

THE T/TAC TELEGRAM

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Come with us when we

GO GREEN

The T/TAC Telegram
is going electronic

See the enclosed insert
for more information

Northwestern Consortium T/TAC
This newsletter is a collaborative effort by
the Northwestern Consortium of the T/TACs,
which includes James Madison University,
co-directed by Cheryl Henderson and
Melinda Bright, and George Mason
University, directed by Lynn Wiley.

Designed by Jeff Richards

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND INFORM FAMILIES TO CONFRONT CHALLENGES OF THE CURRENT ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

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THE current accountability system under which students and educators are scrutinized demands a changing paradigm that calls for collaboration at all levels. Educators are learning new ways to work together and share concerns and solutions to barriers that confront students and impact their success. Overwhelmed with the demands of SOL accreditation, AYP status, and performance results on special education state performance indicators, we often do not take the time or effort to fully involve parents in providing optimal opportunities for their child to succeed. These layers of accountability are complex and sometimes confusing to us, and we cannot imagine trying to explain to parents the larger picture and where their child fits into that picture. We make assumptions that parents will not understand, and perhaps not care about the larger picture. However, parents do care about the implications for their child, and it is up to teachers and administrators to inform parents of decisions that need to be made and how those decisions will impact their child's future.

JoBeth Allen (2008) suggests that to start a conversation about family partnerships and how to effectively involve families in their child's education, "gather a group of educators, students, and family members to brainstorm a list of everything the school does to involve families" (p. 22).

Then, categorize the list according to these three topics: 1) builds relationships, 2) supports student learning, and 3) does neither. Next, focusing on the first two categories, answer the questions: what families are benefiting and what families are not? Many of the things we count as parental involvement do not impact the success of the students. Mattingly, Radmila, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) analyzed 41 parent involvement programs and concluded that "being room parents, signing behavior reports, attending PTA meetings, and so on – don't improve student achievement" (Allen, 2008, p. 23). So, where should we focus our efforts? Begin by looking at what is already being done to build relationships and inform families to support student learning, and then build on that.

Build Relationships with Students and Families

"A successful relationship occurs when emotional deposits are made to the student, emotional withdrawals are avoided, and students are respected... to honor students as human beings worthy of respect and care is to establish a relationship that will provide for enhanced learning" (Payne, 2005, p. 111). Thompson, Meadan, Fansler, Alber, and Balogh (2007) suggested a tool, Family Assessment Portfolios (FAPs) to promote good home/school collaboration and

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build relationships. “They can be used to (a) empower families by involving them in the assessment process; (b) enhance opportunities for families to communicate the information they most want schools to know; (c) familiarize future educators with students (e.g., likes, dislikes, strengths, needs, and communication skills); and (d) increase the likelihood that special education services and interventions will truly address a child’s most important needs” (p.19). FAPs began when a group

of parents in Illinois created materials to introduce their children to future teachers and administrators and influence special education services their children would receive. Guidelines were established for presentation of this information in the form of a scrapbook, a movie, or a Web-based profile. These presentations became valuable tools for IEP teams’ assessment and decision-making efforts. The following table offers guidelines for the scrapbook format.

Section	Purpose	Content Suggestions
All about me	Introduce the child; include essential personal information.	Include information on likes and dislikes. Mention important personality traits or challenging behaviors.
Meet my family and friends	Introduce people important in the child’s life.	This is the place to mention things the family likes to do together, or things different family members like to do with the child.
Learn about (disability/ medical condition)	Provide straightforward, practical information.	Provide resources for additional information. Include guidelines for educators pertaining to medical issues.
Look what I can do!	Provide an overview of the child’s current level of performance in relation to key academic and life skill areas; provide insight into potentially appropriate learning goals.	Present information with the context of what the child is able to do. Samples of the child’s work are useful.
Things to remember	Provide a summary of the most important information for the teacher to remember (<i>limit to one page</i>).	Safety/vulnerability issues are essential. Problems unique to the child are important, as are certain behavioral issues. Include essential tips or reminders for interaction.
Words from people who know me	Present the child through the eyes of those who know and love him/her.	This section should elicit an emotional reaction from the reader. The purpose of the book is to introduce a child to future educators; part of that introduction is to communicate that the child is loved, and that others are vested in the child’s future. Include reflections from adults as well as children.

Adapted from Thompson et al. (p. 21)

Inform Parents of Accountability Expectations and Implications for Their Child

Although the current standards and accountability movement and its value in improving schools are questioned by critics, this system is a reality (Lerner, 2003). As educators, it is our responsibility to focus on its potential benefits. By analyzing school data, we are able to identify areas in which we are successful and those areas in need of improvement. Informing families of their child’s participation in the accountability system and

how it will impact their future is critical to maintaining relationships that support optimal learning outcomes. The current testing and accountability system is often an unfamiliar domain for parents. Although the word testing indicates a level of importance, the meaning of the test, its contents and relevance is often unclear. It is in the child’s best interest to have his family understand the testing process in which he will participate. With this knowledge, parents have the opportunity to provide appropriate support to their child. Inviting this partnership and sharing information in a meaningful way is the role of teachers and administrators.

Test results spark parents' interest and involvement. In fact, parents are often more concerned about how the results will affect their child's education than with the actual test itself. Some of the common questions they might ask include:

- Will the results impact my child's placement?
- If he does poorly, will he be separated from his friends?
- If she does well, will she be moved to a higher class?
- Will these results affect the type of diploma he receives?
- Will it affect his graduation or acceptance to college?

Other parents don't know what to ask, but also have concerns. In order to support their child's education, parents need answers to these questions. These answers will help parents have a greater appreciation of the testing process.

The ramifications of test results will be clearer to parents once they have an awareness of the purpose and content of the test. They should also be informed about when the test is being administered, in what setting their child will take the test, what accommodations are being provided for their child, and what format is required. With this information, parents are better equipped to support their child, and the likelihood of parents having a positive impact on their child's academic success is increased.

Interpreting test results is another very important element of the testing and accountability system. We all know that testing language can be difficult for professionals to understand, and it is usually not explained in clear terms to parents. What exactly do terms like basic, proficient, or advanced mean? Parents should understand how their child's scores compare to his/her previous scores and to other students in the school, state, or nation. They should also have reasonable expectations for their child's test results. If we expect parents to play a key role in their child's education, we must explain these terms and teach parents how to interpret the data.

This information can be shared with parents in a variety of ways. Offering a session for each grade level or team in which test data is explained can be an effective method (Loucks & Waggoner, 1998, p. 118). Sending home a copy of a similar test early in the school year, and again closer to the time of the test, will help parents see what their child is expected to know, thus validating the need for their support. It may be helpful to send home a short notice including testing tips and ways the family can be supportive of their child during the testing period. Ideas such as reminders of the content, date and time of the test, helping their child be relaxed and getting a good

night's sleep, limiting stressful situations when possible, eating a healthy breakfast, and bringing a healthy snack to school the day of testing are a few suggestions.

Understanding what is on the test, what the test will look like, how it will be administered, what the results mean, and what impact the results will have on their child's education will help to prepare both students and parents for a successful testing experience. Parents will be more inclined and better able to support the testing process when they recognize its importance and how it will affect their child's education and future. This understanding will help them to be more comfortable working collaboratively with school personnel, and they may become more involved in their child's daily academic program once they understand how it relates to the testing process. It is up to teachers and administrators to help parents understand that the current accountability system is intended to help the community improve the educational environment for all students. As results are analyzed, programs and placements can be adjusted to improve student learning. Parent involvement in this process is clearly one way to improve student success.

Students benefit from collaborative partnerships between school personnel and family members. Encourage parents to participate by informing and including them in a non-threatening manner.

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DIVERSITY ON THE RISE: SUGGESTIONS THAT BUILD A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

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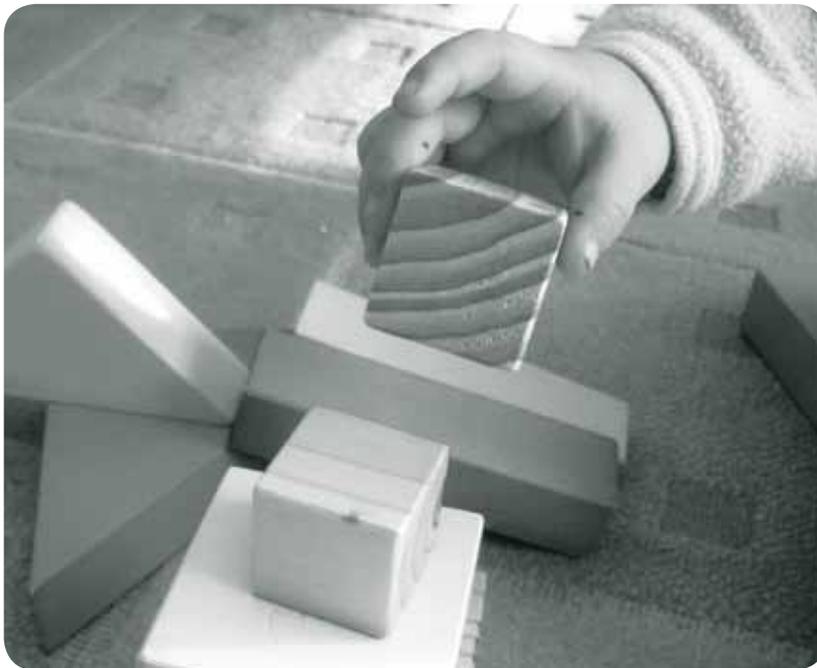
One of the major changes in education today is the rise in diversity of the clientele we serve. With this change comes the necessity to create a successful environment for all students and their families. This article will cite examples of successful practices in the Harrisonburg City Public Schools as described by Wendell Shank, ESL Middle School Liaison at Skyline Middle School.

Harrisonburg City Public Schools has a population consisting of approximately 40 % English as second language learners. Forty-two languages are spoken; however, the five primary languages are Spanish, Russian, Kurdish, Otomi (a regional dialect from southern Mexico with approximately 300,000 speakers worldwide), and Turkish. Harrisonburg City students represent 54 countries, with 58% of these students being born in the United States. There are several reasons for such diversity in the Shenandoah Valley. Harrisonburg is one of six refugee resettlement areas in Virginia, the valley is a peaceful place with mountains that look similar to the home countries of a variety of immigrants, and families are able to find constant employment.

When new students arrive in Harrisonburg, they visit a Welcome Center. It is one resource provided to enroll students when they first enter Harrisonburg City Public Schools. Originally, this center was designed for second language learners, but is now used for all new students entering the system. The center places students

in the appropriate school based on home addresses, petitions previous schools for records, does math and language testing, as well as native language testing when possible, and provides interpreters in Russian, Spanish, and Kurdish as needed. The best aspect of the center is that when students report to their first day in a new school the transition goes much more smoothly.

Another way to build relationships in a culture of diversity is the use of bilingual home/school liaisons. These liaisons work closely with teachers, students, and families to foster school success. For the larger Spanish-speaking populations, there are two liaisons at the high school level, one at each middle school, and four part-time liaisons at the five elementary schools. There are also two part-time liaisons who speak Russian and one who specializes in Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish. These individuals also play an important role in the transition between schools. Liaisons visit feeder schools of rising students, meet the students, and talk to their current liaisons. This ensures that a personal connection is created with the students prior to their entering a new school. The new liaisons are then more aware of the students' areas of strengths and concern. Liaisons meet monthly as a group to encourage information sharing between different levels.



To aid in communication, information that comes from the school is translated into English, Spanish, Russian, and Kurdish to meet the needs of the majority of families. Interpreters can be found, as needed, in other languages to get important information into the hands of parents.

Parent conference days can be very intimidating for parents not confident in their English language skills. In preparation for conference day, letters are distributed in a student's native or preferred language. As necessary, teachers desiring specific conferences submit names of students to the school liaison and phone calls are made. On conference day, volunteer interpreters are available on an as-needed basis – in one middle

school this past fall volunteers greeted parents at the door, guided them to rooms, and made arrangements to ensure a successful visit. These volunteer interpreters represented 15 different languages.

International dinners are an exciting and entertaining way the school personnel have found to build relationships between home and school. Each family is asked to bring a favorite dish representing their culture. Activities include fashion shows highlighting native fashions, music from steel drum groups, students singing in English if they are in the ESL program, and in French or Spanish, if enrolled in these foreign language classes. Parent discussion groups have also been held with teachers and interpreters. Attendance at these events has been as high as 300+ people. It is important to be sure to invite any interested family members, including small children so that child care is not an issue.

An additional program for student support is Blast. Blast, offered at the middle school level, is an afterschool homework program. It works in partnership with education students from James Madison University to provide homework and tutorial support. The program runs once or twice a week and provides a snack and transportation for its participants.

Finally, in an effort to provide extended family support, a program called PEP (Parents as Educational Partners) is offered to parents of elementary school students. The class meets twice a week for six weeks, and teaches English based on functional school literacy. The class helps develop parents' understanding of language that is necessary to successfully navigate the American school culture. Child care is provided and attendees with an 80% attendance rate are offered an additional three-week class using the Rosetta Stone computer program to continue their English language acquisition.

It is imperative to create changes to address the diversity of student population. To guarantee success for students in our schools, a climate of acceptance and support must be made available to the extended family as well as the student. As described in this article, Harrisonburg City Public Schools is diligently working to create an environment of comfort and support for its English as a Second Language population.



Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education

Cori Hill, M.Ed., Virginia Early Intervention Training Specialist | Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University

In the early 80s we used the term “family involvement.” There was an implied sense that early childhood professionals were bringing families into their inner sanctum. The alphabet soup of special education jargon was revealed; parents became members on various boards and family members began to “negotiate the special education maze” (Anderson, Chitwood, & Hayden, 1982).

In the late 90s we modified our terminology to reflect current best practice and we began to use “collaborative partnerships.” Families were viewed as equal members of the IFSP/IEP team. Parents and caregivers had invaluable information to share with other team members.

And now, it is 2009 and a new term is being utilized: **family engagement**. Is it all semantics or could this be the phrase that really changes our practice? Muscott et al. (2008) report that family engagement is defined when “building trusting relationships with family members; that is to say, relationships in which teachers and parents respect one another, believe in each other’s ability and willingness to fulfill their responsibilities, have high personal regard for one another, and trust each other to put children’s interests first. Relationship building is enhanced when family-centered practices that respect the uniqueness and personal circumstances of *all* families including those who have children with disabilities...”

So what does this look like in practice? How do early intervention providers and early childhood special educators *truly* collaborate with families? What is the family’s role in their child’s education?

In 2005, the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) identified four recommended practices for family-based practices:

1. Families and professionals share responsibility and work collaboratively

Family members and professionals work together, sharing information and jointly developing appropriate family-identified outcomes that are responsive to cultural, language, and other family characteristics

2. Practices strengthen family functioning

Practices, supports, and resources provide families with opportunities that strengthen decision making and choice. Information is provided and supports and services are mobilized in ways that do not disrupt family and community life.

3. Practices are individualized and flexible
Resources and supports match each family member’s identified preferences, beliefs, and values. IFSPs and IEPs are tailored for individual children.

4. Practices are strengths- and assets-based
Family and child strengths are used as the basis for engaging families in activities to build knowledge and strengthen parent competence and confidence (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean,

2005).

McWilliam (2004) emphasizes that the family plays a critical role in family-centered practices as *agents of change*, indicating that parents and caregivers have the greatest opportunity to impact the child’s development during activities of the child’s daily life. Family members have many more opportunities than early intervention providers who may see the child a minimum of one hour per week. Teachers typically have more time with the



child but they also miss family routines such as bath time, grocery shopping, and family meals which are rich learning opportunities that support the family's competence and confidence in enhancing their child's development. Early childhood providers share strategies that parents and caregivers can incorporate into everyday routines and activities rather than adding to parents' busy schedules. The following Web sites give examples of learning opportunities for young children while helping in the kitchen, during mealtimes, during bath time, and at "potty time":

http://www.poweroftheordinary.org/et/vol1_iss6/index.php

http://www.poweroftheordinary.org/et/vol1_iss9/index.php

As early childhood practitioners, we know that families are the experts on their child. They bring a wealth of knowledge and experience regarding their family and the learning opportunities on which we can build our strategies. Our job is to merge our knowledge and expertise about child development into the family's daily routines. From this, we can develop IFSP/IEP outcomes and programming that will promote individualized activities that will truly encourage families to become fully engaged. Perhaps then, it will not just be about semantics!

References:

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Beyond tiles and towels! *Everyday times*, 1(9). Retrieved January 2, 2009, from http://www.poweroftheordinary.org/et/vol1_iss9/index.php

Someone's in the kitchen. *Everyday times*, 1(6). Retrieved January 2, 2009, from http://www.poweroftheordinary.org/et/vol1_iss6/index.php

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MOVING ONLINE.**

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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO SELF-DETERMINATION AND EFFECTIVE SCHOOLWIDE DISCIPLINE

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Parents play an integral role in the development of their children both socially and emotionally. Parents are the models on which children base what is deemed an appropriate response to a given situation. Children learn to deal with adversity, set goals, and communicate needs by observing their parents. Parents can increase their child's chance for success at school by understanding the tenets of two national evidence-based practices: self-determination and positive behavioral supports. In Virginia, the Virginia Department of Education sponsors two such programs: *Effective Schoolwide Discipline* and *I'm Determined*.

Positive Behavior Support is based on humanistic values and over 20 years of research. Virginia's state initiative, *Effective Schoolwide Discipline*, takes the holistic approach of PBIS that offers both parents and teachers the opportunity to develop an understanding of why a student has challenging behavior as well as the factors that may contribute to the student's behavior. Strategies that support students through positive behavior supports focus on replacing challenging behavior with new skills to support less challenging behavior and help to provide new ways for the student to interact with others. Schools implementing *Effective Schoolwide Discipline* have helped students access new environments, develop positive social interactions, develop friendships, learn new communication skills, and achieve academic success that challenging behavior may have prevented in the past. Parents, teachers, and administrators should work together to provide students with an environment that supports teaching students the expectations and skills needed to deal with their behavior and the behaviors of those around them. Teaching students the expectations in all environments and at all ages, acknowledging the appropriate behavior within those environments when it occurs, as well as supporting new behaviors with this system as they arise will help students develop the self-esteem and social skills needed to help maintain appropriate behaviors throughout their lifetime while giving them the self-determination to have control and make their own choices.

WHAT IS SELF-DETERMINATION AND HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD BECOME SELF-DETERMINED?

Self-determination refers to both the right and the capacity of individuals to exert control over and direct their lives (Wehmeyer, 2004). To your child, self-determination means:

- Knowing and believing in himself/herself
- Knowing what s/he wants the future to look like and how to plan for that future
- Knowing the supports that will be needed to have control of his or her life

Your child will need self-determination skills to advocate for personal rights and needs, and to be able to explain to others what is needed to be successful on the job, in college or training environments, and when living independently.

Did you know?

- Students who incorporated self-determination goals into their IEPs and transition plans were more likely to earn higher incomes one year after graduation.
- Incorporating choice-making opportunities into behavior support plans improves behavior outcomes.
- Instruction in problem-solving skills can lead to improved employment outcomes

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO ENCOURAGE SELF-DETERMINED BEHAVIOR IN YOUR CHILD?

- Encourage your child to make choices about everyday activities
- Encourage your child to set priorities
- Help your child identify personal interests, preferences, and strengths
- Educate yourself and your child about rights
- Talk to your child about the process of goal setting, including barriers that might be encountered
- Help your child understand the concept of accommodations and how they can help or hinder educational and career goals

- Talk to your child about their disability; get teacher(s) involved to the extent you feel warranted

HOW DO I TALK TO MY CHILD ABOUT HIS DISABILITY?

Begin discussion by talking about the strengths, gifts, interests, and learning differences of everyone in the family. Suggestions for talking to your child include:

- Focus on the child and not the disability:
 - Love and cherish your child and his unique characteristics
 - Recognize that your child is more like his/her peers than different
 - Use person-first language and language your child will understand
 - Be knowledgeable about your child's strengths, talents, gifts, interests, and learning differences
- Educate don't excuse:
- Discuss role models
- Stress coping and learning strategies
- Know that the expectations that you have for your children greatly influence their achievements for themselves
- Children with disabilities are often unmotivated due to feelings of failure, frustration, and false labels (crazy, lazy, dumb)
- Provide feedback for your child
 - Praise progress and effort as well as results
 - Give honest and specific compliments
 - Provide corrective criticism when warranted
 - Know that by talking to your child you are modeling skills s/he will need to be self-determined

When students take charge of their learning, the responsibility shifts from the teacher/parent to the student. When students participate in IEP goal setting, they have a vested interest in achieving those goals. As a result, inappropriate behaviors may decrease as students feel empowered to chart their own course. The key to empowerment of students with and without disabilities is the consistent communication between parents, students, and school staff and the opportunity in all environments to practice their new skills.

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Wehmeyer, M. (2004). Self-determination and the empowerment of people with disabilities. *American Rehabilitation, Autumn*, 22-29.

<http://www.imdetermined.org>

<http://www.ttac.odu.edu/esd>



Conferences & Trainings:

February

7th Comprehension Institute: Teaching Content with Multiple Levels of Text

Reading First in Virginia professional development in Newport News NO ATTENDANCE PREREQUISITE TO ENROLL IN INSTITUTES.

Contact Name: Susan Thacker-Gwaltney

Contact Phone: 877.827.3237

Contact Email: sft2s@cms.mail.virginia.edu

Web: www.readingfirst.virginia.edu

22nd-24th Virginia Society for Technology in Education (VSTE)

VSTE's 23rd Annual State Technology Conference (February 22-24, 2009) & the 1st Annual Educational Technology Leadership Institute (February 22, 2009), will be held in Virginia Beach. The conference theme this year is "i on the Future."*** Submit your presentation proposal on a topic related to assistive technology-- presentation proposals are due by October 1, 2008!!

Contact Name: Fran Smith

Contact Phone: 804.827.1406

Contact Email: fgsmith@vcu.edu

Web: www.vste.org/vste/presenters/

26th-28th Virginia SHAV Conference - Speech-Language and Hearing Conference

The annual state SLP conference with speakers in areas of interest to speech-language pathologists will be held at the Holiday Inn Kroger Center in Richmond, VA.

Contact Name: Robert Cravens

Contact Phone: 888.729.7428

Contact Email: shavoffice@shav.org

Web: www.shav.org

March

11th-13th Autism: Making a Difference Together (8th Annual Autism Conference)

Keynote Presentations: Tony Gentry, Ph.D. "PDA's to Improve Daily Quality of Life for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum, Kristi Sakai "Creating a Supportive Home and Community for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Families" and a Panel of Individuals with Autism "In Their Own Words." This conference will be held at the Crown Plaza Richmond West.

Contact Name: Commonwealth Autism Service

Contact Phone: 1.800.649.8481

Web: www.autismva.org/cas_annual_conference.php

16th-18th Virginia Transition Forum 2009

The Virginia Transition Forum 2009's theme is Transition: We're All In It Together! The 2009 Forum will be held at the Norfolk Waterside Marriott. Hotel reservations will be accepted after August 15, 2008. Keep checking the website for information.

Contact Name: Katherine Wittig

Contact Phone: 804.827.1403

Contact Email: kmwittig@vcu.edu

Web: www.virginiatransitionforum.org

12th-14th Virginia Association for Early Childhood Education (VAECE) 53rd Annual Conference

Marriott Hotel, Richmond. Visit www.VAECE.org for information.

16th-18th Virginia Head Start Annual Conference

Hotel Roanoke, Roanoke, VA.

Visit www.headstartva.org for information.

16th-18th Virginia Transition Forum

Waterside Marriott, Norfolk. Visit

www.virginiatranstionforum.org for information.

March continued

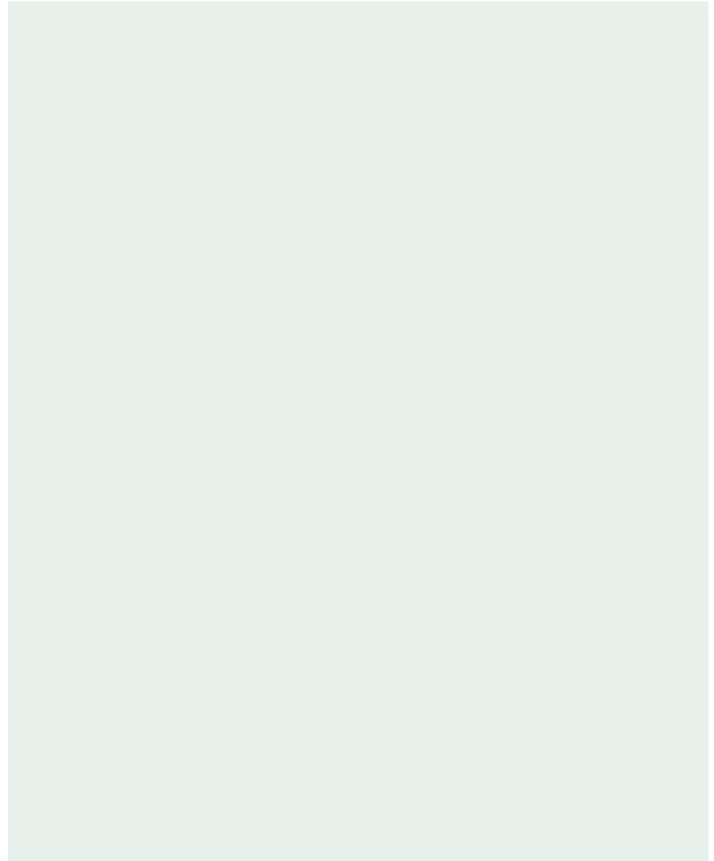
21st Reading First in Virginia: Comprehension Institute – *Teaching Content with Multiple Levels of Text* Fredericksburg, VA. Visit www.readingfirst.virginia.edu for information.

June

22nd-26th Content Teaching Academy
James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA.
Visit www.jmu.edu/contentacademy for information

23rd-26th Reading First in Virginia – K-3 Teacher Reading Academy, Charlottesville, VA.
Visit www.readingfirst.virginia.edu for information.

23rd-26th Reading First in Virginia – Reading Academy for Teachers of Special Education Students
Roanoke, VA. Visit www.readingfirst.virginia.edu for information.



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