



Office of Special Education Programs
Research to Practice Division

IDEA Discretionary Investments
Impact Story Initiative



Office of Special Education Programs
U.S. Department of Education

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OSEP's IDEA DISCRETIONARY INVESTMENTS: IMPACT STORY INITIATIVE

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) authorizes the Office of Special Education Programs to invest in discretionary projects that provide leadership, support, and high-quality capacity-building services to support project recipients and audiences to identify, implement, and sustain effective evidence-based practices that improve outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. These high-quality capacity-building supports are multifaceted, nuanced, and tailored to meet the needs of the recipients of each project's services and to educate varied audiences.

However, because the projects must respond to both OSEP's administrative and programmatic requirements, in addition to the needs of the recipients of their services, projects can find it difficult to explain the difference the project makes in plain language to a general audience. In short, how does the project make a difference? Telling a story about that difference, an "impact story," can help paint a richer picture of how a project fulfills its purpose and can ultimately improve outcomes for infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities.

OSEP seeks impact stories to highlight how its investments in capacity-building services to target recipients support improved outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families. OSEP highly encourages grantees to submit impact stories for those projects that have been funded more than once or are in the third or later year of the project period. Impact stories are not a required project activity.

Cohorts of projects may choose to jointly develop stories or a compilation of impact stories. Grantees may develop an impact story across their various projects (e.g., all projects at a particular institution). Stories may focus on a particular district, region, or state that features multiple projects and their combined impact in the community. These stories may be longer than the recommended 1-3 pages.

WHAT IS AN IMPACT STORY?

Purpose of an Impact Story

Impact stories offer an opportunity to tell a compelling story of how OSEP funded projects are creating systemic improvement with their target recipients and audiences. Impact stories can provide rich insights about how projects reached their intended and unintended outcomes and help audiences see the project's value. OSEP funded projects can use impact stories to highlight achievements and share successes. These stories are an opportunity to capture deeper insights about a project's journey, such as the sustainability of the support it provides, and the meaningful relationships developed with the target recipients.

An impact story should be a brief narrative of one to three pages. Each story should highlight achievements and demonstrate the project's progress. The story should focus on specific aspects of the work to share with a larger community that showcases how the project effectively builds recipients' capacity. Impact stories may address some of the following questions:

- How did the project demonstrate that the project recipients met outcomes?
- How did strategies evolve to meet recipients' needs and project goals?
- What evidence indicates that the project is meeting its outcomes?
- What are some important lessons that contribute to the project's success and led to changes

that improved the project's performance?

- How has the project evolved and moved through different implementation phases to produce desired outcomes?

The Department may broadly share these stories with internal and external audiences, such as other ED offices, States, districts, schools, Congress, technical assistance (TA) providers, and the public. The stories are not a requirement of OSEP's grant. However, projects may find the stories useful to underscore how the project met short, mid, and long-term outcomes, and to inform other audiences about the project's value.

What does "impact" mean?

In research and program evaluation, the word "impact" can be defined as having an effect, benefit, or influence on the lives of citizens and society beyond contribution to academic research (Barnes, 2015). OSEP does not intend that the word impact as used in this document means that there is scientific evidence of causal relationship between the capacity-building services the projects provide and their impact, and in particular the desired long-term project outcomes. However, there should be a logical connection between the services provided and the outcomes achieved as laid out in the project's logic model.

Organizing the impact stories around project milestones towards longer term goals, and project outputs and outcomes can highlight the project's importance. When presented effectively, "impact stories" can be a useful tool for educating audiences about a project's short- and mid-term outcomes, and the results achieved that suggest progress toward longer term outcomes, and ultimately, improved outcomes for infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities.

STORY DEVELOPMENT

Since impact stories can serve several purposes, different audiences must be able to understand and engage with the story. A concise story that articulates the major points the project wants to make, told in a simple and engaging way will hold the audience's attention until the end (see [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#)). The story should be constructed on the foundation of the project's logic model -- its short, mid, and long-term outcomes, outputs, milestones, and the project's context and resources.

An impact story can:

- Capture progress over time;
- Help educate the broader community and education decision-makers about the project's impact on the recipients of its services;
- Demonstrate the value of the project and its responsible use of resources;
- Champion best practices;
- Attract new partners for collaboration; and
- Be repurposed in other dissemination activities.

THE AUDIENCE

Projects should consider their primary audiences when developing the impact story and how those audiences will use the stories. Stories should highlight topics, policies, and outcomes of value to the primary audiences. Audiences may include, but are not limited to, advisory boards, recipients, other projects, local programs or school districts, local and state policy makers, the Department, and Congress.

SELECTING A TOPIC

When selecting the topic of an impact story, projects should consider how the impact story is related to both the specific needs of project recipients and topics, policies, and outcomes that concern the story's audiences. In choosing the primary message the impact story will convey, projects may want to consider how the story will highlight the project's capacity, maturity, and accomplishments throughout the life of the project. The focus of the impact story will vary at differing stages of the project. For example, a project in its early stages might describe the project and the anticipated outcomes. Projects in later stages may want to focus on partnerships that promoted the project's success, significant policy changes achieved because of the project, or how the project met the needs of specific recipients. Although projects may not have achieved long-term outcomes, an impact story can focus on how accomplishments to date serve as indicators that the project is on track toward meeting mid- and long-term outcomes.

Projects may want to focus on impact stories that highlight the current [Secretary's priorities](#), the final supplemental priorities for [discretionary grants](#) (see Final Priorities: 86 FR 70635-86 FR 70641) or stories that align with the key focus areas outlined in the Secretary's [Raise the Bar: Lead the World](#) initiative.

STRUCTURE OF THE IMPACT STORY

The impact story's structure should walk the reader through project's goal related to the impact story, provide context for the work, and share compelling results related to the story's theme. Structural elements to consider could include:

Title

- Captures the overall message of the story (Does not have to be the project's title)
- Can include the project recipient(s), as appropriate
- Should include an action verb
- Should capture the reader's attention

Overview

- Describes the problem the project addresses and why it's important
- Uses data, as appropriate, to frame the problem
- Specifies who benefits from the project and its services

Specifics

As appropriate, impact stories can address the following questions:

- Who provided the service, including project partners?
- If there were project partners, how did they support the project?
- What outcomes have resulted from partnerships?
- How was the project implemented?
- How did the project activities address the problem?
- How was the project's progress evaluated?
- What were some lessons learned that led to course corrections that influenced the project's outcomes?
- What has been the impact to date on the project's outcomes?
- How is the project ensuring that the work will lead to long-term, sustainable change?

Project Outcomes

As appropriate, the impact story can address these questions:

- What are the short-term or intermediate outcomes that the project addresses?
- What are the specific outcomes of the project's services in this impact story?
- How do these outcomes matter to the project recipients?

Style

- Messages should be direct and concise.
- Strong impact stories use plain language and avoid jargon (e.g., do not use abbreviations or acronyms).
- Short paragraphs—no more than three to four sentences—are most effective.
- The impact story should be no more than three pages.
- Impact stories should be in the active voice whenever possible, (e.g., “Mrs. Smith taught Jimmy” not “Jimmy was taught by Mrs. Smith”).
- Factual stories are most effective and, if used, data sources for any evidence or assertions should be cited.
- Direct quotes from recipients can strengthen the story.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Accessibility

All project products, including publications, webinars, and videos developed by must be “508 compliant” which means they must meet or exceed accessibility requirements in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. 794d), as amended. Products must also meet the Open Licensing Regulations at 2 C.F.R. §3474.20 as referenced in the project's cooperative agreement or grant award notification. All projects are responsible for ensuring compliance and accessibility. Resources to support projects in making their products accessible can be found at the [OSEP IDEAS that Work website](#).

Disclaimer

Impact stories should include the standard publication disclaimer located at 34 CFR 75.620, “The contents of this (insert type of publication, e.g., book, report, film) were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.”

Timeline

Please submit your Impact Stories in narrative format in an accessible Microsoft Word document. In addition to a narrative submission, projects may consider 508-compliant video submissions. Projects may submit their impact stories to their Project Officers for review between **December 29, 2023** and **February 2, 2024**. Project Officers will review draft submissions and provide feedback within 15 business days of receipt. Final versions of impact stories should be submitted by **Friday, March 29, 2024** to the **OSEP Project Officer** with a copy to **Julia Martin Eile** at Julia.Martin.Eile@ed.gov.

SAMPLE IMPACT STORIES

1. [An Improvement and Learning Journey: Empowering Local Special Education Entities to Address the Special Education Teacher Shortage in Illinois](#)
(Source: National Center for Systemic Improvement).
2. [Collection of Impact Stories](#) by the US Department of Education's National and Regional Comprehensive Centers
(Source: Comprehensive Center Network)
3. [Investments in Adolescent and School Health Programs Help Youth Become Healthy, Successful Adults](#)
(Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
4. [Summary of Impact of the 325N Projects](#)
(Source: Office of Special Education Programs 325N Grantees at San Diego State University, University of Colorado at Denver, University of Connecticut, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Toledo, and University of Washington).