Session A-2: Best Practices in Assembling Peer Review Submissions
Panelists: ***Lou Fabrizio, Sharon Hall, Vince Verges, Tammy Howard***
Moderator: ***Elizabeth Witt, U.S. Department of Education, Office of State Support***

The focus of the session was best practices for submissions by states for peer review. Peer reviewers discussed what makes an effective peer review submission of evidence. They offered general observations on evidence consolidation and index development that help make the review of the evidence straightforward. The session addressed all critical elements.

Ms. Elizabeth Witt introduced the panelists. Those who had served as peer reviewers were asked what they learned in this role. Ms. Tammy Howard said the most challenging part is "the words." People can go in the wrong direction if they don't understand the wording of the Guide. Her teams try to reach a common understanding of the wording so they can gather the exact evidence needed. She said it's challenging because there are often new staff and staff who have never worked on peer reviews. She noted that sometimes states receive the final notification of the date and then scramble to meet it. To avoid this situation, they should use an ongoing process for pulling information together as the assessment is developed. The entire process must be documented. She advised states to be prepared on the front end, so they can pull information together and submit it when it's due.

Mr. Vince Verges said he once had a team that methodically organized its information and submitted 12,000 pages of evidence. ED responded that it was too much. He advised submitting just the right amount of information, using good explanations and the right words. Explain the process from beginning to end and state why it meets the requirements. A participant asked how to find the right balance. Ms. Sharon Hall responded, "Answer the question." The critical elements have bulleted subcomponents in the index. The best thing to do is to write a header in the middle column, next to each bullet, that indicates the evidence being submitted. Present information in the same order it is listed in the bullets. Write a header, cite the relevant documentation, and include page numbers and processes for each column.

Mr. Lou Fabrizio emphasized making the submission as organized as possible. Think about what you would want as a peer reviewer. Don't include "the kitchen sink." Don't provide multiple copies of manuals as different excerpts; label them and reference the same document by page number. Come up with a numbering system, and spell out all acronyms.

Ms. Hall said states sometimes submit several assessments at same time. They can be in the same index, but the middle column must indicate the assessment being referenced. Different colors or other methods can be used to distinguish the assessments, rather than "dumping" three or four submissions in the same index in the second column and expecting the peer reviewers to unravel the information. States should act as "sherpas," helping the peer reviewers locate information easily. Provide specific page numbers instead of referring to the "technical report" in general.

The panel was asked how much of an overview of the state system is helpful, and where it should be placed. Mr. Verges said there is no specific place in the peer review, other than the cover letter, to describe where a unique situation or system details. He advised providing just enough information to help ED understand the system.

The panel discussed the inclusion of URLs. The peer reviewers said evidence should be submitted without URLs, in accordance with the Guide. Information provided in videos would be more helpful if the content were documented in the text instead. If a URL is used, it should be only for additional information. If using a video, provide the relevant timeframe to help the reviewer find the information.

Ms. Howard said to keep the response specific, make every word count, and use consistent terminology throughout. She recommended editing everything and using an external reviewer to look at the technical quality.

Ms. Witt raised another issue. Often, part of a submission consists of technical documents from a vendor. She asked about the best way for the state to use those documents in a way that helps the peer reviewer. Mr. Verges said their contractors help with those decisions, but they need to make the explanations clear. If there's a "hole" (unmet requirement), it is best to acknowledge it and explain the state's plan for addressing it. Contractors needs to know what is expected of them. Ms. Howard agreed that an unmet requirement should be accompanied by the state's plan to address it.

Other comments:

- The group discussed submitted data runs. Do the peer reviewers want to see them? Mr. Verges said they do if there are correlations. The data require an explanation.
- Understanding and meeting the critical elements is key. Mr. Fabrizio advised preparing summaries of the findings of data analyses or reports.
- Sometimes evidence doesn't fit, and the submission starts to "fall apart" as gaps become obvious. States should learn from the unexpected feedback coming from ED. Peer review information should be integrated into the process up front, as assessments are being developed. Work closely with the vendor and ask the right questions on the front end.
- Be sure the staff compiling the evidence understands the critical elements. A state can submit for the wrong standard because if staff members are not attuned to the vocabulary and process.
- If you didn't do a cognitive lab, how do you meet the relevant requirement? Know what each section means, and look at the evidence.
- As a starting point, read the examples, then prepare your submission accordingly. Add more information only if needed.
- ED is starting to post peer review comments along with the letters; states may find these comments helpful.
- If a state doesn't understand what ED is looking for, what should staff members do? Ms. Hall suggested emailing ED and also looking at other state submissions and peer review notes. Scott Norton can answer questions. Many states have TACs that can provide advice but be sure to submit minutes from a meeting or other evidence indicating that the TAC was consulted. If a vendor is used, they are part of the system as well.
- It's important to send not only the agenda related to the content standards adopted for a state, but also the minutes indicating Board approval.
- Allow months for preparing the submission; work across divisions and staff. Answer all 33 critical elements with their multiple components.
- Organize material in a clear, concise manner. Indicate which contractor is doing what. Provide evidence.
- For the online submission system, don't wait until the last minute to make sure it can be accessed. Check ahead of time to ensure that the password works.

- Applying to be a peer reviewer can help. Working in this role provides an in-depth education, in part because of the expertise of other peer reviewers.

Additional Questions and Comments

- A participant asked if there were examples that affect peer decision-making in a positive way. Mr. Verges said he learned test administration monitoring. Florida uses call logs, chat features, telemetry data, and top-down test administration monitoring. Other people are surprised that they don't do desk audits. He said it was a big change for them.
- Another participant said their monitoring was becoming more sophisticated. They use a checklist, and they know who is supposed to do what. North Carolina helped them with standard setting and alignment studies. They came a long way and will continue to use a more integrated approach to ensure a good system.
- Ms. Spitz encouraged participants to work across offices, especially in large states. For example, if you don't work in special education, you might not get all the right pieces for those critical elements. She said the site MAX.gov is easy to use once you're familiar with it; many documents can be shared. However, it doesn't provide a way to organize documents under folders, so they must be labeled by number or another system that makes it easy to sort and find them. Make the labeling process simple (e.g., use the technical report and test names). She said abbreviations may be used for long document titles.
- It might be useful to have someone who isn't in your office look at your index to see if it makes sense. Feedback from someone who doesn't work on assessments can be valuable.
- Some documents ask for communication with parents, schools, and others. Sections 5 and 6 have a great deal of information on communication.
- In MAX.gov. the documents go into a list, with no sorting or organization; that's why the index is important. Put all the evidence for a particular assessment together; don't mix evidence.
- Another way to organize is to upload documents in the order of the critical elements.
- Ms. Spitz said states don't organize the index in the same way, even though there's an index template. She said to label the sub-elements so peer reviewers can find the information you want them to find. Make sure peer reviewers know where to look because if they can't find the evidence you submit, they can't say that you've met a requirement.
- Mr. Fabrizio noted that sometimes the wrong page number is provided (e.g., it might be transposed). States should have someone check the accuracy of page numbers, use the spell checker, and schedule everything in advance.