Communities of Practice: A Strategy for Program Improvement

By Donna Johnson and Christine D. Bremer

Introduction

High school students with disabilities encounter many barriers to successful transition. These youth are far more likely to drop out of school than their nondisabled peers and often have difficulty finding suitable employment. National studies and reports have repeatedly documented that compared to nondisabled students, far fewer students with disabilities receive a regular high-school diploma at the point of graduation, their rate of dropping out is twice as high, and their enrollment and completion of postsecondary education programs is 50 percent lower (National Center on Education Statistics, 2001). Furthermore, only 32 percent of persons with disabilities ages 18-64 are employed, compared with 81 percent of the general population (National Council on Disability, 2003).

As many national, state, and local organizations work to improve transition outcomes for youth with disabilities, there is growing recognition of the need to share information, resources, and effective practices. Policy makers and practitioners in many fields are increasingly using communities of practice as a core strategy for developing knowledge, sharing ideas, and solving problems. Use of this strategy to improve transition outcomes for youth shows great promise.

What are Communities of Practice?

Communities of practice involve people who "share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). A community of practice is a group of people who join together to help each other solve problems and develop expertise in an area of shared interest.

Communities of practice are different from work groups or project teams. A community of practice may exist within an organization, but many communities of practice are composed of people who do not work together and who may never meet face-to-face. Often, those in a professional community of practice hold similar positions in their respective organizations. Membership in most communities of practice is voluntary, but some employers require or strongly encourage participation among their employees. In communities of practice with voluntary membership, members are self-selected by their interest in the issue that is the focus of the community. If interest in the issue declines, and the community is no longer active, the members may choose to disband.

Communities of practice have three primary components: the *domain*, the *community*, and the *practice*. The *domain* is the topic in which members have a shared

interest. It should be well-defined, relevant, and fill a need for professional development among community members. The *community* consists of the members and should encourage the sharing of thoughts and ideas while setting a tone of mutual respect and trust. Because learning together is integral to community building, it is essential that members develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. The *practice* is based in the particular knowledge of the issue that community members share. This knowledge may be research-based or involve promising practices gathered from the field. It may include tools, strategies, stories, or personal experiences that members find useful and wish to share with others (Wenger et al., 2002).

Benefits and Challenges of Communities of Practice in Education Settings

Communities of practice provide members access to information, networking opportunities, discussion and problem-solving forums, and occasions to share knowledge. It is thought that communities create a "spread effect" in which promising practices are shared with key stakeholders across the country. Communities of practice may focus on local issues in which members come together to discuss a problem that is specific to their geographic area. Communities of practice may also address regional issues. Local communities of practice may meet face-to-face because of their geographic proximity, whereas regional or national communities of practice may meet online, via teleconferences, or through electronic forums such as listservs and e-mail lists.

In most online communities of practice, it is expected that a relatively small number of members will participate actively in conversations, while others stay on the sidelines and acquire information more passively. However, for a community of practice to become a vibrant group that effectively supports learning and change, the individuals who actively participate must trust the group enough to share real problems and solutions. This can be a tremendous challenge if the members of the group fear embarrassment or, more importantly, enforcement actions or official sanctions resulting from self-disclosure of problems. In situations where participants perceive a risk in disclosing problems, it may be helpful to share generic knowledge and published materials in the public forum of the community, and then connect separately with individuals who express a desire to discuss a specific topic further. Subsequent success stories may then be shared with the larger group. Ideally, though, some participants will openly share their stories of challenges and frustrations.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) acknowledged the importance of communities of practice in education settings by initiating the formation of technical assistance (TA) communities in the following areas:

a) Identification–Part C;
b) Settings–Part C;
c) Exiting–Part B;
d) 619 Least Restrictive Environment–Part B;
e) Least Restrictive Environment–Part B; and
f) Data–Part C/B.

Because the projected members of the TA communities were state-level administrators, OSEP identified specific outcomes to help states increase their use of research-based and promising practices. OSEP intended that the TA communities help by:

a) supporting a state's ability to investigate what is successful and what needs improvement;
b) promoting state peer-to-peer learning;
c) encouraging new or expanded state efforts based on research;
d) sharing new state initiatives; and
e) communicating changes in state outcome data.

In order to initiate the concept of communities of practice with state special education directors and others, the OSEP-sponsored TA communities were introduced at the OSEP Continuous Improvement and Focused Monitoring Summer Institutes held in Baltimore, MD, and Salt Lake City, UT, in July 2003. Attendees at these meetings were encouraged to join one or more of the six OSEP-sponsored TA communities. In breakout sessions coordinated by designated facilitators for the six communities, participants discussed how the TA communities might be of benefit. The Exiting TA community can serve as an example of how a community of this sort might operate.

Exiting TA Community of Practice

Staff from the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, the Alliance for Parent Centers Regions 2 and 3 Technical Assistance Centers, and the North Central Regional Resource Center facilitated the Exiting community of practice.

Facilitators conducted focus group and individual interviews with a sample of Exiting community members to determine what they hoped to gain from membership. The facilitators also developed a community vision, purpose, and guidelines in conjunction with community members and implemented a system for welcoming and tracking members. More than 200 state special education directors, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and parents are registered members. This community of practice uses a Web site and e-mail to communicate and share resources. In addition, the facilitators have arranged teleconferences with experts on various topics of

interest to members. Topics have included "High School Diplomas for Youth with Disabilities: Options and Alternate Routes," "IDEA Reauthorization," and "Drop-out Prevention Strategies." Membership in the group is promoted at events and conferences frequented by special education practitioners and policy makers.

Pennsylvania's IDEA Community of Practice

In Pennsylvania, staff from several state agencies joined together to discuss various requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997. This is an example of a community of practice that was established at the state level. These individuals included representatives from the Department of Education (Bureau of Special Education and Bureau of Career and Technical Education); the Department of Labor and Industry (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Bureau of Workforce Investment Partnerships); the Department of Public Welfare (Office of Mental Retardation; Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services; Office of Children, Youth, and Families; and Office of Medical Assistance Programs); and the Department of Health (Bureau of Family Health and Bureau of Drug and Alcohol Programs).

First, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was developed that described each agency's service and financial responsibilities. The MOU also addressed how these departments would work cooperatively to provide services. Next, staff from these offices traveled throughout the state to discuss with local stakeholders what they were required to do under the MOU. This provided an opportunity for the state team to learn from local educators, agency staff, community members, and families about transition-related priorities and barriers to collaboration at the local level. This was the beginning of a state-level MOU training team effort to build state-to-local technical assistance and communication, thus planting the seeds for the Pennsylvania community of practice.

One of the first activities of the newly-formed community was to sponsor a transition conference. More than 1,000 youth, parents, educators, special educators, school administrators, university staff, and others attended the conference, which connected families and youth to the agencies and services that would assist them in achieving their postschool goals. Participants were encouraged to register as teams, and the Bureau of Special Education, through the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), offered mini-grants as financial incentives to team registrants. Because the first conference was so successful, the state-level transition community of practice sponsored additional conferences in 2003 and 2004. In 2004, the first Pennsylvania Youth Leadership

Forum was held, expanding the focus on youth.

The Pennsylvania community of practice has also sponsored two Disability Mentoring Day events, involving all of the departments represented in the MOU. In addition to these activities, members of the community have been asked to participate in the development of child welfare practice standards, to present at child welfare conferences, and to consult on specific cases. As a result of funding through the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, local transition teams have been instrumental in developing 40 projects, including outreach to underserved populations, assessment, data collection, mentoring, access to postsecondary education, self-determination skills, and promoting the competitive employment of youth with disabilities across Pennsylvania.

Continued growth of the Pennsylvania community of practice has been fueled by state-to-local, local-to-state, and local-to-local relationships. Over time, the membership of the state team has grown to include families, youth, and community-based transition partners. By working collaboratively, the community of practice members learn about each other's roles and responsibilities, share information, solve problems, and continue to build a stronger community committed to improving outcomes for youth.

Summary

Communities of practice provide an accessible and flexible means of sharing expertise, information, and resources to improve outcomes for youth with disabilities. They provide educators, parents, and other stakeholders an adaptable structure in which to learn, communicate, plan, and collaborate. Communities can accomplish a great deal, but the participants must keep the group vital and support each other with helpful information and sound advice.

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Related Resources/Further Reading

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General Resources

Technical Assistance Communities of Practice
Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)
U.S. Department of Education
http://www.tacommunities.org/
This is one of several forums available as part of OSEP's technical assistance initiative to exchange strategies and ideas that will improve outcomes for children with disabilities. This project seeks to combine OSEP resources from the Monitoring and State Improvement Planning Division and technical assistance resources from the Research-to-Practice Division.

Communities of Practice
National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
http://www.ncset.org/tacommunities/default.asp

Exiting—Part B community of practice. (This OSEP-sponsored community of practice is facilitated by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, the North Central Regional Resource Center, and the Alliance for Parent Centers Region 2 and 3 Technical Assistance Centers). Mission: to create opportunities for participants to learn from each other about improving state and community capacity to prepare all students for successful school completion and postschool outcomes such as postsecondary education, employment, and independent living.

Leveraging Resources community of practice. Mission: to create opportunities for participants to learn from each other and experts about how to build state and community capacity to prepare all youth for successful school completion and postschool roles.

Postschool Outcomes Data community of practice. Mission: to create opportunities for participants to learn from each other and experts about how to build state and local capacity to collect data on the postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities. This information can then be used to use to improve these policies and practices at the state and local levels.

Transition to Postsecondary Education community of practice. Mission: to create a venue for participants to learn from each other about how to ensure that all youth with disabilities, including youth with intellectual disabilities, have the opportunity to prepare for and participate in postsecondary education.

Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN)
http://www.pattan.k12.pa.us/
The mission of PaTTAN is to support the efforts of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Special Education and its initiatives and to build the capacity of local educational agencies to provide appropriate services to students who receive special education services.

Seven Principles

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) developed seven principles essential to developing vibrant communities of practice:

Principle One—Design for Evolution

Communities of practice may grow from networks that already exist. For example, the Pennsylvania MOU team was the core group that launched the community of practice. Once the members identified transition as the community of practice's domain, they built an infrastructure to support the needs of a growing community (e.g., e-mail, listservs, teleconferences, face-to-face meetings).

Principle Two—Open a Dialogue Between Inside and Outside Perspectives

Good design for communities of practice requires both insider and outsider perspectives. Insiders understand the key issues and barriers to problem-solving and may have the knowledge required to help the community move forward. Outsiders who are not experts on the issue may serve as neutral facilitators to help members see new possibilities. By bringing in stakeholders outside of the Department of Education, the Pennsylvania community of practice was able to gain from the perspectives of other youth-serving agencies.

Principle Three—Invite Different Levels of Participation

As in any community, communities of practice will experience different levels of participation. For example, a small core group (approximately 10%-15%) will actively participate or take on leadership in teleconferences, discussions, etc. Another 15%-20% will casually participate in the community activities that meet their needs. Finally, the majority of the community members will be passive participants. Unlike traditional teams, this passive participation is welcomed in a community of practice. These members may believe they do not have the time or expertise to engage as actively as the other two groups of participants, but as observers they take in the information and discussions and implement what has been learned in their own workplaces.

Principle Four—Develop Both Public and Private Community Spaces

In any community, there are public venues for members to share ideas, exchange tips, and solve problems, such as open forums, conferences, and teleconferences. There are also private venues for closed groups to identify issues and discuss difficulties confidentially. Both forms of communication serve to strengthen the community by building relationships among members. Discussions, events, networking opportunities, etc. are bolstered by this interaction in that members are more likely to share information with and ask questions of members they know.

Principle Five—Focus on Value

Sustainable communities of practice add value to the daily work of their members. Because membership is voluntary, the community facilitator needs to identify topics of interest to the community and develop ways for members to interact around those topics.

Principle Six—Combine Familiarity and Excitement

Successful communities of practice provide enough structured activities for members to build a pace of participation; however, they also provide opportunities for members to share creative ideas and opportunities.

Principle Seven—Create a Rhythm for the Community

Like any town, communities of practice have a unique rhythm. For example, a monthly teleconference may serve the same function as a monthly city council meeting in which community members share ideas, discuss problems, and present expert information. Weekly listserv questions prompt thoughts from the community on a regular basis. Activities such as these create patterns, continuity, and rhythm for the community of practice.

NCSET Web—A National Resource Coordination Tool

http://www.ncset.org

Here's what you'll find—

▶ **Topical Information**

Information on more than 25 diverse topics in secondary education and transition including an overview, answers to commonly asked questions, research abstracts, emerging practices, and more!

▶ **E-News**

NCSET's online newsletter loaded with information and links to publications, events, funding opportunities, Web sites, and other useful national resources—all searchable and at your fingertips!

▶ **Publications**

Full text of all NCSET publications available for quick and easy download!

▶ **Events**

Event registration, pre-event community circles, and online learning resources.

▶ **And More!**

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