

The General Soup Podcast

Episode 2: Measuring Educational Benefit

Transcript

Sara Doutre 00:08

Welcome to the General Soup podcast, a podcast about all things related to special education accountability and support systems, also known as general supervision. I'm Sara Doutre.

Susan Hayes 00:20

And I'm Susan Hayes and we will be your hosts from the National Center for Systemic Improvement, or NCSI, on this exploration of general supervision systems, and also the world of soup jokes. Hi, everyone. This is Susan and Sara and we are excited to share our next episode with you all today. And as in our first episode, we thought we'd start by chatting about our favorite soup of the moment, given our theme. So Sara, what type of soup are you making in your house these days?

Sara Doutre 00:50

Hey, Susan. We have been experimenting with some summer soups and I really like gazpachos and this last weekend we experimented with a watermelon gazpacho. It was really great. It had jalapeno and lime and dill in it. And it was really great. I think my husband liked it better as a salsa, watermelon salsa. So that may be more appealing to people if gazpacho scares you, but that is what we've been making in our house lately. How about you? What type of soup are you enjoying?

Susan Hayes 01:21

That sounds amazing. And I'm so glad that your soup is seasonally appropriate because I have a problem with tomatoes. And I know that's a personality flaw and I should be making gazpacho or something summery. But I found this new soup recipe that I seriously been making like weekly. It is not summery at all. No tomatoes, no watermelon, it's a fall soup. But it's chickpeas and sweet potatoes and spinach with like a ton of ginger and cinnamon. So, it's a much better soup for our fall episodes. I'm really glad that you're representing the summer soups with your choice. And I will aspire to enjoy gazpacho like I aspire to make your roasted butternut squash soup last fall, which I haven't done yet. But for those of you who also enjoy soup, we will share our soup recipes in the Show Notes so that you can also try Sara's amazing watermelon gazpacho soup. and you can try my chickpea soup potato spinach soup in October, when it's appropriate to have that.

Sara Doutre 02:23

Sounds amazing.

Susan Hayes 02:24

It's really tasty. And so, as a reminder, this is our General Soup podcast — short for general supervision — where we discuss all things general supervision. And again, today we will organize ourselves around this soup theme. So today we're going to delve into the topic of educational benefit review. And we'll hear from several states that have embraced this practice with districts either as part of their monitoring process or technical assistance or both. So, we'll

start by setting the table and providing a little bit of context around this topic. And Sara will give us a little bit of orientation to the process of educational benefit review. And then we'll move right into our soup du jour, which will include hearing from several states about their experiences with educational benefit review. We'll then digest and reflect on the discussion with states before ending with our dessert or cheese plate, which is always a new resource from NCSI. Sara, why don't you set the table for us and provide some context on the focus of our episode today.

Sara Doutre 03:24

Thank you, Susan, for that setup, and I am very excited to introduce the topic of educational benefit review today. In the shift to focusing monitoring systems on not only procedural compliance, but also improving student outcomes and the quality of educational programs, many states have started using an educational benefit review process as part of their integrated monitoring system, or their support system, or both. The purpose is to provide a structured reflective process to assess whether a student's Individualized Education Program — or IEP — is reasonably calculated to provide educational benefit to the student, which is something that we hear about being the purpose of an IEP, not only in IDEA but have also heard further in Supreme Court decisions and other court decisions. The process assists educators and families in examining which pieces of the IEP are intended to increase student access to, participation in, and especially progress in general education. The educational benefit review determines whether the design of the IEP is reasonably calculated for the student to receive benefit and generally includes reviewing IEPs across multiple years for each student to assess how the student progresses over time.

Susan Hayes 04:47

Thanks, Sara. I appreciate that context setting and also just wanted to let folks know what will follow. You'll hear from several states, and these were states who joined us in April of 2021 for a virtual meeting of our Results-Based Accountability and Support (RBAS) Cross State Learning Collaborative. So you'll hear several voices on this recording. You'll first hear the voice of Anne Louise Thompson, who was one of our NCSI colleagues and is a team member and a TA provider with our RBS team, and she'll be facilitating the panel. You'll also hear from Jack Brimhall, who is with the California Department of Education; Amy Pastorak, who is the Assistant Director for the Bureau of Special Education for the Pennsylvania Department of Education; Bryan Klimkiewicz, who is the State Special Education Director for the Connecticut State Department of Education. You'll also hear from Nikki Hendry, who is a consultant with the Connecticut State Education Resource Center or SERC. And finally, you'll hear from Kim Mearman, who is the Assistant Director of Student Services with the Connecticut Capital Region Education Council or CREC. So those are our three states represented on the panel—again, California, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania — and the panel will be facilitated by our NCSI colleague, Anne Louise Thompson. So with that, let's dive in to hearing portions of this recorded event. The panel will first address the relationship in their state between educational benefit review and monitoring and technical assistance.

Anne Louise Thompson 06:23

So let's start with our first question and I'm going to direct this to Jack in California. We're really looking for you to describe that question about how does your ed benefit process interface with your monitoring system? So, it's that question about what's that interface with accountability, desk audits, that sort of thing. I'll start with you, Jack. Thanks so much.

Jack Brimhall 06:44

Hi, everybody, I'm glad to be here. So, we use educational benefit with the districts that need it most. So, we've just restructured our monitoring so now we have an intensive tier of monitoring. So the LEAs that are in that intensive tier would be the ones that get that training. In the past, it

was called something different, but the same thing. So, we utilize it with the LEAs that, according to data, aren't doing as well. And so... but there's really two parts of it, right? We use it for technical assistance. But anytime we go and we do this review, this training, if we find noncompliance, we do assign corrective action. So, it is part of our monitoring. It's a small part of our monitoring. It's part of our monitoring in that by monitoring, we select which LEAs are going to get the educational benefit training and corrective actions are also given. But the second part of that that I wanted to mention, it's such a good technical assistance piece that we do occasionally go around the state and do the presentation for LEAs who ask, if it works out that we have the time. So, it's not always just strictly monitoring. It's also a big part of just technical assistance.

Anne Louise Thompson 08:00

Great. Thanks, Jack, I'm going to ask Amy the same question because I know that Pennsylvania also uses it in your monitoring.

Amy Pastorak 08:06

So, in Pennsylvania, the educational benefit review process is embedded into our cyclical monitoring. All districts go through the process as part of our monitoring. That's been established for quite some time now, I want to say over a decade. We provide quite a bit of support through the process and training and I know we're going to talk about that later. We pulled 10 to 12 files for the school districts to work through those 10 questions and the charting through the EBR process. We have our state advisors look at that work afterwards and we do assign corrective action, if necessary. Most often, what we see is just sending that IEP team back to the table to review that information, make adjustments if necessary to the IEP, and just try to move that student forward if we're not seeing the progress that we would like to see in those 10 questions that we're answering through that three-year review.

Anne Louise Thompson 09:00

Great. Thanks, Amy. Now Bryan, I'm going to ask you. I know in Connecticut it's a little bit different in terms of your use of it. And it's a big part of your technical assistance.

Bryan Klimkiewicz 09:09

Yeah, good afternoon, everybody. Again, pleasure to be here. And that's exactly right. It's not really an emphasis within our monitoring process in Connecticut. It certainly is aligned with our targeted technical assistance and professional development. And very occasionally, we also utilize the ed benefit for that puzzle piece of, kind of, correction, sanction activities if it's related to a complaint, for example. But we have a contract with SERC, which is our state Educational Resource Center, to offer this as a professional development opportunity for our districts. And our districts take advantage of that opportunity to access those supports. So it's a little bit of a different structure in Connecticut in that sense

Sara Doutre 09:59

Then, the panel shared the benefits they have seen from the educational benefit review process. You'll hear Amy in Pennsylvania, Kim from Connecticut, and Jack from California speaks to the impact of supporting districts with the educational benefit review process.

Anne Louise Thompson 10:16

Let's move on to the next question that we have for you. And this really gets down to what benefit are you finding from ed benefit review? Like what is the thing about why you're implementing it in your state? And I'm going to ask Amy that question first.

Amy Pastorak 10:32

Sure, I think in Pennsylvania, we really view it as a marriage of compliance and best practice, because inevitably, when you're looking at this as part of a compliance monitoring, those 10 questions and looking at a student comprehensively over three years inevitably gets you discussing best practices for that child: what's working for them instructionally? how is the IEP designed to drive their instruction, and in some cases, we're looking at those three years, and we're saying, "Wow, this is really working." And then teachers and administrators are talking about what's working for that child. And then on the converse, too, if we're seeing that a child's not progressing, we're saying, "Okay, what type of adjustments need to be made here?" That's when that IEP team...we're directing the IEP team to come together and have some robust conversation around the data.

Anne Louise Thompson 11:21

Thank you, Amy. I'm going to direct this question to you, Kim in Connecticut: why do you implement ed benefit in Connecticut?

Kim Mearman, 11:27

Yeah, and I'm just going to echo a lot of what Amy said with in Pennsylvania, so I won't be repetitive to that. But I'm going to add to it by saying, so one of the major benefits is to really help people pull apart the distinction between that procedural compliance...because people do get lost in the documentation, you know, and they really hang out on the dotting the i's and crossing the t's. And the ed benefit really got them off of that and pay more attention to the programmatic side of IEPs. And so, we found that in those conversations, one of the huge impacts we've saw was really the leveraging of the cross conversations, the multidisciplinary conversations that will happen. And really, the most powerful day of that is when general education teachers — who we encourage strongly to be part of the process — jump in and suddenly see the light of the benefit of an IEP. Not to, you know, be ironic with the term, but it really is about that piece of it and how they are becoming part of the process, and how often it's the general teacher who will take over the conversations.

Anne Louise Thompson 12:38

Jack, you can respond to this. If not, we can beam it to the rest of the panel. But is there a way of collecting data on your impact? Have you collected data on your impact? So Jack, I'm going to ask you how Why do you implement ed benefit and do you collect any kind of data on impact? And then I'll take that back to Kim for that.

Jack Brimhall 12:57

First off, the reason we do it is because of all the things that we do with LEAs, districts. it is overwhelmingly the most positive training that we've ever offered, overwhelming. The response we get from when we go into a district and do educational benefit training is just positive beyond belief. And the reason it is, is because whether you're a school psychologist or you're a case manager, or you're a general ed principal, or you're a special ed director, you can immediately take what you learn in that training by looking at those three years of IEPs and those rich discussions and looking to see, "Hey, how does this assessment build the foundation of what the needs are, and how do these goals directed directly to the needs, and how did the services help the students receive the goals?" All of that...people can directly take what they've learned to be better at their jobs? Everybody can, and I'll just give you an example. I was a general education English teacher and then I was a principal for a number of years. And so I sat in on a ton of IEPs. But my role as a principal, I always saw it as, "Okay, well...discipline and attendance." And then once I came to California and I was introduced to this training, all these light bulbs went off in my head like, "Well, I could have been such a better member of an IEP team had I known this." And I think other people walk away from the training, no matter what your position is, even if you're just a Gen Ed principal like I was, with things that you can tangibly use to be better at your job. So, we would do it and we would do it with like 20 staff

members. So, when you talk about impact data, what we found out was, we would do this training in a school district with like 20 people, and the impact really just went to those 20 people and then the kids. So it could have a good impact, a big impact. But what we want to change is we want to now — and we're in the process of designing this — is so when we do a training, it's like a train-the-trainer model where we require them to train everybody — all the special ed folks in their district and even some Gen Ed folks, and then we can better see what the impact is, and really, achievement data. I mean, that, you know, with all those indicators that the state performance plan indicators will get better if that educational benefit training is impactful is I really think it is.

Anne Louise Thompson 15:25

Great. I'm going to beam that question to Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Do you want to talk about how you track your impact? Is there any way that you address that?

Amy Pastorak 15:34

Sure. We don't have a statewide way of tracking that. But what I can say is, kind of piggyback off what Jack just shared with us, is that when we do that training, there's a lot of excitement around it. And then what I hear inevitably, and I can speak to this from a being a recent special ed director at the LEA level, is then encouraging other people in the district to use it outside of that compliance process. I'm having special education teachers sitting down at the beginning of a school year when they have new students assigned to them on a caseload and using this as a tool to understand the student help drive instruction and then author that new annual IEP, as well.

Anne Louise Thompson 16:18

Great.

Susan Hayes 16:19

States also shared how they approach providing training and support to districts around the educational benefit review process.

Anne Louise Thompson 16:26

Alright. For the third question, I want to ask each of you, how do you provide training? How do you go about providing the training on ed benefit? Like, who's involved? How do you do it? How's it made available? How long does it take? That sort of thing. And I'm going to start with you, Amy, if you could?

Amy Pastorak 16:43

Sure. We have a two-tier process. One is mandated as part of our cyclical monitoring training procedures. So, we have a PowerPoint and a video that is just separate to the EBR process that all districts engaging in monitoring have to go through. And then we have an extension of that. We offer training through our intermediate units in Pennsylvania; we have 29 of those regional units. And they will do training specific to the district. So they will go in, meet with, say it's 20 folks that are going to be trained in that process. And they will do a more robust training there. Our trainings are free, whether it's through that intermediate unit, as well. So that is up to the district. There are times as an SEA, we will direct that if we think that is a need. But most often, districts do engage in the process because they find it really helpful to have that deeper dive with their teachers and, you know, hopefully, at some point have that face-to-face connection again.

Anne Louise Thompson 17:42

Thanks, Amy. Jack, do you want to answer that question? How's it done in California?

Jack Brimhall 17:46

Sure. So, it's kind of a two-tiered process, too. So we do do it when districts ask — because, obviously, it's free — if we have time to be able to come and do it. We have regional consultants all across...they're all in Sacramento...but we have consultants that are assigned to regions. And so, you know, they'll build a good relationship with their region. And oftentimes, they might have time to come down and do a training. But for the majority of times, it's mandated. It's mandated as part of our higher tier, more intensive type monitoring. And it takes about a day. And so we normally...we try to get the right people at the training. So, we tell them to get kind of a mixed bag of some school psychologists are great, you know, some special ed teachers are great, potentially, maybe a speech pathologist, and get a mixed bag. And then so that we when we do training, we go through the educational benefit with that team. No more than 20. I've done the training with upwards of over 500 and it was a disaster because you can't have the rich discussions. When you have a small team of around 20 and three or four people from the state to facilitate it. It's really, really powerful, but it's almost always mandated.

Anne Louise Thompson 19:07

Great, thanks, Jack. I'm going to beam in this question to you, Nikki in Connecticut. How do you provide training there?

Nikki Hendry 19:13

You know, we also have a couple different levels, and as Bryan mentioned, sometimes the State Department will sponsor this activity through SERC. And so we open it as a statewide registration. Anybody could come as a team, you know, we might have 10 different districts in the room participating in that session. We also do it as a fee for service contract and it is something that is, you know, highly requested. It takes anywhere between a half a day and a full day and I'd say full day is better because it allows deeper conversation and reflection to do that. But I've done it in a mega cafeteria with, you know, a whole district and 100 people, having those conversations and they might all be working on different IEPs. But it's great because the “aha's” that come out are really good. We also ask for the interdisciplinary team, we want special ed at the table, we want general ed at a table, we want administrators, we want those students support services professionals. Occasionally, there are parents in that group, but we also do separate things for parents. as well.

Sara Doutre 20:15

And finally, Jack from California and Amy from Pennsylvania offered some closing thoughts on lessons learned from their experience with the educational benefit review process.

Anne Louise Thompson 20:26

Jack, any last words, lessons learned, things that you want to share with your colleagues across the country?

Jack Brimhall 20:31

Yeah, I think the really cool thing about educational benefit that you don't really get just by looking at one year of an IEP — somebody mentioned it earlier — it kind of fleshes out so you don't get stuck in the weeds on procedural compliance. You know, dotting the i's crossing the t's. It's really about faith in the LRE. It's about, “Is the kid getting what he or she needs.” And just looking at one year of an IEP doesn't really show the whole picture. And sometimes even for teachers looking at the one year, you know, I've had...we've done this training where case managers have said, “I'm going to start doing this with all my new kids.” Because when you start to see three years of an IEP, you might see why a parent has more concerns than you really understood. We've also taught this to districts. And then when they go to due process, now they're saying, “Okay, hold on, I'm going to do an ed benefit on this.” And then they go, “Oh, yeah, I better understand why this parent is upset, because when they were in eighth grade,

there was these three gigantic gaps that didn't really get fixed until 10th grade.” And you don't see that just looking at one year of an IEP. That's why the process...the lightbulb goes off in so many people's heads because you really see...you kind of follow a kid and you can even do it for further than three years, if you wanted to. It just takes a lot of time and work and it's fairly complex. But I guess that's the biggest takeaway is being able to see that, you know, the multiple years really brings up a lot of information that you're not going to see with just a snapshot of an IEP.

Anne Louise Thompson 22:09

Thanks, Jack. And Amy, any last words to you. What message do you want to leave with the group?

Amy Pastorak 22:14

Sure. I would just echo everyone's comments. The one nuance I would highlight, though, that the process, I think, reemphasizes to teachers, in particular, and administrators is that need to make adjustments throughout a school year and that it's not just an annual process that's done on request. So, I think you can kind of look back in certain points of time and say, “Oh, it probably would have been helpful if we would have done X, Y or Z. And then it's just a different reflection on the IEP and the instruction that's driving where we want kids to make progress and where they want to go.

Sara Doutre 22:51

So many great lessons learned there from states and thinking through how they're using educational benefit review, and what they've learned from it. One of my big takeaways, Susan, in thinking about this is that this is such a nice way to start to shift our monitoring systems more toward improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Some of the pieces in this process are still process oriented and pretty actionable by the IEP team. But it's a nice shift from thinking about, procedurally, whether everything was recorded on the IEP as it should be, to reinforcing the expectation that IEP teams think over the years about how the IEP really should be benefiting students. I really like that actionable recommendations that can come from this for the IEP team.

Susan Hayes 23:45

I totally agree. I think that's such a good point, Sara. And I think the only additional reflection I would add to the great points you've made is that I think these three states all offer different entry points for how the state education agency, or the SEA, can support districts with this process. This is obviously a process that districts or even at the school level, can be embraced locally. But I think these three states offer really nice examples and models of what it looks like for the SEA to support this process and to promote this process for all the good reasons that you mentioned, whether it's intentionally incorporated into the monitoring process, as we heard in Pennsylvania; whether it's a technical assistance or professional learning opportunity, as we heard in Connecticut; or sort of a hybrid, as we heard in California, where it is a professional learning and technical assistance opportunity for districts, but it's really targeted at those districts that bubble up through monitoring or the risk assessment as needing additional support. So really appreciate these states sharing their experiences with us and their different modalities for supporting districts with the use of an educational benefit review process to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Sara Doutre 24:59

I really like that, Susan, that this is a process that states that are in different places with their system or that have opportunities to leverage either support or monitoring could use this process to supplement. And yes, thanks again to the states that participated. Building off that focus and that great state panel that we just had, we want to move on to our dessert or cheese

plate segment where we introduce a resource, and the resource we'd like to share with you today is to build capacity on educational benefit review. And so, Susan is going to tell us about our new NCSI Fast Five focused on educational benefit review.

Susan Hayes 25:42

A lot of F's all strung together. Our new Fast Five focused on educational benefit review...that's a tongue twister. Yes. So, thanks, Sara. So, our Fast Fives are short, easy-to-read briefs on a variety of topics related to — what else — general supervision systems. And as Sara mentioned, we have a new Fast Five to share with everyone focused on our podcast topic today of educational benefit review. So, this resource answers five questions about educational benefit review and also incorporates some of the learnings that you just heard from our state panel, including California, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. So the five questions explored in this new Fast Five include: What is educational benefit and its history? What is an educational benefit review? How is an educational benefit review conducted? Who should be involved in the educational benefit review? And then finally, how are states using educational benefit reviews to support districts? So, this new Fast Five is available on the NCSI website in our resource library and we'll be sure to put the link in our Show Notes, as well.

Sara Doutre 26:52

Thank you, Susan. And thank you to everyone for joining us today for the second episode of our general soup podcast.

Susan Hayes 27:00

We will post today's episode to the NCSI website and please continue checking the website for future episodes. We're aiming to produce four episodes a year, so we'll have an episode later this summer or early fall with hopefully some seasonally appropriate soup recipes. And as always, we're going to close with a soup joke, Sara....

Sara Doutre 27:23

Okay, here we go with our soup joke of the episode. I told Mom to be careful while cooking dinner. Because if you spill a bowl of alphabet soup, it could spell disaster.

Susan Hayes 27:36

[Laughing.] We have to get our drum and cymbal...

Sara Doutre 27:45

Thank you. And if you have submissions of soup jokes, feel free to submit those to us as well as ideas for topics for us to cover in future episodes. Goodbye. See you next time on the general soup podcast.

Susan Hayes 28:01

Thanks, everybody.

Susan Hayes 28:09

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Sara Doutre 28:16

Thank you to our producer and audio editor, Sanjay Pardanani. See you next time when we get together again to dish on General Soup.