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Pepnet 2: Developing Collaborative Relationships for Effective Transition Services

By Marcia Kolvitz

The foundation for pepnet 2 began in the late 1960s when the U.S. Department of Education provided funding to establish four programs for the deaf at postsecondary institutions across the country. As an increasing number of deaf and hard of hearing students began enrolling in mainstreamed colleges throughout the country, the focus of federal funding shifted in 1996 from direct services for students to technical assistance for postsecondary education institutions serving students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The four regional technical assistance centers were known collectively as the Postsecondary Educational Programs Network (PEPNet). The currently funded project, pepnet 2, was established in 2011 when the structure changed from four regional centers to one national center. Pepnet 2 builds on the rich history and strong reputation from its three previous funding cycles while simultaneously reflecting the new model of a national center.

From the beginning the organization has focused on collaboration—getting individuals from different agencies centered on the shared goal. At pepnet 2, our goal is to improve postsecondary outcomes for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, including those with co-occurring disabilities. There are numerous ways to address this—by working with individual educators and service providers, by developing resources and training materials that support the transition from high school to postsecondary opportunities, or by focusing on the systems that support the programs and services.

Photos courtesy of pepnet 2

One of our challenges has been getting the components that comprise the education of deaf and hard of hearing students and services for deaf and hard of hearing adults to work together more effectively. We have focused on collaboration as a tool to construct and strengthen the cooperation among people and agencies that are active in promoting the transition of students from secondary education to the workplace. In an effort to address issues with systems and support collaboration among organizations and agencies, pepnet 2 initiated the Building State Capacity Summit.

We use the term *Summit* when referring to two different initiatives. In 2005, a group of concerned professionals in the field of deaf education convened the State Leaders' Summit to learn about and plan for system change. Initiated as a way to stimulate change in how educational programming was provided to students who are deaf or hard of hearing, this effort resulted in a series of national meetings from 2005-2011 that included teams of state representatives. The meetings provided an opportunity for state teams to use current research and effective strategies as they made decisions for improvement and accountability in educational programs. State teams included educators, administrators, parents, and other interested stakeholders. These teams had a tremendous task in considering the entire range of educational programs and services, prioritizing what needed to be done in their states, and then determining the best course of action.

Although the State Leaders' Summit began as an effort to involve individuals in schools and classrooms, the planning team expanded to include educational administrators, parents, technical assistance providers, and a representative from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Working with teams from each state toward a common purpose was proving successful, and the State Leaders' Summit served as the forerunner for the second Summit, the Building State Capacity Summit, initiated by pepnet 2.



The Building State Capacity Summit resulted from an expectation by OSEP for pepnet 2 to host a national systems change Summit. As part of its funding, OSEP mandated that pepnet 2 provide:

... a forum for the exchange of information on establishing and implementing strategies to improve educational programs and services for postsecondary students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and to increase the number and proportion of these students who persist in and complete college or other postsecondary education and training.
~ U.S. Department of Education (2011)



In addition, pepnet 2 was expected to facilitate collaborative planning and implementation to “address identified needs of postsecondary institutions in the state related to enrolling, retaining, instructing, and graduating students who are deaf or hard of hearing” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), and as a result, the idea for the Building State Capacity Summit series emerged. During these meetings, from 2012 through 2016, individuals would not only offer and receive information that enhances change, but they would have an opportunity to implement and demonstrate change in areas such as service delivery, policy development and implementation, and cross-systems coordination.

The focus of the Building State Capacity Summit was much narrower than its predecessor in that it focused specifically on services to transition-age students and youth. Consequently, the composition of state teams changed. Along with educators and parents, pepnet 2 asked state teams to include vocational rehabilitation staff as part of the core team and encouraged teams to include representatives from transition services, postsecondary programs, community agencies, independent living centers, or deaf education personnel preparation programs. While teams were urged to develop a strong network within their state to develop and implement their plans, participation in the annual national Summit meeting was limited to five team members. Some states already had strong networks among service providers, so team members may have had

previously established working relationships. However, many newly formed teams included members who had the additional challenge of getting to know and trust the other members in a relatively short period of time.

Collaboration within each team and across the agencies and organizations they represent has been a key part of the Summit. Teams were challenged to look beyond the roles of individual professionals or agencies and begin working toward a common goal. What could they—educators, parents, service providers, community agencies—do together to have an impact on student outcomes? To support their efforts, pepnet 2 provided several tools, including assistance with conceptualization plans and working plans, and guidance about using the goal attainment scaling process to measure their accomplishments.

Collaboration can be complicated. Each team member likely had specific goals in mind when joining the team, and members would be expected to support the goals of their agency or organization. Although successful transition of our students from high school was a common goal, how each team member viewed his or her contributions might have been slightly different, especially at the onset of the meetings. The terminology used by groups within a team also sometimes differed, so teams had to come to a common understanding



about what they wanted and how they'd get there.

It wasn't always easy. Breaking down the monumental task of enhancing outcomes was difficult, and losing track of the shared goal was always a real possibility. We encouraged teams to take time to clearly conceptualize and articulate what they wanted to accomplish. Time—so essential to each team's work—was provided through the Summit meetings, which also included opportunities for participants to learn new information in plenary and small group presentations and discuss critical issues with colleagues across state team lines.

Immediately after the Summit most team members reported that they were energized, but then they quickly slipped back into their everyday roles. Taking time to continue collaborating with their fellow team members was a challenge that had to be added into the mix of everyday work responsibilities. In addition, most states faced fiscal restraints and did not have funds available for new initiatives. To address those issues, pepnet 2 offered \$5,000 in support of plans developed by each team and assigned each team a "champion"—pepnet 2 staff members and consultants—to serve as a point of contact, provide encouragement, and help teams navigate any uncertainties as members worked toward implementing their plan.

Throughout the work, teams were challenged to think outside their own part of the student's transition process and consider the *whole*—all of the systems in place and their role in the student's transition. What kind of impact did they want? What type of system change was needed? In some states, the plans built on previous successful practices. In other states, where the relationships among team members and their respective agencies were still forming, the goals were more modest and served to establish a foundation for future planning. Within pepnet 2, we recognized that each state had a unique history and starting point; each would build from its own starting point towards accomplishing goals. To help teams assess their progress, we encouraged the use of goal attainment scaling, which provided a mechanism for recognizing accomplishments even if targets were not reached.

When we consider the impact of all of the Summit activities on deaf education and transition services, we're hopeful that the *parts* that we helped establish and nurture have an impact on the whole. If a state team collaborates on a project and sees positive results, then that should mean easier and more effective transitioning experiences for students and youth who are deaf or hard of hearing. Of course, like each part, the *whole* of deaf education and transition will continue to evolve—and this presents additional questions and needs for planning.

If a state team collaborates on a project and sees positive results, what happens next? What resources are needed to sustain the work and scale it up to another level? Does a positive experience expand the foundation for more collaborative work in the future? And what happens as team members retire or move on to different roles and new members join the state teams? How do we continue to tap into the



synergy of a successful team and use it to further our efforts toward improving services for students and youth who are deaf or hard of hearing?

Ultimately, parents, educators, service providers, students, and pepnet 2 staff members have the same goal. As we strive toward enhancing positive post-high school outcomes, we need to avoid working in isolation and reach out to colleagues who have similar goals. Within our own agencies and organizations, we need to communicate the value of listening to other perspectives and develop an understanding of what options and opportunities need to be available for students and youth as they move toward adulthood. As we continue to deal with limited resources, initiatives such as pepnet 2 and the Summits seem to be a viable way of supporting necessary changes in the systems engaged in education and service delivery.

Reference

U.S. Department of Education. (2011, August 9). Applications for new awards. Postsecondary Education Center for Individuals Who are Deaf. *The Federal Register*. Retrieved January 10, 2016, from <https://www.federalregister.gov>

Resource

For more information about *The National Agenda: Moving Forward on Achieving Educational Equality for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students*, refer to www.ndepnow.org/pdfs/national_agenda.pdf.