



Meeting
Challenges
Through
Communities
of Practice

New Eyes

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

What's Inside

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Find out how the Center for Improving Teacher Quality (CTQ) at the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is using Communities of Practice to improve teacher quality.

Improving Teacher Quality with Communities of Practice

The Center for Improving Teacher Quality Approach

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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.

The current environment framing education for students with disabilities—namely the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEA 2004)—has challenged educators to achieve even greater success. Ensuring **teacher quality** is one strategy that both NCLB and IDEA 2004 have advanced for improving results for all students, including students with disabilities. However, implementation of

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

the highly qualified teacher requirement in NCLB and complementary teacher quality requirements in IDEA 2004 has created many complex issues for state education agency personnel.

Ensuring teacher quality for all students, including students with disabilities, is a complex educational problem that must be addressed through complex work. National, state, local and teacher preparation structures—in both general education and special education—are all affected. There must be congruence across the state teacher licensing system including:

- a set of valid standards for what teachers are expected to know and be able to do in inclusive classrooms;
- approval of programs in which teacher candidates demonstrate proficiency on these standards;
- accreditation that strengthens teacher preparation programs;
- licensure to practice as a qualified professional teacher; and
- ongoing professional development where teachers continue to hone their skills and/or renew their licenses.

The Communities of Practice approach is the future for education. It is a way of working and learning together so that policy gets translated into practice. It can help us move from pockets of excellence to full implementation.

—Bill East
NASDSE

At the center of the teacher quality issue as it relates to educating students with disabilities is the need to re-define the relationship between general education and special education. In short, general education teachers must become better at pedagogy so that the full range of student needs can be met. Special education teachers must develop stronger knowledge of content. And, collaboration between general education and special education teachers is essential to leveraging their expertise. The implications of this change for states and school districts are enormous.

Within this context of improving teacher quality, state education personnel have a major responsibility for crafting teacher licensing, program approval and professional development policies. They also have a major role to play in providing technical assistance to local education agencies and schools. The challenge is great, as the need goes beyond addressing compliance issues to solving complex problems that have an inherent human element.

Read on to find out how CTQ is employing the **Communities of Practice** approach as a technical assistance strategy for supporting teacher quality.

The CTQ Communities of Practice brings together the essential partners within a state. The team acknowledges common challenges and sees other groups as collaborators rather than combatants in moving toward solutions.

—Carol Smith
AACTE

Communities of Practice—The Right Tool for Addressing Teacher Quality

CTQ grew out of the work of two OSEP projects. In one, CCSSO was drafting a new set of model standards for all teachers of students with disabilities through its Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). In the other, NASDSE was bringing together stakeholders to address many issues related to IDEA 1997 through its Policymaker Partnership (the precursor to the IDEA Partnership). The American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) was working with both projects around teacher quality issues.

At that time, IDEA reauthorization was underway and states were in the process of implementing NCLB. CCSSO, AACTE and NASDSE began looking at the relationship between policy and practice related to ensuring teacher quality for all students. They leveraged their expertise—CCSSO through the teacher licensing system, NASDSE through its Communities of Practice and AACTE through its affiliation with teacher preparation programs—to shape the direction for what is now CTQ.

Communities of Practice is a key strategy for addressing teacher quality because it is uniquely suited to deal with complex and interrelated issues. 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 community” and then do work elsewhere. State agency personnel engage stakeholders in interacting, sharing knowledge and determining action steps in the course of solving complex problems. As such, state agency personnel accomplish state goals through communities. [See the text box, “About Communities of Practice.”]

Using Communities of Practice, CTQ identified stakeholders and leverage points where potential existed to create meaningful change in a reasonable pe-

riod of time. The context was set when CTQ identified the core partners for this work. Each understood the issues related to implementing the policy changes, had key knowledge about the issues and would be instrumental in supporting change. The core partners are listed below.

- **INTASC and CCSSO** have influence with state personnel around state teaching standards, program approval, licensing and license renewal.
- **NASDSE** has influence with state special education personnel.
- **AACTE** has influence with higher education, including teacher preparation and professional development.

In addition, stakeholder organizations representing practitioners and consumers who would be affected by the changes were invited into the planning process (e.g., National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, Parent Training Information Centers, Parent Information Resource Centers, American Association of School Administrators, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, etc.). The

The true success of CTQ’s Communities of Practice strategy has been bringing together a variety of constituencies from across general education and special education and building the collaborative culture essential to achieving effective and lasting teacher policy change.

—Kathleen Paliokas
CTQ

National Education Association extended its participation by encouraging state chapters to become part of CTQ teams. Researchers and technical assistance providers who were engaged in related work also were invited to participate.

The Communities of Practice on teacher quality set about the task of identifying issues, considering leverage points and setting an action course in the states. Using the Communities of Practice approach, members engaged in several levels of community building.

Leveraging



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

Example: Teacher quality is a major investment in both general education and special education. Licensing officials are charged with planning and implementing teacher quality efforts. In this case, leveraging requires an understanding of the decision points in the system of teacher standards, program approval for teacher education programs, state licensing and professional development. Therefore, the active and ongoing engagement between licensing officials and special education officials can leverage new opportunities.

Strategic Tips: Leveraging opportunities occur at the intersection of the issues, the people and the system. To understand the leverage points, you need to identify and understand the inter-related aspects of an issue. This will help you choose the actions that can leverage what you need both now and in the future.

Communities of Practice Within a State Team Structure

The CTQ Communities of Practice core partners invited teams—consisting of the state director of special education, state director of teacher licensure and a higher education representative—to work with CTQ to draft and implement state-specific action plans. Team members were encouraged to share their knowledge and suggest action steps, as well as bring other stakeholders into the discussion who could spread the word through their own networks.

By working side-by-side in the CTQ Communities of Practice, teachers, state agencies and families create a shared vision of the critical teaching and learning characteristics that make schools great places to learn.

—Patti Ralabate
National Education Association

Communities of Practice Among States

The CTQ Communities of Practice core partners organized national forums in which state personnel coalesced around shared teacher quality issues, such as co-teaching, relicensure and low incidence. *Case in point:* Co-teaching. A tension exists between the special education service delivery system and the highly qualified teacher subject area requirements of NCLB. A practice group emerged from the CTQ forums in which participants shared their experiences and discussed research related to co-teaching. Participants crafted—and are now using—a survey about the information, attitudes and dispositions necessary to implement co-teaching in a meaningful way as part of

the highly qualified teacher requirement. Results were presented at a CTQ National Forum event.

Communities of Practice Within States

The CTQ core partners modeled how to create Communities of Practice within states. *Case in point:* California. A practice group on low incidence formed in California as a result of a CTQ National Forum. Discussion focused on questions about how the requirements for highly qualified teachers would affect areas such as visual impairment, deaf and hearing impaired—especially in light of the unique context in which teachers serve multiple age groups and teach multiple content areas. California took the practice group work and communicated it statewide. This led to an examination of higher education teacher preparation curriculum and agreements to create a statewide set of cohesive standards for teachers of low incidence students.

Who would have thought that national conference calls could be so informative and so much fun?

—Walter Kimball
University of Southern Maine

I appreciate that the CTQ conference calls are helping us develop a national community of educators who are willing and able to discuss a broad range of education issues.

—Athena Waite
University of California-Riverside

Communities of Practice Across States

The CTQ Communities of Practice core partners created a way for states to share their current emerging work and receive feedback. *Case in point:* Hawaii. Hawaii crafted a survey that asked all beginning teachers

Creating a National Feedback Loop



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, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) could answer all of those individual questions in depth.

CTQ employed the Communities 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 Communities 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 give an answer. Rather, the discussion would focus on the context for making good decisions. OESE representatives interacted with the community members as they considered the questions.

OESE learned a lot about context through these calls. Community members benefited as well. As a result, many calls of this nature took place.

to assess their readiness to perform each of the indicators in the INTASC Model Standards for Teachers of Students with Disabilities. The survey results provided state personnel with insights on how to shape professional development. Two other states extended Hawaii’s work in their own context. Arkansas adapted the survey for all current teachers in the state; and Indiana adapted the survey for all higher education personnel involved in preparing teachers. These three states communicated with each other on the application and technical aspects of their initiatives.

Through the CTQ Communities of Practice, states have been provided expertise and resources on current and challenging topics for improving teacher quality.

—Susie Bronon
State Program Development, Arkansas

The CTQ Communities of Practice approach has provided the opportunity for in-depth exploration of current interests and need-to-know high interest topics by participants.

—Darla Griffin
Southeast Regional Resource Center

For More Information

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For more information on the CTQ’s Communities of Practice work, visit www.sharedwork.org (click on “National Communities of Practice on Teacher Quality”). For more information on Communities of Practice, visit www.ideapartnership.org.

Your Turn

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Applying Learning at the State Level

The CTQ Communities of Practice on Teacher Quality provides a national model in which states share and work on issues. Consider establishing a Communities of Practice on Teacher Quality in your state. To get started, ask the following questions.

- Who are the stakeholders in your state who have an interest in improving teacher quality?
- Who are possible partners (e.g., organizations and agencies with influence and authority) in your state?
- What are the issues related to improving teacher quality that can be used to connect stakeholders to the community?

About Communities of Practice



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. 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.

How does the Communities of Practice approach help state agency personnel accomplish their 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. 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 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 uniquely contribute; 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.

The Center for Improving Teacher Quality (CTQ)



In October 2002, CCSSO through its Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), was awarded funding from OSEP to develop a national center to work with states on developing models for improving the preparation, licensing and professional development of both general education and special education teachers of students with disabilities. CCSSO is collaborating with NASDSE, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the federal Regional Resource Centers (RRCs) and the federal comprehensive centers in creating and implementing CTQ.

CTQ is building on INTASC's work of developing model policies that can help states drive systemic reform of their teacher licensing systems, particularly INTASC's Model Standards for Licensing General and Special Education Teachers of Students with Disabilities: A Resource for State Dialogue. The center's strategies for helping states reform, improve and align their teacher licensing systems for teachers of students with disabilities include:

- hosting an annual forum each year for all states to come together to draft and refine

state-specific action plans and to share ideas;

- conducting case-based studies in 6-8 states to document the change process;
- providing brokered, customized technical assistance to states;
- providing limited grant monies to support states' reform processes; and
- creating within-state and across-state learning communities (via in-person, phone, and electronic communications) whereby states can share their expertise, best practices and successful strategies.

For more information, visit the CCSSO website at http://www.ccsso.org/projects/Center_for_Improving_Teacher_Quality/.



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