

SYNTHESIS BRIEF

Communities of Practice: Activities Sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs

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June 2005

Overview and Purpose

One of the greatest challenges for state education agencies (SEAs) in the next decade will be increasing their facility to provide technical assistance (TA) to local education agencies (LEAs) and schools. This points to the importance of working across agencies, organizations and stakeholder groups. The complex and interrelated challenges of moving policy to practice require that SEAs seek and build relationships with groups that share common ideals, goals and purposes. A new approach called *communities of practice* (CoP) offers state- and local-level policymakers a promising strategy for solving problems and bringing groups together to work collaboratively. The purpose of this document is to:

- introduce the concept of CoP;
- describe some of the ways CoP are currently supported by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the state and national level as a TA strategy within the field of special education; and
- offer guidance to decisionmakers who are interested in forming their own state- or local-level CoP

Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) produced this synthesis of information about CoP as part of its Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's OSEP.

The Concept of CoP

The concept of CoP has its roots in the educational theory of *situated learning* – i.e., when learning takes place within the context and culture of real situations rather than through presentation of abstract concepts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). To date, CoP theory has been applied primarily within business and organizational development. However, in recent years, CoP have emerged as a promising tool for use within the fields of education and special education.

Community is a value that is observable in the work of many organizations. Based on a CoP approach, individuals representing multiple perspectives are identified, invited to participate in the CoP and encouraged to shape the strategies of the organization. According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), CoP can drive strategy, help solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, develop members' professional skills and help organizations/agencies recruit and retain talent. CoP, which serve as a tool for bringing together multiple stakeholders and addressing issues and problems, are similar in some respects to other types of groups that come together around common issues – e.g., formal work groups or project teams (See Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Comparison of CoP and Other Types of Group (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002)

Type of Group	Purpose	Membership	Glue	Life Span
Community of Practice	Develop skills and build and share knowledge	Self-selected	Passion, commitment, and expertise	Driven by internal interest
Formal Work Group	Deliver product or service	People reporting to group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganization
Project Team	Accomplish a specific task	Assigned by senior management	Project's milestones and goals	Until completion
Informal Network	Collect and share information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	At pleasure of people involved

A New Way of Working

Generally, CoP are used to unite groups of people who share experience with a common set of problems. The focus of CoP is always the set of issues itself – referred to in CoP theory as the domain of knowledge. The three essential elements of CoP are the domain or set of issues, a community of people who care about the issues and the shared practice that they are pursuing to address these issues (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p. 27). In addition to the issue that binds the group, it is important to consider the CoP members, the relationships among CoP members and the context in which they are learning together. An important feature of this relationship-building work is that practitioners, rather than external experts or products, enable CoP to solve persistent problems. A variety of terms have been used to describe the

intangible assets that people bring, including “human capital” and “intellectual capital.” Based on the CoP strategy, key individuals and groups do the following:

- use their individual and collective knowledge and experience to analyze and diagnose system challenges;
- propose new strategies; and
- offer their influence to reach their networks and support the new strategies.

CoP usually meet outside of the formal organizational structure, yet complement it. For this reason, CoP are thought to have more freedom in their ability to counter “group think” and other common organizational problems. This kind of community of practice is thought to enhance innovation, but it also can lead to exclusion of some key people and may not

receive the appropriate resources to support it. On the other hand, CoP that are sanctioned by, and functioning within, the organization run the risk of over-management or being constrained by the definition or purposes ascribed to it by the organization (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Both kinds of CoP can facilitate collaboration, information exchange and sharing of promising practices across organizational boundaries. CoP can vary in their level of formality. When applying CoP strategy to state systems, some CoP can be an integral part of the state procedures. Others might be more advisory in nature. CoP could provide ongoing ways to involve stakeholders or be structured in a time-limited way to implement a specific policy or practice.

CoP Structure

When forming a community of practice, there are structural considerations. CoP can easily become large. When this occurs, diverse interests can cloud the purpose and goals. To address this issue, CoP can form issue-based subdivisions called *practice groups*. The practice groups keep the community of practice focused on all the dimensions of the issue. The community of practice keeps the practice groups focused on the whole issue.

Another structural issue for CoP is sponsorship. The sponsor should be a group with influence and authority to offer credibility to the CoP efforts. CoP members want to know that their efforts are connected to the real issues of the day. For example, sponsorship by an SEA offers stakeholders this assurance. Another critical role is the facilitator. Facilitators coordinate agendas, make connections, maintain routine

communication and invite participation in issue-based problem-solving *practice groups*.

The final issue in CoP structure is balance. To be true to the values of community, the sponsor does not control or manage CoP activity. Rather, the sponsor is a partner in the community of practice. Likewise, the facilitator does not play a directive or intrusive role. The facilitator serves the community and the practice groups by making the critical connections for individual members who do not have the reach or resources to make such connections.

SEA Leadership in CoP

Although CoP may emerge naturally or be initiated and sponsored by organizations (Nickols, 2000) state leaders can play a critically important role in fostering the strategic use of CoP. For state leaders, CoP can effectively test assumptions, identify emerging issues, communicate key messages, generate new strategies, garner support and facilitate stakeholders in developing a shared agenda.

OSEP Investments in CoP

OSEP has invested in the CoP strategy as a way of promoting shared implementation of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Longstanding education reform efforts, combined with the sweeping education changes set in motion by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), emphasize this need to work together to serve all students including those with disabilities, meet new accountability requirements for all students and improve post-school outcomes.

The IDEA Partnership

The IDEA Partnership at NASDSE, an OSEP-funded TA project, is using the CoP approach as a national TA strategy. Much of the IDEA Partnership's ongoing work in states began under the Policymaker Partnership at NASDSE during the years 1998 to 2003, and was expanded to include 55 national organizations in the refunded Partnership Project in 2003 to:

- promote interaction and cross-stakeholder affiliation around shared issues, including the involvement of individuals from underrepresented groups;
- stimulate cross-stakeholder involvement in state and local systems to deliver professional development and solve implementation problems; and
- facilitate systematic change and a cultural shift toward greater and more meaningful cross-stakeholder involvement.

The IDEA Partnership builds CoP within and across states. Its work is organized around issues – e.g., transition, mental health, professional development. The fundamental goal of these CoP is learning at the individual and organizational level. The Partnership uses its resources to build two-way *learning loops* between state decision-makers and local implementers.¹

¹ The term *learning loops* is used by the IDEA Partnership to describe the intentional way that two-way learning is promoted and exchanged among partners at every level of the system (i.e., federal, state and local). States involve multiple stakeholders in the core work of the state (e.g., creating a state-wide professional development and family education system to accomplish state goals). The states are asked by the CoP conveners to share what they have learned from this cross-stakeholder interaction and individual stakeholders are asked to share what they have learned about improving their own practice from working with the state. Learning spreads beyond the CoP when members of the CoP report back to the

Likewise, the Partnership invests time and money to convene meetings that bring people together across states that are tackling similar problems. This cross-state learning is another example of two-way learning loops, a strategy that is also used to share ideas and lessons learned among states and federal partners. Some examples are described briefly below and more information is available at www.ideapartnership.org.

State-based CoP

The IDEA partner organizations are keenly interested in building connections to state systems so that their needs are addressed and their experience is valued in the state sponsored system of training. Therefore, the Partnership wrote a proposal asking for state partners who wanted to build more collaborative systems that consistently invite stakeholder participation. The request for proposals (RFP) set forth critical elements to be addressed: cross-stakeholder participation, leveraging of state resources and bringing state affiliates of national organizations directly into the work of building collaborative professional development systems within these states.

Eleven states received one-year seed grants from the Partnership to organize local professional development pilots on key aspects of improving results for students with disabilities.² These states are building communities across constituencies in the state and involving stakeholders in the

group they are affiliated with (e.g., family organization, service provider group, administrator, policymaker), thereby enhancing the professional growth of others.

² Some of these states may apply for additional funding.

core work of the state agency around professional development. The states also participate in a cross-state community of practice with each other, NASDSE and OSEP to learn the lessons of shared work and collaborative systems.

Issue-based CoP

Currently, the IDEA Partnership sponsors three issue-based communities: IDEA/Title I Collaboration; Shared Agenda Across Education, Mental Health and Family Organizations; and Interagency Transition. In each community, states that are pursuing efforts have joined with national TA providers, national professional organizations and federal agencies to explore issues and new strategies. Some of the major activities are:

- *IDEA/Title I* – This community of practice, co-sponsored with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), brings 20 SEAs together to discuss and strategize issues related to participation of students with disabilities in schoolwide Title I programs, adequate yearly progress subgroup performance under NCLB and planning across IDEA and Title I for School Improvement under NCLB. OSEP, the Office of Student Assessment and Accountability and the Inspector General’s Office routinely participate as do Regional Resource Centers (RRCs) and Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers.³ In June 2004, 10 of the IDEA Partnership organizations joined this CoP.

³ Similar to the RRC functions as related to special education, the Comprehensive Centers assist SEAs and LEAs in meeting the needs of children, including children in high poverty areas, children of migrant families, immigrant children, children

- *Education, Mental Health and Families* – Co-led with the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD), this community of practice focuses on a shared agenda of education, mental health and families. Ten states are pursuing state-based initiatives and meeting with a national community of federal agencies, TA providers funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), OSEP and the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) and more than 30 national organizations. The national community is pursuing issues outlined in the President’s New Freedom Commission Report on Mental Health, including the recommendation to increase mental health services in schools.

- *Interagency Transition* – Co-led with the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), this community of practice began in Pennsylvania as an effort across 10 bureaus in four agencies and has now extended to nine states. The states meet monthly on calls with OSEP, Rehabilitation Services Administration, NIDRR, national TA providers and national organizations to advance interagency participation in transition.

The Partnership also collaborates with the CCSSO-led Center for Improving Teacher Quality (CTQ), another OSEP-funded

with limited-English proficiency, neglected or delinquent children, homeless children and youth, American Indian children, children with disabilities and, where applicable, Native Alaskan and Hawaiian children. These centers focus on two priorities: assisting Title I schoolwide programs and helping local education agencies that have the highest percentages or numbers of children in poverty.

initiative that focuses on the alignment of standards, personnel preparation and licensure to improve teacher quality. It includes representatives from 42 states and one non-state jurisdiction. Using the CoP strategy, the Center is encouraging states to form communities across stakeholder groups to address issues within the states and is bringing state teams together around the following five issues that are particularly challenging across states: (1) changes in service delivery patterns in special education and what it means for teacher education; (2) the future of collaborative teaching and meeting NCLB mandates to ensure teachers are highly qualified; (3) new models of induction; (4) local school culture and teacher quality; and (5) relationships between local schools and universities.

OSEP Technical Assistance Communities

In August 2003, OSEP announced a new initiative featuring CoP as a TA strategy. This initiative spawned six CoP at OSEP's Summer Monitoring Institutes in Baltimore and Salt Lake City in 2003. State personnel were invited to join these OSEP TA communities. The CoP were organized around five critical performance indicators related to implementation of IDEA. A sixth community of practice was formed to provide a forum for those who are actively interested and involved in issues of data collection, analysis and use in support of improved services and outcomes for infants, toddlers and students with disabilities and their families. The six OSEP TA communities are:

- Identification – Part C;
- Exiting – Part B;
- LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) – Part B;

- Preschool LRE - Part B/Section 619;
- Settings - Part C; and
- Data – Part B and Part C.

The OSEP community facilitators are RRC and national TA center staff with expertise in the six TA community issue areas. OSEP-supported CoP also have a web-based platform to facilitate the work which can be accessed at <http://www.tacomunities.org>. People in this network frequently turn to one another for more information and expertise around a given topic. As with all OSEP-initiated activities, the goal is to improve results for children with disabilities.

Guidelines for States

The final section of this document is intended to help SEAs consider ways to initiate CoP among existing TA networks. Suggested guidelines will soon be available from NASDSE.⁴ CoP is not a totally new concept in the realm of TA. In some cases CoP merely provide a new name and more structure to a process that is already occurring.

The first important phase involves *forming* the community – i.e., lead partners bringing together a group of people who share similar concerns but who may represent a wide range of perspectives or affiliations including different stakeholder groups, agencies and/or organizational roles. SEA steps that could lead to forming a community of practice might include:

⁴ The Call to Community guidebook is in development and will be available at www.ideapartnership.org when complete.

- locating potential partners/organizations who share the same issues or agendas;
- learning about the issues and agendas of stakeholders and organizations;
- bringing members together by identifying shared goals and taking action that meets the needs of members;
- facilitating meetings or conference calls with early and participatory collaborative partners; and
- identifying members and convening the community.

SEA leadership can reach out to other agencies and organizations by using language that describes the issue in a way that engages them. For example, a principal may be concerned with building-level performance and parents may be concerned with access to the general education curriculum for their children. The community of practice might bring members together to work on the intersection of these issues – i.e., how appropriate access to the general education could enhance academic performance of students with disabilities.

The second phase is *convening* the community of practice, which involves a deepening level of interaction. By arriving at a common understanding about what the issues or problems are and how to take the first steps together, the community of practice can begin to solve problems. This is done by applying and demonstrating what members have learned together while grappling with a concrete issue. Taking first steps in action together is a key feature of how CoP coalesce. Means of accomplishing this include:

- identifying a core group to help define the beginning activities;
- deciding who needs to be involved in the core group;

- discussing when it is appropriate to convene the whole group;
- deciding what shared goals the community of practice can agree on; and
- discussing how the community of practice will make its goals and shared vision explicit.

The third phase is *performing* – i.e., the newly formed community of practice has a picture of its shared purpose and action. The community of practice identifies themes for action through conversations, review of information and/or collection of new data. Members develop an action plan and implement the plan. The emphasis is on engaging collaborative partners and improving the process. In order to accomplish this, SEA leadership needs to:

- identify priority issues that resonate with the full community of practice;
- consider other member perspectives and generate reasons that the work of the community of practice is important to the mission and outcomes from these points of view;
- focus on some key issues that are shared among organizations and agencies, and which might become practice groups; and
- gather and manage feedback.

In the final phase of *sustaining* the community of practice, it is important to create a sense of belonging and synergy. This energy keeps the community of practice active. In fact, community of practice members should begin to take leadership roles. The community of practice forms an action plan and people assume responsibility for different tasks based

on their interest and expertise. Community of practice members work to improve the community building process and the cycle may be repeated as other issues emerge.

Concluding Remarks

CoP provide a new structure and strategies for SEAs to bring stakeholders together and tap their knowledge and expertise on certain issues in order to solve problems and promote best practices. Stakeholders build important relationships when they combine their knowledge, expertise, experiences and perspectives around the issue. This is what leads to the innovation and/or improved practice for which CoP are valued. The Communities' shared commitment to solving problems and acting on what members learn together is one of the essential features of CoP. The CoP members pay careful attention to improving practice. Although the idea of learning as a social process is not new, CoP theory gives education leaders a language and context for learning together around an issue of shared importance. OSEP began investing in CoP in 1998 through the

Partnership Project and now through the CoP web-based platform to encourage SEAs and LEAs to benefit from collaborative problem-solving.

SEAs have a number of processes in place for identifying and prioritizing state issues (e.g., State Performance Planning). As state leaders become more acquainted with the CoP strategy and processes, they will begin to identify those issues for which few have the answers and all have something to contribute.

CoP provide a useful vehicle for bringing people together to define and solve problems, although the structure, leadership, purpose and/or level of formality may differ from one community of practice to another. In order to improve outcomes for students with disabilities at a time of increased accountability, it will be important for all educational stakeholders – across agencies and levels of the education system – to work together toward the same goal. CoP provide an important new TA strategy for bringing people together in this way.

This report was supported by the U.S. Department of Education (Cooperative Agreement No. H326F000001). However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement by the Department should be inferred.

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