



Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

Implementing Communities of Practice in Educational Settings

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DR. CLAPPER: Good afternoon, my name is Ann Clapper and on behalf of the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, I'd like to welcome you all to today's teleconference on Implementing Communities of Practice in Educational Settings.

Before I introduce our presenters, I'd like to take a moment to mention a few housekeeping items. First of all, for those of you who are using a speakerphone to take part in the teleconference today, I would ask that you press the mute button on your phone at this time. Doing that helps to reduce the background noise that sometimes occurs and it makes it difficult for people to hear. Also, at the end of today's teleconference there'll be an opportunity for you to ask questions of the presenters and when doing so, I would ask that you state your first name and identify the state that you're calling from before asking your question. We have a written transcript that's prepared after each of our teleconferences and this information helps us in preparing that document.

Our Center is pleased to be hosting today's teleconference on a strategy that is emerging as a very effective way of enhancing the professional expertise of educators and those people who support educators in their work. The concept of communities

of practice originated in the business community, where it has been successfully used to increase knowledge sharing and organizational learning in work groups and cross-functional teams in companies across the country. This concept is now finding its way into the field of education and we are fortunate to have three people with us today who have expertise and an experience with implementing communities of practice in educational settings.

Our first presenter will be Debra Price-Ellingstad. Debra is an Educational Program Specialist with the U.S. Department of Education in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. After Debra has concluded her remarks, we'll be hearing from Judy Shanley. Judy is a Senior Research Analyst with the Elementary and Middle School Technical Assistance Center at the American Institutes for Research. And after Judy has concluded her remarks, we'll be hearing from Joanne Cashman. Joanne is a Project Director with the IDEA Policymaker Partnership and that partnership is headquartered at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

Debra, if you will lead us off, please.

MS. PRICE-ELLINGSTAD: Thank you Ann, and thanks to the other folks at the National Center for Secondary Education and Transition for the op-

portunity to talk to you today about communities of practice. I'm going to give you an overview of communities of practice and then I'm going to turn it over to Judy and Joanne who will actually tell you about the communities of practice that they've helped to coordinate and be involved in.

Communities of practice as mechanisms for sharing and developing knowledge have been an interest of mine for the last several years and I really do appreciate any opportunity I have to share what I'm learning about communities of practice with others. As an employee of the federal government, we're often criticized for our silos where information is often compartmentalized and it seldom gets transferred across agencies or even across divisions within agencies. And I can tell you from my experience that there's a lot of truth to this criticism. We don't always do a good job of managing and sharing knowledge across the federal government. So when I was introduced to the concept of communities of practice I became very intrigued by it and I've been working for the last several years to see how we can promote communities within my office, OSEP, and across our divisions and across our technical assistance and dissemination network. And because I work in OSEP's Division of Research to Practice, I'm also very interested in how communities of practice can be used to get knowledge that we developed through our OSEP-funded research into local practice to actually improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

And before I start, I also want to take time upfront to acknowledge Etienne Wenger and William Snyder who have provided me with most of what I know about communities of practice. Etienne and Bill have been the keynote presenters at our Technical Assistance and Dissemination Conference for the last two years. These two individuals have really been pioneers in introducing the concept of communities of practice into the world of business and organizational development and have more recently brought the concept into other venues, including now the federal government. You'll only get a taste today of what communities of practice are all about, but I'm told that we'll provide you, through the Web site, references to a number of publications produced by Drs. Etienne Wenger and Snyder and

others if you'd like additional information.

But first let's start with a definition of communities of practice and the definition that I like to use was developed by Etienne Wenger and Snyder and it's quite simple. According to Etienne Wenger and Snyder, "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. Communities of practice are different than teams in that they often develop organically, from the bottom of an organization rather than from the top, and are frequently driven by the value that they have for the individual community member rather than by a task that needs to be accomplished."

Now I know that many of you are saying to yourselves that you already belong to a number of groups that fit this description and you are right, you probably do. Communities of practice are everywhere and they may just – they just may not be called communities of practice, they may be part of your work already or they may be part of your social life. However, these communities are often informal, both in your work and in your social life, and frequently in your work they go unrecognized for the value that they bring to your organization. They are often formed by individuals seeking information or solutions to problems.

It might be helpful at this time to give you an example of a community of practice and I'm going to give you an example that Etienne Wenger and Snyder have used, based on their work with the Daimler Chrysler Corporation, just to illustrate the concept. And later in the presentation Judy and Joanne will give you examples that might be more relevant to the work that you do. This example has to do with how Daimler Chrysler reorganized its work in 1989 and how communities of practice were used to shepherd the knowledge within their organization. Daimler Chrysler originally structured

its organization around the functions associated with manufacturing automobiles, but its reorganization – it reorganized into five structural divisions which included large cars, small cars, trucks and minivans and jeeps.

But what happened was that the function specialists within each of those areas, such as those responsible for brake design or windshield wipers or seats, often felt isolated within those platforms. And so what Daimler Chrysler did was create what they called tech clubs, which were actually communities of practice, to help eliminate the isolation that these specialists felt and also helped to maintain the deep knowledge base that they had in the functional domain. So they created communities of practice around, say, brakes or seat design, and then were able to share that knowledge throughout their entire organization.

So it may be hard for some of us to relate to a corporation that manufactures automobiles, but I think we can all relate to being in organizations where we may, at times, feel isolated from others that share the same kinds of work that we do or others who may have the same expertise and share the same passion for a particular topic and who may have the same need to keep up to date on that topic, but because of our work loads and schedules, we don't often interact with those people.

So what Etienne Wenger and Snyder discovered when they studied large corporations that formally acknowledged and used communities of practice within their businesses to share domain-specific knowledge, is that these communities could make valuable contributions to the productivity of their organizations. Some of the benefits that they and others have uncovered from their study of communities of practice include the fact that communities help employees manage change, they help employees access new knowledge, they help foster trust and give employees a sense of common purpose, they add value to professional development, they generate new knowledge, they offer a format for sharing best practices, and they decrease the learning curve for new employees. And sometimes communities of practice can actually help businesses retain valuable employees.

So next I'd like to talk just briefly about the

three primary components of communities of practice. The first is the domain, which is the topic around which members have a shared interest. For example, secondary transition, which is related to the interest area of people on this call. Members usually understand what their issues are and agree upon common approaches to the issues. The next component is the community itself, which includes the participants and their interactions and relationships that are developed within the community. Members often help each other solve problems or answer questions. They often network across divisions within organizations or even across different organizations. The third component is the practice, which generally includes the sharing and development of knowledge around the domain. Members share information, their insights and best practices and later may even build tools for doing their jobs better and create new knowledge.

So what are some of the characteristics of a good domain? According to Etienne Wenger and Snyder, a good domain should be strategically important to the organization; it should be likely to have a major and noticeable impact on the organization so it actually helps improve the organization's outcomes; it should be relevant to its members or practitioners and it helps them to solve real problems and generate innovations; it should be connected to their professional identities and aspirations so it fills a need for professional development and social network; and it should have some enduring significance in the organization. And they estimate that to reach maturity, a community should last up to two years. And, again, it should be reasonably scoped so it's not too broad so that it has no focus, but too narrow so that few people are interested.

When you think about a community component of communities of practice, you need to reflect on the following questions: who are the key players? is everyone here that needs to be here? who else should be included and what types of members are important and what is their expertise? you need to ask who has the energy and the ability to lead the community? what would make members want to engage actively in this community? how will we build strong relationships between the members?

and how frequently should we interact. The practice component of the community, we should – it should be considered in light of the following questions: what knowledge do we have around a particular domain; what kind of knowledge is it (and here they distinguish between the knowledge that you would get from training and books and course work, and tacit knowledge, which is actually the knowledge that you get from doing your job).

And they like to talk about the tacit knowledge as a real important part of a community. We need to know who has this knowledge and who needs this knowledge. We also need to understand what knowledge we are missing and what documents and tools, such as guidebooks, databases, that we need to manage it. And examples of practice development activities might include problem solving, site visits, benchmarking, or just simply information sharing. And we should undertake specific learning projects to develop our practice so we might actually in a community schedule experts to come in and give us professional development.

Etienne Wenger and Snyder identified some critical success factors of communities of practice. The domain energizes the core group, or the community. There should be a skilled coordinator. There should be executive sponsorship, which means that your organization should acknowledge the legitimacy and the value of the community. There should be adequate resources, both in terms of time and money, and the community should also have credible measures of success.

So that's just a simple overview of communities of practice. I'm going to turn it over now to Judy Shanley who's going to be giving you actual examples of her work with communities of practice in local schools. Judy?

MS. SHANLEY: Thank you, Debra, appreciate that. As Ann indicated, I'm Judy and I'm with the Elementary and Middle School Technical Assistance Center which I will refer to as EMSTAC to make it easier. I thought that I would provide you with a little context and background for what our project EMSTAC is and talk specifically about how our community evolved, some of the activities that our community members were involved in, and importantly, what we learned from this whole process.

First, EMSTAC is – was a five year project funded by the Office of Special Education programs. We were funded from 1997 to 2002. We recently concluded on September 30th. Our mission, or charge, was to provide technical assistance to local school districts, as well as to evaluate the technical assistance that we were delivering. We provided technical assistance face-to-face, as well as through using distance education methodologies. Our community evolved not in a planned way, but in a way that represented the interests of the members, or constituents.

Our members of the community were individuals that had gone through our training and were called linking agents. And a linking agent is someone from a local school district who facilitates change. They identify appropriate research base resources, acquire resources to implement an intervention, and then evaluate that intervention once the intervention is placed. So our community consisted of linking agents who all shared a common purpose, or mission, in improving outcomes for students with disabilities by using best practices or scientifically based practices.

These were individuals who voluntarily participated in our EMSTAC program and were typically staff development specialists or curriculum specialists, someone in a local school district who had an opportunity to make decisions about the curricular or interventions used. The community also evolved through forums we provided at the national level. We provided linking agents with opportunities to engage in chat events with esteemed researchers from around the country, we provided a list serve, we had threaded discussions and these platforms served as an opportunity for community members to meet and greet and establish relationships and, importantly, establish trust with each other that they then took offline to their own settings.

Some of the activities that our community members engaged were problem solving. For example, one of our linking agents, or community members, had a need to implement a behavioral program within her school district and she sought the assistance of other community members to identify appropriate and realistic solutions or resources to address the behavioral issues that were transpiring

in her school district. A second activity was information sharing. The common interests, or passion, that these individuals shared made trust and sharing information easy and a common occurrence within the community. And I think a third activity, and an important activity, was the support that they provided to each other. The linking agents, or community members, would reinforce each other for work that they were doing on a daily basis and also use the community as a forum for sharing frustrations or problem situations that they had occurred in their own environment.

We learned a great deal through this process and, again, this wasn't planned from the onset of our project, but we learned that providing community members with an initial structure was important. We provided, as I indicated, opportunities to meet and greet through chat events and list serves that provided them with the initial forum to establish the relationship from which they could take off and work, or foster that community amongst themselves. Also I think that we learned that it's important to establish credibility, or a sense of legitimacy, for the purpose of the community by setting a tone through opportunities to provide research-based information.

We had some esteemed researchers on our chat events and that set a tone, or sense of legitimacy, for the purpose of the community. And thirdly, we used a lot of distance education methodologies, as I indicated, things like chat events and online interactive training, and what we learned was if we're using those kinds of forums for a community, or to serve as a forum to establish the community, then you need to encourage people, or let people know, or the members know, that it's OK for them to go beyond the forum, the distance education forum, and take it offline and go in their own environment.

I think we were able to take what we learned from the community and improve the overall purpose and mission of our project and that was exciting. Our project specifically focused on linking agents, or staff development specialists, within school districts and what I've learned about communities of practice has opened my eyes to the fact that this – the theories and tenets of communities

of practice can be used for varying audiences and I think Joanne Cashman at NASDE will also talk to you now about another application of communities of practice. Joanne?

MS. CASHMAN: Thanks Debra and Judy. Good afternoon, all. I don't exactly know who is on the phone or what your roles are, so I think that regardless of the situation you're in, you'll probably find something that you can relate to in the descriptions of the communities, the various communities that we've been working on developing here at NASDE. Now for those of you that don't know, NASDE is the National Association of State Directors of Special Ed. I'm the Director of the Policy-maker Partnership. It's one of the four IDEA partnerships and we were charged by OSEP, right after the 97 amendment, to really go out and engage organizations that were influential with key groups on IDEA implementation. We were charged to engage them and to meet their information needs around IDEA 97, but also to get them to engage cross-stake holder, cross-organization, cross-agency, in meaningful work around the challenges of IDEA implementation.

So it became pretty apparent to us in the first meetings with our partners – and some of our partners are the National Governor's Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers, Mental Health National – the State Directors of Mental Health – so you see we have a lot of state focused organizations that have authority and responsibility on some of these issues. But we also have groups like the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Ed, ASCD, the Hundred Black Men of America, who have expertise on particular topics such as personnel, disproportionately, you know, that have a number of interests in things that are critical to their membership. So we had a good combination here of policymakers that had authority and policymakers that had influence.

And so we were looking for a strategy that would allow us to bridge all of that and we kind of came to this idea of community of practice – we grew into it and I have to say that up until about a year ago, I really didn't know the term. Although

we knew the concept and we were doing the work, we didn't have the term for it, we didn't have the grounding and the research in community of practice. But once we became aware of that as a growing concept, certainly all the things we were doing fit and, actually, in talking with Dr. Etienne Wenger and Dr. Snyder, as Debra indicated and as I'm sure Judy did, too, they really validated all the things that we were thinking about. How we really, truly met the definition of community of practice. But they pointed out to us that we were shedding new light, which is the point of a community, on what a community can mean to education.

And so I want to just tell you a little bit about some of the things that we were doing. And I'd like to start out with the idea that, as I said, we kind of came to this, we grew into it. We started out with the idea of what we call peer technical assistance and it was an idea that grew out of some research by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Primarily they worked with groups that were mental health providers, family mental health providers, and they were – they were investing in the idea of how family groups could learn from each other. And then they thought, "Well this had broader application." So we started to work with them on this idea from the very beginning of our partnership and it became clear that there was something there that they called a developmental match and it was a piece of this work that they hadn't really investigated, but they had the sense of it.

Most of their work had been sort of around the one group has a need and you match them up and do an onsite match with another group that's met a similar challenge, not a show-and-tell, but rather a sharing of experiences and kind of a consultation. Well we weren't so much interested in that kind of a peer technical assistance than in this other that we learned about, this developmental match. And what they just lined as a developmental match was something for which nobody is the expert, nobody's the expert on it and – on the topic – yet everybody is expert on that topic in its application to their own setting. Now what we saw in that when we heard that – this was something they hadn't really developed very well – it was clear that that's what was going to resonate with our groups because there were

so many issues in this law that nobody was expert on. And yet everybody had a situation which was both unique and which they uniquely understood.

So what we decided to do was shape this work around this concept of a developmental match. And we started out, actually, with the Council of Chief State School Officers and we started out with a very little accessed provision of IDEA 97 and that is – but one which I think meets the criteria of a domain under community of practice and that domain is really a key – to me is a key organizing piece. It's the thing that grabs these people and says, "Yes, I want to be part of this. They get what I'm concerned about." It binds them immediately. So the first community I'd say we started was a community of six states around this new position of IDEA 97 and that was the use of IDEA funding in school-wide Title I programs. So it had two pieces. First of all, it was the linkage of IDEA and Title I, two huge federal silos, and furthermore, it defined it a little bit more and that is – but there was a concrete -- you could focus on. What it meant to collaborate these two big programs through a new provision for use of IDEA funds in school-wide programs.

So we had six states that came with us on that topic right away. It was immediate and it was – they were intense about the idea that they would like to pursue this new opportunity. So we set up our first match and, in describing how we did this, I hope you see some of the things that Debra talked to you about in terms of the way that communities come together, form, affiliate and sort of stay together, and why they stay together. I'm going to give you this description of this first network and then I'm going to tell you the various kinds of spin-off networks, not spin-off from this particular network, but spin-off in type that have grown because another key point of communities is they have to be need-fulfilling for the people that are there. So sometimes you can't exactly prescribe the format, you have to see what's going to affiliate these people because their voluntary affiliation is the first and most – and foremost of all things that you can do.

So, back to the story of the Title I group. We now have six states that said they wanted to do this. Next thing was to identify who the key people are

because, after that first meeting, we had to have significant accomplishments so that they would want to stay together. So we figured that the way to do that was to get the people that had authority on both sides of the issue, that is, the State Director of Special Ed, State Director of Title I, require that -- and then prescribe some roles which were key to this issue. So we prescribed that they would come in a five person team: the Director of Title I; a director of Special Ed; a local director of either Title I or Special Ed; a fiscal person, whether that's somebody from the state or the local because so often the fiscal issues were sited as being the obstacle; and a parent, either a Title I parent or Special Ed parent, from one of the parent organizations.

That would either be like a PTI, a State Advisory Council or a Title I parent organization. And across the states, we mixed those up because here's the critical thing: just because we were sponsoring this out of Special Ed, we could not specify that all those people were going to be from the Special Ed side, otherwise the Title I side could not be adequately represented. So we allowed them to choose, we just said across the network we need a mix. And we got a very good mix, almost right down the middle. We just gave them the criteria, we told them what our concerns were, and they really respected that right from the start.

Another key piece was for us because we're a national policy organization and because we're using -- we are looking at the state level as an impact point, a leverage point, a way to make some systemic change. We needed to have the federal representatives on both sides, both the Office of Special Ed programs and the Office of Title I, because how could we ask these states to go forward without some reassurance that the two federal agencies were with them? Otherwise, we were just affiliating a group of people that were sort of talking among themselves, you know.

And although that talking among themselves is really good, without some guidance on some of the questions that for which there is no answer, it would be difficult to keep them involved because they'd keep coming back to the same point, nobody knows, nobody knows, nobody knows. We had to have some reassurance that those with the author-

ity would move with these states. So we did get buy-in from the Office of Special Ed programs. A very good buy-in from top people, the director, the project officers, monitors, from the states that were coming. The same thing from the Title I side, the director, the project officers, the monitors, from the states that were coming. And we went one step further, we went to the Inspector General and we asked his office to send somebody, too.

So we had the stage set for these first meetings. And if you talked to some of the people from these states, they would tell you that when they heard we weren't going to have experts there, that they were going to be learning from each other, they didn't know what to make of that, they just didn't know what to make of it. And one of the gentlemen who's probably most supportive of the network thought that -- he said very openly that he just didn't think it was going to turn into anything, but he was going to go anyway because his commissioner wanted him to be a part of this. And he's probably one of the biggest proponents of this, the idea that you can learn from peers, that when you put the right people together, you find these questions, that there's a commonality around certain kinds of questions that point to the fact that they are the right questions and that they need to be uniquely answered in local context.

It points to the fact that a certain kind of information can come from the field, that it may not be the State Director of Special Letter Title I that knows the issues, but rather those issues might be articulated from someone that's further into the field and that those issues can come from the field through a state -- you know, with a state lens put on it, too, for policymaking -- but that the questions can come from anywhere along this continuum of roles, the answers can come from anywhere along that continuum of roles and that everybody is somewhat equal in that kind of a network. There's not a lot of deference in the group, I would say, to various positions, someone in the discussions. Everybody is expert in their own -- the way that they contribute to the discussion.

And it was -- it's a very, very good exchange among those from the state, across states, across the federal agencies, and I have to say that it's probably

one of the most unique experiences I've had and one of the most far-reaching because, after our first meeting, those states identified that, in many ways, they were imposing barriers on themselves that no one else was imposing on them. And they met with the department of Special Ed and the Office of Compensatory Ed to plan demonstration projects. They did it with their monitors on both sides so that there was no surprise in terms of when a compliance on monitoring came around, a compliance audit came around. They did it with the full involvement of the Inspector General so that there would be no surprises on fiscal audits and they started to see the federal government in a new way, as a partner rather than sort of enforcer. And that was groundbreaking for some of these states.

They also started to see their own potential in a new way because they clearly knew that some of these things, as I said, were self-imposed. And the various states took the lead on different areas. Kansas left that meeting and really wanted to go back and work on the personnel area, training Special Ed and Title I personnel together because, you know, across Kansas they were dealing with the most at-risk kids in Special Ed and Title I. Washington went home and wanted to work on the financial aspects, the blending of funding. Kentucky went home and Michigan went home and worked on the cooperative planning and collaborative monitoring so that when they plan, they plan Special Ed and Title I together. When they monitor, they monitor the two programs together. So those – some of those states kind of went out in front and then we were able to broker among them assistance around particular issues. NASDE and the Council of Chief State School Officers were the sponsor for this group. A major strategy in moving this forward was to find key venues and to book various people from the group to speak on behalf of the group.

So it was very little dollars, it's a big national spotlight, and it's amazing what that can do. We've booked various combinations of states out of this network all over the country at some high profile meetings and every time you do that you get more and more interest and you build the commitment from those people to be sort of wedded to this project. It'd be hard to shake those states from this net-

work now because they know that they're out there, they're recognized as leading-edge states. We started with six states, last year we had nine states, this year for our meeting we have 16 states that have joined. And in two years we've gone from having this be a little-known, little-recognized area of IDEA 97 with huge impact from what was coming with No Child Left Behind. The 16 states that have cross-stake holder, support and participation in network design to do this in two years.

So that's – that was our initial entrée into this field and I'd just like to take a couple more minutes. I don't want to take up too much more of the time, but I want to just give you a couple more examples. One of the things that we have been trying to do, as I said, is to look at this state strategy. We've done this in a couple of other areas and some of them slightly different.

The first one I'm going to tell you about is with the State Boards of Education. They had identified interest in early childhood and their key interest was in the either collaboration or lack of collaboration between agencies that were the sponsor of the birth to three and pre-school programs, and Education as the sponsor of the school-age programs. So they wanted to start some work in some leading-edge states around that idea of collaboration between whatever the pre-school agency was and Education. Well, we did a meeting with some basic information, we provided a CD so that they could be grounded in this with all the basic information, we brought teams together with representatives of the various agencies, and then we offered, as a way of starting these communities, we offered seed grants, small seed grants. Very small seed grants to states that wanted to do some action planning and some sharing around this issue and that would agree to stay with us as a community. Well, we had 14 states that applied.

We gave out seven grants and those states have done, just as the Title I states have done with very little money and a big national spotlight, from both the partnerships, the Department of Education, the National Technical Assistance Center on Early Childhood, which is an OSEP investment, and their own organization, the state boards, with big write-ups in their journals featured at their meet-

ings, those states have done incredible things with \$10 thousand each. This last – two weeks ago they came together and they're going to stay together as a community and, actually, they've decided that they're going to stay together and they're going to look for some private funding because they have needs and interests far beyond what we could support with our little seed grants. So we were the genesis and the beginning of their community building. They now are ready to seek some private funding to keep them going and build that support across agencies. It's that little bit of money that isn't in one budget or another to do this kind of cross-sector work and that by providing it, that nobody has to pay from their own budget, it's unbelievable what they'll do.

We have another network that's grounded the same way with the Mental Health Commissioners share the agenda for Education in Mental Health. Instead of doing a meeting, we did a document, we brought the researchers, the TA providers, the practitioners, the administrators from both Education and Mental Health, together for two face-to-face meetings. We developed a document, we took that all over the country for a whole year to every high-profile meeting to sort of garner support for it, then we issued seed grants. 14 states applied for those grants. We issued six grants and now we will have six states with a shared partnership across Mental Health and Education with a very small amount of money. The things they're saying they're going to do are huge. So that's another group that we're growing.

We have two groups that are sort of – that are a little bit different in that they're not just state-focused, rather they're focused on a state to local – a state to local interaction. The first one is with the Hundred Black Men of America. We have five local sites that are working on disproportionately and they are doing that in conjunction with their state so that the state learns the lesson of local implementation and the locals learn the lesson of how to move a local design through a state system. We have five of those projects that are working on disproportionately.

And then I wanted to – I don't know if anybody's on the line from Pennsylvania – but I wanted

to give some credit to the State of Pennsylvania for working with us specifically on transition issues. And I have to say I picked Pennsylvania because I'm from Pennsylvania and I worked quite a long time in the Pennsylvania system. And I know that some of the things that they were trying to do, how well it fit into the national goals around transition. So we – an example I'd like to give you of this is the way that a group of people joined with us last year, President's Commission on – oh, not the President's Commission – the President's Committee on Employment of Adults with Disabilities have, together with the American Association of People with Disabilities, have sponsored a National Disability Mentoring Day and we brought a number of people from Pennsylvania to the national event that would be mentored by people within the administration on various agencies.

So we brought students from a number of Pennsylvania schools with a range of disabilities here to Washington. While the students were being mentored, we took their families – because this was in the middle of the anthrax crisis, so they were – parents were not going to let these students come without them – so we took the parents and the teachers to the Department and we held a workshop on how to sort of leverage this experience when you went back home. How to change your workforce investment systems, how to promote mentoring, and we asked them for a commitment that they would take on an action initiative when they went home. Do something with this experience. And what they did was pretty phenomenal.

Those five people that came here went home and they leveraged a Disability Mentoring of Pennsylvania with, what, about 150 students and parents this last October. An absolutely fantastic event and the National Disability Chair came to be a keynote at their reception. So that's a little different. That group now is staying together. We're inviting them with the National Center for Secondary in Transition to be a part of some ongoing capacity building institutes with the secondary school principal, so now they're moving this community out a little bit. They're bringing in some other key players in the state. The idea is to build this affiliation that everybody is in this together, to do things together,

to present together, to be acknowledged by these invitations together, and gradually it provides them with the leverage that they need to move things within the state. And they're moving it with the full cooperation of the state, the full participation, and they're moving it by the insight of their local experience, combining that with the way that the state knows how to move this systemically.

So I think you can see that each of these is a little bit different, but I hope you can see that each of them follows the community of practice framework. Each of them is grounded in the idea of community building. And if I have to say one thing, it is that the only way that you keep a community together is if it's need-fulfilling. When it's not need-fulfilling for them, there's no way, it doesn't matter how much money you pour into it, you won't keep them. If it's need-fulfilling, they don't need very much dollars. They need attention, they need to feel affiliated, they need opportunities to show their affiliation, to see that their affiliation is valued.

The other thing I would have to say in terms of the communities, and I've said this to the Department and I've said this to the TA, the Technical Systems network for OSEP, is that the quickest thing that will kill a community is somebody's need to say that they did it, you know? That if anyone feels the need to show, or to be acknowledged, for essentially the good work of the community. It's that need for acknowledgement by an individual, organization. But the community's pretty good about once they form, they are very good about giving credit. It's when they feel that somebody has taken credit that is almost, as I've said to the Department, it's the kiss of death to this. And so there are some logical challenges to the way that we collect evaluation data on – to show project usefulness and things like that because it's that idea of somebody claiming credit that is the undermining of a community.

I didn't know – I had a sense of this way of working, certainly not as much as I have of it now, but there's very little that I think can be accomplished in education, at the scale we need to accomplish it, without recognizing the potential of community building. And actually, I think it's about the only thing that's ever going to get us to scale because there'll never be enough money in

education to directly fund all the things that need to be funded. It's the – it's this kind of relationship that will move this by voluntary affiliation through locals, through states, through national networks. And I'm just delighted to share our experience with you.

DR. CLAPPER: Thanks, Joanne, and thank you, Debra and Judy, for your comments. You've given us a lot to think about. Before I open it up to questions from participants, I'm going to ask Debra and Judy, if they have any other things that they'd like to share? As you've listened to everybody else give some information, do you have anything else you'd like to add before we open it up for questions?

This is Judy. I just – I want to concur with Joanne's sentiments about having a common need and we learned that the need has to be directed by the community, and not a need directed by a national project or an outside entity. It has to be developed from within the group.

DR. CLAPPER: Good point. Thank you, Judy. Debra, any other comments?

MS. PRICE-ELLINGSTAD: The only thing I want to just remind people is as communities can be of any scale that people can manage, so if it's just a community within your own organization to share knowledge and expertise and solve problems, that's a legitimate community, just as these larger state level communities are that Joanne and Judy have described. So I think the flexibility of community is important to acknowledge.

MS. CASHMAN: Oh, absolutely, Debra, I couldn't agree more. It's the idea once you get what motivates people for solving a task that sort of keeps moving them to higher levels, once you get that you can apply it to anything.

MS. PRICE-ELLINGSTAD: Right.

DR. CLAPPER: That's an excellent point and our hope today on this call was to try and present a range of options and, just as Debra suggested and others have concurred, there are a lot of different ways that this community of practice concept can be used at various levels within the educational system.

Now, if there are questions from the field, I would ask that, again, if you would give your name and the state you're from, we'll open it up for ques-

tions.

PATTY: Well, I'll jump in.

DR. CLAPPER: Please do. Your name?

PATTY: This is Patty. I'm calling from Oregon.

DR. CLAPPER: Welcome, Patty.

PATTY: Hi. And all of you alluded to it, but maybe if you could be a little bit more specific, without taking too much time, about the evaluation. We're constantly looking for ways that we can really track what's happening and I work nationally and with mostly states in the West, but how can we track what's happening within that community and how can we take it to the level of the Kiddos?

MS. CASHMAN: I'd like to respond, if I could. That be all right?

PATTY: Please.

MS. CASHMAN: I think that, you know, one of the things that – that's exactly, Patty, the kind of thing that we've been struggling with. How do you show what the community has done without making it look like you pulled the strings and here's this unit that's doing what you wanted them to do?

PATTY: Right.

MS. CASHMAN: That's somewhat how it feels, you know? If it looks like the organizer, the sponsor of the community is, like, "OK, here's my little puppets and here's what I had them do", that's what you have to avoid at all costs. And the way that I think we do that is through describing concrete outcomes because we do all have to be outcome-based, but also telling the stories of the community. Here is the – here's where you have to balance the qualitative and the quantitative. I think the quantitative information, we need the outcomes. What we need the qualitative; we need the stories of how it developed. Because the stories of those deepening relationships where everybody gets credit for what they did are really – I mean, isn't that really the strategy we want to get?

How to deepen relationships, how – rather than saying, you know, "How's Keep the Focus on the Students?", what we did in the Title I network was to get them to adopt that one year as – we heard from Joe Johnson, who was then the Title I Director, and he said to us that he was challenging us to keep the out – keep the focus on student outcomes because it's so easy to get tied up in process of, you

know, "I had these three people talking who never talked before", and all that's nice, but it doesn't change anything for kids. So we got them to sort of agree on that as something that they were going to focus on and they reflected on it. Every time we were together, every time we were on the phone, they told us what it meant to them. And that's what we captured. So those are ways where it's still on them, it's not the outside agent, or the sponsoring agent, imposing. Rather it's the sponsoring agent acting on something they've affirmed as a guiding principle for that, whatever time, that month, that quarter, that year. And you're just bringing it up to them and then they're telling you what it means to them.

PATTY: Right.

MS. CASHMAN: And it's a really good way to get it – get at that data and actually we've been – we talked to Etienne Wenger and Bill Snyder about this, that with our focus now on evidence-based data, there is going to have to be some thought to this. If communities are really going to be a viable part of educational technical systems, we're going to have to tackle this issue. And this is how we've approached it. I don't know, you know, it's a beginning anyway.

DR. CLAPPER: And I think Judy actually has done some local level kid outcome data. Do you want to talk a little bit about that, Judy?

MS. SHANLEY: Sure. We had built in the importance of evaluation and data collection and outcome information into our tools in the initial development of our modules. And so community members, when they were leaving the structure of our training intervention, they took away with them the notion that data collection was important. And, in fact, that was one of the topics that I subsequently learned that was shared amongst community members, and that was the kinds of tools they utilized to collect outcome data, how they used it, how to develop consensus among practitioners at all levels that data collection was important. And it almost became a part of their day that data collection was important. And we, too, used stories and qualitative information to highlight the process of what they were doing. Our information will be available on our Web site that I'm sure that Ann

will share with you all after the call.

PATTY: Great. Thank you all.

DR. CLAPPER: Are there other questions? Well, if not, we're actually just about at our time of closing anyway, so I'll take this opportunity to remind you that there will be a transcript of this call and it will be posted on our Web site. Our Web site address is www.ncset.org. I also wanted to mention that several times during today's teleconference, our presenters have referenced various articles like Etienne Wenger's and Snyder's and some other links to Web sites, just as Judy has mentioned. They are as follows:

www.emstac.org
The EMSTAC Web site

<http://www.dssc.org/frc/CommPrac.htm>
FRC Web site that has descriptive information about various communities within the TA&D network

<http://www.linezine.com/1/features/ewwslc.htm>
Contains an article in a business journal related to Communities of Practice—has lots of links to Wenger and Snyder's work.

You might also check our Web site for is the date and the time and the topic for next month's teleconference call. That information should be posted there shortly.

I'd like to thank you all for participating in today's call and give a special thanks to our presenters, Debra Price-Ellingstad, Joanne Cashman, and Judy Shanley. We very much appreciate your willingness to spend an hour with us and share your expertise and experience with us on this very important topic.

Thanks all. Bye now.

END OF TELECONFERENCE

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