

New Jersey Strengthens Foundations with Written Procedures

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Documented processes and procedures support the accurate implementation of fiscal requirements and data reporting obligations set out in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). With transparent and comprehensive written procedures, a state can better ensure the timely completion of essential fiscal compliance and data reporting activities. Written procedures also smooth communication and collaboration across state divisions, streamline processes, and improve efficiency.

Staff Transition and High-Stakes Requirements

At the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), systematically documenting IDEA fiscal processes and procedures was essential to navigating a personnel transition. With the impending retirement of a long-term IDEA Part B fiscal coordinator, who had worked primarily on her own managing federal grants, staff in the NJDOE Office of Special Education Policies and Procedures (OSEPP) faced numerous concerns.

What is our exact process? What data do we need to gather from whom and when? Is any of this documented? In implementing high-stakes federal regulations with complex nuances, these can be common questions when addressing staff turnover.

“Our fiscal coordinator had done it for over 25 years and was getting ready to retire,” said Kathy Ehling, manager of NJDOE OSEPP’s Bureau of Governance and Fiscal Support. **“We didn’t have any set procedures in place. We really had absolutely no idea what she did.”**

NJDOE OSEPP staff soon determined that they did not have written procedures specific to the allocation of Part B subgrants to local educational agencies (LEAs) to pass on to the veteran’s successor. Although the fiscal coordinator kept a tracking spreadsheet to guide her work, the documentation was not easily understood by a newcomer to the grants management process.

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The Center for IDEA Fiscal Reporting (CIFR) provides technical assistance to state educational agencies (SEAs) to help them collect and report special education fiscal data to meet IDEA fiscal requirements, specifically maintenance of state financial support (MFS), allocation of IDEA Part B subgrants to local educational agencies (LEAs), LEA maintenance of effort (MOE), and coordinated early intervening services (CEIS).

To build states’ capacity and facilitate state sharing on IDEA fiscal issues, CIFR provides universal, targeted, and intensive technical assistance through virtual and on-site engagements, virtual communities of practice, tools and resources, a website, and a listserv for state staff with IDEA fiscal responsibilities.

“It was all in her head,” said Barbara Haake, the incoming coordinator. **“She always knew where to go for something, what to do, what time. Getting the procedures written down was going to be paramount.”**

Staff quickly realized they needed technical assistance to help them systematically and comprehensively capture the necessary information to accurately allocate Part B subgrants in the next cycle.

Putting Institutional Memory to Paper

New Jersey enlisted CIFR to review its processes and help staff develop proper documentation from start to finish. During an on-site visit in the spring of 2017, a team of CIFR TA providers walked the staff through a framework of eight critical components to include in state procedures for allocating Part B subgrants. The framework included suggested timelines and sample language. The team’s guidance and the framework (see sidebar) enabled NJDOE OSEPP to develop high-level procedures to describe how the state fulfills IDEA subgrant regulations.

“They sat with us for literally two days straight, with the person who was retiring, and we documented from A to Z everything that we needed to document,” Ehling recalled.

The CIFR team also helped gather detailed information from the outgoing fiscal coordinator to serve as a basis for an internal staff manual covering every step of the allocations process. They asked a series of probing questions about each activity to obtain a comprehensive picture of her tasks and timelines. **“CIFR asked questions we didn’t even know to ask,”** Haake said.

Building on the information shared and collected during CIFR’s site visit, NJDOE OSEPP staff continued to create and refine documents that identified relevant staff roles and responsibilities, data needs, timelines, and state fiscal monitoring responsibilities. The combination of CIFR technical expertise and resources helped New Jersey standardize its fiscal processes and give its incoming IDEA Part B fiscal coordinator a strong foundation going forward.

Does your state need assistance documenting processes related to IDEA fiscal implementation or reporting? Contact your CIFR TA Team at cifr_info@WestEd.org.

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CIFR PRACTICE GUIDE

Developing Written Procedures for the Allocation of IDEA Part B Subgrants to Local Educational Agencies provides recommended components, key questions for states to consider, and sample text to adapt. View CIFR’s resource catalog: <https://cifr.wested.org/resources>

