

Transition

Best Practice Update

Transition Community of Practice

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Often rural teachers, counselors or human service providers feel like they are the only ones tasked with solving problems in the transition of youth with disabilities into the adult world. This rural isolation can affect the morale and problem solving abilities of staff, and might ultimately impact services for the youth. However, several states are using a strategy to help transition providers stay in touch with others in their disciplines. This strategy is called Community of Practice (CoP).

Community of Practice

A Community of Practice is a human process for solving a problem that is important to its members (IDEA Partnership, 2006). In a CoP, participants connect with each other, generally through some technological means, usually through an interactive website. These participants engage in question, answer, and learning sessions to gain knowledge about issues and search for ways to solve mutual problems.

Conceptual background on CoP. These mutual learning and discussion systems were developed around the context of situational learning. This term describes learning that takes place within the context and culture of real life rather than abstract or simulated events (Linehan, Muller & Cashman, 2005). In CoPs the “individual representing multiple perspectives are identified, invited to participate...and encouraged to shape the strategies of the organization” (Linehan, Muller & Cashman, p.1). Thus CoPs are systems that are dynamic, changing and ever-evolving. In many ways they are like the Wiki programs¹ some have used to develop interactive websites.

Organization of CoPs. Most CoPs are organized around a large central theme or issue. The first CoP was developed on the issue of Title I – IDEA program linkages. A six state consortium of Title I and State Directors of Special Education began a CoP to work on blending funds from IDEA with Title I funding (now called School Achievement and Accountability). With support from the IDEA Policymaker Partnership and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), these states worked through a peer-to-peer sharing and technical assistance network to resolve issues about the combined funding, and to exchange ideas for solving their mutual challenges.

Today there are many CoPs. Many education and special education topics are represented. These include school behavioral health, improving teacher quality, and transition. Presently 11 states (see Table 1) are part of the NASDSE Community of Practice on Transition.

Table 1. NASDSE Community of Practice on Transition Participating States

Alabama	Minnesota
Arizona	New Hampshire
California	North Dakota
Delaware	Pennsylvania
District of Columbia	Virginia
Wisconsin	

Practice groups. While the CoPs are organized around a central theme, the issues and discussions can be quite broad. In order to keep participants active on the CoP, various practice groups are designated around sub-topics of the principal theme. For example, the NASDSE CoP on Transition has practice groups on a) building a meaningful youth role; b) employment; c) increasing accessible transportation and transportation options; d) outreach to child welfare, juvenile justice and mental health; e) post-secondary options; and f) statewide conference planning. CoP members can access any practice group. In some states, members can begin new topics easily and quickly when new sub-issues arise within their states.

Using Communities of Practice for Transition

Members of the Pennsylvania Transition CoP have operated a website since the summer of 2005. Through this CoP website, members can discuss issues online, send email questions and answers directly to group members, can share documents, forms or instructional plans, and learn about new techniques. Recently, Pennsylvania signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on transition. The MOU was posted on the PA CoP and listed the 6 state priorities and accompanying action plans for facilitating transition in the state.

North Dakota's CoP at Sharedwork.org has space for Announcements (the 2006 State Interagency Secondary Transition Conference is listed), a Repository (for sharing documents), and a Discussion section (for developing issues and answers in transition). Getting connected to North Dakota's site is easy (see Table 2).

Table 2. Connecting to the ND Community of Practice on Transition

1. Go to <http://sharedwork.org>
2. Click on National Community of Practice on Transition
3. If you are new, you will be asked to register (remember, this is FREE!!)

4. Once registered, select North Dakota on the left side of the page.

The ND CoP on transition is a great way to get interagency partnerships established. Teachers, counselors, parents, and human service providers who may feel isolated will have a quick, interactive link to others in their field who often face the same challenges. Through the CoP on transition, ND providers can stay connected and avoid professional isolation. They can share their ideas and stories. Most importantly they can help each other to provide the best in transition services for our youth with disabilities.

For more information on Communities of Practice, check out

- ◆ **IDEA Partnership project** at <http://www.ideapartnership.org>
- ◆ **National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)** at <http://www.nasdse.org/>
- ◆ **Sharedwork** website at <http://www.sharedwork.org/>

Note:

1. A **wiki** is a type of website that allows the visitors themselves to easily add, remove and otherwise edit and change some available content, sometimes without the need for registration. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative authoring.

References

IDEA Partnership. (2006). *What is a community of practice?* Working paper obtained online at <http://www.ideaprthership.org/partnership1.cfm>.

Linehan, P., Muller, E., & Cashman, J. (2005). *Communities of Practice: Activities sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs*. Available at the following website. <http://www.ideaprthership.org/partnership1.cfm>