

Meeting  
Challenges  
Through  
Communities  
of Practice

# New Eyes

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

## What's Inside

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There are a number of key strategies that are fundamental to the Communities of Practice approach. Find out how these strategies can assist Communities of Practice leaders and facilitators in building a strong foundation and enhancing stakeholder participation.

## Facilitating Community

### *Key Strategies for Building Communities of Practice to Accomplish State Goals*

**Joanne Cashman, Patrice Linehan and Mariola Rosser**  
IDEA Partnership, NASDSE

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.

Communities are a new way of doing work. Everyone—including state agency personnel and all stakeholders—in a Community of Practice is considered to be an expert in his or her own context. Together with state agency personnel, stakeholders seek information and solutions from each other. These solutions are implemented and participants report back to the Communities of Practice on how well implementation was achieved. Based on this feedback, the Communities of Practice will determine the next steps.

New ways of working demand new strategies and approaches. When creating and implementing the Communities of Practice approach, facilitators work through the following activities:

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

There also are a number of key strategies that are fundamental to the Communities of Practice approach. These strategies assist Communities of Practice leaders and facilitators in building a strong foundation and enhancing stakeholder participation.

The strategies presented in this brief have been used with positive results in non-education settings such as business and government. The IDEA Partnership has implemented these strategies in its Communities of Practice approach. In all cases, the strategies have been tailored to fit the education context.

The examples that follow illustrate the strategies in action. In some cases, the examples feature a national Community of Practice. States are encouraged to adapt these national examples to the state level.

Read on to discover new strategies that can support community building.

### Brokering

For most issues, there are groups that have influence, groups that have authority and groups that have both. Typically, these groups have important roles and responsibilities related to the issue at hand. However, they may not always have established working relationships.

A broker is a person (or group of people) who understands the importance of bringing these groups together. Brokers create opportunities that make connections between groups more likely. Brokers:

- bring people together to exchange information and to work together;
- create opportunities for groups to communicate and understand each other's needs and abilities; and
- facilitate connections that make ongoing or deeper work more likely.

**Consider this example.** In South Carolina, the state IDEA Partnership was planning its third state summit on the implementation of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEA 2004). A key focus was the general education role in changing outcomes for struggling students and reducing over-identification for special education. The state education agency asked an IDEA Partnership partner, the South Carolina Education Association, to promote the summit and recruit key general education leaders. In this way, the state was able to broker greater participation and connect to leaders who could move the issues beyond the summit.

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*By identifying the group that needed to be at the table (general education teachers) and the organization that represents them (South Carolina Education Association), we can purposefully engage their members in discussion. Not only did the numbers of teachers increase at the Summit, the opportunities to move forward and improve services to students in South Carolina schools increased exponentially.*

—National Education Association Representative

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**Strategic tips.** Brokering requires knowledge and relationships. Brokers use their knowledge of issues and people to create opportunities. Through relationships, new opportunities can be created. Consider incorporating the following tips.

- Think about the organizations that might provide entry points for new participants. Invite them to become conduits for new groups.
- Explain to organizations why they should be involved in the Communities of Practice activities.
- Plan concrete ways for organizations and new groups to move forward together with the existing Community participants.

### **Coalescing Around Issues**

Everyone experiences and defines issues differently. Sometimes, stakeholder groups can become polarized as a result of differing positions. When this happens, group members engage in communication that can be described as stating and defending. Opportunities for dialogue and agreement are lost.

Coalescing around issues is a strategy that can help groups move beyond their own position and find commonalities with other groups. It involves realigning the discussion around common interests. Diverse views are redefined as strengths that can be expressed through a common commitment to shared interests.

**Consider this example.** There is a national focus on academic performance as a measure of the success of the education system. Yet, there are both academic and non-academic barriers to achievement. One non-academic barrier is behavioral health. When asked about the range of strategies to address increased performance, researchers, policymakers and administrators often describe strong research-based academic strategies as the keys to better results. On the other hand, families, teachers, school health providers and community workers often focus on the non-academic factors that contribute to achievement. If the situation is conceptualized and presented as a choice be-

tween research-based academic interventions and research-based behavioral interventions, little progress is likely.

The national Community of Practice on School-Based Behavioral Health—which is composed of many stakeholder groups including researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families and others—has coalesced around issues to move forward on a shared agenda. Using the strategy of coalescing around issues, groups have been asked to address the *multiple* factors that promote increased achievement. As a result, new alliances have been created and indicators of success have been identified that engage and build a broad based understanding and commitment to action, reflection and change.

Drawing on the shared interest in changing outcomes for students with behavioral issues, 10 states, 23 national organizations and 5 technical assistance centers came together in 2004 to form the national Community of Practice. Today, they meet annually at the National Conference of School-Based Mental Health, work year round to shape the national meeting and collaborate on 10 high-interest issues co-facilitated by a range of stakeholder groups.

**Strategic tips.** A Community of Practice is the ideal approach for diverse groups to coalesce. When using coalescing around issues as a strategy, consider the following tips.

- Ensure that the agenda is transparent. If there are hidden agendas, trust is compromised and may actually reinforce differing positions rather than opening new avenues of collaboration.
- Acknowledge the value that each stakeholder brings to new discussions.
- Create concrete opportunities for participants to build trust with one another. This is best done in the context of group work on a project or issue.

## Cross Pollinating

Special education issues rarely are one-dimensional; they affect many areas. Policy trends in other areas—such as general education and mental health—also can have an impact on special education.

Cross pollinating is used to create opportunities for interdisciplinary learning. It facilitates multi-stakeholder attendance and/or interaction among organizations or people doing related work who are not part of the same networks.

**Consider this example.** In 1999, NASDSE and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) created a community of states and organizations that were focused on learning about how special education and Title I could better collaborate to improve outcomes for struggling learners. In 2004, the states redefined their work under the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB). To do this, states and organizations needed to reach a new influential group—state school improvement coordinators.

The IDEA Partnership facilitated the joint attendance of states, researchers and technical assistance providers at the National School Improvement Network meeting. In conference calls and onsite meetings, participants determined how they would interact with each other and with the new network. They also decided what issues they would bring forward in discussions during the meeting. Following the meeting, they used conference calls to decide what to report to the full Community. As a result, the Community was transformed into an affiliation that now includes 12 states, 19 national organizations and technical assistance providers that are all focused on the intersection of IDEA 2004 and NCLB.

**Strategic tips.** When using cross pollination as a strategy, consider the following suggestions.

- Use conferences and meetings as an opportunity to gather information and learn about other perspectives.

- Create opportunities for group observation of promising practices that can be revisited later for exploration.
- Be intentional about crossing boundaries and reaching out to someone else's turf.
- Don't let the participation in the meeting be a one-shot event. Create follow up and apply the learning to work across groups.

## Customizing

Every stakeholder has his or her own vocabulary and unique perspective on whether or how issues are connected. Customizing is a strategy that addresses the need to create a deeper meaning within groups by translating key messages into the vocabulary of the group and placing them in contexts that are familiar.

Customizing always requires looking at issues from the viewpoint of the intended audience. This means asking what is already known and building on that in a vocabulary that is familiar before moving to new terms and concepts. In building a shared agenda, the work takes on deeper meaning and is more easily moved to scale.

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*People work together in various ways, but too often do not get maximum results because of how they work. NASDSE's IDEA Partnership has been using the Communities of Practice approach to improve results through essential strategies developed, practiced and proven over time.*

—Bill East  
Executive Director, NASDSE

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**Consider this example.** In Pennsylvania and North Carolina—two states in the Community of Practice on NCLB/IDEA Collaboration—there was a need to engage the school principals actively in the Response to Intervention (RTI) initiatives that were currently underway. By partnering with the state affiliate of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the states hoped to build on what principals already knew about good practice and expand that knowledge to include RTI approaches. The intent was to communicate new ideas in an a way that honored what was already known. It invited active participation by showing how the emerging RTI approaches could meet principals’ needs.

**Strategic tips.** When using issue specification, consider the following tips.

- Be sensitive to the language being used to present the information. Make sure the language is jargon-free.
- Engage stakeholders with various roles to present the information from their particular points of view. This helps to model the role of community building in understanding different perspectives.
- Highlight the participation of group members in high-profile meetings where the issue is addressed.

### **Leading from All Levels**

In a Community of Practice, leadership is neither top-down nor bottom-up. Theoretically, leadership can come from anywhere—the caveat being that the sponsor (e.g., the state) must have enough influence and authority to offer credibility for Community of Practice efforts. The strategy of leading from all levels entails 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 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.

**Consider this example.** In Hawaii, the state Community of Practice on Mental Health created a state team that partnered with eight local school complexes. The state wanted local participants to exert leadership as they shared their knowledge. To this end, the state provided them with ongoing opportunities to raise issues that needed to be addressed at the state level.

**Strategic tips.** Creating opportunities for participants to share knowledge and raise issues encourages the growth of leadership at different levels. It also helps to sustain work by providing a safety net when the leadership changes. When using leading from all levels, consider the following tips.

- Seek to understand the interest of other stakeholders and establish conditions so that these groups interact, find commonality and see the benefit in allied action.
- Select, organize, present and deliver information in a way that makes it more consumable by and need fulfilling for various stakeholders.
- Develop an interactive process for gathering stakeholder input at all levels.

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*The days of everyone having good ideas without action are over. If this community work succeeds all will be empowered and share in the work.*

—Wisconsin Department of Education Staff

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### **Learning Loops**

Real progress requires that decision makers test the ideas they think will work against how they actually

work in practice. To do this, networks are established that help us understand whether the anticipated actions are occurring and whether any unanticipated results are developing. This process requires two-way learning—the intentional exchange among individuals at different levels of implementation.

The learning loops strategy is the intentional way that two-way learning is promoted and exchanged among individuals at every level of the system (e.g., federal, state and local). The strategy is particularly useful in helping the group move from vision to results.

**Consider this example.** The requirements of NCLB and IDEA 2004 related to teacher quality raised many questions for school districts and state education personnel. Logistically, it was unlikely that the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) could answer all of those individual questions in depth. The Center for Teacher Quality (CTQ) at CCSSO employed the Community of Practice approach to facilitate knowledge sharing. CTQ core partners solicited questions from stakeholders. The questions were synthesized and a conference call was scheduled with OESE and the Community of Practice participants to discuss the questions.

The ground rules stipulated that there would be no “Yes” or “No” type answers and no one would be forced to respond. Rather, the discussion would focus on the context for making good decisions. OESE representatives interacted with the Community members as they considered the questions. Stakeholders learned about the thought processes used by OESE to craft the provisions and OESE gained a better understanding of the context in which the provisions were implemented.

**Strategic tips.** Two-way learning loops depend on participants being open to feedback. The success of learning loops depends on the extent to which relationships have been built between decision makers and the stakeholders who are involved in implemen-

tation. Consider the following tips when using the strategy.

- Identify key decision makers and the range of implementers around an issue. Build a relationship of trust between them.
- Set ground rules for interaction.
- Articulate what all participants have gained.
- Provide for active and ongoing dialogue.

### **Leveraging**

Leveraging is the use of authority, influence and/or resources to create new attention, action or change. Leveraging demands an understanding of the content of the issue, the system(s) that influences the issue and the context for implementing the desired changes.

**Consider this example.** The Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) encourages the use of mediation and other collaborative strategies to resolve disagreements about special education and early intervention programs. In 2004, CADRE joined with the IDEA Partnership to leverage its reach into constituent networks. Representatives from eight national and state organizations who shared a fundamental interest in the prevention and early resolution of special education disagreements signed on to work around creating an agreement.

Fundamental to this collaboration is the belief that training and technical assistance is more effective when there is meaningful stakeholder involvement. Participants developed a basic presentation and series of skill-building activities on conflict resolution with the purpose of reaching and informing a wider network of people. The information also was disseminated into participants’ own networks and presented to other organizations where early dispute resolution was an important issue. Several states have initiated additional activities based on this work.

**Strategic tips.** Leveraging opportunities occur at the intersection of policy, practice and people. Consider the following tips.

- Learn the interrelated aspects of an issue.
- Identify the key stakeholders.
- Choose the actions that can move you toward what you need, both now and in the future.

### Showcasing Exemplary Sites

Showcasing is the way that successful models get attention as instructive examples of practice based expertise. Exemplars help cross the research, policy and practice divide by making models more understandable.

Seeding is a form of showcasing. With this strategy, the state provides incentives for model program staff to promote their programs. This also can be done by providing start-up funds for replication. The success of seeding depends largely on understanding what will be learned from creating practice based examples, how those examples will be connected to ensure continued participant learning and how coaches will be used to move ideas to scale.

**Consider this example.** Arizona has had a long history of facilitating a state level transition team. Through interaction with other states participating in the national Community of Practice, Arizona began to focus on strengthening its efforts through the creation of local community teams.

Arizona created a funding initiative through IDEA discretionary funds to seed seven local school districts. The seed grant enabled the local districts to work actively with each other, community partners, stakeholders and the state team to enhance the transition community statewide. Arizona connected the state team, community teams and stakeholders through a web-based Community of Practice. It planned face-to-face activities and the community team development program, which was supported by the University of Kansas Transition Coalition.

**Strategic tips.** The showcasing of exemplary sites can be used to deepen understanding among all stakeholder groups. Many states have used showcasing successfully to some extent. In all cases, care has been

taken to specify the kinds of examples that are to be showcased or seeded. Consider the following tips.

- Take a deeper look at how to position the leaders of exemplary sites as coaches.
- Be intentional about making the products easily available to all.
- Create community-sponsored events focused on learning from and with the exemplary sites.
- Provide opportunities to share stories of learning and successes.
- Be sure all stakeholders within exemplary sites are considered to act in the role of advisors and coaches.
- Ensure a connection among exemplary sites to build support and improve practice.
- Connect new sites to the exemplary site network to scale up practice.

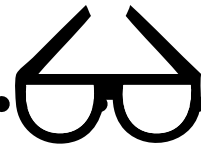
### Your Turn—Applying Learning at the State Level



The strategies in this brief can be used to enhance Communities of Practice in your state. Make a plan to implement one or more of the strategies. To get started, ask the following questions.

- Which strategies have relevance to the work in which we are currently involved?
- What results do we hope to achieve by using the strategy?
- Who else should be involved in implementing the strategy?

# About Communities of Practice



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

## Helping State Agency Personnel Accomplish Goals

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

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

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

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

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

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

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