Communities of Practice

A New Approach to Solving Complex Educational Problems

National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc.
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Acknowledgments

The IDEA Partnership—a project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), and housed at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)—brings state agencies and 55 national organizations together through shared work and learning.

The IDEA Partnership supports four national Communities of Practice. The communities and participating states follow.

**National Community of Practice on Collaborative School Behavioral Health**
- Illinois
- Hawaii
- Maryland
- Missouri
- New Hampshire
- North Carolina
- Ohio
- Pennsylvania
- South Carolina
- South Dakota
- Vermont
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National Community of Practice on Transition
- Alabama
- Arizona
- California
- Delaware
- District of Columbia
- Minnesota
- New Hampshire
- North Dakota
- Pennsylvania
- Virginia
- Wisconsin

NCLB-IDEA Collaboration Community
- Colorado
- Kansas
- Louisiana
- Maryland
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- New Hampshire
- North Carolina
- Pennsylvania
- Washington, DC
- Wisconsin
- Wyoming

National Community of Practice on Professional Development/Adult Learning
- Hawaii
- Maryland
- Michigan
- New Hampshire
- New York
- North Dakota
- Oregon
- South Carolina
- Utah

The Communities of Practice guide was developed by IDEA Partnership staff members under the guidance of Debra Price-Ellingstad (OSEP Project Director) and Bill East (NASDSE Executive Director). Both set important visions for the work—Debra for her belief in Communities of Practice as a viable approach for doing complex work in special education, and Bill for his continuous commitment to positioning community building in the national dialogue for state leaders.

As with any change effort of this size, many individuals and organizations played important support roles. In particular, the IDEA Partnership wishes to thank the following.

- U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) for its vision of investing in stakeholder expertise and for modeling a federal commitment to Communities of Practice. Two OSEP divisions also are acknowledged—the Research to Practice Division for recognizing the power of Communities of Practice to move beyond dissemination to utilization and the Monitoring and State Improvement Planning Division for understanding the value of community building in the continuous improvement process.

- National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) for its leadership role in pioneering Communities of Practice as a way of working and a way of learning with and from the stakeholders.

- Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) for supporting the Communities of Practice as a way for states to provide technical assistance to local stakeholders in accomplishing state goals.

- National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) and Council of Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) for co-leading national Communities of Practice that focus on issues important to their members.

- Mark Weist, Director, The Center of School-Based Mental Health Analysis and Action (CSMHA) for his willingness to model cross-system work through the community.

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- **Etienne Wenger** for his continued inspiration and expertise in helping us reinvent his model for state agency personnel in the context of special education.

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- **State agency personnel** in the national Communities of Practice for helping us to understand the power of state-state learning.

- **Members of state Communities of Practice**, the real pioneers in this effort.

This *Communities of Practice* guide was written and produced in collaboration with Warger, Eavy and Associates.
As a State Director of Special Education for a number of years, I worked hard with stakeholders but I didn’t work smart. More times than not, I didn’t involve them up front in the decision-making process. Thinking deeply about community building has led me to understand just how important it is to have stakeholder involvement from the very beginning.

Bill East, Executive Director, NASDSE
When I was asked to write a short foreword to this guidebook, I saw it as a chance to articulate why my involvement with the IDEA Partnership has been such an inspiration. I also viewed it as an opportunity to explain why I find the IDEA Partnership’s systematic application of Communities of Practice to address a complex problem to be so promising.

The provision of a good education to students with disabilities is a worthy goal expressed in such laws as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004). In practice, enhancing the learning of these students is an ambition that requires a great deal of learning on the part of all groups involved. All involved must learn to do their own work as well as learning to work together.

The U. S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and other important stakeholder organizations and state education agencies, through their participation in the IDEA Partnership, are pioneering a thoroughly collaborative approach to addressing such a large-scale learning challenge. Central to this approach is the convening and cultivation of Communities of Practice among stakeholders. This commitment to community imposes what I call a “social discipline of learning” on the whole initiative. Important questions to this work follow.

- What shared concerns are going to bring people together in meaningful ways?
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- Who should be at the table to ensure real progress in practice?
- What should participants be doing together to increase their individual and collective learning and ability to act?
- Who has the skill, legitimacy and leadership to convene these communities?

Coalescing Around Issues

Implementation of IDEA 2004 involves a complex and dynamic portfolio of issues. These issues do not fit neatly within existing institutional frames. They cut across government agencies, research organizations, advocacy groups, school districts and families. They cover multiple levels from local practices to national policies. They can only be addressed by a correspondingly complex constellation of Communities of Practice.

In some of the Communities of Practice sponsored by the IDEA Partnership, people are connected at a given level of scale—individuals learn together across states, across agencies, across local districts and within districts. Other IDEA Partnership Communities of Practice cut across levels of scale, bringing together national organizations, state officials, school personnel, local leaders, community-based professionals and parents.

Ensuring Relevant Participation

Communities of Practice form out of the learning needs of members. Mutual relevance drives participation. This approach allows the IDEA Partnership to address important issues by bringing together all who can contribute, regardless of affiliation or role.

From a Communities of Practice perspective, stakeholders are not just there to represent an organization, perspective or interest. Rather, they come as engaged practitioners, and thus as experts in their own context, whether they are professionals, politicians, activists, parents, students or citizens. The self-governing nature of a Communities of Practice approach capitalizes on this wealth of experience. It places the members in a position to direct and organize the learning they need to do.

Doing Work Together

The best way to bring out the wisdom of practitioners for collective learning is to engage them in doing some real work that builds on and enhances their own practice—something meaningful that engages their identity as practitioners. The IDEA Partnership invites participants to address common issues by pursuing together the work they are doing in their own contexts. This approach cultivates three essential elements of community building.

- **Engagement.** The discipline of making progress in practice and of doing something mutually useful keeps the focus on learning together and helps to develop relationships of trust even when there are conflicts.

- **Imagination.** The multi-scale, multi-perspective community format gives participants a new vision of their own work, of its significance and of the potential for collaboration.

- **Alignment.** Doing their work in the context of a community whose members are focused on important issues allows practitioners to better align their respective pursuits to accomplish shared goals.

Leading by Convening

Bringing together the diversity of stakeholders takes a special kind of leadership—a mixture of insight, networking, inspiration and humility.
Some people have an amazing capability to do this work. They translate the challenge of complex problems into social spaces in which individual practitioners can contribute their wisdom.

I call these people “social artists.” I have met many of them throughout the years and a good number through my work with the IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice. I have learned to appreciate the convening leadership they show in creating the conditions for people to come together in productive communities. Other artists give us pieces of music, spectacles, paintings, poetry and films. Social artists give us communities.

It is important to recognize these social artists. Their work is not necessarily obvious or visible because they give others a voice. Yet the quality of their work is such an important success factor.

This guidebook helps state education agencies identify the social artists in their midst and support their work. We learn from the experiences of these social artists about what it takes to help stakeholders join in this work and create positive change. The spirit of social artistry can live within all of us. This guidebook offers information that can help many more of us become skilled at this work.

**Emerging Principles: The Outline of a Model**

In summary, the IDEA Partnership’s Community of Practice approach illustrates the following principles of learning systems that are needed to address complex issues:

- convene a constellation of communities that matches the size and complexity of the challenge you are trying to address;
- bring together the people who have a stake in key issues to work in community structures that allow them to take charge of their learning together;
- involve them as expert practitioners in real work that contributes both to a joint goal and to their learning in collaboration with each other; and
- recognize and sponsor the work of the social artists who can convene these communities and weave them into a dynamic constellation.

This is the outline of a model with broad applicability. Indeed, most major problems in the world today have a similar nature: multiple issues, multiple stakeholders, multiple practices and multiple scales.
Introduction

*A Call to Community*

Since passage of the 1975 landmark federal legislation (P.L. 94-142), the special education field has come a long way in providing a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities. Local school educators—working together with families, service providers in other agencies, state agency personnel and policymakers—have made great strides in ensuring that students achieve to their potential. Although there have been many successes moving from policy to practice, the potential exists to achieve even greater success.

Compliance with federal and state laws has ensured a basic level of success. However, as many educators, state agency personnel and policymakers are finding, there is a human side to continuous improvement. Local school educators face complex, and often persistent, problems—the solutions to which require us to consider the human aspects that are limiting success.

The current environment surrounding education for students with disabilities—namely the requirements for engaging multiple stakeholders in problem solving related to both the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEA 2004)—has intensified the need to focus on the human aspects of issues. Special education performance is affected by many
stakeholder groups. All students are general education students first and are increasingly served in general education and natural environments. In the past, special education was judged independently of general education. Today, special education accountability is determined to a greater degree by how well others meet the needs of students with disabilities and general education accountability is also determined according to how well diverse student needs are met.

Within this context, state education personnel have a major role to play in providing technical assistance to local education agencies and schools in advancing their goals related to improving results for students with disabilities. The challenge is great, as the need goes beyond addressing compliance issues to solving complex problems that have an inherent human element.

In solving complex problems, state agency personnel cannot rely on traditional strategies of “rolling out” information to stakeholders. Common experience has repeatedly shown that practices rarely transfer across organizations or even across sites within the same organization. There are never sufficient technical assistance resources to provide direct assistance to all who need it. For solutions to be of value, stakeholders must be engaged as critical change agents.

There is an urgent need for stakeholders to come together with state agency personnel and to work toward solutions that reflect a shared and common message. Partnerships among all stakeholders—including state education agency personnel, individuals from local education agencies and schools, individuals from other pertinent agencies and organizations, families and students themselves—must be established, utilized and sustained. To do this requires taking the discussion to the next step beyond compliance and engaging in a new way of working together to solve problems. A system is needed in which state agency personnel operate as leverage points and stakeholders operate as partners.

This guide describes one promising approach—Communities of Practice. The IDEA Partnership has developed a Communities of Practice approach in working with state agency personnel to address the human side of change in solving complex and persistent special education issues. The approach assumes that compliance strategies are in place and functioning. Through Communities of Practice, state agency personnel enhance their improvement initiatives by engaging stakeholders in shared problem solving.

Communities of Practice offer state agency personnel a promising approach for engaging stakeholder groups in collaboratively 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.

The IDEA Partnership drew upon the pioneering work of Etienne Wenger and his colleagues (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Snyder, Wenger & de Sousa Briggs, 2004; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) in crafting its unique Communities of Practice approach with special education state agency personnel and stakeholders. Communities of Practice is not a formula or a recipe. Rather, it is a way for state agency personnel to “do” work. Work is done through community—in other words, one does not “do
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How does the IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice approach help state agency personnel accomplish their goals? Communities of Practice unite groups of people who share experience with a common set of problems in 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. The gap between knowing and doing is reduced or eliminated when it is considered in the context of the work at hand and pursued collegially with others sharing the same challenges.

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

Early Efforts

Much of the IDEA Partnership’s ongoing work in states began with the Policymaker Partnership at NASDSE during 1998-2003. The Partnership’s IDEA/Title I Community of Practice was co-sponsored with the Council of Chief State School Officers. It brought together personnel from 20 state education agencies (SEAs) to discuss and strategize issues related to participation of students with disabilities in school-wide Title I programs. Early participants included U.S. Department of Education representatives from OSEP, the Office of Student Achievement and School Accountability and the Inspector General’s Office. Other participants included the Regional Resource Centers (RRCs) and technical assistance centers for Title I programs. Title I and special education directors in 14 states began to work together on the challenges of blending IDEA and Title I funds. The work expanded in 2000 when policymakers from six core states began the process of eliciting their constituents’ views (e.g., visions, examples, perceived barriers, etc.). These policymakers shared their findings with the core group and undertook efforts to consider regulatory clarifications on the blending of IDEA and Title I funds.

In 2002, the community expanded to consider issues related to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), including adequate yearly progress subgroup performance and planning across IDEA and Title I for school improvement. State agency personnel continued to identify and devise practices and policies for improving education for all students in high-poverty schools and to address other provisions in NCLB.
a common message. Communities of Practice do this by:

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

The Advantages of Working as a Community

There are many advantages to using Communities of Practice to accomplish certain state goals. In the short term, state agency personnel will find value in the following outcomes of working through a Communities of Practice approach:

- broader communication and dissemination;
- ability to look more deeply at complex issues;
- access to information about real world implementation;
- better feedback on emerging ideas;
- connections to stakeholders with influence; and
- alliances with the intended beneficiaries of state policy.

There also are long-term advantages for state agency personnel who use a Communities of Practice approach for accomplishing state goals. Communities of Practice offer the following opportunities:

- access to existing networks;
- creation of new allies;
- deeper networks for dissemination;
- increased likelihood of sustainable solutions;
- synergy across levels of implementation; and
- ongoing feedback mechanisms for stakeholder input.

Stakeholders benefit as well. Communities of Practice promote the role of stakeholders in problem solving, thereby strengthening their voice in determining solutions. Stakeholders are enriched as they expand and deepen their connections with others in their own network as well as across networks. As a result, the value of Communities of Practice to individuals includes:

- increased respect for the legitimacy of implementers and consumer knowledge;
- less frustration because implementation is supported by deeper understanding; and
- more complete approaches to complex problems.

IDEA Partnership—Forging New Opportunities for Community Building in Special Education

To date, the Communities of Practice approach has been applied almost exclusively to business and organizational development. The IDEA Partnership has pioneered work with this approach with state agency personnel in the field of special education. [Note: The IDEA Partnership has drawn heavily from the theoretical work of Etienne Wenger and his colleagues in developing the Communities of Practice approach for special education that is described in this guide. While there are similarities to Wenger’s seminal work, there are variations and differences in the IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice approach. These differences reflect the realities facing state agency personnel as they address complex special education issues.]

Since 2003, the IDEA Partnership at 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 focus has been on developing an approach that state education agency personnel can use for technical assistance.
The IDEA Partnership staff formed partnerships with selected states and national organizations. Together, representatives from these groups began exploring how a Communities of Practice approach might be used to address complex and persistent issues in states. As the work evolved, state agency personnel tested ideas and eventually shared lessons from their work. That knowledge was used to inform subsequent practices. This manual presents what we have learned, along with guidance on how to adopt a Communities of Practice approach for solving complex special education issues.

To date, more than 30 states have participated in this effort. This guide will feature the work of policymakers in several states—Hawaii, Michigan, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania—as early examples of how Communities of Practice helped them address core work on critical issues. For examples showing how the Communities of Practice approach has evolved in other states, visit the IDEA Partnership website at www.ideapartnership.org for more information.

**Purpose of this Guide**

Many of us have been and are involved in collaborative interactions. Communities of Practice is not intended to replace or supplant those strategies and experiences. Rather, the intent is to offer state agency personnel a new approach for solving complex problems that draws upon their knowledge and experience working collaboratively with others.

The purpose of this guide is to provide an overview of the Communities of Practice approach that the IDEA Partnership has developed in the field of special education. Chapters include information on:

- the IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice approach, including guiding principles and the phases of community building;
- how state agency personnel are using Communities of Practice to improve outcomes for students with disabilities; and
- how to create and implement Communities of Practice.

**Answering the Call to Community**

State agency personnel and stakeholders must work together to meet the challenges facing students with disabilities. Individual groups cannot meet many of the challenges facing children and their families alone. State agency personnel and stakeholders also need new structures that facilitate their collaboration in developing meaningful solutions. Communities of Practice offers such an approach.

**References**

The following are recommended sources for further information about Communities of Practice.


Communities of Practice are groups of people who share expertise and passion about a topic and interact on an ongoing basis to further their learning in this domain. Communities of Practice members typically solve problems, discuss insights and share information. Communities of Practice also develop tools and frameworks that become part of a common knowledge of the community. And over time, these mutual interactions and relationships build up a shared body of knowledge and a sense of identity.

—Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002

Communities of Practice offers state agency personnel a lens for exploring the human aspects of problems. It can be used as a process for bringing together multiple stakeholders to address complex issues and problems.

Many of us have experience working with colleagues in meaningful ways by participating in formal and informal work groups or project teams. Usually, such groups are formed naturally as a useful way of shaping and spreading effective practice. While such groups may have similar features to Communities of Practice, there are usually differences. Consider the following examples.
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The concept of Communities of Practice has its roots in the educational theory of situated learning. This theory promotes the view that learning should take place within the context and culture of real situations rather than through presentation of abstract concepts. 

—Lave & Wenger, 1991

Coalitions bring together individuals of like mind who typically push for a particular outcome. Communities of Practice members may belong to outside coalitions, but in the community they work differently. The Communities of Practice approach unites various stakeholders to explore a range of opinions and to take collective action on issues.

Task forces typically bring together individuals to complete a limited scope of tasks in a set time frame. Communities of Practice members come together based on their interest in an issue and determine the action steps they will take. Communities of Practice may be sustained over time as participants decide to work on different aspects of the issue.

Communities of Practice are defined by the presence of certain characteristics. They unite groups of people who share experience with a common set of problems in action. Stakeholders are viewed as having value—in their knowledge and experience related to the problem and in their ability to access and connect to networks of other stakeholders. In Communities of Practice, individuals representing multiple perspectives are identified, invited to participate in the community and encouraged to shape the strategies of the organization. The work of participants is more than information exchange—participants are expected to plan and take action. Participants in Communities of Practice “do” work.

While it is important to reach out to external groups and give careful attention to individual needs within a growing network, this process is not expected to take away from the work of the state. Instead, it should enhance its work by broadening the state’s sphere of influence and importance. This is done by focusing on a few key issues of strategic interest to the state. With the issue as the central focus, the state then leads the way in demonstrating how collaboration can build community and how community can change the way we do business. The state needs stakeholders to meet its goals. And, stakeholders need the state to assure that the strategies that meet their needs become part of the system.

This chapter presents a brief overview of the theoretical elements underlying the IDEA Partnership's Communities of Practice approach. It takes a look at the following topics:

• guiding principles;
• leadership; and
• phases of community building.
Guiding Principles

The IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice approach is a way of thinking about and doing work. Community is a value that is observable in the work of participants. Communities of Practice brings together multiple stakeholders to address complex issues and problems. Stakeholders are asked what they think about an issue or problem and then are asked to do something to address the issue or solve the problem.

There is a strategic advantage to collaborating with stakeholders. Working from a community frame, states become actively involved in identifying how collaboration can help improve outcomes for students with disabilities and promoting shared work in the state and, as appropriate, with colleagues across states. Through the Communities of Practice approach, states:

• unite their leadership with professional organizations and family groups on issues of shared interest and concern;
• connect policy agendas with the reality of implementation by engaging all stakeholders;
• discover how to move beyond professional roles or positions to find solutions that are acceptable to all stakeholders;
• eliminate the compartmentalizing of information by working together;
• invite and support stakeholders in doing shared work, realizing the potential of this new knowledge in doing the work together; and
• share learning within and across organizations and roles.

The Communities of Practice approach reflects a technical assistance model of the future in which stakeholders are engaged in solving critical problems and are supported in their efforts, rather than being told what to do by external sources. [See the text box, Doing Business a Different Way.]

In addition to collaboration, the following main principles guide the work of Communities of Practice.

• Stakeholders are involved in doing the core work of states. This means that state agency personnel empower stakeholders to work with them to find and enact solutions to major issues.
• Community participation coalesces around stakeholder interests and not professional positions. The emphasis is on sharing knowledge and expertise on issues of importance to all stakeholders. All knowledge is valued.

Doing Business a Different Way

Traditional Technical Assistance
State agency personnel act as experts or they employ experts. They roll out information to stakeholders who are expected to implement the changes.

Communities of Practice Technical Assistance
Everyone—including state agency personnel and all stakeholders—in the Community of Practice is considered to be an expert in his or her own context. Together with state agency personnel, stakeholders seek out information and solutions from each other. These solutions are implemented and participants report back to the Community of Practice on how well implementation was achieved. Based on this feedback, the Community of Practice will determine next steps.
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- Organizations and stakeholders are allies. Individuals look to each other as resources in solving important issues.

- Community building is an implementation strategy. Change happens through shared work. As participants in the community learn from each other and develop new knowledge, they share it with other stakeholders within their networks and organizations. Similarly, participants tap the expertise of their networks and bring it back to the Communities of Practice group.

Leadership

Theoretically, leadership in a Community of Practice can come from anywhere—the caveat being that the sponsor must have enough influence and authority to offer credibility for Communities of Practice efforts.

In the IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice approach, the state serves in a leadership role. Communities of Practice stakeholders want to know that their efforts are connected to real issues. The state can offer such assurances.

The key role of state education personnel is to convene a Community of Practice. The state must be perceived by stakeholders as endorsing the community to work on an issue. The level at which the state will participate must be made clear. Collaboration is central to the Communities of Practice approach and as such, each state must determine where it stands and where it needs to go in terms of stakeholder collaboration as a major strategy for accomplishing state goals. In Communities of Practice, state agency personnel play a number of critical roles, including:

- accepting the unique position to advance change;

- uniting people who are working in isolation of one another trying to do the same work;

- seeking to understand the interest of other stakeholders and establishing conditions so that these groups interact, find commonality and see the benefit in allied action;

- selecting, organizing, presenting and delivering information in a way that makes it more consumable by and need-fulfilling for various stakeholders;

- recognizing that stakeholders can help unite others and translate information into more consumable formats;

- developing an interactive process for gathering stakeholder input on how the state can be helpful and responding to various audiences by providing information in the context of practice; and

- emphasizing throughout the shared learning process how stakeholders (e.g., local districts, families, etc.) can be included in making important development decisions and how they can build their capacity to participate effectively and responsibly.

As each Community of Practice evolves, state agency personnel may choose to empower participants. They may do this by recognizing participant contributions and sharing responsibility with individuals who feel invested and who are willing to take leadership roles.

[Note: State agency personnel—who are the conveners of Communities of Practice—may choose to appoint a facilitator (or rotate facilitation among group members) to manage group activities. The facilitator should be someone who is committed to the Communities of Practice approach and who is viewed as credible by both the state and participating stakeholders.]
In the Communities of Practice approach, a shared interest in the particular issue brings stakeholders together. Stakeholders are asked what they think and are asked to do something in relation to the issue. Individuals build relationships by working on the issue together.

The IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice approach has the following three dimensions.

- **Relationship**—Participants function as a community through collective engagements that unite them. Relationships are built as participants interact regularly and engage in joint activities that build trust and a common identity. The emphasis is on looking at mutual interests rather than on differences.

- **Issue**—Communities of Practice organize around an issue that gives members a sense of joint enterprise. Participants identify with the issue and with each other.

- **Action**—Communities of Practice participants develop a shared language and a shared set of resources that represent the collective knowledge of the community. This shared knowledge serves as a foundation for future learning. Participants build their capability by taking action on the issue.

**Phases of Community Building: Creating, Taking Action and Deciding Next Steps**

One of the most frequently asked questions is, “What does a Community of Practice look like?” Because Communities of Practice is a process that typically varies depending on the players and the issue at hand, a step-by-step description is not particularly relevant. Rather, it is more helpful to consider the phases of community building—creating the community, taking action and deciding next steps. Within each phase certain activities and experiences are fostered. As participants engage in the activities and experiences at each phase, a community is established and begins to operate as a working group. A description of each phase follows.

**Phase 1: Creating the Community**

In the early formation stage of Communities of Practice, individuals from various groups begin to understand the importance of working together. They connect with other people who share common interests and discover commonalities. As participant needs are met through the group, individual members begin to depend on the group. Bonds develop and strengthen. New information and relationships build and the intersections of the work become clearer. As state education personnel support the creation of the community, the value of the state working together with stakeholders is realized by all participants.

Creating a Communities of Practice approach includes:

- sensing issues;
- seeking participants;
- strengthening an emerging community; and
- fostering collaboration and envisioning possible actions.
Sensing issues. State agency personnel begin by sensing issues. There are two parts to this activity:

- ongoing scanning in which state agency personnel constantly probe for how stakeholders are responding to issues; and
- intentional scanning in which state agency personnel actively seek input from stakeholders on a particular issue.

In both cases, state agency personnel listen to what different stakeholder groups are saying about the issue and determine whether there is agreement among stakeholders. Often, state agency personnel will need to translate and/or explain the issue in terms that different stakeholders understand and explain what it will take for individuals to seek answers and solutions outside of their own stakeholder groups.

Through issue sensing, state agency personnel determine if it makes sense to convene a Communities of Practice to address the issue. If it becomes apparent that there is no consensus on what to do about an issue or if work can be enhanced by bringing together different stakeholder groups to work on an issue, state agency personnel may choose to take the next step and seek participants.

Seeking participants. Once state agency personnel recognize that they do not have to face complex and interrelated issues alone, they begin to seek groups with a shared interest in the issue. In a sense, the state becomes a catalyst for getting groups to think and learn together.

At this point, the focus is on identifying individuals who are working on the same or similar issues in isolation of one another and finding connections within their work. Through Communities of Practice, the knowledge and resources of professional organizations and family groups—some of whom may be unaware of or disconnected from state priority setting and planning mechanisms—can be tapped and used to address concerns.

Although service delivery is likely to improve with involvement of other stakeholders, such involvement is sometimes perceived as hindering or delaying the implementation process. By involving the groups who traditionally come in after priorities have been set, the challenges and opportunities to improving practice can be addressed within a broader context from the beginning.

Through Communities of Practice, stakeholders build relationships within their own stakeholder groups and across those of others. The relationships that they build by coalescing around an issue of shared importance often transcend the particular issue and provide a mechanism for groups to come together on future issues.

Strengthening an emerging community. Once individuals begin to discover their common goals through meaningful interaction, they move toward forming new and deeper relationships. Participants learn about each other in the context of the issues being addressed. As participants access new information, they begin to broaden their view of the issue and see new connections. As they learn together, individuals feel that their needs are being satisfied.

Although the community is still emerging at this point, participants are developing an initial vision for how they want to act together as a group. The goal is to move into a more inviting way of working, which leads to greater stakeholder involvement and the potential for joint action to improve results for students and families.

Fostering collaboration and envisioning possible actions. Engaging partners in the community is all about accessing new information and relationships in order to learn together. Shared meaning occurs as participants learn more about each other and begin to share stories. This repertoire of stories helps clarify the issues in context and builds a common vocabulary among group
members. At this point, a deepening sense of trust may evolve, along with increased loyalty to the developing community.

However, bringing together diverse groups of people in the learning process is not enough. Although group members should be channeling their knowledge to find solutions to shared problems, the true test lies in whether there is a concerted effort to put what they have learned into action.

When participants envision possible actions, they think about various solutions from different stakeholder perspectives. In addition, they propose ways to remove barriers.

At this point in the process, state agency personnel typically accelerate the collaborative process and strengthen the natural bonds between people who do common work. While much of the system transformation will depend on external change, the first step is marshalling people internally. State agency personnel serve an important role in maintaining communication and keeping community members focused on shared outcomes. Members access new information without demanding that individuals give up their personal and organizational missions.

By working in a more inclusive way within and across the state agency, state agency personnel model a collaborative culture. This sets the tone for accomplishing the important tasks and building the vital relationships needed to carry the shared work forward. State agency personnel can play a pivotal role in the process by using their influence and authority to engage key people, focus attention on important issues and highlight best practices in the state.

**Phase 2: Taking Action**

We have all experienced the disappointment of attending a conference that creates an exciting action agenda but goes nowhere once the conference is concluded. Unlike this type of experience, Communities of Practice provides a powerful vehicle for change.

A Communities of Practice approach to problem solving focuses on learning together by doing the work. By arriving at a common understanding of what the issues or problems are and how to take the first steps together, the community members can begin to solve problems. This is achieved when participants apply and demonstrate what they have learned together.

In Communities of Practice, participants do more than share information—they see the range and depth of issues and they understand how things are connected. As they look through their new community lenses, they see exactly what needs to be done to improve the system. They feel a sense of responsibility to further the work. Sharing and contributing to the common goals empowers individuals to move beyond their individual goals.

People now make more intentional connections to each other’s work and opportunities for collaboration come more clearly into focus. Something begins to gel within the group and the community acts.

Taking action within the community is about being committed to using what is known. In this action-oriented stage, participants feel comfortable together and can easily move to action. Through their shared expertise, participants begin to see innovative ways to improve the system. They begin to generate new methods, new solutions, new processes, new influences and new identities. There is now a shared vocabulary and conversation flows. The community might review exist-
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The following two activities are critical to taking action.

- **Developing an action plan.** Developing an action plan is something very familiar to state personnel. Because most states have planning mechanisms in place, we will not delve deeply into the basic process. The key is for the participants to develop a series of actions that individuals and groups will undertake in solving the problem. [Note: When working with a Communities of Practice approach, it might be helpful to revisit existing action plans and check how flexible they are. Innovation often comes from being able to adapt a plan. As the community members learn together, it may be necessary to conduct a reality check among those with diverse perspectives, as well as agency staff, and revise plans as appropriate.]

- **Implementing the action plan.** It is an exciting moment when the action plan is ready to go. Individuals and groups follow through.

- Is the way we are working meeting our needs? Do we need to shift how we are working?
- What more are we willing to take on (e.g., focus on new information, focus on forging new connections to issues with other groups, focus on additional contextual issues, etc.)?
- Do we need new roles and/or new actions?

For example, the Community of Practice on Transition decided to look in greater depth at contextual issues. To do this, participants created several practice groups in which individuals chose to study an issue more deeply. These practice groups sought members, met as a community and shared their work with the larger group.

**References**


**Phase 3: Deciding Next Steps**

Once a Community of Practice is operating, it is important to reflect on how well the group is fulfilling the participants’ needs. Typical reflective questions follow.
Structural Components

Based on the experience of the IDEA Partnership in adapting the Communities of Practice approach to the work of state agencies, the following six components are necessary to build and sustain communities.

- **Task Orientation**—Task orientation is a structured interaction through which individuals in different roles discover a commonality that transcends their roles and organizational positions to reveal shared interests.

- **Relationship Orientation**—Strong relationships are the foundation of the community’s work. Individuals at all levels are more open to information and influence from organizations with which they are voluntarily affiliated. When the work of the group is mutually need-fulfilling, interaction typically deepens.

- **Learning Orientation**—There is a positive relationship between performance and learning. Group members who are skilled at learning together tend to outperform groups where this is not the case. An opportunity to think about the deepening quality of the tasks and relationships in a collegial manner enhances the shared work. Individuals learn how to learn with each other while they are learning what works.

- **Tools**—By bringing individuals with influence and authority for policy and programs into a partnership with individuals who work in and are served by those programs, issues and effective strategies emerge, gain support and are translated into actions that lead to systemic change (i.e., shared meaning, shared value, shared action). Tools support task completion and relationship building. For example, tools can enable participants to “check in” with others and build relationships. Instead of sending out a survey “cold” and out of context, information is gathered following a conversation that generates excitement and highlights the need for more detailed information. Similarly, feedback flows naturally as conversation that improves activities and relationships. It is not viewed as separate or an add-on to existing tasks.

- **Stories**—As existing groups or new state initiatives emerge into Communities of Practice, they begin to build a repertoire of shared stories that convey a sense of where the community has been and where it is headed. Sometimes these stories help to illuminate the community’s process as individuals relate the experiences of others to their own practice. Stories help illuminate the success of the Communities of Practice approach and may provide valuable information on interim outcomes.

- **Evaluation**—Practical strategies for documenting the process and outcomes may lead to future adaptation, improvement and/or replication. All evaluation must answer the question: How will we know when we are successful? Our evaluation uses the following questions to provide that answer: What was done, with whom and to whom? How well was it done? Is anybody better off? Is there evidence of knowledge, skill, value and/or behavioral change? Do changes result in improvements for students with disabilities in the target institutions?
Examples of Communities of Practice

Learning from the States

This chapter takes a brief look at how several states have used the IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice approach. It is important to note that in all cases, the featured examples represent only a small part of much more extensive work being undertaken by each state. For more information on the work of the states cited here and other states, visit the IDEA Partnership website at www.ideapartnership.org.

Collaborating Around NCLB and IDEA Issues: Communities of Practice Emerges in Michigan

Michigan was one of the first states to join a peer-to-peer network aimed at stimulating collaboration among Title I and special education directors. The network of state education agencies was sponsored and supported by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the IDEA Partnership at NASDSE.

The impetus for this network of states—later recognized as a Community of Practice—was a meeting of the CCSSO High Poverty Schools group. This group is dedicated to improving outcomes for students at-
tending districts and schools that have high percentages of children from low-income families. The IDEA Partnership and CCSSO capitalized on an upcoming national High Poverty Schools meeting by targeting invitations to special education directors. At the meeting, a recent policy change allowing a small portion of federal IDEA Part B monies to be spent on Title I school-wide programs was discussed. Many state agency staff members heard this information for the first time and found it hard to believe.

The IDEA Partnership invited federal leaders from the U.S. Department of Education Title I and Special Education offices to explore the spending flexibility in more detail. The Inspector General’s office also was instrumental in helping participants understand the boundaries of the legislation. Together, federal and state partners built a shared understanding of the policies and how they influenced practice.

Other stakeholders were brought to the table to share their knowledge, expertise and/or experience related to Title I and IDEA funding streams. They came together first as a small group of state agency personnel working across divisions to find solutions to newly emerging issues. There were no experts who understood the full complexity of the issues, yet many had an interest and stake in the outcomes.

There was a sense that this group could discover new opportunities by separating the real barriers from the imagined barriers that the policies and existing practices created in people’s minds. There was a belief that federal agencies had a lot to gain from working with states and stakeholders to learn more about the various aspects of the problem and about potential solutions. The states felt that the federal partners were working with them to identify promising approaches. Both groups moved forward as partners in the work and built a foundation of trust and support.

Eventually, the community grew to include people in a variety roles who practiced at all levels of the system (e.g., local, state and federal). As the community members exchanged ideas and experiences, they soon learned that the work extended to a wider range of strategies for improving education opportunities for struggling students. Community participants found many commonalities between IDEA and Title I, including:

- both served students with the farthest to go to achieve on par with other age and grade-level peers;
- both were transforming from separate systems to systems that were integrated with general education; and
- both had personnel who had been trained to deliver services in separate settings and who were now required to deliver services in integrated settings.

“"You can't force a community. You can only create the context for it. The community has to come from the participants. In our state, it's important to say that we created the environment.”

—Michigan state agency staff member
Taking Action in the State

The Michigan team took a proactive approach to integrating the Title I and IDEA systems. Following are highlights of the work.

- In 2000, the state pilot-tested a joint monitoring system to align special education monitoring with standards-based reform efforts.
- In 2000, the state implemented unified school improvement plans by aligning flexible Title I funds in support of co-teaching models. This encouraged an increase in the number of special educators working as co-teachers in general education classrooms.
- In 2001, the core state team established data-driven pilot projects for collaboration in six schools. There was heavy investment in professional development for teachers in order to help students with disabilities succeed in general education classrooms.
- In 2002, the joint monitoring plan for Title I and IDEA was in place to focus on continuous improvement.
- In 2002, a state-initiated grant supported a Web-based data analysis system (SWIS) that expedited data collection for schools.
- In 2002, the state team began to branch out to key stakeholder groups to increase the reach of their collaborative efforts. The Michigan Council for Exceptional Children, the Special Education Advisory Committee, the Title I Advisory Committee, parent centers and several other organizations were brought into the state’s planning and implementation processes.

The timing for Michigan’s focus on including a broader array of stakeholders was perfect. In 2003, the unified IDEA Partnership had been funded, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act had been reauthorized as NCLB in January 2002 and the regulatory guidance was released in December 2003.

Today, Michigan continues to participate in the national IDEA/NCLB Community of Practice and to utilize the stakeholder relationships that continue to grow within the state around this important topic. To learn more, visit the IDEA Partnership website (www.ideapartnership.org).

Community Building in Pennsylvania: Pushing the Interagency Envelope

The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA required all states to examine agreements across agencies for compliance with the law. While this is a familiar and technical process in many places, the activity launched a dynamic new interaction in Pennsylvania.

Personnel in 10 offices from four state agencies involved in updating the IDEA Memorandum of Understanding (IDEA-MOU) began to envision a shared responsibility across agencies. The IDEA-MOU, enacted in December 1999, identified how services for children with disabilities would be provided and coordinated in the state. It identified agency responsibility for services, agency financial responsibility, conditions and terms of reimbursement, procedures to address interagency disputes and procedures for coordinating services.

While this agreement covered services for students with disabilities at all levels, it was especially important in launching the cross-systems planning and professional development efforts for the state’s Secondary Transition Initiative. It
also formed the basis for developing the relationships that ground the Community of Practice in Support of Transition. The original community included representatives from the following Pennsylvania state agencies:

- **Department of Education** (Bureau of Special Education and Bureau of Career and Technical Education);
- **Department of Labor and Industry** (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Bureau of Workforce Development Partnership);
- **Department of Public Welfare** (Office of Mental Retardation, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families and Office of Medical Assistance); and
- **Department of Health** (Bureau of Family Health and Bureau of Drug and Alcohol Programs).

[Note: While not a formal party to the IDEA-MOU, the Parent Education Network (PEN)—the Parent Training and Information Center in Pennsylvania—became an important partner in the planning, development and delivery of all of the transition training initiatives.]

In creating the formal document, the MOU community built the foundation for real collaboration. Yet, the members agreed that the technical agreement was insufficient to address significant barriers to implementing the agreement. To this end, they created a Community of Practice.

**Expanding its Reach**

Pennsylvania’s Community of Practice member agencies shared a common interest and responsibility to provide services to youth and young adults with disabilities who were transitioning from school to adult services. The MOU community members realized that they would need to promote much greater interaction among

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For our work in the areas of transition and school-based behavioral health, the Communities of Practice approach has enabled us to establish a support structure at the state, regional and local levels. Communities of Practice is not simply a better way to complete tasks, which it is, but a way of fostering relationships and ways of working that will endure for many years to come. It is particularly exciting to see the impact at the local level.

—Pennsylvania state technical assistance provider
stakeholder groups and hold focused dialogue around issues if the new ideas were to grow.

As a first goal, the team decided to open training sessions that had typically been held exclusively for one group to all stakeholders who had a role in successful implementation. As an example, training that had once been primarily geared for teachers now included vocational rehabilitation counselors, one-stop youth workers, family members, mental health workers, independent living workers and many others. Presentation and dialogue changed according to the audience preferences.

Gradually, a broader view of the issues began to emerge and to be supported. One of the most important activities in modeling cross-stakeholder commitment was the planning and participation in the Pennsylvania Community of Practice on Transition annual statewide conference. Once an event primarily attended by educators, the conference was redesigned to draw attendees from all stakeholder roles. All stakeholders were invited to contribute to themes developed around post-school outcomes. Through the formation of the Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network, young adults became equal partners in the development, implementation and evaluation of year-round strategies.

Today, the Pennsylvania Community of Practice on Transition has expanded to include many stakeholder groups who focus on improving post-school outcomes of transitioning youth. [See the text box, Pennsylvania Community of Practice on Transition Leadership Team 2007 for a listing.] The transition of youth with disabilities priority is documented in policy actions and program guidance issued by many of the partners to their respective field staff in support of the interagency work needed to expand opportunities for youth with disabilities in transitioning to post-school outcomes. Other agencies have crafted pilot programs...
programs that require interagency participation along with family and youth engagement. Several of these initiatives connect pilot sites from around the state to each other and to the state team. They use the annual statewide meeting to showcase the pilots and spread the impact.

In Pennsylvania, state agency personnel and stakeholders are discovering new ways to build on their interconnections. Visit the IDEA Partnership website (www.ideapartnership.org) to learn more.

The Shared Agenda Across Education, Mental Health and Family Groups: The Growth of a Community of Practice in Hawaii

For a number of years, policymakers in Hawaii have been pursuing the integration of education and mental health to improve the well being and achievement of children and youth. Much of the interest in working across state agencies was driven by the Felix Consent Decree that required, among many things, extensive examination and monitoring by federal agencies.

By the spring of 2005, it appeared that, after years of intervention, Hawaii was ready to steer its own system. The last and most recent federal monitoring report stated that the infrastructure was in place to deliver a system of school-based behavioral health alternatives and that measurable progress toward goals continues. Yet, the report also cautioned that progress must be self-sustaining and powered by a continuous progress model. In two separate references, the monitoring reports asserted:

"The process must detect problems at the local schools, family guidance centers and local service provider agencies. Management must demonstrate that it is able to synthesize the information regarding system performance and results achieved for students that are derived from the process and use the findings to make ongoing improvements…"

—Performance Report
January-March 2005, p. 13 and p. 38

To the leadership of the Hawaii Office of Special Education, it was clear that this high standard of interaction was not likely to be achieved through monitoring alone.

Communities of Practice offered a way to reinvent the operation of the state agencies, engage local service providers and connect more deeply to the families and youth who were the intended beneficiaries. For state personnel in Hawaii, monitoring was a valuable technical process. But it stopped short of providing an accurate description of the dynamic interrelationships among the various stakeholders and service providers that seemed to undergird the system. They needed to cultivate a deep understanding of shared agendas and cross-cutting policy and practice issues in order to influence the results.

Hawaii state agency personnel wanted to create a two-way learning and feedback exchange between the decision makers, practitioners and consumers. In this way they could test assumptions, create and evaluate pilot efforts, develop insights that inform policy choices and drive strategy that is built on a vision for a system that is meaningful to stakeholders in every role and in every location.

Taken together, a shared vision, relationship building and monitoring seemed to hold some promise for achieving the self-directed and self-sustaining system envisioned in the Felix Consent Decree. In June 2005, Hawaii began to plan for the birth of its Community of Practice.
Capitalizing on a New Opportunity

Using a seed grant from IDEA Partners Hawaii, Hawaii state education agency personnel invited other agencies and 50 diverse stakeholders to consider the Communities of Practice approach. In their first forum (October 2005), Hawaii state agency personnel engaged prospective partners in a conversation about:

- building a sustainable system for communicating and collaborating across agencies and with consumers to connect policy, practice and people;
- learning how other states have begun to work across agencies and consumer groups through the Communities of Practice approach;
- considering emerging practices in school-based and school-linked mental health services;
- considering the potential for integrating positive behavioral support efforts in education with other behavioral health initiatives supported by mental health;
- designing a clear, inclusive and goal oriented initiative to build a Communities of Practice across decision makers, implementers and consumers in education and mental health;
- understanding the range of consumer groups, public providers, private providers and military providers that should be invited into the Communities of Practice;
- envisioning together how the Communities of Practice would improve the systems and the relationships;
- considering the issues around which the community could begin to coalesce; and
- considering the connections to national organizations and state affiliates representing stakeholders in every role available through the IDEA Partnership.

The forum was a success and a state leadership team was formed. Meeting monthly, team members crafted a cross-agency, all-island plan. Their intent was to build a Community of Practice on every island and connect them all to the state leadership team. In this way, the effort would truly become a local effort that was capable of sensing issues early and making the connection to the state agencies and the decision makers who could create action. Two notable participants—Tripler Army Base and the Hawaii State Legislature—added both the symbolic and substantive value to the community. Hawaii also noted the participation of key school community leaders (e.g., complex area superintendents) from the Department of Education and a large contingent from the Department of Health in the 2006 forum.

Building a Statewide Community of Practice

In October 2006, the state team was ready to engage the local schools as partners. In a two-day forum attended by 120 stakeholders participating on 12 local teams, the state leadership team hosted dialogue around the concept.

“Community has become the vehicle for coming to common agreement on standards of care across places and settings.”

—Hawaii community outreach provider

—Hawaii community outreach provider
IDEA Partnership personnel supported the state team by describing how other states were using the Communities of Practice concepts and by sponsoring Etienne Wenger, founder of the Communities of Practice strategy, as a keynote presenter and advisor. IDEA Partnership personnel also described various resources. As an added bonus, Hawaii state education agency personnel offered to support some pilot projects to develop Communities of Practice at the local school complex level. As an added incentive, the IDEA Partnership offered to host these sites on its interactive website and provide a small stipend for each local complex to test the site for its usefulness in local communication and sharing across sites in Hawaii.

Today in Hawaii, a Community of Practice that operates on many levels of scale is taking root. After years of work under the Felix Consent Decree, the goals and the indicators are clearly understood. Now, members of a state leadership team and individuals at eight local area complexes are pioneering a new way of sharing the vision, the strategy and the accountability for the behavioral health outcomes for Hawaii’s youth. Follow their progress on [www.ideapartnership.org](http://www.ideapartnership.org).

**Aligning Initiatives: The Call to Community in New Hampshire**

During the last four years, New Hampshire has capitalized on every opportunity to work across groups in support of state goals. The first foray into community building came through a visit to the Pennsylvania Statewide Transition Conference to see how community building might add value across state agencies. Inspired by what they saw, New Hampshire joined the national Community of Practice on Transition.

Through IDEA Partnership seed grants, New Hampshire embarked on another boundary-spanning initiative. New Hampshire established Communities of Practice across education, mental health and family organizations. The intentional focus on family connections led the state and its partners to develop a family-led literacy initiative and support the work through the national Professional Development/Adult Learning Community of Practice. A partnership between the state and the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services has led to participation in the National Community of Practice on Collaborative School Behavioral Health. Most recently, New Hampshire joined a national community of 11 other states in understanding the critical connections between performance in special education, Title I and the general education school improvement process as promoted in NCLB.

“Sometimes working separately is not a conflict of interest, but it is always a conflict in energy. In New Hampshire, we have much to do and no energy to waste.”

—New Hampshire state agency staff member
Aligning the Community

The New Hampshire story could be one of separate collaborative initiatives. However, New Hampshire decided to reach out and seek the commonalities that could unite all aspects.

Acting on the principles of community building, state agency personnel and their partners have held routinely scheduled meetings to align their work and their energies. They have developed a community mind frame.

Most recently, state education agency personnel and their partners have applied their community work to an initiative crafted by the new Commissioner of Education, Lyonel Tracy. Tracy asked the leadership and staff of the New Hampshire Department of Education to envision all efforts in a child-centered frame and examine the impact through a child outcome orientation. This initiative is known as Follow the Child.

This lens has provided the structure in which to nest the various Communities of Practice initiatives and to consistently apply the community mind frame to all the work done within education and with the partners who are critical to achieving the child-oriented outcomes defined by the Commissioner.

For more information, visit the IDEA Partnership website at www.ideapartnership.org.
Your Turn
Creating and Implementing Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice at the state and local levels provides a way of communicating, learning and advancement of work that is unparalleled.

—State technical assistance provider

People are excited about shared work. They are overwhelming me with ideas.

—State technical assistance provider

So you have decided to address issues through a Communities of Practice approach. As the convener of a Community of Practice, it is important to ensure that you have the authority to address the issues because if not, the potential to enact meaningful change will be limited. It also is important to make sure you have sufficient time to build a Community of Practice.
The following activities are used to create and implement the Communities of Practice approach:

- sense issues;
- invite participants;
- engage participants in the process by sharing information and taking action; and
- determine next steps.

In many cases, state agency personnel will want to appoint an individual (or rotating individuals) to serve as group facilitator. In addition to being skilled in facilitation processes, the facilitator should have the confidence and the trust of the stakeholders who will be participating. Tips for facilitating the process are offered throughout this chapter.

[Note: General activities related to convening groups (e.g., meeting arrangements) are not discussed in this manual. The activities that follow relate specifically to facilitating a Communities of Practice approach.]

**Sense Issues**

Sensing issues begins with a frame of mind that issues should be considered from a community lens. This is an ongoing process that can be done by:

- keeping the broad perspective/problem in mind when approaching tasks or identifying people to share the work;
- thinking about the approval process of a potential implementation and being intentional about involving those with influence and authority from the beginning;
- considering whether the state can act as a conduit for other groups to meet as a way of forwarding the work; and
- monitoring the state and local environments for connections to the state strategic mission; matching interests across groups (e.g., scanning for priority issues on websites across and within agencies and organizations).

As issues emerge, state agency personnel listen to what different stakeholder groups are saying about the particular issue and test out whether there is agreement across stakeholders. They seek to learn what stakeholders need to address the issue as well as what it will take for individuals to seek answers and solutions outside of their own stakeholder groups. While this may sound obvious, it sometimes requires a more concerted effort to sort out the variety of ways different stakehold-

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**Facilitator Tip**

**Keeping Track of Expertise**

Develop a matrix around areas of specialty and influence on important issues (organize by roles, geography, expertise, etc.). Consider turning the matrix into a database that helps you reference and make sure to continue to invite, see gaps and decide who else should be involved.

An ongoing scanning process can help keep you apprised of how the issue is being addressed by others. Examples follow.

- Conduct online searches of issues and scan websites of organizations that share the same concerns.
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- Survey needs of key stakeholder groups about what issues are important (e.g., formal surveys about existing work, eliciting general ideas through informal conversations, etc.).
- Look for intersections of interests and scan for like priorities (e.g., in survey responses, on websites, across similar documents and other products).

Scanning the environment routinely (e.g., conference agendas, local activities and events promoting best practices, districts facing similar challenges across the state, other emerging trends, university initiatives, legislative agendas, state policies with rippling effects across stakeholder groups) also can provide insights into related issues and/or issues that are emerging.

Often, the state will need to translate and/or explain the issue in terms that different stakeholders can understand. Once an issue is identified, you will want to articulate it in stakeholder terms and examine impact points for systems change. Remember: The key is to identify real issues that stakeholders care passionately about and that they perceive must be addressed as part of their work. For example, the state may be interested in how appropriate access to the general education curriculum could enhance academic performance of students with disabilities. A school principal may be concerned with building-level performance. Parents may be concerned with their own child’s learning.

Invite Participants

Once you have identified the issue or problem, you will need to identify stakeholders and invite their participation. Everyone has a group of trusted colleagues who can be tapped whenever the need for group membership arises. In the Communities of Practice approach, it is important to move beyond the “regulars” and consider all possible stakeholders. Also look to networks within states and local jurisdictions that are organized to share information and provide opportunities for individuals to learn from one another. Some initial points to keep in mind follow.

- Locate potential partners/lead organizations that share the same issues or concerns.
- Involve people who represent various perspectives.
- Seek people who are known and well respected.
- Choose people who can solve the problem.
- Learn about the agendas, needs, missions, interests, concerns and activities of stakeholders and organizations. There may be opportunities on other issues that might match your mission.
- Ensure a balance of roles and perspectives.
- Ask stakeholders who else they think should be involved.

Facilitator Tip

Increasing Participation

- Ensure that first meetings, conference calls and other methods of communication have been scheduled at times that accommodate the greatest participation.
- Provide supports, as appropriate, to encourage the greatest participation (e.g., toll-free lines, travel support, caregiver expenses, etc.).
- Arrange time to be together (meet face-to-face at a specific meeting or as part of an existing activity where potential members tend to gather naturally).
When selecting participants, make sure they have an incentive to participate. Participants need to feel that they are getting something out of the experience. One key way to do this is to identify priority issues that resonate with the full range of stakeholders. Another way is to assure them that something will happen as a result of their input.

When extending the invitation to participate, make sure you describe the Communities of Practice approach in enough detail so potential members understand that they will be expected to share information and take action on issues. Generate excitement around the activity. Let invitees know that you are:

- involving individuals who do shared work;
- creating opportunities to connect with other people across roles and issues;
- facilitating interactions by linking people in a way that benefits the work they need to get done anyway; and
- being intentional about how and why the issues are shared.

### Engage Participants—Sharing Information

Convening the community focuses on learning together by doing the work. By arriving at a common understanding about what the issues or problems are and how to take the first steps together, the community can begin to solve problems. This is done by applying and demonstrating what members have learned together. Everyone must feel valued as a contributing member of the group. This requires a structure for learning and building new knowledge together.

Creating a welcoming environment is essential. Evaluate whether your first messages convey a sincere intent to involve stakeholders in meaningful ways. Examine whether your first messages honor the work of the stakeholders. Some strategies that may help promote collaborative sharing follow.

- Make explicit what you are doing and why. Expect that participants will not be familiar working in a Communities of Practice approach and will need guidance and support in learning how to work in this new way.
- Create a procedure for generating ideas for reaching out beyond education (e.g., think about shared issues, agencies with similar mission or audience, stakeholders who share the same concerns).

### Facilitator Tip

**Approaching Diverse Stakeholder Groups**

When approaching diverse stakeholders, consider the following techniques.

- Inspire individual group members to think about things that have connections.
- Honor the history and/or work of the individual or affiliate organization.
- Avoid assuming that you are the first to tackle this issue.
- Honor the context and be open to the different ways individuals or groups may approach an issue or solution to a problem.
- Familiarize yourself with the work that has been done before and the relationships that have come before.

Make mental notes about some possible connections to your work, but do not assume you are making the appropriate connections based solely on your own impressions of the work that you have seen.
Facilitator Tip

Facilitating the Process
How you facilitate the process also will have an effect on how comfortable participants feel sharing their ideas.

- Communicate in an effective manner (e.g., listening, probing, building consensus, checking reality and reflecting).
- Honor the knowledge and expertise that different members bring.
- Pay attention to the details that show you value individuals (e.g., add new members to emails as the group grows, listen actively, give feedback, include all members in every correspondence, etc.).
- Look for convergence on issues and problem-solving strategies on which everyone can agree.
- Frame questions in a way that demonstrates your willingness to listen, probe, ask and clarify.
- Model the community approach across the existing state structure through actions, invitations and interactions.
- Communicate the idea that talking about and attending to relationships is done for a constructive purpose (i.e., not just a “touchy feely” approach).
- Resist sarcasm at all costs.
- Avoid making value judgments.
- Cultivate language that acknowledges what was being said even when you do not agree.
- Model willingness to learn and unlearn.
- Examine whether the group is unintentionally excluding group members through communication methods, unstated knowledge exchanges that need to be made more explicit, etc.
- Be aware of participation levels and check in with members to ensure needs are being met (e.g., personal calls to less vocal members outside of broad group meeting times when they might feel more comfortable talking).
- Highlight the contributions of all members and select examples of activities in a way that demonstrates success at different developmental levels.
• Think about the vocabulary used in other fields to describe important issues. Make sure everyone understands the differences.
• Build a pattern of work that respects different views and check perceptions.
• Provide support based on the needs identified by the community rather than anticipating what you think the community members need.
• Model systemic thinking by helping others see where they fit into the broader system.
• Share reasons why the work of the group is important to the mission and outcomes of other groups’ activities in your state.

Once participants begin sharing their knowledge and discussing their views, you will want to provide additional support to help them stay focused and to promote collaboration. Examples follow.

• Ask others to jot down notes about areas of agreement (ideas on supporting information, etc.) as others present information or their organizational perspectives.
• Probe deeper into statements with questions such as, “What recommendations do you have based on your unique perspective?” “What other issues are affected by the current issue?” “What new problems might result from trying to solve a current problem?”
• Think about what goals and/or needs the various members express. Decide what shared goals and needs the community can agree on.
• Build confidence among individuals or teams by highlighting their successes.
• Model a positive attitude that sees opportunities in problems and encourages self-leadership, resiliency and resourcefulness.
• Respect the existing state structure (i.e., cultural norms, individual styles, alignment of community work with organizational goals and objectives) when integrating the community approach.

### Facilitator Tip

**Strengthening an Emerging Community**

- Help participants find areas of alignment instead of staking out organization, division or agency positions.
- Move participants beyond organization positions to find commonality on issues about which they share concern.
- Seek solutions to shared problems.
- Share the issue in a broader context that considers multiple stakeholders rather than viewing it through the lens of one subgroup or organization.
- Appreciate the interests of members instead of viewing them as demands.
- Encourage consensus building instead of majority rule or strict rules of order (e.g., Robert’s Rules of Order). For example, use questions such as, “Can anyone propose a way of proceeding that meets all the interests we have heard so far?” and “Is there anyone who cannot live with the last version of what has been proposed?”

- Constantly ask, “Who can we learn from?” and “Who isn’t here who should be?”
- Encourage active participation by emphasizing everyone’s responsibility to the shared learning and improvement of the process.
- Build the shared knowledge base. For example, learn what others have done on an issue, add what you have done and then begin a discussion of how you can learn together.
Typically, new individuals will join the community over time. This can occur when participants identify others who should be involved (e.g., individuals representing a particular group, individuals with influence and/or authority on an issue to help inform the work of the group, etc.) as well when individuals ask to participate. Help newcomers by having varying levels of materials on hand to orient them. You may want to establish peer-to-peer learning opportunities to help newcomers become acclimated. Members with a history can help focus the message of the group and describe how far they have progressed.

### Engage Participants—Taking Action

Once participants in the newly formed community have an understanding of their shared purpose, they will identify actions that can be undertaken to address the issue. Participants identify themes for action through conversations, review of information and/or collection of new data. They develop an action plan and implement the plan.

To help participants arrive at actions they will undertake, consider the following suggestions.

- Discuss how the community will make its goals and shared vision explicit.
- Encourage participants to take collective responsibility to overcome barriers and get the work done.
- Acknowledge problems and adjust plans with input from the group.
- Reevaluate old activities by seeking new connections and new activities.
- Make predictions about what outcomes might be expected though alternate routes.
- Agree to an end goal.
- Surface assumptions and test those assumptions across groups.
- Brainstorm alternate options for addressing the issue.
- Sort out real constraints from imagined constraints.

Most states have a process for action planning. You should feel free to use whatever approach is appropriate for the community. At the very least, when developing the action plan, participants should engage in:

- prioritizing activities;
- determining goals;
- suggesting activities or tasks to meet goals;

### Facilitator Tip

**Working with a Core Group**

Sometimes it may make sense to form a core group that will initially work with you on the issue or some aspect of the issue. Core groups can be helpful when you have a large group in which not all participants wish to commit to the same level of participation—yet they still wish to be involved. Use the following techniques when establishing a core group.

- Identify a core group to help you define the beginning activities.
- Decide who needs to be involved in the core group representing some key points in considering this issue.
- Consider how far the core group can go and still be credible regarding the meaningful roles for the whole group.
- Discuss when it is appropriate to convene the whole group.
- Develop a mechanism for sharing information between the core group and the whole group.
• identifying individuals to take responsibility for activities; and
• developing a timeline for completion.

As participants are implementing the plan, it is important to keep the group informed about the progress and findings. Build innovative dis-

**Facilitator Tip**

**Supporting Ongoing Communication**

- 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, listserv and online directories.
- Facilitate meetings or conference calls.
- Use a regular “check-in” method to strengthen relationships (calls and emails).
- Tag websites to highlight one another’s 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.

...semination strategies that drive information and change models throughout the state and local environments.

**Determine Next Steps**

Once the Community of Practice has been operating for a period of time, it is important to reflect on the process and accomplishments. This is a time to determine if the Community of Practice is fulfilling the needs of the participants. Be intentional about asking certain questions. Examples follow.

- Is the way we have been working meeting our needs? Do we need to shift how we are working? Are there things we need to do differently?
- What more are we willing to take on (e.g., focus on new information, focus on forging new connections to issues with other groups, focus on additional contextual issues, etc.)?
- Do we need new roles and new actions? Who is willing to take on other roles?

The next steps will be determined by participants’ answers.

In some cases, this reflection time can be used to refocus the conversation. For example, the IDEA/Title I Community of Practice, which had been in place for several years, shifted its focus with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Participants may decide that they want to investigate an issue in greater depth. Practice groups—subgroups within the community that unite individuals with special interests or specific issues for the purpose of helping the community understand specific interests and issues more in
Communities of Practice . . . A New Approach to Solving Complex Educational Problems

depth—may be established. Participants in practice groups can:

- explore aspects of issues in greater depth;
- illuminate different perspectives around issues; and
- focus on key issues that are shared among agencies and organizations.

The practice group allows the community to keep its focus on the bigger picture and the practice group shares its findings with the community.

[Note: This section primarily focused on the facilitation process. Keep in mind that the purpose of the process is to bring community members together to address the issue.]

Facilitator Tip

**Asking the Right Questions**

As with any new approach, you will want to reflect on your direction and progress. Review the following questions and consider which ones should be asked routinely of your community.

**Selecting Participants**

- How will we determine what partners are needed and how to use them in appropriate ways?
- How can we bring in other groups such as the general education community and federal agencies (e.g., Social Security Administration, Vocational Rehabilitation, etc.)?

**Evaluating Success**

- How will we know when we have been successful?
- How can we collect evidence that collaboration makes a difference?
- How do we measure our successes in terms of student outcomes through quantitative measures when so much of the work is about building capacity and measured in qualitative terms?

**Ensuring Accountability**

- How do we ensure accountability for shared work?
- How do we report each other’s contributions in shared work?
- How will we show outcomes for work that is the combined effort of different services or agencies?

**Building a Team**

- How can we build a committed team?
- How do we build a collective vision among partners?
- How do we create a sense of shared ownership for all children?
- What if a state has an issue that is not considered a priority by the stakeholders?
Participating in the Communities of Practice approach has totally reconceptualized my notion of collaboration. It has given me a whole new way to work more effectively with others in an inspiring, welcoming atmosphere.

—State technical assistance provider
With the Communities of Practice approach the array of partners is greatly expanded. There is a richness to the dialogue and subsequent products that is not achieved in other processes.

—School psychologist

Communities of Practice have afforded me the opportunity to meet with people from the entire spectrum of the education field. The opportunity to meet with various stakeholders has given all of us the opportunity to reach a common understanding of how we can best meet the needs of the children we serve.

—School principal

The Community of Practice brings stakeholders together in forums from which they have previously been absent. It provides a vehicle for very rich discussions, deeply-felt perspectives and developing a common agenda.

—Teacher

If we don't communicate how can we know all the possibilities that are out there just waiting for us to ask!

—Family member
As these stakeholders attest, a Communities of Practice approach can have a far-reaching, positive effect. The relationships that are developed through Communities of Practice can be long-lasting and serve to strengthen future state initiatives.

Community is a way of working that, with time, will become part of your identity. Working from a community lens enables you to seek out solutions to complex issues and gain support from stakeholders in implementing those solutions.

There is an urgent need to come together now and eliminate barriers to student achievement. The timelines are short and the stakes are high. The IDEA Partnership’s Communities of Practice approach offers a promising strategy to support positive change. It is our hope that, together, we can discover what it will take to engage state agency personnel, policymakers and stakeholders as partners in a way that truly improves the system—to effectively translate policy and research into practice to ensure successful outcomes for students with disabilities and their families.

**Communities of Practice Resources**

Interested in learning more? A series of briefs, *New Eyes—Meeting Challenges Through Communities of Practice*, is available on the IDEA Partnership website (www.ideapartnership.org). The briefs describe the relationship of Communities of Practice to various topics of interest to state leaders. Briefs are intended to provide a more in-depth look at implementation issues and provide practical tools, state examples and resources.

Check out the IDEA Partnership website at www.ideapartnership.org for more information.
The IDEA Partnership

- 100 Black Men of America, Inc.
- American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
- American Association of People with Disabilities
- American Association of School Administrators
- American Federation of Teachers
- American Occupational Therapy Association
- American School Counselor Association
- American School Health Association
- American Society for Deaf Children
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
- Association for Career and Technical Education
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)
- Council for Exceptional Children
- Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE)
- Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
- Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR)
- Division for Early Childhood
- Easter Seals
- Education Commission of the States
- Family Voices
- Federation for Children with Special Needs
- Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health (FFCMH)
- Higher Education Consortium for Special Education
- Learning Disabilities Association of America
- National Alliance of Black School Educators
- National Association for Bilingual Education
- National Association for Parents of Children with Visual Impairments
- National Association for the Education of Young Children
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- National Association of Pupil Services Administrators
- National Association of School Psychologists
- National Association of Secondary School Principals
- National Association of State Boards of Education
- National Association of State Directors of Special Education
- National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
- National Association of State Title I Directors
- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
- National Conference of State Legislatures
- National Council on Independent Living
- National Down Syndrome Congress
- National Down Syndrome Society
- National Education Association
- National Fiesta Educativa
- National Governors’ Association
- National Head Start Association
- National Indian Child Welfare Association
- National Mental Health Association
- National School Board Association
- PACER Center
- Part C Coordinators: Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association
- School Social Work Association of America
- TASH
- The Arc
- United Cerebral Palsy Association