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Parent Centers and State Education Agencies: Collaborative Models

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Overview

This QTA provides information about building and maintaining collaborative relationships between Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs), Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs)¹ and State Educational Agencies (SEAs).² It is based on material presented by three states at the IDEA Partnerships' 2nd National Summit in Arlington, Virginia on June 19, 2003 and material from three additional states that was presented at the Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers (ALLIANCE), National Conference in Washington, DC on January 30, 2004.

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Background

In recognition of the importance of parent involvement in the education of children with disabilities, the Bureau of the Education of the Handicapped (now named the Office of Special Education Programs) within the U.S. Department of Education funded five parent information centers on a pilot basis in 1976. These parent centers were based on the philosophy of "parents helping parents." Currently, there is a network of more than 100 parent centers distributed across every state and most territories providing an assortment of services to parents and professionals.

¹ Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) are funded by the U.S. Department of Education and are authorized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [20 U.S.C. §§1482-1483]. The term "parent centers" is used in the field to refer to PTIs and CPRCs, and is used generically hereafter in this document.

² The IDEA defines State Educational Agency as the state board of education or other agency or officer primarily responsible for the state supervision of public elementary and secondary schools [20 U.S.C. §1401(28)].

Today there are two types of parent centers: (1) Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) that serve a state or territory or a large geographical area within a state or territory and (2) Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) that serve smaller communities, which often include families from diverse backgrounds.

SEAs, which have responsibility for implementing IDEA, must establish partnerships with organizations (such as parent centers) that represent individuals with disabilities and their parents [20 U.S.C. §1452(b)(B)(v)]. These partnerships are viewed by many as being essential for improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Recently, representatives from parent centers and SEAs from six states were invited to share their collaborative experiences at two conferences.

In June 2003, three states shared their experiences at the IDEA National Summit. The states and their participants were: Delaware - Marie Anne Aghazadian (PTI) and Martha Brooks (SEA); Maine - Janice LaChance (PTI) and David Stockford (SEA); and North Carolina - Connie Hawkins (PTI) and Mary Watson (SEA). Sharman Davis Barrett from the ALLIANCE National Office moderated this session.

In January 2004, three states participated on the panel moderated by Bob Brick from the FAPE and ALLIANCE Projects at the annual conference sponsored by the Technical Assistance ALLIANCE for Parent Centers. The participants were: New Hampshire - Heather Thalheimer (PTI); Rhode Island - Cheryl Collins (PTI) and Tom DiPaola (SEA); and South Carolina - Susan Durant (SEA) and Beverly McCarty (CPRC).

The remainder of this document highlights the major points made by parent center and SEA representatives at the two sessions described above.

Critical Elements for Collaboration

The nature of the relationship between parent centers and the SEA varies from state to state. Based on ALLIANCE's work over the years, the majority of these relationships are collaborative. The states that presented at the 2004 ALLIANCE conference identified four critical elements for effective collaboration—*mutual goals, shared responsibility, authority to make decisions* and *mutual respect*.

In order to establish mutual goals, staff from parent centers and the SEA must make time to engage in meaningful discussions that reflect respect for the expertise and perspective that each party brings to the table. In South Carolina, respecting the parent perspective comes naturally for the current state director of special education, Susan Durant, because she is the parent of a young adult with a disability. However, staff from parent centers and the SEA may have different perspectives; therefore, concerted efforts must be made to facilitate collaboration through mutual respect.-

One way to put “collaboration through mutual respect” into practice is through joint planning by the executive director of the parent center(s) and the SEA's special education director. They must be equal partners in the process and have authority to set goals and plan for their

implementation. In a successful collaboration, the assumption must be that both the parent centers and the SEA will share the responsibility of implementing the mutual goals. For example, if the goal is to provide training on positive behavior supports, the SEA and parent centers could provide joint training opportunities to parents and professionals to ensure that consistent messages, philosophies and strategies are conveyed and maximum results are obtained. Another option could be to provide separate trainings for parents and educators, but use the same curriculum and trainers to ensure consistency.

Developing, Maintaining and Improving Relationships

To have a successful collaboration between the SEA and parent centers, an institutional infrastructure must be established that both can build upon and rely on as the relationship develops. Parent center and SEA representatives emphasized that time is needed to build a solid infrastructure and it must be built with *trust*, *communication* and *partnering* at all levels.

Trust means that the parent centers and the SEA must believe that they need each other to accomplish their mutual and individual goals. It means being honest with each other about identified problems and concerns—a willingness to share their “issues” so that they can work together towards solutions. Trust also means that in some situations, the parties must agree to disagree.

Communication involves more than sending a letter or e-mail to provide information. It involves taking time to share ideas, set goals and discuss reactions. Parent center and SEA representatives described effective communication as an “open door policy” where all staff members, not just directors, feel their thoughts and ideas are welcome by the other party. Heather Thalheimer, the PTI executive director in New Hampshire, emphasized that the SEA and parent centers must remember that it’s important to communicate positive information as well as complaints and concerns.

True collaboration between parent centers and SEAs develops when both parties model the *partnering* relationship, which means attending and participating in each other’s events. For example, in Oregon the parent center director regularly attends the special education staff meetings at the SEA. Partnering also means that neither party is perceived to have more authority than the other. Partners work together, even in difficult situations.

Common Barriers and Obstacles

Parent center and SEA representatives identified three barriers and obstacles to collaboration: *turf issues*, *limited resources* and *personal reactions*.

The primary functions and responsibilities of parent centers and SEAs are different and not interchangeable. Consequently, there may be certain topics or roles that have historically been the *turf* of one entity or the other (e.g., the SEA has exclusive responsibility for personnel development). Furthermore, SEAs are bureaucracies that have established policies and procedures that may make certain topics or roles appear to be “off limits” to parent centers. Both parties must be aware of these turf issues and traditional roles, but not allow them to sabotage

developing collaborations. In fact, panelists suggested that where good collaborative relationships exist between parent centers and SEAs, parent centers may undertake activities that have traditionally been carried out by the SEA (e.g., survey parents about satisfaction with services). Susan Durant, the state director in South Carolina, likened SEAs and parent centers to gardens with a fence and a gate. Both parties must leave their gates open and be sure to water and fertilize each other's garden periodically.

All parent centers and SEAs are very familiar with the challenge of *limited resources*. When time and personnel are scarce, the development of collaborations could be jeopardized because time is needed for the parties to build a relationship that grows into an effective collaboration. As mentioned above, such collaborations must be nurtured over time. At the same time, contractual arrangements with parent centers to do specific work may extend the limited personnel resources of SEAs and provide further collaborative efforts. When limited resources bring parent centers and SEAs together, creative solutions are often found and trust develops that did not previously exist. In New Hampshire, a joint IDEA training was conducted, born out of inadequate resources to conduct separate trainings.

In some cases, *personal reactions* and attitudes may be the barrier to collaborative work between the parent centers and the SEA. Individuals representing one party or the other may have firmly-held beliefs regarding the roles and responsibilities of the other party that make it difficult to establish an effective collaborative relationship. Panelists emphasized that patience, persistence and grace are important ingredients of collaborations because parent centers and SEAs will not always agree.

State Specific Examples

In Delaware, the PTI and SEA have a long history of working together for mutual benefit. For example, as part of the State Improvement Grant (SIG), the SEA funds a Family Literacy Coordinator who is housed at the PTI. The SEA also provides funding to support the PTI's Hispanic Outreach position and has several additional contractual arrangements with the PTI (e.g., producing a newsletter, sponsoring a conference targeted to parents and administering a project that processes parent stipends for family members who participate on various SEA task forces and committees). The PTI provides data to be used for the SIG tracking efforts and had a lead role with the state's transition system change grant project. The PTI and SEA have collaborated on the development of a parent manual that is a supplement to the parent's rights brochure. When parents call the SEA, they are often referred to the PTI for assistance. The SEA/PTI relationship has enabled the organizations to proactively solve problems when they encounter situations where there is difference of opinion.

In Maine, the SEA and PTI report that some of the advantages to working together include: children with disabilities obtain better educational outcomes; solving problems is easier; and there is less conflict and misunderstanding. Also, there is value in having families more involved in local and state planning efforts and in having a greater understanding of education issues. The SEA and PTI have collaborated on rule making, developing information materials, conducting joint training sessions and carrying out committee work. The PTI has also participated on interview committees designed to select SEA staff.

In New Hampshire, the level of collaboration between the SEA and PTI increases every year and is demonstrated in small and large ways. In general, the SEA seeks assistance from the PTI when it needs input from families and uses PTI materials for training sessions and informing parents. Through co-sponsored special education forums, families have been given an opportunity to give input and drive positive systems change in the state. The PTI has exhibited at conferences sponsored by the SEA and presented at the 2003 orientation for new local special education directors. The SEA awarded the PTI grant funds under three different programs to accomplish the following: (1) build regional support networks for parents and other stakeholders involved with children with disabilities; (2) enhance home and school partnerships as part of its SIG grant; and (3) provide training for persons to become certified as educational surrogate parents. The SEA and PTI worked together with others to sponsor a state IDEA Summit in October 2002, which focused on positive behavior supports. When IDEA is reauthorized, they will be sponsoring a joint conference along with the New Hampshire Association of Special Education Administrators, to explain changes in the law and its potential impact for all stakeholders. These three organizations also collaborated to re-write a model statewide procedural safeguards handbook. The result was a user-friendly product for all parties.

In North Carolina, the SEA and PTI have determined that by working together the organizations can model parent and professional collaboration. Examples of collaborative activities include inviting the PTI to appoint representatives on advisory councils and topic-specific task forces, and be part of the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) Steering Committee. The PTI reviews the SEA's materials and there has been joint training for parents and professionals, including the development of training materials. The SEA often considers the PTI perspective when developing policies. The SEA also co-sponsors and provides funding for activities, such as a state-wide conference for parents on literacy and a stipend program for families presenting in, or co-teaching, preservice preparation classes at the university level. Both organizations report their relationship has resulted in more effective advocacy for children and provided a unified voice on critical issues.

In Rhode Island, the SEA and PTI report that all their activities are interwoven to some degree. The SEA includes the PTI in meaningful roles, including collaboration on planning and development, State Improvement Grant (SIG) activities, parent training, professional development and a variety of committees. The PTI provides in-kind support to the SEA by participating in the self-assessment process and being part of monitoring teams. Making the PTI an integral part of these activities means that issues may be raised by the PTI that the SEA had not been aware of or intended to address, but this is part of the collaborative process.

The representatives from South Carolina highlighted a number of ways in which the SEA and a local CPRC collaborate. The SEA has offered stipends to parents who attend conferences sponsored by the CPRC and the SEA supports personnel development for CPRC representatives in other ways. The state director of special education has spoken at CPRC conferences and encouraged SEA staff to attend these conferences. CPRC advisory committees often include SEA staff members and both organizations have collaborated with others in re-writing the state model parent handbook. Both organizations were part of the planning committee for the state's IDEA Summit held in April 2003 and promoted the Summit among their constituents. The

CPRC made a presentation at the Summit. The SEA and CPRC also sent representatives to the National IDEA Summit in June 2003 to be part of a panel presentation.

Concluding Remarks

Developing and implementing collaborative activities between parent centers and SEAs is time consuming. However, the individuals who contributed to this document believe that the potential advantages far outweigh the disadvantages and that the time is well spent. Parent centers and SEAs considering a more formalized collaborative relationship need to learn how each other's organization works and identify those areas where there are common goals. A strong, long-term collaboration starts with smaller projects; larger projects can be added once the relationship has been nurtured and trust is established.

One of the goals of the Technical Assistance ALLIANCE for Parent Centers over the next four years is to encourage more collaboration between parent centers and SEAs, in an effort to improve outcomes for children with disabilities.

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