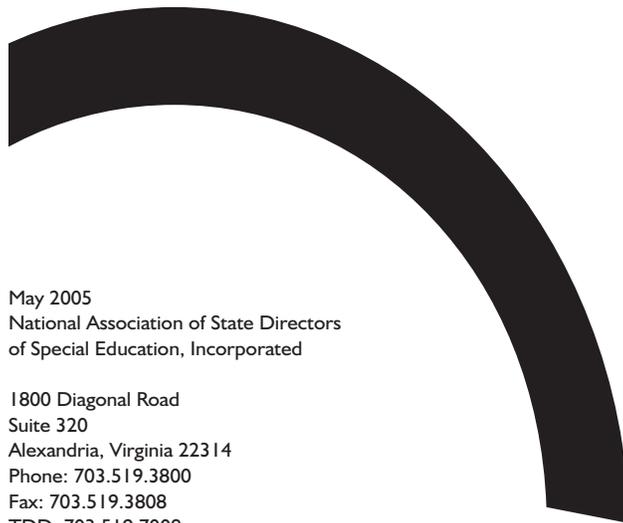


# Dialogue Guide

## Facilitator Handbook





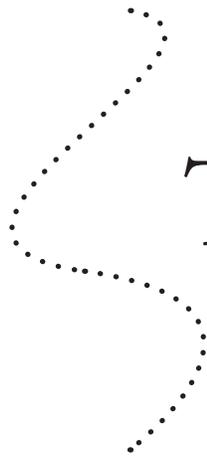
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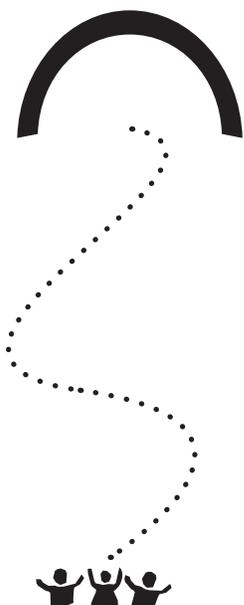
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## Foreword

Welcome to the IDEA Partnership!\* We are devoted to stimulating new ways for stakeholders—administrators, service providers, family members, policymakers, and other interested individuals—to work together on issues related to IDEA 2004 that are shared across states and districts; across roles and relationships. To accomplish this goal, the IDEA Partnership provides opportunities for stakeholders to move beyond information and build shared meaning; to go beyond dissemination to joint understanding and action.



**Y**our opportunity to  
become involved

We invite you to assist us in one of our major initiatives—providing opportunities for meaningful dialogue associated with IDEA 2004. To support this venture, the IDEA Partnership has developed a set of innovative tools called *Dialogue Guides*. Each Dialogue Guide focuses on an issue relevant to understanding IDEA 2004 and directs stakeholders to useful materials that have been produced through federal research and technical assistance projects. Within the Dialogue Guides are suggestions for:

- creating dialogue related to the issue;
- building shared meaning; and
- generating solutions to issues of mutual importance.

A capable facilitator is essential to the success of Dialogue Guide activities. Individuals who serve in leadership roles—principals, parent leaders, state chapter presidents of professional organizations, local district special education directors, faith-based leaders, etc.—are typically considered to be prime facilitator candi-

\*The IDEA Partnership is housed at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

dates. However, more important than job title or position are the qualities and skills that a facilitator brings to the task.

Facilitators organize and convene Dialogue Guide activities and provide follow-up assistance to keep the work of the dialogue group going and growing. Dialogue Guide facilitators are expected to help groups—composed of individuals with similar roles or individuals who represent a variety of stakeholder roles—share their ideas and opinions and to generate ideas that build upon initial events. To this end, facilitators should:

- be comfortable serving in a role that requires them to remain neutral during discussions;
- be skilled in reaching out to individuals who represent diverse points of view and engaging them with other participants in meaningful ways;
- be someone who is trusted by stakeholders;
- have credibility with participating individuals, which assumes an understanding of the jargon, context and politics of those who are participating; and
- be able to translate ideas and perspectives across roles.

Being a facilitator of a Dialogue Guide activity involves a commitment in terms of time and energy. This *Dialogue Guide Facilitator Handbook* was written to assist facilitators in carrying out Dialogue Guide activities.



**Your call to action—Help  
identify and support  
Dialogue Guide facilitators**

### *If you are a facilitator...*

We invite you to read through the *Dialogue Guide Facilitator Handbook* to gain a solid understanding of Dialogue Guide activities and the type of facili-

tation that is necessary for success. We encourage you to reflect on your strengths in carrying out the facilitator's role and associated responsibilities. Ask yourself, "Am I comfortable assuming the role of facilitator—or is someone else a better choice? Do I have the time and energy required to carry out all of the tasks?"

### *If you are interested in hosting a Dialogue Guide activity, but will assign or recommend a facilitator...*

We invite you to read through the *Dialogue Guide Facilitator Handbook* to gain a better understanding of the facilitator's roles and responsibilities. Ask yourself, "Does the potential facilitator have the skills and characteristics necessary to ensure success? Does the individual have the time and support needed for the activity?" Share the handbook with others who may be nominating candidates. Make the handbook available to potential facilitators. Encourage them to read and reflect on their ability and interest in serving in the role before making a final decision.



**Your invitation to  
stay involved**

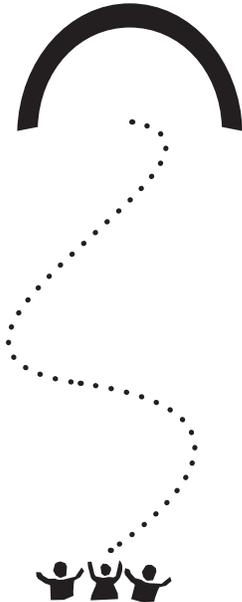
This is only a starting point. As the IDEA Partnership convenes Dialogue Guide activities throughout the country, participants' stories and insights will be used to inform and shape future practices. Participants will share and exchange feedback via the IDEA Partnership websites at

<http://ideapartnership.org>

or

<http://ideainfo.org>

We invite you to stay connected to the work of Dialogue Guide participants by joining our online discussions.



# Introduction

## *Welcome, Dialogue Guide Facilitators!*

All children deserve a quality education, one in which they can learn and achieve to high standards alongside their peers. For the more than six million children and youth with disabilities in this country, the right to a free and appropriate public education is supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004). However, as the following scenarios suggest, implementing IDEA 2004 does not come without challenges—many of which require the collaboration of diverse groups of stakeholders. For example:

*A local director of special education has been charged with leading the districtwide effort to develop a system for intervening early on academic difficulties. One of the main goals of this system is to help prevent the overidentification of students from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Acknowledging the importance of this task—not to mention the need for all of the many stakeholders to be involved in the planning and implementation—the director decides to convene a series of dialogue groups that focus on exploring the issues related to overidentification.*

...

*While volunteering at their children's school, a group of parents started talking informally with several teachers about how student progress is reported. Both teachers and parents shared things that they thought worked well, as well as things they would like to see done differently. At the end of the discussion, one of the discussants asked, "Wouldn't it be great to talk to other parents and teachers about their ideas and thoughts?" The group agreed and set about inviting other teachers and parents to a brown bag lunch to share their insights and ideas.*

...

*Keeping highly qualified teachers has always been a major concern for the district. But this year, faced with mounting shortages of special education teachers, prin-*



*principals are feeling the pressure. Principals decide to come together during a staff work day to see what they might be able to do to support teacher retention. In preparation for the meeting, principals review selected information. One document describes IDEA 2004's requirements for highly qualified special education teachers. The other document synthesizes research that suggests a positive school culture and administrative support can influence teachers to stay in teaching.*

...

*Each year, the local teacher association sponsors a workshop at a regional conference on a topic that has implications for teachers throughout the state. This year, the topic is discipline, including IDEA 2004 requirements for interim alternate placements. Given the current emphasis on school-based mental health, a session is organized in which teachers, related service providers, representatives from mental health agencies, parents and administrators are given the opportunity to dialogue. Formal and informal invitations are issued to various stakeholder groups.*

Each of these scenarios has in common an important issue to be addressed and the need to form a partnership in which stakeholders—administrators, service providers, family members, policy-makers and other concerned individuals—can contribute to the dialogue and take collective action in meaningful ways.



**D**ialogue—Turning challenges into opportunities

The IDEA Partnership believes that dialogue among and across stakeholder groups is essential for addressing the many complex issues related to ensuring that children and youth with disabilities receive a high-quality education. Dialogue often is defined by what it is not. It is not a simple, informative discussion in which participants agree to disagree. Nor is it a debate in which one side is persuaded to accept assumptions as truth. Rather, through dialogue, participants:

<b>What Do We Mean By Dialogue?</b>		
<b>Debate</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>Dialogue</b>
Accepts assumptions as truth	Surfaces various assumptions	Examines/questions assumptions
Point - Counterpoint	Majority rules; agree to disagree	Seeks common ground; consensus
Persuasive	Informative	Reflective

- Examine and question assumptions.
- Seek common ground and consensus.
- Reflect on and generate joint actions.

The IDEA Partnership has prepared a variety of Dialogue Guides designed to support stakeholders in forming dialogue groups. These Dialogue Guides provide stakeholders with tools they can use to engage other stakeholders in a dialogue on issues related to the implementation of IDEA 2004. In the hands of a capable facilitator, these Dialogue Guides provide tools and suggestions for organizing and convening dialogue activities.



**D**ialogue Guide facilitators—Helping stakeholders join together, build shared meaning and generate solutions to issues of mutual importance

So, you have been chosen or have self-selected to be a Dialogue Guide facilitator. What will you be expected to do? First and foremost, you will be expected to have a thorough understanding of the purpose and function of the Dialogue Guides. A good first step would be to familiarize yourself with the different types of Dialogue Guides and their content.

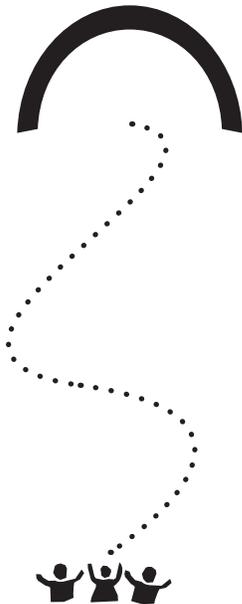
It is equally important that you have an understanding of the logistics of organizing, convening and following up on a Dialogue Guide activity. Here the emphasis is on providing ways for stakeholders to interact and contribute ideas in an emotionally safe environment.

## *Using the Facilitator Handbook*

This *Dialogue Guide Facilitator Handbook* is designed to support facilitators in carrying out their responsibilities. To that end, the handbook is organized into the following sections:

- **Understanding Dialogue Guides—An Overview for Facilitators.** Use this section to familiarize yourself with the Dialogue Guide concept. Information is included about the different types of Dialogue Guide activities and the development process.
- **Organizing a Dialogue Guide Activity—What Facilitators Should Know to Get Started.** Use this section to review general planning and organizational considerations. Topics include identifying participants, designing the agenda, publicizing the event and arranging logistics.
- **Convening a Dialogue Guide Activity—How Facilitators Can Ensure Meaningful Participation.** Use this section to reflect on how you will support participants to create dialogue, build shared meaning and generate solutions to issues of mutual importance. Suggestions for increasing participation and ensuring future action are provided.
- **Taking the Dialogue Guides a Step Further—How Facilitators Can Build upon the Initial Event.** Use this section to gain ideas for continuing Dialogue Guide activities after the initial session.





# Understanding Dialogue Guides

## *An Overview for Facilitators*

- ... Offering mental health services*
- ... Providing alternate assessments*
- ... Aligning the No Child Left Behind Act with IDEA 2004*
- ... Ensuring access to early intervention*
- ... Supporting the transition to adult life*

These are just a sampling of the many issues facing stakeholders as they work to ensure high-quality education for children and youth with disabilities. What defines the issues is their relevance and importance to stakeholders and the need for unified action across stakeholder groups to find solutions.



**Needed: A means to connect stakeholders who care about the issues and who seek unified solutions to them**

The IDEA Partnership has developed Dialogue Guides for this purpose. Dialogue Guides are tools that identify relevant issues pertaining to the implementation of IDEA 2004 and direct stakeholders to materials for improving results for children with disabilities. Accessibility and usability are enhanced through the Dialogue Guide format, which engages stakeholders in:

- exploring together the practical value of information and knowledge;
- developing a shared process for managing and reflecting on information; and
- becoming better able to act jointly upon shared knowledge to improve practice.

To ensure relevance, all Dialogue Guides are developed by stakeholders who are actively engaged in their work, who have identified the issues, reviewed the available materials (most of which can be accessed via web downloads or are available in the particular Dialogue Guide) for relevancy and written questions to stimulate dialogue.

Several Dialogue Guides are available for each topic. For example, there are:

- **Cross-stakeholder guides.** The nature of some issues necessitates bringing together diverse viewpoints and talents. Cross-stakeholder Dialogue Guides facilitate these kinds of interaction.
- **Role-alike guides.** Certain documents might require a more in-depth look at a document through the lens of a particular audience (e.g., youth, families and advocates; administrators; policymakers; teachers; or related service providers). Role-alike Dialogue Guides facilitate these kinds of interactions.

The Dialogue Guides are located on the IDEA Partnership website and are customized to each user. To retrieve your customized Dialogue Guide, go to <http://ideapartnership.org> and click on Dialogue Guides. You will be prompted to:

1. Choose a topic.
2. Describe the individuals in the Dialogue Guide group.

Once you answer the prompts, you will be able to review online and/or download the Dialogue Guide, which includes:

- a facilitator's guide;
- documents for review; and
- dialogue questions.

### Introductory Dialogue Guide Elements

Dialogue Guides are intended to promote dialogue centered on an issue of high interest to the education community. The following elements will guide the group through the dialogue process:

- **Full text document**—An unedited document produced through federal research and/or technical assistance projects that is evidence-based and generally acknowledged as valuable within the education community may be included (or a link is provided for downloading). Note: In some cases, a summary sheet may be presented instead of the full document.
- **Summary sheet**—In some cases (e.g., lengthy documents), a brief synthesis of the information covered in the complete document, written in a straightforward, easy-to-read style may be included.
- **Dialogue questions**—Questions that reflect what stakeholders believe is important for people in the field to discuss are presented. Stakeholder-identified data from national studies that are relevant to the topic and that have implications for practice and data points and questions that engage participants in exploring the information also may be included.

After selecting a particular issue for a Dialogue Guide activity, facilitators might consider familiarizing themselves with all of the Dialogue Guides for that topical area. This is recommended for two reasons: to enhance one's understanding of the issue and to provide ideas in the event the initial group wishes to expand its efforts. For example, a role-alike group decides to invite other stakeholders into the dialogue. Knowledge of how the Dialogue



Guide addresses the issue for cross-stakeholders might prove useful in planning this next event, as is the case in the following example:

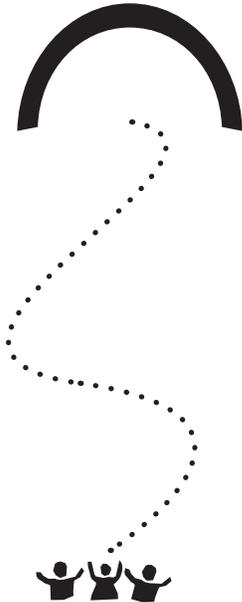
*Discipline was high on the list of potential topics. But as the facilitator thought about the topic, he realized that in order to make the topic appeal to a variety of stakeholders (e.g., family members, mental health agencies, community services groups and faith-based organizations) it would have to be expanded. His ultimate goal was to bring together representatives from these different groups to create new bonds. As the facilitator talked with several colleagues, he determined that the topic was better framed as “supporting positive mental health in our children.”*

The IDEA Partnership website (<http://ideapartnership.org>) also features comments and suggestions from facilitators who have used the Dialogue Guides and from individuals who have participated in Dialogue Guide activities. Take some time to learn from your colleagues’ experiences using the tools.

Part of selecting a topic involves choosing a Dialogue Guide. The IDEA Partnership offers a variety of Dialogue Guides on topics of interest to stakeholders concerned with providing a quality education to children and youth with disabilities. As you review the Dialogue Guides available in your topic area of interest, think about how you might tailor one of them to fit your group. And, don’t forget to check out the “Your Voice” section of the IDEA Partnership website where other facilitators have shared their ideas and experiences using various guides.

*Note:* In the event that you need a Dialogue Guide that is not available, contact the IDEA Partnership via the “Your Voice” section of the website. Partnership staff members may have suggestions for crafting one and/or may put you in touch with someone who has similar needs. It always helps to ask!





# Organizing a Dialogue Guide Activity

## *What Facilitators Should Know to Get Started*

Thoughtful planning can go a long way in ensuring that the Dialogue Guide activities are launched successfully. Keep in mind that the nature of Dialogue Guide activities will be relatively new to most people, making it doubly important to spend adequate time on certain planning elements, including:

- selecting the topic;
- inviting participants;
- planning the agenda; and
- arranging the logistics.

## *Selecting the Topic*

Selecting the right topic or issue is one of the most important things you will do as a facilitator. Topics must resonate with stakeholders; they must compel them to participate. As you think about the topic, consider the purpose or goals of the dialogue. For example:

- Do you want participants to build new relationships?
- Do you intend for participants to improve their practices?
- Are you looking to bring together individuals who do not typically talk with one another and/or to create bonds between organizations that do not usually work together?

Your answers to these questions will help you select your topic and determine how the issue will be framed; choose the participants who will be invited; determine the



format (e.g., whether you should initially pursue a role-alike or cross-stakeholder dialogue group; and, whether you should arrange for a few initial small-group meetings followed by a large public meeting).

## *Inviting Participants*

Once you have determined the topic and purpose, it's time to create a participant list. Ask yourself, "Who should be included in the initial dialogue?" Usually, a number of people whom you know will come immediately to mind. Or, you may have been given a list of possible participants to invite. However, it also is important to consider individuals who are not on any list but who may benefit from participation and who may contribute to the dialogue as well. To tap into other sources of participants, you might consider:

- **Investigating possible opportunities that already exist.** For example, opportunities may be available to collaborate with certain school district groups (e.g., parent-teacher organizations, school improvement teams), family groups and/or community-based organizations.
- **Making contact with other groups and organizations.** Several organizations and/or groups may have a vested interest in the topic at hand. In some cases, they may even be interested in partnering or co-sponsoring a Dialogue Guide activity. For example, it might be a good bet to investigate a state or local chapter of a national organization whose members have an interest in the issue. Because family involvement helps enhance success in school, make it a practice to consider including parents and representatives from parent organizations in cross-stakeholder groups.
- **Asking for suggestions.** Networking may prove helpful in uncovering other individuals and groups who might be invited. As you talk with different individuals, always ask, "Is there someone else who should be included?" "Are there other groups with an interest in the issue that I should contact?"

## *Suggestions for Increasing Interest*

It helps to give thought to the kinds of supports that may increase participation when considering various audiences and communities. The goal is to make participation easy and inviting, as well as to make sure that logistics have not made it too difficult for certain individuals to attend. Here are some examples of areas to consider:

- **Make sure invitations are inviting.** Wording is key. Make sure to use person-first language (e.g., "a student with a disability" rather than "a disabled student"), avoid jargon and acronyms and whenever possible, make the invitation personal (e.g., use the individual's name in the salutation, make a phone call to follow up a formal invitation). Give people a specific reason to come and be very clear about the time commitments. Use care in framing the issue so as not to make it appear that any one group will be judged or blamed.
- **Let people know who else has been invited.** Sometimes it is appropriate to share the names of individuals, core planning group members and/or organizations who are participating. When doing this, make sure you have their permission.
- **Enlist representatives of organizations and groups to help with recruitment.** Outreach can be enhanced when individuals who have status within a particular group or organization show support (e.g., co-sign the letter, put the invitation on their letterhead, announce the opportunity in their newsletter).
- **Publicize the Dialogue Guide activity widely.** Interest may be enhanced when multiple means (e.g., phone trees, reminders, etc.) are used to get the word out. Think in terms of a long-range plan for publicizing the event. For example, announce the opportunity in a newsletter, introduce key players at a meeting, send invitations and reminders, post invitations in well traveled areas (e.g., parent work room, teacher lounge), have people make personal contacts, etc.

### Inviting Participants: Sample Invitation

#### Attention All Sixth Grade Teacher Teams

Bring your brownbag lunch and share in an exchange of ideas with colleagues and parents. At this Friday's inservice/teacher work day, a group of us are hosting a dialogue on the topic of helping students with disabilities participate in districtwide assessments. Many of us have been working hard this year to prepare our students for the assessments. We want to share our thoughts, insights and ideas on making the districtwide tests a productive and successful experience for our students. We have invited our special education colleagues to join us and they plan to share information on the new federal regulations (a summary sheet has been prepared for your convenience) and entertain our reactions.

Will you join us? Come and share your thoughts! Let's make this a valuable exchange.

Time: 12-2

Location: Guidance Planning Room

- **Give thought to cultural considerations.** Be sensitive to the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of individuals. For example, if writing to someone who does not speak English as a first language, consider having the entire invitation or certain phrases translated (e.g., greetings, use numbers rather than words for dates, etc.). Decide whether translators may be needed at the Dialogue Guide activity and let invitees know that translation services will be available. Pay careful attention to how phrases are worded to ensure respect. Keep in mind that some words can have dif-

ferent meanings (e.g., after a newspaper ran the headline "Influx Problems Pressure Community," people found it inappropriate to use the word influx when describing an increase in the number of immigrants who were joining the community). Ask individuals from different cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to advise you. *Note:* Facilitators are encouraged to share their suggestions on the IDEA Partnership website at <http://ideapartnership.org>.

- **Provide resources.** In general, access may be increased by providing tangible resources, such as release time, dedicated meeting time or professional development credit for teachers; child care, transportation, parking, interpreters, stipends or refreshments for families. You may want to ask if invitees require any special services (e.g., interpreter for an individual who has hearing needs). Plan to start early to secure and/or raise funds to pay for such services.
- **Choose a convenient location and time.** Host the Dialogue Guide activity in a location that is convenient and accessible to all participants and schedule it at a convenient time for most people. For example, if hosting a role-alike group, try to locate the Dialogue Guide activity at a time and place where individuals typically come together (e.g., inservice days). If the group members are from cross-stakeholder groups, then identify a neutral location that is accessible (e.g., convenient to public transportation, ample parking, etc.). Make sure to enclose written directions and a detailed map. Also, take a few minutes to think through how you will inform invitees of any changes to the schedule. For example, do you have a make-up date in the event of cancellation due to weather? Is there a phone number to call or a website from which invitees can get information?

## Planning the Agenda

Dialogue Guides contain the information you will need for convening the activity. The Dialogue Guides provide the questions and materials, but it is your responsibility as the facilitator to design the process that will allow dialogue to happen. Thus, your role is two-fold: to make sure that materials are disseminated to participants in a timely fashion and to develop an agenda that makes everything happen.

The agenda should address the goals that you established for the activity. When crafting the agenda, consider the following components:

- **Welcoming participants and making introductions.** This initial task sets the tone and climate for the entire Dialogue Guide activity. Your attention to making sure that all participants feel safe and welcome is essential. Let participants know why their participation is important. Invite them to introduce themselves and share why they believe the issue is important. Some facilitators may prefer to ask participants to reflect on their expectations for the meeting. As individuals introduce themselves, invite them to share one thing they hope to accomplish in the meeting. *Note:* There is no set way to complete this part of the agenda. You are encouraged to share ideas, as well as check out others' ideas, on the IDEA Partnership website at <http://ideapartnership.org>.
- **Using a warm-up activity.** Some facilitators prefer to start with warm-up activities or ice-breakers. These activities are designed to help participants get to know each other quickly. For example, you might have participants brainstorm the meaning of dialogue first independently, then with a partner and finally with the entire group (this activity format is referred to as *Think, Pair, Share*). Have participants generate words and phrases that come to mind when presented with the terms *dialogue*, *discussion*, *debate*. *Note:* You are encouraged to share ideas, as well as check out others' ideas, on the IDEA Partnership website at <http://ideapartnership.org>.
- **Setting the dialogue's purpose.** Although you have sent information to participants in advance of the meeting, it is still wise to review the purpose and goals. Invite participants to ask for clarification. Also, because dialogue may be new to participants, plan to spend some time reviewing what it is and what it is not, as well as its potential benefits.
- **Establishing ground rules.** In Dialogue Guide activities, it is essential that all participants feel welcome and safe sharing their

### Warm-Up Strategy: Exploring the Purpose of Dialogue

According to Judith Winston, Executive Director, President's Initiative on Race and Rose Ochi, Director, Community Relations Service, U.S. Department of Justice:

"We cannot underestimate the power of dialogues. When people explore perspectives and ideas, they discover how much they share in common and learn to appreciate their differences. Dialogue is an opportunity for growth and change. Dialogue can help open our minds. Dialogue can help each of us listen better. And dialogue can bring us closer together."

Collect quotes on the power of dialogue. Share them with participants. Invite participants to reflect on the quotes. Or, to enhance reflection, ask participants to construct their own quotes. Post them throughout the room before adjourning and keep for any follow-up meetings.

**Note:** As you discover other quotes (e.g., from texts, participants, etc.), consider sharing them on the IDEA Partnership website at <http://ideapartnership.org>.

views and ideas. The purpose of establishing ground rules is to promote interaction patterns that respect the individual while increasing the effectiveness and productivity of the group. One way to establish ground rules is to have the participants reflect on the purpose of the Dialogue Guide activity. Ask them, “What can others do to help me feel comfortable participating?” and/or, “What can I do to help others feel comfortable participating?” Draw on their answers in making a list of ground rules for participation. *Note:* There is no set way to complete this part of the agenda. You are encouraged to share ideas, as well as check out others’ ideas, on the IDEA Partnership website at <http://ideapartnership.org>.

- **Convening the dialogue.** The Dialogue Guide provides questions that have been developed by stakeholders like you and represent the kinds of questions that people want to talk about. As you pose the questions, plan to promote discussion by: asking individuals to expand on their statements; drawing attention to the materials as appropriate; periodically clarifying, summarizing and gathering feedback; making sure that all participants have the opportunity to speak. *Note:* The next section discusses facilitation skills in greater depth.
- **Planning future actions.** Dialogue Guide activities are not one-time, once-done ventures. There is an expectation that participants will take action and continue the dialogue process. Allow time for brainstorming and planning. Make sure that specific steps have been identified and agreed to before moving ahead. *Note:* The last section of this handbook provides more ideas for planning future actions.
- **Pausing for reflection and evaluation.** Plan to have participants reflect on their learning and their experience in the dialogue group. Determine how participants will evaluate success. It is helpful to review the goals and purpose of the meeting and ask participants how well they were met. For example, some facili-

tators are comfortable posing a general question to the group, while others may prefer to have participants write their responses to predetermined questions. (“What is one of the most important things you learned today?” “Were you comfortable participating in the dialogue?” “What did people do to help you feel comfortable?” “Would you like to participate in future sessions?”) *Note:* There is no set way to complete this part of the agenda. You are encouraged to share ideas, as well as check out others’ ideas, on the IDEA Partnership website at <http://ideapartnership.org>.

Plan for breaks in the agenda. Formal breaks ensure that individuals do not miss important interchanges. They also provide an opportunity for participants to step back and reflect. Although natural break times often occur (e.g., once discussion has

### Dissemination Planning Checklist

- Have I...
- reviewed the materials referenced in the Dialogue Guide?
  - developed a plan for making them available to participants?
  - created a way to make sure everyone knows the importance of the materials and how each person contributes to and/or is affected by the topic covered in the document?
  - provided access to the summary sheet ahead of time for those who need it?
  - designed and distributed the agenda to all participants?

been exhausted for a particular topic; midmorning or afternoon), it is wise to build specific break times into the agenda. Encourage participants to let you know if they need an unscheduled break.

Also, make sure that the agenda fits the time frame you have scheduled for the activity. *A word of advice:* it is hard to predict the amount of time that participants will need to feel complete in their work; however, dialogue and full participation often require more time than simple group discussions. It is better to err on the side of allowing what appears to be too much time. One suggestion is to have the group prioritize the questions and identify those that must be addressed.

## Arranging the Logistics

Anyone who has planned logistics for a meeting knows how important details can be. Making sure that everything is in order prior to the meeting can go a long way in helping you focus your attention on facilitating the process. Whether you are totally responsible for this task or have others who can help, the major logistical elements to consider include:

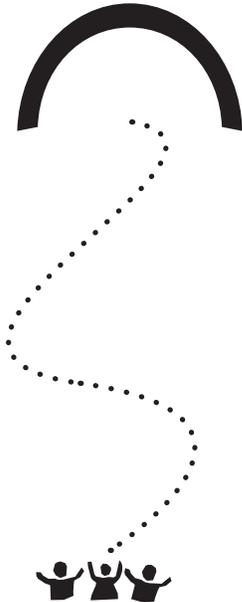
- **Selecting a site.** Make sure the space is appropriate—large enough to comfortably handle the group, well lit and ventilated, convenient to lavatories and other amenities, clean and well equipped with comfortable furniture. As discussed previously, thought should be given to selecting a location that is convenient (e.g., ample parking, on a major transportation route, accessible to individuals with mobility needs, etc.). If you are planning to provide refreshments, check out any restrictions and/or policies with the site. *A suggestion:* Make a point to do a walk-through of the room before making your site selection decision.
- **Gathering materials.** Make sure that you have all of the materials needed for the Dialogue Guide activity. These include extra copies of the materials, flip chart, markers, writing tools, paper, masking tape, etc. Unless you are

### Logistics Tip

Keep in mind that logistics may vary according to the type of group you have selected. For example, participant comfort may be enhanced for participants in cross-stakeholder groups if you choose a neutral location (e.g., public library) and select a time that is convenient for everyone. When planning for a rolelike group, you may want to look at where and when these individuals already come together (e.g., a statewide event, a monthly meeting).

sure that everyone knows each other, plan on having name tags and sign in sheets.

- **Providing refreshments.** If you are lucky enough to have a budget and can provide refreshments, make sure that the set-up is completed at least 15-30 minutes before the meeting. Think through participant preferences and requirements. (Is there an alternative to caffeine? Are there healthy snacks available for those individuals who are on restricted diets?) If providing refreshments, you may wish to let people know in advance so that they can plan accordingly. For example, on the invitation you might say, “Coffee and tea will be available.” And, if serving a meal, you will want to ascertain any special dietary restrictions (e.g., vegetarian) on the invitation response form. Schedule time for clean up, which is especially important if another group will be using the space immediately following your group.



# Convening a Dialogue Guide Activity

## *How Facilitators Can Ensure Meaningful Participation*

The Dialogue Guide format is intended to help stakeholders feel positive about:

- creating dialogue;
- building shared meaning; and
- generating solutions to issues of mutual importance.

Facilitators are responsible for shepherding activities that continue the group's initial work, such as providing opportunities to invite others into the dialogue and providing opportunities for participants to develop deeper understanding.

Throughout the Dialogue Guide activity, facilitators can enhance the process by what they say and do. Consider these scenarios:

*Most of the group members had never met face-to-face before. As participants arrived, the facilitator noticed that they clung to those people whom they knew, using body language to keep others at bay. Being respectful of the participants' lack of comfort, the facilitator began by sharing her own feelings about entering a new group and commended the participants for coming to the event. She then posed a warm-up activity in which participants were invited to meet others in the room—find someone who is wearing the same color shirt or sweater and discuss a set of questions; now with your partner, find another duo and introduce yourselves to them; now find a foursome.... During the activity, the facilitator noticed people smiling and exchanging information.*

...

*Two participants in the group seemed to dominate the dialogue. The facilitator noticed that some of the participants were starting to withdraw from sharing. To*



*address the group needs, the facilitator acted in the following way. First, to acknowledge the contribution of one of the dominating participants, the facilitator restated what she had said. Next, he reminded the group of the group rule, “We will take personal responsibility for sharing our views and ideas in an equitable way.” He then asked to hear from participants who had yet to contribute.*

In both cases, the facilitator anticipated possible challenges to the dialogue process and acted in a respectful way. Following are some ways facilitators might enhance the Dialogue Guide process. The suggestions are organized according to four main facilitator tasks:

- establishing trust;
- maximizing participation;
- focusing on action; and
- redirecting the process as needed.

[*Note:* The suggestions that follow are not all-inclusive. They are offered as a starting point for stimulating ideas about facilitation strategies. You are encouraged to share your own ideas and to check out the ideas of others on the IDEA Partnership website at <http://ideapartnership.org>.]

## *Establishing Trust*

Dialogue Guide activities are designed to provide a way for stakeholders to interact and contribute ideas in a safe environment—one that is not characterized by power struggles or distrust. The success of Dialogue Guide activities depends, in large part, on the ability of group members to build trust and create a safe place to take risks. They must see each other as co-collaborators and learn to ask for and share perspectives in non-judgmental ways.

Facilitators can do much to help participants establish trust. Following are several examples:

- **Build trust activities into the agenda.** As was discussed in the previous section, certain agenda components—setting the tone with welcomes and greetings, making intro-

ductions, setting ground rules, sharing reflections—help to establish a safe environment that is conducive to dialogue. As you plan your agenda, think about how you might design each of these components to support participants.

- **Stress confidentiality.** Sensitive issues and feelings may arise during the course of meaningful dialogue. It is important to discuss confidentiality with participants when orienting the group to dialogue. At critical times during the dialogue (e.g., an emotional interchange, an example that inadvertently revealed the identity of an actual person), you may want to remind participants of the need to keep information confidential.
- **Facilitate the process in a neutral way.** Facilitators should use and encourage the use of plain, jargon-free and person-first vocabulary. Encourage participants to offer preferred terms if a biased or offensive word or phrase arises during dialogue.
- **Ensure equal weight to all perspectives.** There may be a history of adversarial relations among some participants. In such cases, participants may come to the Dialogue Guide activity with certain biases, either about specific individuals or about a particular group in general. It is important to acknowledge the perceived social hierarchy (e.g., different members perceived as representing groups with different values or status) by taking extra care to ensure that all group members feel respected. Be sensitive when such issues exist and respond accordingly. Keep in mind that you may have to take things more slowly than planned to ensure that everyone feels comfortable.

## *Maximizing Participation*

In Dialogue Guide groups, everyone is an expert within his or her own context and each individual has valuable input. Facilitators create a safe environment that enables participants to speak hon-



estly while considering how others might feel. Ask yourself, “How would I feel as a participant?” and “What can I do to foster a positive feeling?” For example, cross-stakeholder Dialogue Guide activities bring people together who have different roles and responsibilities but who share a common interest in the topic. In these groups, facilitators often spend considerable time helping participants form connections with one another.

The following suggestions, which are not all-inclusive, are offered to help stimulate your thinking about strategies that may increase participation.

### *Focus on the Elements of Dialogue*

As discussed previously, dialogue has several defining characteristics. Facilitators can help participants by articulating these characteristics and then drawing attention to them throughout the dialogue. Consider these examples:

- **Examining/questioning assumptions.** After participants have brainstormed or shared initial reactions to the issue, ask them to examine any assumptions underlying the different viewpoints. (“What beliefs support these views?” “Are some beliefs felt to be stronger than others?”) Facilitators can help extend the dialogue by asking participants to consider what they know and feel about the different perspectives. For example, a facilitator might pose the following questions: “What do we know about the viewpoint?” “What more do you want to know about the viewpoint?” and “What have we learned about the viewpoint?”
- **Seeking common ground/consensus.** After discussing various viewpoints, ask participants to determine any common ground. (“What do the different perspectives have in common?” “What themes cut across all suggestions?”) Facilitators can encourage the dialogue by drawing attention to how people often use different words to describe the same thing. For example, a facilitator may start this line of dialogue by reminding participants

that everyone is concerned about improving results for students and then asking, “What else do we have in common?”

- **Reflecting.** Provide ample time for ongoing reflection throughout the course of the Dialogue Guide activity. This is often accomplished by pausing periodically to think about a topic or perspective. At the end of the Dialogue Guide activity, facilitators often draw on participants’ reflections to extend the dialogue. For example, after an individual has shared what he or she has learned (e.g., a principal states her relief that others share her concern about using data to make decisions), the facilitator might encourage the group to consider how they might use that perspective to stimulate dialogue with others.

### *Facilitate Interaction*

Facilitators keep participants moving toward the goals. Using cues from the participants (e.g., facial expressions, body language, verbal input, etc.), facilitators keep a comfortable pace and alter it as necessary. For example, a facilitator may allow more time for a question that is eliciting interest, substitute a line of questioning when it appears that the topic has been exhausted, or introduce an ongoing reflection opportunity when participants need to sort out too many perspectives.

Facilitation strategies are used to help keep participants on task and involved. General facilitation strategies include:

- **Communicating respect.** Use individuals’ names, make eye contact and give credit for participants’ ideas. Recording participant viewpoints on flip chart paper is a good way to demonstrate their value and provide a visual for reflection.
- **Listening actively.** Facilitators let speakers know they are listening by facing them, making eye contact as appropriate and using positive or neutral body language. You can let speakers know you heard what they were saying by paraphrasing what they said, com-



menting on a point they made, and/or empathizing (e.g., “That must have been very frustrating for you...”).

- **Clarifying points.** Sometimes participants may make statements that are vague or confusing. Or, they may use jargon or technical terms that others do not understand. Facilitators can help by asking for more information or encouraging other participants to feel comfortable asking. For example, you can ask the person to restate what he or she said (e.g., “I am not sure I understand the point completely so could you please say a little more about...”). Or, you might restate what you think you heard and ask for confirmation (e.g., “Let me make sure I understand your position by restating what I think I heard...”). If the clarification involves an emotionally charged statement, then it is important to identify the feeling (e.g., “It seems like you have reservations. Is that an accurate perception?”).
- **Summarizing and paraphrasing.** Facilitators should periodically restate—or invite the participants to restate—the major dialogue points and have participants reflect on them. Use this strategy whenever it appears that the conversation on a question has come to an end or as a technique to reorient the group when it is off task.
- **Giving feedback.** Facilitators can use feedback as acknowledgment. (“Everyone seems very invested in this topic—true?” “It’s been a long time since we heard from general education teachers and I want to make sure we hear from them on this question.”) Make sure that feedback is stated in concrete terms and presented in the spirit of helpfulness.
- **Brainstorming.** When generating ideas, facilitators may use brainstorming to encourage participants to feel comfortable sharing divergent approaches. With brainstorming, participants are encouraged to generate solutions without any evaluation or feedback. Once all of the solutions have been exhausted, then the

group members will review each one in terms of its pros and cons.

- **Helping individuals disagree appropriately.** Disagreement can arise in Dialogue Guide activities. It is the role of facilitators to ensure that disagreements are made appropriately. For example, some groups make a ground rule to “agree to examine common ground underlying disagreements.” As a facilitator, you may want to ask the group to suggest positive ways to voice disagreements (e.g., acknowledge the person’s right to hold a particular belief, refrain from judging or criticizing a perspective, etc.).

### *Use Thoughtful Questions*

At the heart of dialogue are the questions that lead to interchange and build real understanding. These kinds of questions are openended and seek to engage participants in building meaning.

In addition to the content focused questions contained in the Dialogue Guides, facilitators may use process questions periodically to help participants stay on task and involved. Examples include:

- **Status questions** help people regroup and reflect. (“How are we doing?” “Do we need more time to reflect?”)
- **Invitation questions** encourage people to take responsibility for their participation. (“What do others think?” “What experiences do others have with...?”)

Questions that connote a judgment (e.g., “Don’t you think that...?”) should be avoided.

### *Focusing on Action*

*A team of middle school teachers began a dialogue about the growing number of new students in the district who speak a first language other than English. At the end of the second meeting, they talked about whom they might bring into the dialogue. They decided that other teacher*



*teams would benefit and made a plan to talk to the administration about designating time for such dialogues. The teachers also felt that families would benefit from the dialogue. They began planning how they might bring families into the dialogue. One suggestion was to talk with several community leaders about how to support participation.*

...

*A professional organization decides to conduct a dialogue on an emerging topic of interest to its membership as part of its state convention. Attendees generate several actions that the group might take—report to local chapters; hold local dialogues on the topic; survey the membership for input on the topic. Participants sign up for tasks. The facilitator agrees to coordinate follow-up activities by posting all communications on the organization website and creating an electronic bulletin board that will allow participants to keep in touch.*

A distinguishing feature of the Dialogue Guides is the focus on action. Further dialogue depends on the participants. Participants are expected to take some type of action that is based on what they have learned from the dialogue.

Action can take many forms. For example, the dialogue could lead to:

- **Increased perspective taking.** Facilitators can help by providing participants with opportunities to reflect on their experience (members think about how their perspective compares to the perceptions of others). Formalizing reflection demonstrates its importance and provides an impetus for participants to learn from the reflection of others.
- **Development of new venues for more in-depth and collaborative work.** Discuss how the dialogue might be built into other ongoing activities (e.g., in service, professional development, or community capacity building opportunities). In some cases, participants may identify specific tasks to accomplish (e.g., collect information from their respec-

tive constituents; organize a new group meeting). Suggest a follow-up activity (e.g., conference call, face-to-face meeting) in four to six weeks. Invite participants to help you plan it.

- **Recruitment of new audiences to the dialogue.** Encourage a discussion about who else should have dialogue. Ask, “Who else needs to have this dialogue/who else should we bring in?” Encourage participants to suggest how to make it more likely that these new people participate.

## *Redirecting the Process as Needed*

Comprehensive planning—making sure that all logistics have been taken care of, that activities have been developed to support participation and that people feel safe in sharing—can go a long way in ensuring success. Through planning, facilitators are able to anticipate typical challenges and prepare appropriately.

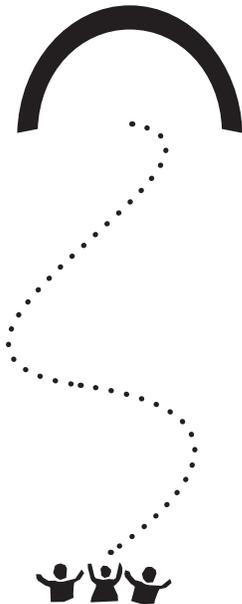
However, no matter how well you have planned, there is always the possibility that the group will get off track at some time. In many cases, the derailment is only minor and the group recovers on its own. But, there may be other times when group members look to you as the facilitator to help get them back on course.

When the process veers off course, you may find it necessary to redirect the group. Following are several suggestions to consider:

- **Repeat directions.** Keep in mind that dialogue will be new to most people. In some cases, there may be misunderstandings or miscommunication regarding the purpose of dialogue. Sometimes it is necessary to repeat directions periodically throughout the course of the dialogue. You may even want to check participant understandings to ensure that everyone is clear.



- **Remind participants of the ground rules.** Pause periodically and review the ground rules (e.g., after returning from a break, before launching into a new question). You also might consider using ground rules to review the process throughout the dialogue—for example, point to the ground rules that were posted on flip chart paper and ask, “How are we doing?” and “What can we do better next time?”
- **Focus on the big picture of improving results for students with disabilities.** Sometimes it helps to pause and remind people that they have come together because they share a common goal of supporting students with disabilities. Stress commonalities among participants.
- **Keep track of who is contributing and who is not.** Assess the situation by asking yourself, “Has everyone received a fair hearing?” Have several techniques ready to encourage people to share. For example, you might use the technique, *Think, Pair, Share*, in which individuals reflect on a question, then share it with a partner before being asked to debrief in the large group. If one or more individuals are dominating the dialogue, take action by inviting other participants to comment. It might be helpful to refer to any ground rules about equality of participation. If you suspect that some individuals are not participating because of power issues with another group member, consider breaking the group into smaller dialogue groups. After the smaller groups have dialogued, reconvene the larger group and debrief.
- **Move the discussion back on track.** Sometimes participants will begin talking about something that is off topic. Facilitators might respectfully redirect the dialogue back to the topic. For example, they may restate the topic and use a polite segue back to the topic (e.g., “That’s an interesting point that helps us acknowledge the magnitude of the issue. Now, let’s return to the central issue, which is...”).
- **Check yourself.** Professionally trained facilitators remark that it is sometimes the subtle things they inadvertently do that get the group off track. For example, reflect on your own interactions. Have you unintentionally made a judgment by dismissing someone’s input, cutting somebody off too abruptly, giving advice where none was requested, talking too much about your own views, or favoring a particular group of participants? If so, reflect on the situations that tend to trigger these responses and make a conscientious effort to check yourself.
- **Stop inappropriate interchanges.** Sometimes the best way to deal with conflict is to confront it head on. Should a participant act in an inappropriate way (e.g., blaming, shaming, name calling, making personal attacks), remind the group that while the topic is emotional and we might expect conflict as a result of sharing, everyone has agreed to disagree respectfully.



# Taking the Dialogue Guides a Step Further

## *How Facilitators Can Build Upon the Initial Event*

A Dialogue Guide activity is not intended to be done only once. The goal is for participants to plan actions that can extend past the initial meeting. As was described in the previous section, actions may include learning more, inviting others to dialogue and planning new venues for dialogue.

Helping participants stay connected and continue the work they began together are key activities. Examples include:

- **Coordinating follow-up.** Develop a plan to keep participants involved in carrying out decisions taken by the group. Share progress routinely.
- **Helping participants build a network.** Assist individuals in staying connected. Start an electronic bulletin board, phone tree, or other communication network.
- **Empowering others to lead.** Discuss ways in which individuals can help to stay in touch with one another and take on responsibilities for future actions. This may involve identifying individuals to serve in facilitative roles.

As a facilitator, you may wish to stay involved and support these future activities. Or, you may prefer to turn over future activities to another individual. Sometimes it may not be possible to engage in organized follow-up activities. In any case, facilitators are encouraged to make these topics a focus of discussion during the Dialogue Guide activity.



## *Sharing Your Experiences*

You are invited to share your experiences with colleagues across the country who are engaged in Dialogue Guide activities. The IDEA Partnership is committed to building on the experiences and learnings of Dialogue Guide facilitators and participants. Your experiences, and the experiences of your group participants, will be used to inform future Dialogue Guide activities. To assist facilitators and participants in sharing feedback and ideas, the IDEA Partnership has developed a website [<http://ideapartnership.org>] where you can:

- **Share reactions.** Ongoing feedback provides a forum in which everyone can continue to grow and learn. Thoughtful feedback can stimulate ideas and reflection in others. It can also lead to solutions and other insights.
- **Post materials and techniques.** For example, have you designed a strategy or tool (e.g., invitation, welcome activity) that worked particularly well? The website will serve as a repository for ideas that may prove useful.
- **Learn about new types of Dialogue Guides.** The IDEA Partnership is considering ways to help Dialogue Guide participants stimulate deeper dialogue in a topic area. One idea is to develop *Issues Packages*, which are two or more connected documents. Examples include school climate and behavior and culturally and linguistically diverse students. As with the current Dialogue Guides, stakeholders will develop these Issues Packages using their own expertise and by drawing on the feedback/experiences of participants in the initial Dialogue Guide activities. Stay tuned.



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## ***IDEA Partnership Organizations***

American Federation of Teachers  
 American Occupational Therapy Association  
 American School Counselor Association  
 American Society for Deaf Children  
 American Speech-Language Hearing Association  
 American School Health Association  
 Council of Administrators of Special Education



Council of State Administrators of Vocational  
 Rehabilitation  
 Council for Exceptional Children  
 Easter Seals  
 Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health  
 Learning Disabilities Association of America  
 National Alliance of Black School Educators  
 National Association of Elementary School  
 Principals  
 National Association of School Psychologists  
 National Association of Secondary School Principals  
 National Association for Bilingual Education  
 National Coalition for Parent Involvement in  
 Education  
 National Conference of State Legislatures  
 National Education Association  
 PACER, Inc.  
 School Social Worker Association of America

### ***State Partners***

Cross-state Transition Community of Practice

### ***Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network and National Study Partners***

National Dissemination Center  
 Southeast Regional Resource Center  
 National Longitudinal Transition Study 2  
 Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact  
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- 100 Black Men of America, Inc.
- American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
- American Association of People with Disabilities
- American Association of School Administrators
- American Federation of Teachers
- American Occupational Therapy Association
- American School Counselor Association
- American School Health Association
- American Society for Deaf Children
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
- Association for Career and Technical Education
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)
- Council for Exceptional Children
- Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE)
- Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
- Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR)
- Division for Early Childhood
- Easter Seals
- Education Commission of the States
- Family Voices
- Federation for Children with Special Needs
- Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health (FFCMH)
- Higher Education Consortium for Special Education
- Learning Disabilities Association of America
- National Alliance of Black School Educators
- National Association for Bilingual Education
- National Association for Parents of Children with Visual Impairments
- National Association for the Education of Young Children
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- National Association of Pupil Services Administrators
- National Association of School Psychologists
- National Association of Secondary School Principals
- National Association of State Boards of Education
- National Association of State Directors of Special Education
- National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
- National Association of State Title I Directors
- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
- National Conference of State Legislatures
- National Council on Independent Living
- National Down Syndrome Congress
- National Down Syndrome Society
- National Education Association
- National Fiesta Educativa
- National Governors' Association
- National Head Start Association
- National Indian Child Welfare Association
- National Mental Health Association
- National School Board Association
- PACER Center
- Part C Coordinators: Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association
- School Social Work Association of America
- TASH
- The Arc
- United Cerebral Palsy Association



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