

CommunicationPoints

Welcome CoP Members!

Welcome back to school! And, welcome back to the NCSC-GSEG Communities of Practice (CoPs). The start of a new school year is a lot like the start of a new calendar year. It is a time to make a fresh start, to resolve to do some things differently, and to plan for the future with hope and optimism.

Your NCSC Work Group III trainers have been busy reflecting on the feedback you provided over the past year. We plan to use that information to make improvements to the materials and delivery of a new set of webinars that are being sculpted for this year. Among the likely topics will be access to English Language Arts instruction and certainly more information on communication. A detailed schedule of webinars will be announced soon.

“Should old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind?” Surely not! This year is set to build on the CoP relationships that have been established and reach toward the goals of the GSEG.

So, as this school year begins and in light of what you have learned already from participating in your state’s CoP, what is your “new school year resolution”? What are your goals for this year? What do you hope to accomplish? What changes are you going to put into action to accomplish your goals? How will you keep your momentum? And, finally, what do you hope to gain from your CoP this year? These are some reflective questions to help you begin the school year in the mindset that while there may be many challenges, both now and

in the months ahead, the new school year offers many opportunities to make improvements that will ultimately benefit students. We hope you enjoy this issue of the newsletter and look forward to resuming our work together!

NCSC Goal Review

What is the purpose of the NCSC grant? Our long-term goal is to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities achieve increasingly higher academic outcomes and leave high school ready for postsecondary options. A well-designed summative assessment alone is insufficient to achieve that goal. Thus, NCSC is developing a full system intended to support educators, which includes formative assessment tools and strategies, professional development on appropriate interim uses of data for progress monitoring, and management systems to ease the burdens of administration and documentation.

As members of the NCSC Communities of Practice, you were selected because you are seen as dynamic, persuasive individuals, who are role models and respected by peers. As we move forward with our work in year two, we hope that you, our CoP members, are willing and eager to share what you learned in year one with your fellow CoP members (both new and returning), your colleagues, and with the grant staff. With hard work and determination, we can help all students – those with and without disabilities – achieve increasingly higher academic and post school outcomes.

Summer Communication

Institute by Elizabeth Towels-

Reeves, PhD, EdCount

An important focus of the NCSC Capacity Building team is to educate and prepare state education agency personnel, district and school administrators, and general and special education teachers for developing communicative competence for every child participating in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards.

While this goal is certainly prudent for understanding what students know and can do through a summative assessment, ensuring that all students have a “voice” and a way to express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions is a right into humanity. As a first step in achieving communicative competence for all students taking alternate assessments, the NCSC Capacity Building team hosted a Summer Communication Institute in Lexington, Kentucky June 13-15, 2012.

A wide range of objectives drove the content of the Institute including: a) reviewing evidenced based practices for communication interventions in lieu of the state level Learner Characteristics Inventory data on communication for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities; b) considering implementation science practices for successful statewide interventions; c) reviewing communication intervention models; and d) developing individual state action plans for systemic, statewide communication interventions for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participating in alternate assessments.

NCSC state partners (including core and Tier II

states) sent representatives to the Institute to learn more from the well-known expert panelists brought together to share a wealth of perspectives in relation to communication.

The communication experts include Jacqui Kearns and Jane Kleinert from the University of Kentucky, Kathy Gee from California State University at Sacramento, David McNaughton from Penn State University, Michael McSheehan from the University of New Hampshire, and Charity Rowland from Oregon Health and Science University. In addition, Beth Steenwyck, an expert in Implementation Science, shared a model for integrating systemic change initiatives to achieve the goal of developing communicative competence for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Together, these experts shared the Learner Characteristics Inventory data gathered for all the core partner states in the NCSC project, presented an innovative model for implementing and facilitating change through statewide initiatives, and shared moving stories of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities taking charge of their lives by developing communicative competence.

Many attendees at the Institute noted the impact of what they learned, and one attendee noted: “This is the most exciting meeting of my 20-plus year career as an augmentative and assistive communication specialist.” Results from the follow-up with our state partners two months after the institute indicate that many district and state level attendees have taken the information back to their state or districts and have plans in place to focus more deliberately on communication and to take action to give every student a “voice.”

Voices from the Field

The contents of “Voices from the Field” represent the view of the author and are not endorsed by the staff at the National Center and State Collaborative, the Office of Special Education Programs, or the state supporting the CoP member. The contents of this newsletter were developed under a grant from the Department of Education (PR/Award #: H373X100002, Project Officer, Susan.Weigert@Ed.gov). The contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education and no assumption of endorsement by the Federal government should be made.

Communication Institute: One State’s Plans

By Mary Keeney, Cathy

Coloma, Audra Ahumada, and Pat
Reynolds, AZ Department of Education

The AZ team returned from the Communication Summer Institute in Kentucky full of enthusiasm, ideas, and shared purpose. This was a unique opportunity for cross-collaboration among three ADE departments: Assessment, Assistive Technology and Early Childhood. It’s exciting to have these experts in their respective areas coming together to inform this important endeavor. We share a passion for establishing and improving communication opportunities for pre-schoolers so that they arrive at kindergarten with a viable system that allows them access to learning on an equal footing with their peers.

With that goal in mind, we are moving forward with plans for several projects. The first involved setting up a model pre-school classroom for the AZ Director’s Institute, which took place at the end of August. Special education directors from across the state viewed the latest innovations in communication, integrated and demonstrated in a model that lends itself to promoting enhanced communication for all students within the class – a universal design approach.

Over the next few months the team from AZ will collaborate with two or more districts within the state to develop actual programs, providing both professional development and recommendations for designs that promote best practices for optimal learning environments where communication is a central feature. Finally, the team plans to gather stakeholders to share what was learned at the summit and move forward to bring more awareness and a future initiative in the state around communicative competence.

Our mantra going forward is “the earlier, the better,” and we will work to ensure the expectation that communication systems are routinely addressed as part of the pre-school experience in Arizona.

Recommendations for You

“An App About Apps”

Several of you have asked for communication app recommendations. Try “Autism Apps” (TouchAutism.com). It is a free, comprehensive list of *other* apps that are not only useful to persons with autism but to those with other disabilities as well.

The app includes “search” and “categories” sections if you’re looking for a particular kind of app, but there is also a “featured” section. New apps are continually added, making Autism Apps an ever current one-stop shop for what’s available.

Be sure to read the customer reviews for each app on the list; they should help you determine which apps are worth your time and money.



Communication Corner

Communication Myth: The student doesn't have the pre-requisite skills for communication.

The truth here is that all students communicate regardless of the severity of their disability, and there are no pre-requisite skills that must be demonstrated BEFORE AAC systems and instruction are provided. These emerging communicators are likely using body movements, facial expressions as expressive forms in order to get basic needs met or for social comfort. These forms only need to be interpreted by teachers and caregivers.

Consider Shelley's case. Shelley uses body movements, facial expressions, and hand biting to communicate frustration, needs, or signal happy/pleasure. Her family identified a preference for taking a ride in her wheel chair fast enough for her to feel a light breeze on her face. As an introduction to AAC, a single switch with the spoken message "walk faster" was placed it on her tray. Staff then took her for a ride in her chair. At specified intervals, the staff would stop walking and say "Uh-oh, we stopped. What do you need to do to go faster?" and demonstrated for Shelly how to activate the switch. In less than five trials of this routine, Shelley was independently activating the switch to say "walk faster".

While Shelley still needs a more sophisticated symbol system to communicate information in academic content, she is clearly already emerging in her use of symbolic language. No pre-requisite skills are needed before communication intervention is started.

Acronyms and Other Terms to Know

The field of special education is full of jargon and acronyms, and this project is no different. As we return to school and start thinking in NCSC language again, it may be helpful to remember some of the common terms and acronyms that are most often used by the project staff.

- **NCSC** – National Center and State Collaborative
- **CCSS** – Common Core State Standards (for College and Career Readiness)
- **CoP** – Community of Practice
- **CCR** – College and Career Ready
- **CCC** – Core Content Connectors
- **Trainer** – An NSCS staff member who works with the state leads to provide professional development for the CoP members
- **State Lead** – The person in your state's department of education who is the contact person for the CoP members and the NCSC project
- **Webinar** – The narrated PowerPoint or other video that is posted on Webex for the CoP members to view
- **Live Chat** – The process where CoP members, state leads, and the trainer discuss the webinar content via a live conversation using Webex
- **WebEx** -The online platform that NCSC uses for viewing the webinars, hosting online chats, and other live meetings