



Meeting
Challenges
Through
Communities
of Practice

New Eyes

The IDEA Partnership at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) has been working with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to develop and implement **Communities of Practice** within the field of special education. The Communities of Practice approach offers state agency personnel a promising approach for engaging stakeholder groups in collaboratively solving complex, and often, persistent problems in special education.

What's Inside

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Find out about the website **www.sharedwork.org**—a living resource for facilitating communication between and among stakeholders.

www.sharedwork.org

A Communication Resource to Support Communities of Practice

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The Communities of Practice approach offers state agency personnel a lens for exploring the human aspects of problems. They can be used as a technical assistance approach for bringing together multiple stakeholders to address complex issues facing special education.

When different stakeholder groups are joined in a Community of Practice, affiliations often develop that support the spread of successful strategies and the generation of new knowledge. Useful information, training and innovation are transferred quickly from colleague to colleague. Policy, research and practice documents pick up meaning as they are shared and translated into practice by the Community of Practice members.

State agency personnel serve an important role in maintaining communication and keeping community members focused on shared outcomes. They develop a collaborative foundation in which stakeholders can undertake their shared work on issues. This sets the tone for accomplishing the important tasks and building the vital relationships needed to carry the shared work forward.

Learn about the IDEA Partnership's Communities of Practice at **www.ideapartnership.org**.
National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc.

There are many ways that state agency personnel and Communities of Practice facilitators can enhance communication. [See the text box, *Supporting Ongoing Communication*, for suggestions.] One approach that shows great promise is the use of an interactive website to link stakeholders together.

The IDEA Partnership has pioneered the use of a website for its national Communities of Practice. The living resource provides a foundation for participants to share their knowledge, generate suggestions for addressing issues and showcase the progress within states and organizations. This example features national Communities of Practice that are focused around issues such as transition, mental health and the relationship between the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) and IDEA.

Read on to find out about how the IDEA Partnership's website, www.sharedwork.org, is supporting the communication needs of participants in the IDEA Partnership's Communities of Practice.

*Everyone should use a tool like **shared-work.org**. It is very useful in reaching many people for help and ideas.*

—State Agency Personnel
State Community Member

This site is not only great for veteran program people...but also is a real resource to those just getting started!

—State Agency Personnel
State Community Member

Supporting Ongoing Communication



The following suggestions can help state agency personnel and Communities of Practice facilitators enhance and sustain participation.

- Capture interactions through meeting summaries and other documentation. Distribute to all participants.
- Compile and circulate a list of participants' areas of expertise and spheres of influence.
- Create group email, listservs and on-line directories.
- Facilitate meetings or conference calls.
- Use a regular "check-in" method to strengthen relationships (calls and emails).
- Tag websites to highlight other work and to honor the work that has been done around an issue.
- Discuss the best way to come together in ways that consider the needs of all group members (e.g., dedicated conference, cross-stakeholder strand/panel at a statewide conference, issue-focused meeting, presentations/speakers across fields, invitational meeting across disciplines, video telecast, toll-free audio teleconference, etc.) and then help create those opportunities.

www.sharedwork.org—A Place to Share Knowledge and Conduct Work

As the IDEA Partnership began to promote Communities of Practice as a way of doing work, state teams began to express the need for communication channels that modeled their commitment to engaging stakeholders as allies. Official state websites were available, and while they provided excellent sources of information, typically they were not interactive and were more geared toward providing highly technical information.

It became clear that a mechanism was needed for connecting participants at all levels. The challenge was great. Not only did the IDEA Partnership need a way to keep stakeholders across the nation in communication, there also was a need to develop a model that was responsive to the Communities of Practice work being done within the states. A new approach had to:

- allow for two-way interactions;
- be accessible to all stakeholders;
- view work through a community lens;
- serve as a vehicle for inviting participation; and
- be user-friendly.

An interactive website seemed well suited for these purposes.

IDEA Partnership staff, in cooperation with several state teams, began exploring possible options. Much of the available commercial software was considered too complicated and time consuming to use. Instead, the IDEA Partnership decided to create a simple and functional platform. The **www.sharedwork.org** website was designed by Communities of Practice participants to support and facilitate the shared work that occurs among individuals, organizations and agencies at the local, district, state and national levels.

Site Structure

The **www.sharedwork.org** site accommodates stakeholder interaction at multiple levels. There are three opportunities for interaction. They are:

- **National page.** At the national level, interaction is facilitated among states and organizations in the Communities of Practice.
- **Individual state pages.** Within states, stakeholders use the interactive community structure to discover shared goals, create connections and move to action.
- **Practice group pages.** Participants in practice groups (individuals who have coalesced around an aspect of a larger issue) share information across states and across stakeholder groups.

This structure creates the platform for sharing and generating ideas. It encourages states and stakeholders to look for existing resources, ask for information and tap stakeholder expertise. In this way the structure models active engagement for all stakeholders—a key value of the Communities of Practice concept.

Design Features

Together with state partners, the IDEA Partnership set about identifying features for the site. The goal was to keep it simple in structure, yet functional with regard to the Communities of Practice work. The following features became part of the shared work site for Communities of Practice groups.

- **What's New.** This feature allows users to post upcoming meetings, important information, announcements and other documents. Users click on the link of any topic in which they have an interest. It contains all announcements and background issues.



- **Repository.** This feature allows users to post and share important files and documents of interest to participants in the Communities of Practice. The repository has folders that contain a variety of materials including key documents that are readily available to all users; a history of the work participants have completed; locally developed materials for sharing across the state; and other documents of interest. Users click on the link of any file or document they would like to access.
- **Discussion.** This feature allows for online, ongoing communication and sharing between the members of the national Communities of Practice, practice groups and all stakeholders. Users may click on a topic of interest, review comments made by others and add their own comments. This section sets the context for the work being done on the site.

Site Facilitation

Facilitation is a management function that is necessary in order to keep the site content current and the stakeholders engaged. Participants volunteer to provide facilitation services. Although individuals can serve as facilitators, the responsibilities are such that it is preferable for a group of people to take on the facilitation role as part of their shared work. Examples follow.

- **State facilitation.** State facilitators receive information—in a simple, ready-to-post format—from community participants across the state. If state facilitators decide that the content is appropriate, they will post it to the appropriate site section or folder. Most states have at least a few facilitators. Typically there are more facilitators in states where shared work is being done on many topics and in many locales.
- **Practice groups.** Practice groups focus on topics of interest. They bring together a variety of individuals from across the nation to work

on specific issues. Facilitators are individuals with expertise and experience in a particular issue. They agree to act as the managers of the shared work site. Like their state counterparts, practice group facilitators post information and ensure that stakeholders remain engaged.

*So many practical ideas are floating around the state. **Sharedwork.org** allows us to share each other's knowledge.*

—Professor
State Community Member

State Work on the Shared Work Site

Participating states organize their work on the shared work site around the aforementioned features. Multiple facilitators manage the site. Pennsylvania's involvement with **www.sharedwork.org** provides an example of how the website is being used.

Pennsylvania is a member of the national Community of Practice on Transition. Many stakeholders across the state of Pennsylvania are working collaboratively to improve post-school outcomes of youth and young adults. The vision of the Pennsylvania Community of Practice on Transition is that all Pennsylvania youth and young adults with disabilities will successfully transition to the role of productive, participating citizens. Youth will be empowered to recognize their talents, strengths and voices and have equal access to resources that promote their full participation in the communities where they reside. The Pennsylvania state page is devoted entirely to this work.

Let's take a look at what was on Pennsylvania's state page as of March 31, 2007. As of this date, 775 participants from around the state were registered to conduct work on the Pennsylvania state page. These

individuals actively participate on the shared work site and they also share information throughout their local networks.

The *What's New* feature lists many conference and meeting opportunities throughout the state. These opportunities illustrate the extent of activity that is happening throughout the state related to transition.

Participants have collected a number of items in the *Repository*. For example, users can find:

- historical documents related to transition;
- current documents of importance to all stakeholders; and
- folders for local-to-local sharing.

In the *Discussion* feature, there is a call for suggestions on how to make state meetings more family friendly.

Pennsylvania has a number of practice groups that bring stakeholders together from across the state to work on specific issues. Issue-based practice groups are organized around topics such as career assessment, business partnerships, employment, healthy lifestyles, assistive technology, community participation, transportation and post-secondary education.

*It makes sense to use **sharedwork.org** for communicating with one another. It allows us to find solutions to common issues and barriers many of us are encountering in our own work. This is an active collaborative effort!*

—Local Practitioner
State Community Member

Pennsylvania also provides a shared work space for particular groups. Examples include county workers, transition councils, local projects, recipients of state grants, the Pennsylvania Leadership Team and the Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network. Access to these pages is often password protected.

State agency personnel support participants in working on the shared work site. In addition to directing stakeholders to the shared work site, the state models its use. The live website is in full view at all trainings and meetings. Materials and trainings are posted on the site.

National Work on the Shared Work Site

The National Community of Practice on Collaborative School Behavioral Health provides an illustration of the shared work site features at the national level. National organizations, state and local agencies and technical assistance providers came together and defined pressing problems in school behavioral health services. Now, many national organizations and a wide range of state and local stakeholders and technical assistance centers are forming practice groups to work on these problems. Twelve states have formed Communities of Practice that replicate the national collaborative model around their own issues. Sponsors of this national Community of Practice are the IDEA Partnership and the Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action at the University of Maryland.

Let's take a look at what was on the Collaborative School Behavioral Health page on March 31, 2007. As of this date, there were 1,171 registered members.

In the *What's New* section, there are announcements of an upcoming national meeting in October 2007, an announcement of a newly awarded mental health grant, congratulations to a state that was participating in the grant and an update on an upcoming teleconference. The items in this section are more than

announcements—they convey the extent of activities in which various stakeholders are involved. For example, in the announcement for the 12th Annual Conference on Advancing School-Based Mental Health, the following information from the planning group is shared.

The 10 practice groups organized, disseminated and received submissions in conference strands that mirror the practice group focus. The practice groups have created cross-stakeholder teams from across the country to conduct the reviews. We are in the process of reviewing proposals. We have received 200 proposals this year versus 162 last year. Submissions increased in seven Practice Groups. Click on the link below to see the proposal chart.

From this posting, community participants are kept up-to-date and linked to the work that is being undertaken.

In the *Repository* section, the Collaborative School Behavioral Health Community of Practice has created folders to collect materials. Some of the folders include:

- information dedicated to the National School-Based Mental Health Conference and National Community Building Forum;
- strategies and guidelines that this community uses to conduct work;
- outcomes of participation in high-profile national meetings; and
- information dedicated to the partner organizations.

The folders that are dedicated to ongoing work are constantly changing. As participants conduct their work on the shared work site, the information in the folders changes accordingly.

In the *Discussion* section, two topics are posted.

- Can a Communities of Practice model participation in an invitational meeting? After reading the description of a Community Focus Group Process to generate ideas that would be represented in SAMHSA's National Consensus Meeting, what are your thoughts? Can the voice of community members be invited, even if only one person can be physically present to represent the Community? Let us know your thoughts.
- Is the national Communities of Practice a useful mechanism to connect people who care about school-based mental health? What motivates you to become involved?

There are practice groups around ten issues related to school behavioral health. These practice groups are facilitated by individuals at national organizations, state leaders, technical assistance providers and family group members. The practice groups keep stakeholders across the country connected between national meetings.

*My co-facilitators are all around the country and we share the work. **Sharedwork.org** makes it easy and the response is fantastic!*

—Technical Assistance Provider
National Community Member

Your Turn—Developing a Shared Work Site at the State Level



The IDEA Partnership's shared work website provides a national model for engaging stakeholders in sharing knowledge and working on issues. Keep in mind that even though it is a model, in no way should it be considered the *only* approach.

State agency personnel are encouraged to consider establishing a state website for their Communities of Practice work. Such a site could provide a foundation for supporting local participation throughout the state. As states develop their own shared work sites, the IDEA Partnership will continue the cross-state sharing that has begun on www.sharedwork.org.

To get started, consider the following steps:

- Review www.sharedwork.org.
- Participate in IDEA Partnership demonstrations on the site.
- Identify the website features that would support shared work in your state.
- Explore with stakeholders the features they would like to have on a shared work site.

Remember: A shared work site must enable two-way communication among Community of Practice participants. The IDEA Partnership has found that it is important to provide support for participants in how to use the site.

It also is important to help participants understand the purpose of the shared work site. This may mean differentiating it from other common types of sites. For example, some stakeholders will have experiences with sites where lobbying is a primary activity. They may be accustomed to using sites to get alerts out. This purpose works well when all participants share a particular view, but can be problematic when participants hold varying perceptions. Thus, care should be taken in a shared work site to remind participants that its core purpose is to understand differing perspectives and to find commonalities that unite participants.

Similarly, some users may have experiences with blogs and listservs where sarcasm and irony are used to create humor around issues. Unfortunately, such attempts at humor in a diverse group can have a negative effect. Thus, it also is helpful to distinguish the shared work site from these types of sites to ensure that the spirit and culture of community work can grow.

About Communities of Practice



The Communities of Practice approach offers state agency personnel an approach for engaging stakeholder groups in solving complex and, often, persistent problems in special education. Communities of Practice can help state agency personnel drive strategy, solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, develop members' professional skills and help organizations recruit and retain talent.

Helping State Agency Personnel Accomplish Goals

The Communities of Practice approach unites groups of people who share experience with a common set of problems into action. The focus of Communities of Practice is always on the set of issues itself. Group members develop a shared process for uncovering and solving problems together. They share their knowledge about the issue and then they take action to address the issue, often resulting in the work being taken to a deeper level.

When different stakeholder groups are joined in a Community of Practice, affiliations often develop that support the spread of successful strategies and the creation of new knowledge. Useful information, training and innovation are quickly transferred from colleague

to colleague. Policy, research and practice documents pick up meaning as they are shared and translated into practice by the Community of Practice members.

Individual members in Communities of Practice also contribute through their existing networks. Stakeholder networks—including professional groups and family organizations at both state and local levels—exist across the nation, throughout states and within local jurisdictions. Typically, these networks are organized to share information and provide opportunities for individuals to learn from one another, thus providing an outlet for Communities of Practice to build support for a common message. The Communities of Practice approach does this by:

- involving stakeholder organizations in the effort to improve data on student outcomes;
- identifying how each group can contribute in unique ways; and
- making the connections to professional organizations and family networks routine and meaningful.

Reference: Cashman, J., Linehan, P., & Rosser, M. (2007). *Communities of Practice: A new approach to solving complex educational problems*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Available on the IDEA Partnership website at www.ideapartnership.org.

New Eyes: Meeting Challenges Through Communities of Practice provides occasional updates on the IDEA Partnership's Communities of Practice work. Publication of *New Eyes* is made possible through Cooperative Agreement #326A010001 between NASDSE and OSEP. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial

products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government or by NASDSE. **Warger, Eavy & Associates** produced *New Eyes*.

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