

A National Assessment of Staff Development Needs  
Related to the Education of Students with Disabilities

Edward L. Meyen, Eugene Ramp, Cheryl A. Harrod, Yvonne N. Bui

The University of Kansas  
e-Learning Design Lab  
3061 Dole Human Development Center  
Lawrence, Kansas, 66045  
785-864-0675  
[elm@ku.edu](mailto:elm@ku.edu)

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Abstract

The Online Academy (HO29K73002) was funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to develop online instructional modules in the content areas of reading, positive behavior supports and technology across the curriculum. Targeted to teacher education programs in Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), the modules were implemented by over 160 institutions. A supplemental award was made by OSEP to develop five additional modules designed to meet the staff development needs of teachers. Focus groups combined with phone surveys and an online ranking system were employed to identify and prioritize national staff development topics representing needs of teachers in K-12 schools. Focus group participants included staff members from State Educational Agencies (SEA), Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) programs, and staff members of State Improvement Grants (SIG), National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), Regional Resource Centers (RRC) and OSEP. One hundred and thirteen topics were identified in four priority categories. Five topics were selected as meeting national criteria. They included (a) curriculum design and instructional accommodations for secondary students with mild disabilities, (b) relating instructional assessments to standards, (c) models for collaboration, (d) transition-focused secondary education for all students, and (d) developing standards-based IEPs. Online modules have been developed on these topics.

## Background

IDEA compliance, curriculum standards, faculty turnover, high-stakes testing and increased expectations among policymakers and school patrons are among the many factors that contribute to staff development needs for experienced teachers. As teachers pursue personalized staff development plans, they seek opportunities to enhance their skills and to expand their knowledge. Typically, if they are engaged in a graduate degree program they are likely to depend on their home institution of higher education (IHE) as the source for their professional growth experiences. If they are not pursuing a degree program, they may look to their employer to provide staff development opportunities or, on their own, seek opportunities that best fit their needs and aspirations.

However, with the emergence of the Internet, access to professional development opportunities is increasing at an unprecedented rate. Offerings by IHEs on the Internet are increasing, professional associations are developing web sites to offer staff development, and e-learning in the commercial sector is evolving as a source for staff development. Thus, the Internet has dramatically changed the potential for accessing staff development anytime, anywhere.

The need for staff development among teachers to fully implement the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is exacerbated by the growing shortage of trained personnel and the tendency for states to allow emergency waivers for noncertified teachers to enter the field when the supply of certified teachers does not meet the demand. In particular, educators trained to work with students with disabilities continue to be in short supply (Brownell & Smith, 1993, 1997; Lauritzen & Freidman, 1993), a shortage that is expected to become even more acute in coming years for several reasons. First, the public school population, ages 5 through 13,

rose to approximately 38.5 million in 1998 and continues to increase. Further, the U.S. Department of Education projects the need for an additional two million teachers over the next decade as veteran teachers retire (i.e., baby boom generation).

This critical personnel shortage is particularly significant when considering the chronic shortage of special education teachers over the past decade. For example, the Twentieth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1998) reports that from 1987-88 to 1995-1996, shortages for teaching positions nationally for students aged 6-21 with disabilities have averaged about 27,000 fully certified teachers per year. The production of new teachers is inadequate to meet projected personnel needs. This means that large numbers of teachers will enter the profession with significant staff development needs.

In response to the growing need for staff development among teachers, OSEP contracted with the Online Academy (<http://onlineacademy.org>) to develop a series of exemplary online modules for staff development on topics of high national concern. The online format would allow for experimentation with online instruction as a mode of delivering staff development. The modules would be designed using the production tool developed by the Online Academy to produce multimedia interactive online modules. The modules include the following features: be content-rich, self-paced, accessible 24-7, employ streaming media, be interactive and have a research-to-practice focus.

A prerequisite to developing online modules was to identify which topics were representative of nationally perceived needs. It was apparent that if only five online modules were to be developed (a limitation of resources), it was essential to select topics that were of national importance. While the five topics could have been selected by consulting with a few staff development specialists at the state and national levels, a decision was made to

systematically examine the need for staff development nationwide. Not only would this result in better decisions on the topics, but having an inventory of assessed staff development needs would be useful to SEAs and LEAs as they plan staff development programs in the future. Additionally, such an inventory might have implications for preservice teacher education programs. Finally, professional organizations, publishers of teaching resources and individuals engaged in developing staff development programs would also find the inventory to be of interest.

### Methodology

The first challenge was to determine an appropriate method for prioritizing staff development needs nationally as a basis for identifying the topics for the staff development modules to be developed. Several examples of needs assessment strategies have been employed at the state level. For example, Azin-Manley (1996) used a survey instrument to obtain input from all teachers and administrators in Wyoming schools. In another survey, the Illinois State Board of Education (1992) carried out a statewide needs assessment for personnel associated with prekindergarten programs for children at risk of academic failure, prevention initiative programs for at-risk infants and toddlers and their families, and the model early childhood parental training programs.

A similar model could have been used to assess the staff development needs of teachers nationally in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. However, the problem in adopting this strategy for a national needs assessment was in determining the most representative sampling, as well as cost and time requirements.

Two other statewide strategies were considered. One was a model implemented by Black (1998), who surveyed all directors of technical and adult education within a state who were in attendance at a conference. The results were supplemented by a mail survey of all instructors statewide. Taking another approach, Hart (1995) reported on the use of focus groups to collect qualitative data on staff development needs. The advantages of focus groups are that data can be collected in a relatively short amount of time and the results can be combined with other measurement methods. Focus groups also serve to improve communication and allow for clarification to be obtained on recommended topics.

Based on these findings, we opted to develop a hybrid model that employed focus groups, engagement of key state agency staff attending a national conference and an online ranking system to build a set of national priorities in staff development to guide the initial development of online staff development modules.

#### Advisory Board

Working with the leadership of OSEP and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), a national advisory board was assembled comprised of State Education Agencies (SEA), CSPD (Comprehensive System of Personnel Development), State Improvement Grants (SIG), Regional Resource Centers (RRC), and National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) personnel. The advisory board included 10 carefully selected individuals with expertise in staff development, as well as professionals from the Monitoring and State Improvement Planning Division and the Research to Practice Division of OSEP. This board served a central role throughout the topic identification process and continued to provide significant input during the module development stages.

A qualitative approach, relying heavily on focus groups involving resource experts, was adopted, combined with an analysis of source documents containing information related to staff development needs, a phone survey and an online prioritization instrument.

### Focus Groups

Four focus groups were held to generate staff development topics perceived by the participants as representing national concerns and warranting an investment at the national level. Each Focus Group session lasted approximately 60 minutes.

One group session consisted of 15 OSEP staff members from the divisions of Research to Practice and Monitoring and State Improvement Planning. Each participating staff member had responsibility for monitoring state implementation of IDEA, thus providing them perspectives on staff development needs. This session was held in the Monitoring and State Improvement Plan Division (MSIPD) offices.

Two focus groups were held at the CSPD 2000 national conference. Participants recommended by the staffs of NASDSE and OSEP as individuals who were knowledgeable about national staff development needs were invited and assigned to focus groups in advance of the conference.

The fourth focus group was made up the 10-member national advisory board. Since members of the board were selected because of their perspectives on staff development and knowledge of state needs, their input was considered important to have factored into the topic identification process.

Focus group procedures. The following procedures summarize the focus group process:

1. The number of participants per group averaged 13.

2. The focus groups were held in the OSEP offices and during the 2000 CSPD Conference sponsored by NASDSE.
3. The same facilitators and recorder (a three-person team from the Academy) were involved in each focus group. Two functioned as facilitators and assumed the role of stimulating discussion and keeping the discussion focused on generating and clarifying topics. The third person recorded the topics emerging from the discussion on which there was group consensus.
4. Immediately following each session, the three-person team refined the list of topics and sorted them into categories. Independent summary reports were prepared for each session, but the reports were not shared with participants in subsequent sessions prior to their session. This allowed each group to be independent in its generation of topics.
5. Following the first focus group, the team repeated the refinement process for each session. Specifically, the categories derived from the first session were reconstructed after each session as the topics generated in each session were factored into the sorting process. Consequently, as the number of topics grew, the categories changed depending on the emphasis of the topics added to the pool from the previous session.
6. An inventory of staff development topics was created based on the consensus topics emerging from the groups.
7. Following the last focus group, a final refinement and sorting process was employed. The last group was the 10-member advisory board, whose composition was similar in terms of expertise to that of the other focus groups. Having the



advisory board serve as a focus group enhanced their later role in working with consultants and content writers.

#### Phone Survey and Review of Source Document

This component of the process consisted of the following:

1. A firm that provides evaluation studies was engaged to conduct a phone survey and to review SIG proposals and selected reports on staff development in the literature.
2. The phone survey consisted of a sample of over 25 individuals nationally, including regular education teachers and school administrators. The phone survey and literature review were carried out parallel to the focus groups and completed at the same time.
3. A series of stimulus questions was used to cause respondents to think about staff development needs.
4. The Study Group Inc. prepared a report independent of the focus group report process. The report results were not made known to the Academy team of facilitators until the results of the focus group and the validation process were completed. This allowed the survey data to be factored into the prioritization process as an independent source of input.

#### Validation Process

The validation process allowed all participants across the focus groups to respond to an instrument containing all topics generated via the focus group process. The specific steps of the process are outlined below.

1. The combined results of the focus groups were analyzed by the Academy team and redundancies were eliminated.
2. An instrument was developed containing nine subsets and 113 topics. A subset was defined as topics related to a theme or similar in terms of the training implied. No topic was assigned to more than one subset. The number of topics per subset ranged from four to 22.
3. The instrument was posted on the project web site and all responses were collected online. Respondents were notified of the URL, provided directions on the task that they were being asked to perform, that is, to prioritize each topic by placing them into one of four categories (see Table 1) and given a timeline for responding.
4. The data were analyzed by ranking the topics according to the categories in which the respondents placed them. Topics were then judged to be of national, state and local significance.
5. The results of the phone survey and the literature review were analyzed to determine the relationship between the topics identified through those processes and the focus groups. They were then crosschecked against the results of the categorizing process that was carried out online. For purposes of selecting the five topics to be developed into online staff development modules, these data were recorded along with the instrument categorizing results.
6. Anticipating that a substantial number of topics might be classified as being of national significance and warranting being addressed through a national effort, a set of decision rules for selecting topics for module development was developed

by the Academy team in conjunction with the advisory board. These decision rules were used as a criteria for selecting the topics for module development from among those judged to be of most importance nationally. The selection criteria were decided during an advisory board meeting.

Decision rules employed by the board included the following:

The topics must:

1. Be research-based or highly validated. (This was consistent with the mission of the Online Academy.)
2. Entail content and instructional goals that can be incorporated effectively within the Academy module design. The Academy module design had been already validated. Thus, incorporation was important in order to capitalize on the investment already made in the technology and to expedite the development process within the designated timeline.
3. Require content and activities to effectively cover the information and skills central to the topic within the limitations of a three- or four-lesson module (about 12 clock hours of instruction).
4. Accommodate a range of needs that transcend grade level, disability groups and that relate to the requirements of IDEA.
5. Have been proposed as a need area from several input sources rather than a single source.
6. Have a high probability of being successfully addressed through staff development efforts and be valued by the target group.

A major limitation of the study was that it focused on school-age programs and did not include early childhood staff development needs. Further, in the process of selecting topics, the board opted to orient the modules toward teachers at the secondary level. Comments throughout the forum sessions indicated that staff development was needed at the secondary level and there were fewer resources available. However, the topics were applicable for the K-12 programs unless specifically addressed to an age group.

### Results

The results of the prioritization responses to the instrument are shown in Table 1. The number of responses per category are reported in the four columns on the right hand side of the table. In reviewing the results in Table 1, keep in mind that the purpose was to identify topics of national significance that warranted an investment into creating online development resources for national dissemination.

The categories were defined as follows:

Category 1: National Response (High Priority): Needs to be addressed nationally and in the immediate future. (Use this category for no more than 10 of the topics listed in the next pages.)

Category 2: National Response (Medium Priority): Very important, but if a choice had to be made to develop a priority the Category 1 topics would be selected.

Category 3: State Response: Important priority but a topic that could be addressed at the state level rather than through a national initiative.

Category 4: Local Response: An important topic warranting attention at the LEA level. May require SEA leadership but represents a topic that can and should be addressed at the LEA level.

Staff Development Topics Sorted by Priority Categories

Rank Order	Topic	Category				
		1	2	1+2	3	4
1	Best practices on curriculum/instructional accommodation*	9	6	15	3	0
2	Relating instructional assessments to standards*	9	6	15	3	0
3	Bilingual teaching practices that work	8	3	11	7	0
4	Modifying curriculum to the needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities	8	1	9	7	2
5	Models for collaboration*	7	7	14	4	0
6	What constitutes an effective transition plan?*	7	7	14	2	2
7	Accommodation...special and general education teachers working together	7	4	11	7	2
8	Developing standards based IEPs*	7	4	11	6	1
9	Understanding alternative assessments	7	4	11	6	1
10	Assessing progress of students with disabilities in the regular curriculum	7	3	10	8	0
11	The teacher's role in collaboration	7	3	10	5	3
12	Understanding national curriculum standards	6	9	15	2	1
13	Issues related to measuring student progress	6	6	12	4	2
14	Defining outcomes for transition	6	6	12	6	0
15	Achieving accommodation in high stakes testing states	6	5	11	7	0
16	Collaboration skills and accessing the regular curriculum	6	5	11	6	1
17	Understanding cultural differences in teaching English	6	5	11	6	1
18	School-wide behavior management planning processes that work	6	4	10	5	3
19	Creating standards based IEPs	6	4	10	6	2
20	Collaborating with regular classroom teachers	6	2	8	3	6

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21	Mentoring paraprofessionals	6	2	8	6	3
22	Sound pedagogical practices	5	7	12	4	2
23	Planning instructional systems that build from a philosophy of school improvement, curriculum frameworks, standards and IEP planning	5	7	12	2	1
24	Working with families of non-English speaking children	5	6	11	6	1
25	Techniques for monitoring student progress on IEPs	5	6	11	5	2
26	Measuring progress in achieving the IEP	5	6	11	3	4
27	Efficient and effective approaches to accommodation	5	5	10	6	2
28	Collaboration skills for teachers at the secondary level	5	5	10	3	3
29	Defining accommodation	5	4	9	7	2
30	Relating outcomes to student needs	5	4	9	4	5
31	Standards based reform strategies for special/B104general education teachers to work together	5	4	9	4	1
32	Setting outcomes for middle school students	5	3	8	4	6
33	Classroom discipline strategies	5	3	8	4	6
34	Developing behavior plans	5	2	7	7	4
35	Techniques applicable to instructional differentiation	4	8	12	1	5
36	The use of functional assessment in planning for IEP planning	4	8	12	5	2
37	Strategies for developing transition plans for students with mild disabilities	4	7	11	4	1
38	Understanding critical education in general education curriculum	4	6	10	6	2
39	How to design informal assessments that align with standards based testing	4	6	10	7	1
40	Coordinating services across agencies for families and children (target could be service coordinators across disciplines)	4	6	10	7	0
41	Knowing what accommodations to ask for in general education	4	5	9	3	5
42	Curriculum accommodation strategies that generalize cross content areas	4	5	9	3	3
43	Inclusion skills for beginning classroom teachers	4	5	9	8	1
44	Accommodation strategies	4	5	9	6	3
45	Collaborative strategies applicable focusing on sharing behavior management techniques	4	5	9	7	2
46	Relating national curriculum standards to state standards	4	5	9	9	0
47	Tracking assessments to IEP goals	4	5	9	6	2
48	Working with families of children 0-2 and 3-5 programs	4	5	9	3	5

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49	Working with para-professionals	4	5	9	4	5
50	Adapting instructional plans	4	4	8	6	4
51	Collaborating with parents	4	4	8	1	2
52	Translating curriculum standards by subjects to meet the needs of student with disabilities	4	4	8	6	4
53	Co-teaching techniques applicable to achieving accommodations	4	3	7	7	4
54	Accommodating the needs of students with sensory disabilities in a standards-based curriculum	4	3	7	9	2
55	Teaming at the building level	4	3	7	7	7
56	Understanding the basics of bilingual Education and English as a Second Language	3	8	11	5	2
57	Behavior management strategies applicable to 0 -3 and 3-5 year olds	3	7	10	6	2
58	Basic collaboration skills	3	6	9	6	3
59	Strategies beyond PBS	3	6	9	4	4
60	Aligning standards based curriculum with needs of students in inclusion settings	3	6	9	7	2
61	Creating assessments in forms that allow students with disabilities to gain routine experience with those formats and testing procedures used in statewide testing programs	3	6	9	5	4
62	Collaboration skills that work with paraprofessionals	3	5	8	7	3
63	Sources of data for improving instruction	3	5	8	8	2
64	Role of the general education teacher on the IEP team e.g., documentation	3	5	8	6	4
65	Conflict resolution strategies that work	3	4	7	3	2
66	Making effective use of adults in the instructional environment	3	3	6	5	6
67	Time management strategies for collaboration	3	3	6	6	6
68	Preparing 14 year olds as self-advocates in the IEP process	3	1	4	9	5
69	Assessment based instruction	2	9	11	7	2
70	Understanding age appropriate content in the general education curriculum	2	8	10	4	4
71	Using informal assessment as a basis for instructional planning	2	8	10	4	4
72	Getting a job is not enough	2	6	8	4	6
73	Communicating with parents of students with disabilities	2	5	7	6	5
74	Mediation skills for teachers	2	5	7	3	3
75	Engaging regular classroom teachers in the IEP process	2	5	7	8	3
76	Working with families and parents in supporting students in inclusion programs	2	5	7	6	3

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77	Building community with colleagues	2	5	7	6	7
78	Curriculum planning for teachers: neither texts nor tests equal curriculum	2	5	7	7	4
79	Understanding transition requirements (0-2, 3-5, and secondary)	2	5	7	8	3
80	Teaming strategies in ESL	2	4	6	9	3
81	Developing behavior modification plans and strategies for measuring progress	2	4	6	4	8
82	Strategies for instructional planning based on curriculum standards	2	4	6	9	3
83	Teaching reading across the content fields	2	4	6	10	2
84	Teaching the language of the subject e.g., in science and math there is a critical vocabulary that must be known to participate in the regular curriculum	2	4	6	8	4
85	Effective ECH transition practices	2	4	6	6	5
86	Techniques for handling conflict resolution	2	3	5	7	5
87	Transitional opportunities in rural areas	2	3	5	8	4
88	Involving community agencies in transitioning for O-3 and 3-5 year olds	2	3	5	9	4
89	Developing collaboration between teachers and related service providers	2	3	5	8	5
90	Role of paraprofessional classrooms serving non-English speaking children	2	3	5	8	4
91	The basics of curriculum	2	2	4	13	1
92	Interpreting informal assessment results	1	8	9	4	4
93	Decision making in manifestation meetings	1	7	8	0	4
94	Self-advocacy for 14 year olds	1	7	8	6	4
95	How to help students participate effectively as self-advocates	1	7	8	4	6
96	The measuring of curriculum standards for classroom instructors	1	6	7	4	7
97	Different ways to collaborate	1	5	6	5	5
98	Teaming skills	1	5	6	6	5
99	Transitional opportunities in urban settings	1	5	6	8	4
100	Informal assessments: design, application, and interpretation	1	5	6	7	4
101	Understanding the child's perspective in transitioning	1	5	6	7	3
102	Monitoring the work of paraprofessionals	1	4	5	6	7
103	Involving directors, counselors, teachers and other care providers	1	4	5	8	4
104	Teaming for solutions	1	3	4	6	7



105	Student procedures for paraprofessionals	1	3	4	7	6
106	Strategies for co-teaching with paraprofessionals	1	2	3	6	7
107	How to design teacher made tests	0	6	6	8	4
108	Communities for transition for school programs.	0	6	6	4	7
109	Integrating related services into the regular classroom instructional program	0	5	5	8	4
110	Family role needs to be strengthened in IEP/teaching literacy development for deaf and blind	0	5	5	4	3
111	Ensuring that paraprofessionals know their children understand their role	0	5	5	8	5
112	Transition strategies for hospital to home or to another care provider	0	5	5	10	2
113	Focusing on speech and language in the regular classroom	0	2	2	9	6

\*Topics selected for module development

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Items with asterisks in Table 1 indicate the topics were selected for development into online modules after applying the decision rules previously mentioned. Because the topics were not all independent, that is, many overlapped when viewed from the perspective of how they might be dealt with through a staff development program, the framing of the topics selected for module development varied somewhat from the wording listed on the survey instrument. Clarification of the topics occurred through a two-day planning session involving the board, Academy team, and consultants with expertise in the skills and knowledge associated with the high-priority topics. The intent here was to translate the selected topics into wording content maps that were more meaningful to teachers.

The process entailed a review of the ranked topics in the four categories to ensure that there were no topics in Categories 2, 3, or 4 that, when examined by the advisory board and consultants, might be viewed as warranting special consideration. Because the membership of the board and consultants included individuals with extensive knowledge of states, staff

development programs, and IDEA, their perspectives provided a validation of the ranking system.

This review did not result in any topics being moved to Category 1. However, it did stimulate discussion on two issues. One related to the omission of early childhood in the needs assessment process; the other related to focusing on topics most important to middle and secondary schools. Participants agreed that should further staff development modules be developed in the future, preschool needs should be included in the assessment process. With reference to the middle and secondary school emphasis, it was decided in reviewing the Category 1 priority rankings that the general need for staff development was greater at those levels. This is not to suggest that the topics do not generalize to teachers at the elementary level. Consequently, once the priority topics were selected from Category 1, they were analyzed in terms of their application to the middle and secondary school levels.

Once the topics were selected, content maps in the form of outlines were developed as a way of operationally defining the topics. This was viewed as important prior to engaging writers to develop content for the modules.

Following are the topics selected for development in the form of online modules.

1. Curricular design and instructional accommodations for secondary students with mild disabilities
2. Relating instructional assessments to standards
3. Models for collaboration
4. Transition-focused secondary education for all students
5. Developing standards-based IEPs

### Summary of Lessons Learned

1. The use of focus groups proved to be an effective strategy for developing an item pool of staff development needs/topics of national importance. Considerable overlap occurred across focus groups. The topics that surfaced most frequently were the ones ultimately ranked in the national response category in the prioritization process via the online instrument.
2. The use of the Web to obtain responses to a validation and prioritizing instrument was effective with a sample of respondents with vested interests in the results. This was not a random sample. All respondents had been involved in some aspect of generating items or were participating in the project.
3. Consensus can be achieved on staff development topics warranting attention at the national level. While the language may vary for how best to describe each topic, groups with national perspectives share common views on staff development needs when judged by categories of priority needs.
4. Needs specific to curriculum content or subject matter fields did not receive significant attention in the needs assessment process because the Academy had already addressed many of them in previously developed online modules in reading, positive behavioral support (PSB), and technology in education. A process that engages teachers rather than staff development specialists and experts in national roles might result in more curriculum/instruction related topics.
5. The high priority topics derived largely from the consequences of reauthorization of IDEA.

6. There were serious concerns about staff development issues among focus group participants. The level of discourse was consistent and each session could have gone beyond the scheduled time frame.
7. There appeared to be a close relationship between the perspectives of OSEP staff who participated in the first focus group and SEA and RRC representatives participating in subsequent focus sessions.
8. The need for staff development for teachers is of critical importance. There was a clear perception among participants in the focus groups that a major investment needs to be made in models that allow for national dissemination such as through the features allowed by online instruction.
9. The topics in Table 1 reflect skills and knowledge that teachers need and which warrant serious attention in preservice teacher education. Additional research needs to be done to ascertain the extent to which preservice curriculum covers the topics judged to be high priority staff development needs for practicing teachers.

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