

Maryland's Framework for the Preparation, Review, and Approval of Local Master Plans and Annual Updates

October 28–29, 2008

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A. Bridge to Excellence Mandate for Local Master Plans and Annual Updates

Over the past six years, the State Department of Education and Maryland's 24 local school systems have directed a great deal of time, effort, and resources toward the master plan provision of the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act.¹

This legislation (also known as Bridge to Excellence or BTE) is the most recent effort by State government to provide equitable funding along with the accountability mechanisms and tools to improve student achievement and close achievement gaps among student subgroups across all Maryland public schools.

BTE is based on the premise that high standards, an increase in State education aid, and specific performance and accountability measures are essential in moving school systems and the State forward.

The Bridge to Excellence Act restructured Maryland's public school finance system, resulting in an increase in State aid to public schools by \$2.2 billion over the past six fiscal years (\$1.3 billion more than required under the previous system), and creating an adequate funding stream that is distributed in an equitable, simplistic manner, and which affords school systems flexibility in allocating the funds.

In exchange for flexibility in spending, local school systems are held accountable for the performance of their schools and their students and must demonstrate that they are making progress each year in improving student performance and closing achievement gaps.

In 2003, local school systems were mandated under BTE to develop a 5-year master plan that outlined strategies for improving student achievement and eliminating achievement gaps. Each year, an update to those plans is submitted and reviewed for sufficiency and to determine if progress is being made by individual school systems and by the State.

Whereas the comprehensive 5-year master plan is a blueprint, the annual updates rely on the analysis of performance data to adjust the blueprint as necessary to assure that local school systems are on track toward meeting their goals.

A-1. What essential information were local school systems required to include in their master plans?

Answer: The essential information that local school systems had to include in their master plans reflected key program and fiscal requirements in both the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act and the No Child Left

¹ Section 5-401, Comprehensive Master Plans, of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland.

Behind Act of 2001.² Specifically, each Master Plan was required to include:

- Goals and objectives that are aligned with State performance standards and local performance standards;
- Implementation strategies for meeting goals and objectives;
- Methods for measuring progress toward meeting goals and objectives;
- Time lines for implementation of the strategies for meeting goals and objectives;
- Time lines for meeting goals and objectives;
- A description of the alignment of the county board's budget with goals, objectives, and strategies for improving student achievement;
- The impact of the proposed goals, objectives, and implementation strategies on public school facilities and capital improvements that may be needed to implement the plan; and
- Any other information required by the State Superintendent.

Based on the authority given the State Department of Education under BTE, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) also required that

² The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The NCLB Act can be found at <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/>.

individual local school systems address the following attributes in each master plan:

- An Executive Summary as a stand-alone reference document;
- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) goals and performance indicators relating to: (a) student attainment of reading and mathematics proficiency; (b) English Language Learners' attainment of English proficiency; (c) teacher quality; (d) safe learning environments; and (e) graduation from high school;
- MSDE Cross-program Themes (e.g., Education That is Multicultural³; Fine Arts⁴);
- ESEA Cross-program Themes (e.g., Gifted and Talented Programs⁵; Teacher Capacity and Quality⁶; Educational Technology⁷); and
- Written certifications and assurances.

State law and MSDE called for each master plan to include these requirements to address both the general student population as well as eight specifically identified student subgroups (African American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, White, Free/Reduced Meals, Limited English Proficient, and Special Education).

³ COMAR 13A.04.05, Education That is Multicultural.

⁴ COMAR 13A.04.16, Fine Arts Initiative.

⁵ ESEA, Title V, Part D, Subpart 5.

⁶ ESEA, Title II, Part A.

⁷ ESEA, Title II, Part D.

In order to ensure that the myriad of educational programs are integrated, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) further required that local school systems (LSSs) submit their federal program applications along with their master plan and annual update submissions.

A-2. What performance data were included in the master plans?

Answer: Local school systems were required to include in the master plans the baseline data for each NCLB Goal Area.

A-3. What help did MSDE have in meeting its responsibilities for developing a framework for the preparation, review, and approval of local Master Plans and Annual Updates?

Answer: To help meet MSDE's responsibilities under the BTE Act, the State Superintendent of Schools established the Bridge to Excellence Master Plan Workgroup. The original workgroup, which was comprised of staff from MSDE and experienced educators and representatives of important stakeholder organizations across the state, advised the Department in developing guidance documents for LSSs to use when preparing master plans and the required plan contents, including the additional MSDE requirements.

Each year, a workgroup that is similar in composition to the original BTE Master Plan Workgroup is convened to assist MSDE in refining the guidance documents and the review process. In collaboration with this workgroup, MSDE refines the guidance documents to reflect changes in federal and State statute and regulations.

B. Preparation of Local Master Plans and Annual Updates

The State adopted the master plan as a framework for improving academic achievement for all students and subgroups of students and providing transparency in the LSSs' use of new resources allocated under BTE. The ultimate goal was to create a local master plan that focuses on student achievement and is consistent with performance targets established by MSDE for each NCLB Goal Area.⁸

B-1. How is the master plan defined?

Answer: The master plan is defined as a local school system plan that describes the goals, objectives, and strategies that would be used to improve student achievement and meet State performance standards and local performance standards in each segment of the population.⁹

In developing their plans, local school systems were required to incorporate State, federal, and local funding and initiatives and integrate them into a comprehensive master plan to improve student achievement for all students and to eliminate achievement gaps between subgroups of students. A local school system could submit its existing integrated management plan or strategic plan as its master plan – if the integrated plan met the requirements outlined in the Bridge to Excellence Act.¹⁰

⁸ Maryland State Department of Education. (March 25, 2003). Final Guidance on Developing the Five-Year Comprehensive Master Plan, p. 17.

⁹ Maryland State Department of Education. (March 25, 2003). Final Guidance on Developing the Five-Year Comprehensive Master Plan, p. 3.

¹⁰ Section 5-401 (g), Comprehensive Master Plans, of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland.

B-2. What is the annual update requirement?

Answer: BTE required that local school systems submit to MSDE updates to their master plans on or before October 15 each year during the period covered by the plans (a 5-year period beginning with the 2003–2004 school year).

Senate Bill 907, which amended BTE, requires local boards of education to continue submitting updates to their comprehensive master plans in October 2008 and 2009 and to submit new 5-year comprehensive plans by October 15, 2010.

Each year, in response to guidance documents developed by MSDE, local school systems engage in a careful examination of data related to the federal, State, and local goals; changing demographics; and fiscal considerations; and prepare and submit Annual Updates to MSDE for review and approval.

C. MSDE's Review of Local Master Plans and Annual Updates

Under BTE, the State Superintendent of Schools is required to conduct a review of master plan and annual update submissions for compliance with BTE requirements.¹¹

Annual Updates are also reviewed to determine if the local Master Plan is having the intended effect of improving student achievement, in relation to State performance standards, for all students and subgroups of students during a school year.¹²

¹¹ Section 5-401 (f), Comprehensive Master Plans, of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland.

¹² Section 5-401 (f)(2)(ii), Comprehensive Master Plans, of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland.

As required under Senate Bill 894 and BTE, the State Superintendent must review annually how each school system's current year approved budget and increases in expenditures over the prior year are consistent with the master plan and any updates to the master plan; and how the board's actual prior year budget and additional expenditures in the prior year's budget are aligned with the Master Plan.¹³

C-1. How did MSDE conduct the review of the local Master Plans submitted in 2003?

Answer: MSDE instituted a formal peer review process that was intended to ensure that each local Master Plan complied with BTE and NCLB requirements, and additional MSDE requirements. Each review panel was comprised of a combination of MSDE staff, staff from local school systems, and other experts.

In addition, MSDE staff conducted technical and program reviews of specific program areas. The review process involved more than 130 persons and thousands of hours.

Peer reviewers used an instrument developed by a subcommittee of the BTE Master Plan Workgroup to record whether or not evidence of required information was included in the Master Plan. The reviewers then met with a designated facilitator to discuss each member's evaluation. Subsequently, the review panel wrote a consensus evaluation indicating both the strengths of the plan and any weaknesses that the local school system needed to address. Clarifying questions, related to the areas where required evidence was absent from the plan, were also forwarded to the LSSs.

¹³ Section 5-401 (h)(1), Comprehensive Master Plans, of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland.

A site visit was then conducted to discuss the consensus evaluation and provide the LSS with an opportunity to comment on the findings. A timeline was established for the LSS to submit additional information to MSDE. The panel wrote a final report and made a recommendation to the State Superintendent on the approvable status of each Master Plan.

C-2. How does MSDE conduct the review of Annual Updates?

Answer: MSDE has instituted a process for the review of Annual Updates. By design, the review process is similar to the master plan peer review process, by including multi-member review panels, technical reviews, specific written review guidance, final consensus reports, and recommendations to the State Superintendent regarding approval. It is different from the master plan review process previously described, by:

- Including guidance review instruments for the analysis of data and assessment of plan content for sufficiency;
- Eliminating on-site visits; and
- Only requiring a Meeting Review based on the LSS designation as a System in Improvement¹⁴ or Corrective Action, or the need that the LSS provide additional information to the panel.

¹⁴ Code of Maryland Regulations 13A.01.04.08. The State Board, upon the recommendation of the State Superintendent of Schools or upon its own motion, shall identify for improvement any local school system that for 2 consecutive years fails to make Adequate Yearly Progress.

C-3. What methods are utilized to establish a fair and consistent review?

Answer: MSDE utilizes several methods that are intended to make the review process fair and consistent. To begin, panel rosters are drafted to ensure impartiality in panelists' assignments.

Each panel member receives training on the role of the review panelist and the step-by-step procedures that result in a consensus decision on the plan's approvability. The training focuses on the consistent use of tools used in the review, with specific guidance provided on what to record during the reviewer's independent review of the Annual Updates.

Panel facilitators play an important role in facilitating the panel review. In the additional training that they receive, panel facilitators become familiar with the Consensus Tool for recording, updating, and transmitting clarifying questions to local school systems. Facilitators also participate in training on how to work with panel members in reaching consensus, vetting clarifying questions, and debriefing procedures.

In a recent survey of individuals who are responsible for preparing Annual Updates and plan reviewers, survey results indicate that, overall, MSDE's guidance and communication are effective throughout the updating process.

- 82 of 85 respondents (96%) reported they were provided clear and comprehensive guidance.
- Of all respondents, 92% reported that communication throughout the Annual Update process was effective in assisting them to successfully fulfill roles.

**D. Department of Legislative Services’
Performance Audit of Local Master Plans
and 2004 Annual Updates**

During the fall of 2004, staff from the Office of Legislative Audits in the Department of Legislative Services conducted a performance audit of local Master Plans and the 2004 Annual Updates to determine if the plans and updates contained information as required by State law and MSDE.

D-1. Are the Master Plans and Annual Updates compliant with State law?

Answer: Yes. The Performance Audit Report issued in January 2005 revealed that LSSs generally complied with the requirements contained in State law and, as applicable, additional requirements established by MSDE.

D-2. What additional findings were included in the Performance Audit Report?

Answer: The Performance Audit Report revealed that the master plan update guidance provided by MSDE to LSSs did not adequately address all necessary components. Specifically, the guidance did not require each LSS to submit the current status of the performance indicators for each NCLB Goal Area.

Another finding of the Performance Audit Report was that LSSs needed additional guidance on how to submit a summary of how the prior year’s budget and actual expenditures aligned with goals, objectives, and strategies of the Master Plan, as most of the updates failed to adequately address this requirement.

**E. MSDE and BTE Workgroup
Improvement Efforts in the
Preparation, Review, and Approval
of Annual Updates**

Each year, in collaboration with the Bridge to Excellence Workgroup, MSDE addresses areas of concern that are raised by local educators regarding the preparation, review, and approval of annual update submissions. The workgroup improvement efforts typically result in changes to the guidance documents. The goal of the workgroup is to balance the need for accountability with local school systems’ desire to reduce burden.

E-1. What changes were made in the guidance documents as a result of the Performance Audit Report?

Answer: In response to the findings of the Performance Audit Report, MSDE amended the guidance by organizing around the five goals established under NCLB, and additional State and local goals. As a result, MSDE and other users of Master Plans and Annual Updates are able to determine if each local school system is satisfactorily progressing toward State mandated performance targets in each of the NCLB Goal Areas.

In response to the Performance Audit finding that additional guidance was needed related to budgeting, the guidance was improved. More information is explained on this in section E-3.

E-2. Are the guidance documents updated to reflect changes in statute and regulations?

Answer: Yes, the guidance documents are updated annually to reflect changes in statute and regulations.

In 2005, in response to Senate Bill 894, schools systems received revised guidance on illustrating the alignment between identified priorities and their budget.

This required each local school system to submit with the Annual Update a detailed summary of how the school system's current year approved budget and increases in expenditures over the prior year are consistent with the Master Plan. Additionally, each school system was required to include in the update a summary of how the board's actual prior year budget and additional expenditures in the prior year's budget aligned with the Master Plan.

School systems were further asked to list revenue according to source (local, State, federal, and other) and planned expenditures attributed to the following areas: the five goals of No Child Left Behind, local goals not included in the federal goals, and a mandatory cost of doing business category, which includes increases in negotiated contracts, transportation, nonpublic special education placements, additional positions for enrollment growth, and the costs of opening a new or renovated school.

E-3. Has MSDE changed the guidance documents in response to local school system input?

Answer: Yes. The updated guidance documents also respond to results of surveys of local planning teams and MSDE staff.

Local staff wanted the updating process and the Master Plan and Annual Update documents to be more meaningful and helpful for the public. As a result, significant revisions were made in 2006 to the annual update guidance document. The revisions included a set of questions that persist throughout the document as a follow up to performance data analyses. The set of questions that school systems are required to respond to are as follows:

1. Describe where progress is evident. In your response, please identify progress in terms of grade levels, subject areas, and subgroups.
2. Identify the practices, programs, or strategies, and the related resource allocations, that appear related to the progress.
3. Describe where challenges are evident. In your response, please identify challenges in terms of grade levels, subject areas, and subgroups.
4. Describe the changes or adjustments that will be made, along with the related resource allocations, to ensure progress. Include timelines where appropriate.

Local school systems wanted the data reporting required by the Annual Update to be more efficient. Due to limited technological and staff capacity, annual update documents were not initially pre-populated with data. This meant that local school systems were reporting data that MSDE already had.

While the lack of technological infrastructure and staff capacity remain a challenge, the State Department of Education has streamlined the annual update guidance document this year by incorporating templates pre-populated with data that convey progress toward improving student performance and eliminating achievement gaps.

These templates, which display system-level data demonstrating achievement and achievement gap trends, relate to student performance on the Maryland School Assessment, the High School Assessments, and other performance measures, and are intended to help local systems assess and adjust plans at the system and school levels. Local school systems are asked to analyze the most current data available and to adjust their master plans so that the goals of the school system are met.

Also, in an effort to make the Annual Update more meaningful and helpful to the public, local school systems are asked this year to address the alignment of priorities and annual budgets in terms of the realignment of funds or retargeting of resources to meet their current year priorities.

F. Review and Approval Process for the 2008 Annual Update Submissions

Each year, the State Department of Education conducts the Technical Review of federal grant programs and the Fine Arts Initiative in August, and the Content Review of the progress toward State and federal NCLB goals in October. These reviews are completed by the end of November.

F-1. How does MSDE ensure the Annual Updates are educationally and programmatically sound?

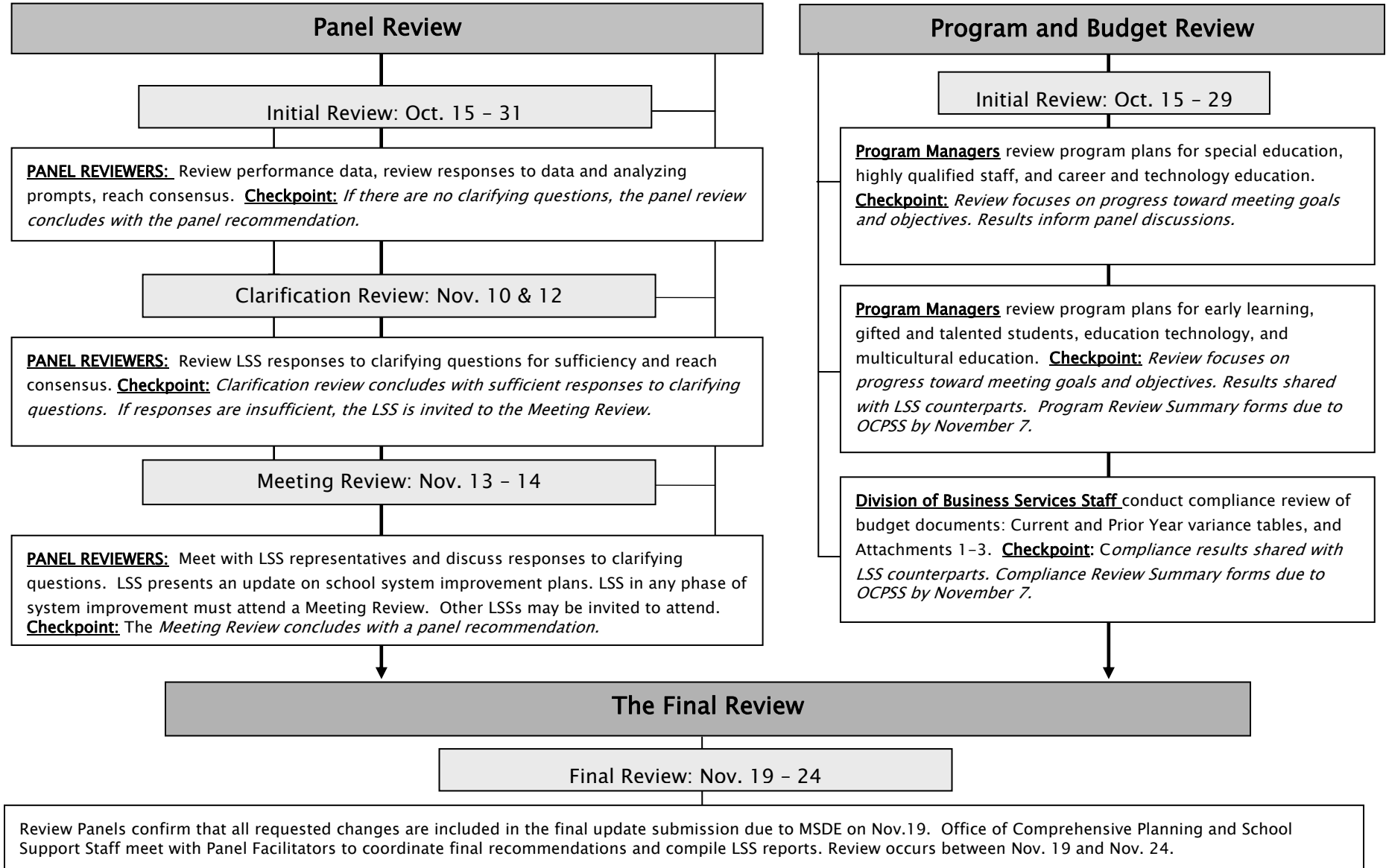
Answer: The Content Review involves an examination of school system analyses of and response to performance data for each of the NCLB Goal Areas, additional State reporting requirements, and cross-cutting themes using the set of questions outlined previously. The Content Review, which is shown on page 9, includes a Panel Review, as well as Program Reviews and a Budget Review.

F-2. How does MSDE make sure the Content Review is consistent and impartial?

Answer: MSDE uses a peer review process. In doing so, MSDE staff and educators from the local school systems who are qualified and able to perform an impartial review are assigned to review panels.

In 2008, a total of 97 review participants are serving on eight panels that will evaluate the updates individually (e.g., Initial Review) and then discuss them with a group to arrive at a consensus decision.

The Content Review



In discussion, panels will identify areas of the Annual Update that need further work, as well as areas of commendable achievement in meeting standards. The panel will forward the school system commendations and, if necessary, requests for additional information. LSS personnel will then respond to these requests in writing (e.g., Clarification Review).

Personnel from any school system may be invited to attend a face-to-face meeting (e.g., Meeting Review). This meeting review is a requirement based on the Local School System's status as a School System in Improvement or Corrective Action.

Representatives from school systems that are invited to the Meeting Review must provide additional information to the panel on their plans for improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps.

F-3. How does MSDE make sure the reviewers are knowledgeable and have experience in specific program areas?

Answer: Because of their knowledge and experience, MSDE program managers review particular components of the LSS Annual Updates related to specific student groups (e.g., early learning, gifted and talented students, students enrolled in career and technology courses) and cross-program themes (e.g., multicultural education, educational technology).

Program managers work with their LSS counterparts as they assess the sufficiency of school system plans toward meeting program goals. In certain cases, the program reviewer (Special Education, Highly

Qualified Staff, and Career and Technology Education) provides a report to the panel to inform their discussion.

F-4. How does MSDE conduct the compliance review of budget documents and the budget alignment?

Answer: Financial specialists conduct a technical compliance review of the budget documents (e.g., current and prior year variance tables). While the Panel Review looks at the alignment between LSS priorities and the budget, this review focuses on the accuracy of the individual budget documents.

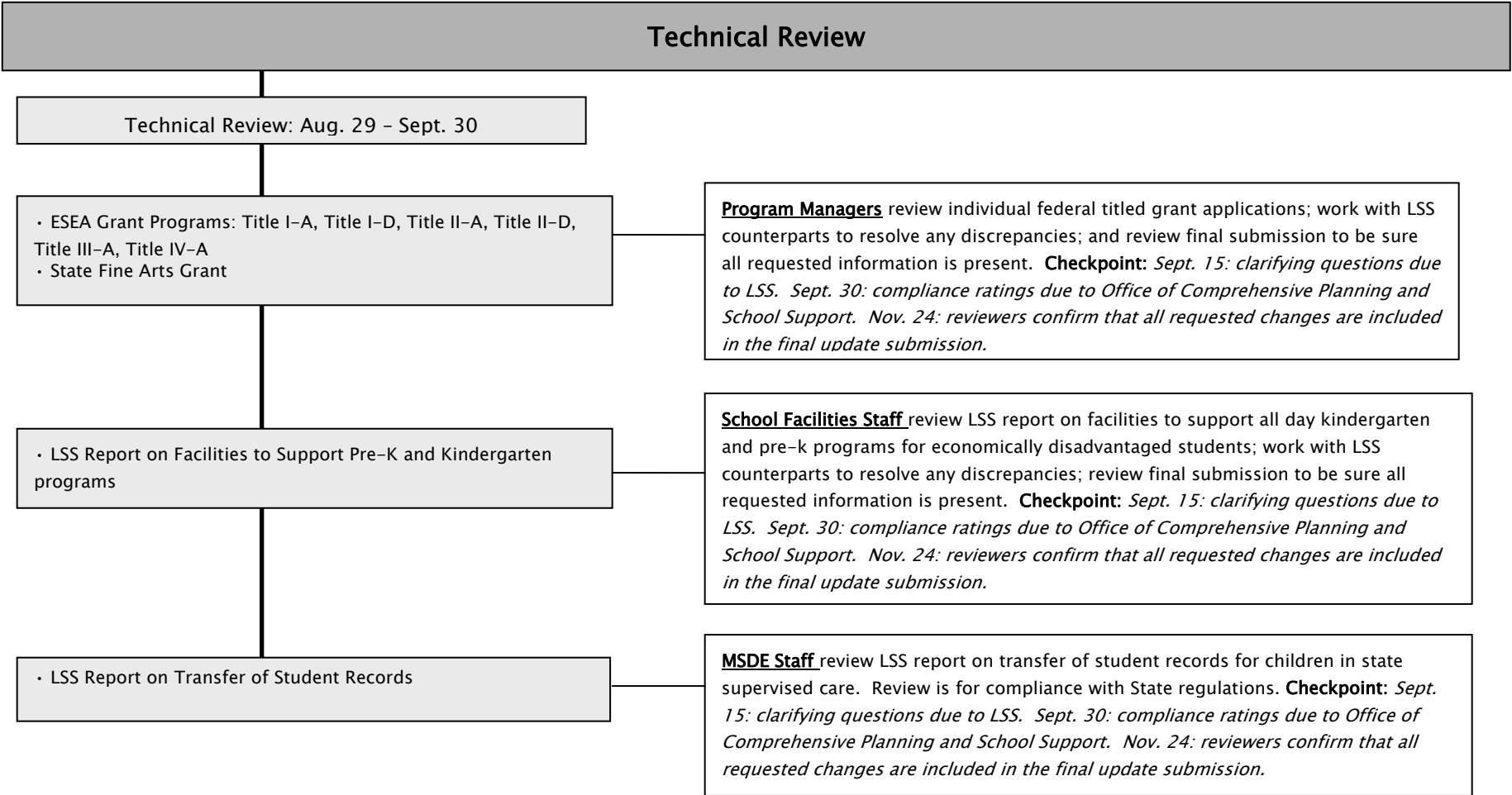
Financial specialists work with their LSS counterparts to resolve any compliance issues. A summary report is provided to the Office of Comprehensive Planning and School Support. The summary report is included in the Final Review.

F-5. How does MSDE make sure the annual update submissions are compliant with State and federal law?

Answer: MSDE conducts a Technical Review, which involves the examination of State and federal grant programs and supporting budget documents to ensure compliance with NCLB and BTE requirements. MSDE program managers work closely with their LSS counterparts to resolve any issues that arise throughout the review.

The graphic organizer on page 11 illustrates step-by-step this year's Technical Review.

The Technical Review



F-6. How does MSDE make sure there is consistency across review panels?

Answer: At the conclusion of the process, Review Panels make a recommendation on the approvable status of each Annual Update. The recommendations are reviewed by staff in the Department's Office of Comprehensive Planning and School Support in the Division of Student, Family, and School Support, and the Division of Business Services, who, in turn, provide the State Superintendent with a recommendation on the approvability of each LSS's annual update submission.

The State Superintendent's recommendations on the approvable status of each Annual Update are reviewed at the State Board of Education meeting in December.

G. Approval Process

G-1. As a result of the Final Review, have any Master Plans or Annual Updates not been recommended as approvable?

Answer: Initially, not all master plan and annual update submissions were recommended as approvable.

One local school system was required in 2006 to submit a new Master Plan, and a number of other school systems were required to submit specific revisions to sections of Master Plans or Annual Updates for additional review and later approval.

Under BTE, a county board may not implement a plan or update unless it has been approved by the State Superintendent.¹⁵

¹⁵ Section 5-401 (f)(3), Comprehensive Master Plans, of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland.

G-2. How are the outcomes of the review process communicated?

Answer: A report that contains the results of the annual review of local school system Annual Updates, and how each school system's budget aligns with its master plan and any updates to the master plan, is submitted annually to the Governor, county governing body, and the General Assembly.¹⁶

¹⁶ Section 5-401 (h)(1) and (2), Comprehensive Master Plans, of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland.