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## Collaborative Partnerships Between SEAs and Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs)

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The purpose of this document is to identify the features of four successful collaborative partnerships between state education agencies (SEAs) and parent training and information centers (PTIs) and describe how these collaborative partnerships are improving SEA outcomes on Indicator B8<sup>1</sup> of the state performance plans (SPPs)—i.e., “*Percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities*” [20 U.S.C. §1416(a)(3)(A)]. Although a similar Part C indicator exists, this study focuses on the Part B indicator since most Part C programs exist outside the SEA. This document elaborates on an earlier document published by Project Forum and the Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers (ALLIANCE) (Brick & Markowitz, 2004). Project Forum completed this document as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

### BACKGROUND

According to Brick and Markowitz (2004), OSEP first piloted five PTIs in 1976 in recognition of the importance of parent involvement in the education of children with disabilities. The PTIs were based on the philosophy of “parents helping parents.” Today there are 106 parent centers distributed across every state providing a variety of training and information to parents and professionals. The majority of staff members in these centers are parents of children with disabilities.

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, often including parents from diverse backgrounds (Brick & Markowitz, 2004). PTIs and CPRCs are funded by OSEP and authorized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [20 U.S.C. §§1482-

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<sup>1</sup> State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report require state IDEA administrators to report on 20 Indicators for Part B and 14 for Part C.

1483]. OSEP also funds a project that consists of one national coordinating center know as the ALLIANCE, and six independent regional centers. The ALLIANCE provides technical assistance for the purpose of developing, assisting and coordinating PTIs and CPRCs.<sup>2</sup> IDEA requires that SEAs establish partnerships with organizations that represent individuals with disabilities and their families, including groups such as PTIs and CPRCs [20 U.S.C. §1452(b)(B)(v)]. This document focuses exclusively on the collaborative partnerships between SEAs and PTIs because CPRCs operate at the community rather than regional and/or state level.

Brick and Markowitz (2004) found that critical elements for collaboration included mutual goals, shared responsibility, authority to make decisions and mutual respect. Parent center and SEA representatives also emphasized that time is needed to build a strong infrastructure for collaboration and it must be built with trust, communication and partnering at all levels. Parent center and SEA representatives identified three barriers to collaboration: turf issues, limited resources and personalization of systemic issues.

SEAs receiving OSEP funds in the form of the State Personnel Improvement Program (also known as State Improvement Grants or SIGs) are required to award contracts to PTIs to carry out the SIG objectives of improving systems for personnel preparation and professional development in early intervention, education and transition services in order to improve results for children with disabilities.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In collaboration with the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center (the Region 2 Parent Technical Assistance Center), Project Forum developed two interview protocols: one for SEA staff and one for PTI staff. During the months of May and June of 2007, Project Forum staff conducted interviews with SEA and PTI staff in four states—*California*,<sup>3</sup> *Connecticut*, *Montana* and *North Carolina*—for a total of eight interviews. States were chosen based on a reported high-level SEA/PTI collaboration by regional PTI. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Atlas.ti, a software program designed for the analysis of qualitative data.

## FINDINGS

### Collaborative Activities

#### *Professional Development and Technical Assistance*

Interviewees from three states described extensive collaboration around professional development and/or technical assistance activities. For example:

- *Connecticut*—Based on a contract with the SEA, the PTI offers a three-week training series with bi-monthly follow-up to parents on the basics of special education law and

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the ALLIANCE, its website is located at <http://www.taalliance.org/index.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike most states, which have one PTI, California has five PTIs.

individualized education program (IEP) development. As a part of this training, the PTI frequently invites SEA staff with expertise in a particular area to make a presentation. Also, in response to a settlement agreement that was the result of a class action lawsuit, the SEA has contracted with the PTI to conduct extensive trainings of LEAs throughout the state. Furthermore, as part of its state personnel development grant (SPDG), the SEA partners with the PTI to help specific LEAs (e.g., those with higher frequencies of complaints) improve their relationships with parents. Technical assistance provided by the PTI is customized to meet the needs of each LEA (e.g., enhancement of its website or training of a parent liaison).

- *Montana*—As part of the state’s comprehensive system of professional development (CSPD), the PTI works with the SEA to identify professional development needs and develop and administer trainings for each region within the state. Registration costs are waived for parents and continuing education units (CEUs) are available to all participants for a nominal fee. The PTI is also in the process of developing a distance learning infrastructure for parents that will offer a series of interactive video conferences to sites throughout the state. The SEA funds these conferences via the general supervision enhancement grant (GSEG) and works closely with the SEA to identify training needs and provide speakers/presenters as needed.
- *North Carolina*—When the SEA offers its eight-month training program for new special education directors, PTI staff are invited to present on the topic of parent/professional collaboration. The PTI also invites SEA representatives to train PTI staff on issues such as dispute resolution. The SEA and PTI jointly sponsor conferences for parents and professionals on topics such as literacy, dispute resolution and positive behavioral supports. They also co-hosted regional public comment hearings on state policy and procedures and regional trainings on IDEA 2004.

In addition, all eight interviewees noted that PTI staff are routinely invited to participate in SEA-sponsored training opportunities.

#### *Development of Training and/or Guidance Materials*

Interviewees from three states (*California, Montana, North Carolina*) reported that PTI representatives are frequently included in the development and/or review of training and guidance materials on topics as varied as secondary transition, state-wide literacy initiatives, dispute resolution, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and standards-based IEPs. All interviewees reported that SEAs include PTIs in the development of materials related to parent involvement and/or training. *North Carolina’s* SEA, for example, contracted with its PTI to develop autism training modules for parents and *Montana’s* SEA frequently contracts with its PTI to develop training materials targeted towards a parent audience. Other interviewees reported that their SEAs often consulted with PTIs in order to ensure that documents are written using “parent friendly” language.

### *Taskforces and Workgroups*

Interviewees from all four states reported that PTI representatives are frequently invited to participate in various SEA-level taskforces and/or workgroups. For example, PTI representatives are members of SIG/SPDG committees; secondary transition taskforces; Response to Intervention (RTI) workgroups; least restrictive environment (LRE) taskforces; PBIS steering committees; IEP taskforces; CSPD councils; special education advisory councils; Part C groups; and state improvement plan (SIP) steering committees. In addition to soliciting input from PTI representatives, SEAs occasionally ask PTIs to recommend parents who are *not* formally affiliated with the PTI to serve on SEA taskforces and workgroups.

### *Dissemination of Information*

Interviewees from all four states described efforts by SEAs and PTIs to identify and promote resources available to parents of children with disabilities from one another (by providing web links and phone numbers). In most cases, the SEA refers parents to PTIs, and vice versa, for additional information and support. For example:

- *California*—The state’s CALSTAT program, funded via the state improvement grant (SIG) to provide professional development and technical assistance to LEAs, frequently refers LEAs to one of the state’s five PTIs to help LEA staff increase parental involvement. In addition, the SEA sponsors a parent hotline providing information on procedural safeguards that was developed with extensive input from the state’s PTIs.
- *Connecticut and North Carolina*—The SEA includes the PTI’s telephone number on the IEP template sent out to LEAs. The PTIs also described efforts to disseminate the Child Find brochure and SEA-produced materials.
- *Montana and North Carolina*—The PTI newsletters include information on SEA initiatives (e.g., upcoming parent survey relating to Indicator B8) as well as notices about SEA-sponsored events and/or conferences. In North Carolina, the PTI often includes articles written by SEA staff.

### *Parent Outreach*

One of *California’s* PTIs receives a grant from the SEA to do outreach to parents residing in rural areas and *Montana’s* SEA relies on its PTI to help reach parents in geographically remote areas. In *North Carolina*, the SEA and PTIs have worked together to conduct outreach activities to low-income urban neighborhoods and migrant worker communities. In *Connecticut*, the SEA and PTI jointly fund a community-based parent outreach position housed at a health clinic. The staff person is bi-lingual in Spanish and English and fills a much-needed role for both the SEA and PTI.

### *Dispute Resolution*

Interviewees described a variety of collaborations relating to dispute resolution. For example:

- *California*—The PTI frequently refers families to the SEA’s dispute resolution hotline. Also, the SEA invites and pays for PTI representatives to receive training in alternate dispute resolution.
- *Montana*—The SEA and PTI offer training at least once per year for early dispute resolution staff and additional dispute resolution training is provided at a statewide conference for parents and educators.
- *North Carolina*—The SEA and PTI co-hosted a statewide all-day training for parents and professionals on alternative dispute resolution. Also the SEA trains PTI staff on the state’s dispute resolution and facilitated IEP processes.

### *Data Collection*

Interviewees from *Connecticut* and *Montana* reported that the PTIs help (or, in the case of *California*, will soon help) gather data via parent surveys for inclusion in their SPPs. *Montana’s* parent survey, for instance, includes the PTI logo and a cover letter from the PTI director “endorsing” the survey. *Connecticut’s* state survey includes an insert referring parents to the PTI for assistance in completing the survey and offering incentives to parents (in the form of PTI services) to those who do. PTIs also help SEAs with other types of data collection, for example:

- *California*—The PTIs track the numbers of parents served who, as a result of services, have not felt the need to go to due process hearings.
- *Connecticut* and *North Carolina*—PTI representatives share information with the SEA on numbers of parents served, demographics and the nature of services received (e.g., provision of information on alternative dispute resolution processes).

### *Other Types of Collaboration*

Interviewees from three states reported engaging in other types of collaborative activities, in addition to those already listed. For example, *Connecticut* and *Montana* described stipend programs, funded by the SEA and administered by the PTI, enabling parents throughout the states to participate in professional development activities by offsetting travel and child care costs and/or waiving registration fees. *Connecticut’s* SEA also sponsors a speaker’s fund, administered by the PTI, that helps local parent groups cover the costs of visiting speakers and solicits input from its PTI when recruiting parent members for compliance monitoring teams. In

*California*, the SEA subcontracts with one of its PTIs to maintain a special education library for parents and professionals.

### **Data Collection and Indicator B8**

Interviewees concurred that *all* collaborative activities described above contribute, directly or indirectly, to improved outcomes for SEAs on Indicator B8 of the SPP. Several expressed, however, that data collection (specifically in the form of parent surveys) and professional development activities are most directly linked to this Indicator.

In terms of collecting data for Indicator B8, *North Carolina* has adopted the National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring (NCSEAM) parent survey<sup>4</sup> that was developed expressly to help states collect information for this indicator; both *California* and *Montana* have adapted the NCSEAM survey (e.g., *Montana* has modified a few items so that they also apply to parents of children ages three to five); and *Connecticut* developed its own survey that includes items that respond directly to Indicator B8.

### **Communication**

Interviewees described a combination of formal and informal communication between the SEAs and PTIs. Contractual arrangements (e.g., through the SIG or other grants) frequently provided more formal vehicles for identifying and implementing collaborative activities. More commonly, however, interviewees described an “open door policy” that enables SEA and PTI staff to feel free to contact one another at any time via phone or e-mail. In the words of one PTI interviewee, “I can directly pick up the phone and talk to the state director of special education—it’s been wonderful.”

Interviewees tended to agree that the effort to identify collaborative activities was “mutual” and that SEAs and PTIs are equally likely to suggest ideas for collaboration. In terms of formal, grant-funded collaborative activities, however, SEAs are usually more likely to approach PTIs.

### **Fiscal and Human Resources**

Fiscal and human resources supporting collaborative activities are handled in a variety of ways. For example:

- *California’s* collaborative activities are funded via the SIG, the Family Participation Fund (approved via the state legislature) and various subcontracts.
- *Connecticut’s* SEA and PTI have an arrangement funded through the SIG and a settlement agreement that was the result of a class action lawsuit where the SEA contracts

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<sup>4</sup> The NCSEAM parent survey can be found at [http://www.monitoringcenter.lsuhs.edu/parent\\_family\\_involvement.htm](http://www.monitoringcenter.lsuhs.edu/parent_family_involvement.htm).

with the PTI to administer certain activities. Also, as mentioned earlier, *Connecticut's* SEA and PTI co-fund a bilingual staff person to conduct parent outreach.

- *Montana's* collaborative activities are funded by the SPDG, CSPD and GSEGs.
- *North Carolina's* SEA contracts with its PTI to complete different components of various shared projects (e.g., development of training modules and a stipend program in which parents “tell their story” to teacher candidates or co-teach a teacher preparation course.).

## Barriers

Because interviewees described participating in such successful collaborative partnerships, few reported any significant barriers. Those mentioned, however, were similar in nature to those reported by Brick and Markowitz (2004). For instance, interviewees frequently mentioned lack of funding and/or staffing to support collaborative activities. Several PTI representatives mentioned that they would like to be included more actively in the development and review of *all* SEA training and/or guidance materials, not just those designed for use by parents. A few interviewees noted that close collaboration with the SEA is occasionally viewed with suspicion by parents and that a strong SEA/PTI relationship may create tensions within the PTI in terms of its functioning as a parent advocacy organization. Although interviewees noted that a “difference in vision” can pose occasional problems, the SEAs and PTIs are usually able to work around these differences. One SEA representative felt that gathering data for Indicator B8 (including getting OSEP approval for the state’s sampling plan) has diverted energy from the more important task of building relationships with parents.

## Benefits

Most commonly, PTI representatives noted that their collaborative relationships with their SEAs had increased the credibility of the PTIs at the regional and LEA levels. According to one interviewee, the SEA had helped increase the PTI’s standing within local communities by providing its “seal of approval.” Another PTI representative noted that being written into the SIG also facilitated this process. Several SEA representatives expressed confidence in the high quality of professional development opportunities provided by their PTIs. In the words of one, “We really put our PTIs out there because we know how talented they are.” SEA representatives frequently mentioned the important role played by PTIs in representing parents’ perspectives on special education issues and minimizing adversarial relationships between parents and the SEA by functioning in the capacity of “liaisons” or “ambassadors.” In the words of one SEA representative, “I’d hate to think of life without [our] PTI.” Other benefits mentioned included a reduction in due process hearings, the institutionalization of parent involvement at the SEA level as well as increased parent involvement overall, and improved outcomes for students.

## **Facilitators of Success**

Interviewees described a number of factors facilitating successful collaboration between SEAs and PTIs. Most importantly, interviewees mentioned that the inclusion of PTI representatives and other parents at all levels of SEA decision making is “ingrained now, part of the culture.” Other factors include the following:

- SEA and PTI leaders who have made collaboration a priority;
- frequent and open communication between SEA and PTI representatives;
- formalization of relationships via SIG/SPDG and other grants;
- acceptance of differences of vision and/or perspective; and
- trust and mutual respect.

## **SUMMARY**

Based on Project Forum’s interview findings, it appears that the inclusion of parents in SEA-level decision making has become “second nature” for states with strong SEA/PTI collaboration. At least three of the four states interviewed reported that SEA/PTI collaboration included shared professional development and/or technical assistance activities, the dissemination of information and/or promotion of one another’s services, the development of training and guidance materials, joint development of training and/or guidance materials, participation by PTI representatives on SEA-level taskforces and workgroups, shared parent outreach efforts, promotion of alternative dispute resolution models and PTI assistance with data collection for SPP Indicator B8. All interviewees reported that collaboration played an invaluable role in increasing parent involvement at all levels. Collaboration has been facilitated by the availability of additional funding made available to SEAs through State Improvement Grants, General Supervision Enhancement Grants or other sources.

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## REFERENCE

Brick, B., & Markowitz, J. (2004). *Parent centers and state education agencies: Collaborative models*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

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