (core instruction) works for most students (usually at least 80 percent). For example, if six of every ten students in a particular grade score below the cut point on a screening test at the beginning of the year, school personnel should consider assessing the appropriateness of the core curriculum and incorporating differentiated learning activities to better meet the needs of the students in that grade.

***Spotlight on Screening***

**Purpose:** To identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes

**Focus:** All students

**Tools:** Brief assessments that are valid, reliable, and demonstrate diagnostic accuracy

**Timing:** Administered several times per year (e.g., fall, winter, spring)

Establishing a screening process begins with identifying district or school needs and resources and then selecting a screening tool to meet needs and complement existing resources. There are four key issues to consider when developing a screening system:

- **Outcome Measures.** Districts and schools need to identify the outcome measure(s) for their RTI framework. Measures can include not only reading and mathematics but also mental and physical health, speech and language, and behavior. Multiple outcome measures may require multiple screeners. In addition, districts and schools need to consider how the outcome measures map to the curriculum and state standards.

- **Timing.** The timing of screening is critical because students are developing the same skills that schools and districts are measuring. Screening tools must target the skills that are pertinent to the grade and the time that the screening is administered. Schools and districts also need to determine how frequently they will screen students.
- **Staff Roles.** Schools and districts must identify the staff who will be involved in each stage of the screening process, taking into account knowledge and abilities regarding how to administer and score screeners, analyze data, and make instructional decisions based on the data.
- **Logistics.** Different screeners require different types of resources. Districts and schools need to consider logistical issues including how the tool is administered (e.g., paper and pencil, computer-based), the appropriate type of staff training—both initial and ongoing, and the associated costs.

By carefully considering these issues, districts and schools can establish a research-based, comprehensive screening system that is tailored to meet their unique needs, preferences, and circumstances. District and school staff will be able to select rigorous screening tools as well as design procedures for using the tools with fidelity. Further, they will be able to ensure that most students appropriately respond to the core instruction program in each class, grade, and school throughout the district.

#### ***Spotlight on Progress Monitoring***

**Purpose:** To monitor students' response to primary, secondary, or tertiary instruction to estimate rates of improvement, identify nonresponders, and compare efficacy of instruction

**Focus:** Students identified through screening as at risk for poor learning outcomes and students receiving secondary or tertiary interventions

**Tools:** Brief assessments that are valid, reliable, and evidence-based

**Timing:** Students assessed at regular intervals (e.g., weekly, biweekly)

**3. Student progress monitoring should involve a research-based assessment tool that is used to repeatedly measure performance over time and provides useful information to inform the instruction of individual students in general and special education.** Progress monitoring tools must be reliable and valid for representing students' development and have demonstrated utility for helping teachers plan more effective instruction. Progress monitoring data determine whether students need increased intensity or other instructional modifications, such as those that would typically occur when a student moves to another tier of instruction. Progress monitoring is conducted at least monthly to:

- Estimate rates of improvement.
- Identify students who are not demonstrating adequate progress.
- Compare the efficacy of different forms of instruction to assist in the process of designing more effective, individualized instruction.

The integration of progress monitoring into an RTI framework conserves school resources by reducing the need to administer expensive interventions to students who may be falsely identified as at-risk through universal screening (Compton et al., 2006; Compton et al., 2010). Progress monitoring also provides critical information about the instructional needs of students who fail to respond to small-group tutoring or other supplemental interventions (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010).

Establishing a progress monitoring process begins with identifying the needs, priorities, and resources of the district or school and then selecting a progress monitoring tool based on those factors. Data from progress monitoring provide key information for making effective instructional decisions. The following steps are recommended for the progress monitoring decision-making process:

- Establish a data review team.
- Establish a baseline data and progress monitoring level.
- Establish student progress goals.
- Determine frequency of data collection.

- Collect and graph data.
- Analyze data and make instructional decisions.
- Continue progress monitoring.

Teams also must consider why progress monitoring is being conducted; what they hope to learn from the progress monitoring data; and how the results will be used at the class, grade, school, and district levels. Detailed planning helps to ensure that districts and schools select rigorous progress monitoring tool(s) and establish a process to use these tools to help target teachers' instruction and improve student learning.

**4. States and districts should consider establishing a common, research-based framework that all schools could follow.** A common framework should include each of the four essential components of RTI:

- Data-based decision-making
- Screening
- Progress monitoring
- Multi-level prevention system

RTI tools and practices employed within an RTI framework can vary. For example, districts within a state may select different tools for screening and progress monitoring or different sets of interventions for use within the multi-level system. However, all tools and interventions should be based on rigorous research that documents their effectiveness in improving student learning and achievement.

A common, research-based RTI framework will help strengthen implementation by expanding school staff's understanding of how instructional programming becomes increasingly intensive. For example, districtwide use of a common framework helps individual schools accurately classify practices as primary, secondary, or tertiary. These distinctions should help building-level administrators and classroom teachers determine how to deploy staff and instructional resources in a sensible and efficient manner.

Finally, the use of a common, research-based RTI framework provides a standard delivery system structure against which to assess fidelity of implementation, ensuring that RTI assessments and interventions are delivered as intended by their developers. Districts and schools must address the integrity with which screening and progress-monitoring tools are used as well as the procedures followed to deliver primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions across classrooms and grades in each school. Fidelity helps ensure that RTI assessment data are used properly within an explicit decision-making model; it means that teachers analyze RTI assessment data to make informed decisions about how to instruct different students in the class. Fidelity is important at both the school level (e.g., implementation of RTI process) and the teacher level (e.g., implementation of RTI assessment and instruction) to ensure that all students learn and achieve at high standards.

#### **Idaho: RTI and Meeting the Needs of All Learners**

Throughout the past seven years, Idaho has scaled up implementation of RTI significantly. Virtually all school improvement efforts in the state have been influenced by or specifically include the essential components of RTI. Idaho differentiates its support to assist schools and districts in meeting the needs of all learners. For example, English language learners often need academically focused and linguistically focused Tier 2 intervention. The state has provided tools, resources, and guidance in both areas.

In the past three years, Idaho has worked with the National Center on RTI (NCRTI) to fine-tune and scale up implementation of RTI as part of the statewide system of support, leading to explicit connections to school improvement planning. NCRTI has helped the state explicitly tie the essential components of RTI into its larger school improvement tools and framework—the WISE (Ways to Improve School Effectiveness) Tool. The WISE Tool is the state’s online continuous improvement planning tool, which guides improvement efforts for all schools (including focus and priority schools) and is aligned with federal turnaround principles. For example, the clusters and indicators within Idaho’s WISE Tool are aligned to the RTI framework so that schools and districts can plan for RTI while planning for school improvement. More information about Idaho’s RTI process can be found at the Idaho Department of Education website ([www.sde.idaho.gov/site/rti](http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/rti)).

*Source:* Idaho State Department of Education, 2012

# Considerations for Using a Research-Based RTI Framework as a School Turnaround Strategy

## District- and School-Level Support for Successful School Turnaround

Districts and schools can use a research-based RTI framework as an integrated structure for implementing effective turnaround strategies in persistently low-performing schools:

- 1. Strong Leadership.** Launching RTI provides an opportunity for district and school leaders to announce their dissatisfaction with the status quo and the need for immediate change. Strong RTI leaders must articulate their vision for RTI and its impact. They must convince local educators to change their previous instructional practices and fully commit to their new RTI duties at both the school and classroom levels. For example, leaders need to explain how RTI's system for linking assessment and instruction will help create new conditions that actively improve teaching and learning and convey how RTI radically changes instructional roles in classrooms and schools.
- 2. Consistent Focus on Improving Instruction.** RTI is especially well-suited to support teachers in improving instruction. An RTI multi-level system provides, in effect, a structure for differentiating instruction based on student needs. Student screening and progress monitoring data provide empirical evidence that a student is (or is not) responding to prescribed instruction. Also, RTI fidelity monitoring systems can offer a process for schools and districts to monitor the quality with which teachers implement instruction as well as to then provide refresher training to individual teachers (or the entire school) as needed. In addition, RTI produces ample assessment data to systematically track changes in student achievement over time. Universal screening data should be collected for all students in each class. Progress monitoring data should be collected on a bimonthly or even a weekly basis for at-risk students. This approach gives teachers more immediate feedback in terms of what is effective or ineffective in improving student achievement, thereby providing an opportunity to deliver timely interventions for students who are not progressing adequately.

**3. Committed Staff.** In order for RTI to be successful, school staff need to be committed to the approach. Staff roles and responsibilities are likely to change when RTI is implemented, as it requires increased and different types of interactions among administrators, teachers, parents, and other professional staff. For example, screenings are conducted with all students and by all teachers, not just by the school psychologist or special education staff for certain students. The performance of all students is compared, and close attention will be paid to classroom instruction. However, these screening data and other progress monitoring data can be put to immediate use. Data showing achievement losses can be used to refocus efforts to improve instruction. Data showing achievement gains can be widely publicized to help generate support for RTI as a turnaround strategy among local educators and families. When data are linked to everyday practice and student performance, teachers are more likely to see RTI as relevant to their work.

## Conclusion

As states and districts press forward on an array of reforms, RTI initiatives—whether existing or new—provide a streamlined framework for organizing student supports and improving schools. Most states have already incorporated essential components of RTI into their ESEA flexibility plans. RTI, when implemented with fidelity, can be a powerful driver for school improvement and turnaround. Much has been learned from leading states and districts, and there are a number of research-based resources to support successful RTI implementation.

## Resources for Principle 2

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# Resources on RTI Implementation

- The **Center on Response to Intervention at AIR and the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII)** maintain a database on state-produced resources and materials on RTI, including guidance documents, templates, trainings, and tools  
<http://state.intensiveintervention.org/>

- The **Center on Response to Intervention at AIR** provides a number of modules and resources to help sites implement RTI. There are three modules:
  - Module 1: Screening
  - Module 2: Progress Monitoring
  - Module 3: Multi-level Prevention System

Each module contains a standard set of materials, including (a) training facilitator's guide, (b) PowerPoint presentation (that includes slides and speaker's notes), (c) handouts and other materials for training workshops, (d) videos (embedded in PowerPoint slides), and (e) training manual. Educators can use the information in these modules to effectively implement the essential components of a research-based framework for RTI, as described in this Pocket Guide.

[www.rti4success.org/implementer-series](http://www.rti4success.org/implementer-series)

- The **RTI Action Network at the National Center on Learning Disabilities** has many resources to help states and sites get started.  
[www.rtinetwork.org](http://www.rtinetwork.org)
- The **National Association of State Directors of Special Education** has a series of blueprints (school, district, and state) to help with implementation.  
[www.nasdse.org](http://www.nasdse.org)

- **Federal Technical Assistance Centers Supporting RTI Implementation**

Federal investments in research-to-practice centers have helped to identify strategies for implementing RTI and other complex innovations. Such investments include the following:

- National Center on Student Progress Monitoring  
[www.studentprogress.org](http://www.studentprogress.org)
- National Center on Intensive Interventions  
[www.intensiveintervention.org](http://www.intensiveintervention.org)
- Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports  
[www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)
- State Implementation & Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center  
<http://sisep.fpg.unc.edu>
- Equity Assistance Centers (regional)  
[www2.ed.gov/programs/equitycenters/contacts.html](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/equitycenters/contacts.html)
- National Center on Educational Outcomes  
[www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/)

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## Acknowledgments

This Pocket Guide was developed with support, guidance, and review from Stephanie Jackson, Ph.D., Louis Danielson, Ph.D., Darren Woodruff, Ph.D., Lynn Holdheide, and Sabrina Laine, Ph.D. Sara Wraight, J.D., Whitney Donaldson, and Amy Elledge, Ph.D., of AIR conducted the review of ESEA flexibility plans. We extend our appreciation to our gracious reviewer Martin Ikeda, Ph.D. (The Homestead).





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