

History and Purpose of the National Education Network (NEN)

In November 1997 under the leadership of then Executive Director of the National Library of Education, Blane K. Dessy, an invitational conference was held in Washington D.C. that brought together the various stakeholders in the area of education information. The purpose of the conference was to identify ways to disseminate education information through effective collaboration, to identify gaps in this information, and to build a network of national education resources. As part of this vision, there would also be “one-stop” reference service for a variety of users. This set of goals was in partial response to the national Access for All Task Force that had developed a set of recommendations regarding access to education information.

The National Library of Education (NLE), created in 1994, took a leadership role in bringing together education stakeholders to discuss these issues. The participants in this conference included representatives from regional education laboratories, education centers and clearinghouses, the publishing industry, information technology, foundations, professional associations, education, the communications industry, research and information services, and public, state, and academic libraries. Participants were asked to collaborate with a goal of creating tangible outcomes. The focus was on improving what is currently available and identifying ways to address gaps in education information. While technology was seen as an important factor in reaching these goals, preservation of information in traditional ways was also a consideration.

NLE commissioned five papers to provide a framework for discussion. The papers by Jo Ann Carr, John D'Amicantonio, Donald Ely, Patricia Libutti, and Nancy O'Brien were presented in draft form to be finalized after the conference to allow input from the audience. The 1997 conference included breakout sessions with ample opportunity for participation and feedback from the diverse audience. Each breakout group recorded its discussion and recommendations for future reference.

Following this initial conference, a smaller working group was invited to participate in formulating a strategy to develop a network of education information and resources that relied less on a single place (such as a national library) and more on collaborative efforts that linked resources across the U.S.

Initially, the NLE designated the envisioned network as the United States Education Information Network (USEIN) to be similar in scope and function to the counterpart (USAIN) at the National Library of Agriculture. After extensive discussion over several months it became clear that USAIN had a somewhat different role than the one that the education stakeholders had discussed, and that the names were too similar to have a distinct “brand” look and feel. As the working group continued its efforts to refine the mission and desired outcomes for this network, the name “National Education Network” emerged and a Web domain with www.nen.org was acquired for future use. The working group emerged as a smaller group after twice yearly meetings in May and November over the next few years. It became an Executive Committee first chaired by Nancy O’Brien and subsequently chaired by Jo Ann Carr. During these same years, leadership at the National Library of Education also changed. Constant membership of the Executive Committee included representatives from the K-12 education sector, the publishing industry, information technology, regional and national education laboratories and clearinghouses, libraries, and the NLE. While individuals might change the representation from these groups was stable.

Out of these meetings developed a vision of a network that transcends time and place. Following is the official NEN vision statement:

The National Education Network (NEN) will provide comprehensive access to information services and information resources in education to educators, parents, policy makers, and the general public. Access will be provided through a collaborative partnership of United States libraries, archives, clearinghouses, information centers, and educational institutions; publishers, producers, and distributors of educational resources; and agencies, associations, and organizations concerned with education.

Similarly, a concise mission statement was also developed:

The mission of the NEN is to preserve the education past, connect the education present, and shape the education future by providing and supporting comprehensive access to education information.

As were the goals:

- Promote effective access for users of education information.
- Leverage our investments in providers and repositories of education information.
- Support the development and preservation of education information.

Tasks that NEN has accomplished to date include partnering with the Virtual Reference Desk conferences from 1999 to 2003, a successful forum on preservation of education materials held at the American Library Association conference in January 2000, and creation of a robust Web site <<http://www.nen.org/index.htm>> that includes a materials exchange registry that encourages relocation of materials between institutions instead of disposal. The fledgling AskNEN service has to a great extent been deferred due to the development of the extremely active and popular service, Educator's Reference Desk <http://www.eduref.org/>. The EduRef Web site was developed with support from many of the participants and stakeholders that have been involved with NEN since its inception.

These tasks have been accomplished using the current organizational structure for NEN. At present, NEN is a collaborative partnership of entities that have as part of their mission the collection, production, and/or dissemination of education information. NEN is an autonomous group of entities of which the National Library of Education (NLE) is a part. NEN is a non-government organization supported by the NLE. NEN is not an advocacy group. NEN brings together groups representing a variety of professional communities to share knowledge and expertise. NEN participants benefit from each other's perspectives and experiences in providing education information and services to their constituencies.

The current status of NEN is fluid. While the above organizational structure is in place, changes in the federal government have altered the role of the National Library of Education. At the grassroots level there is a deep interest in continuing to provide a national network of education resources, information and services. The opportunities to collaborate and develop services will continue as long as there is interest expressed by the stakeholders and the service providers.

The meeting in Boston on January 13, 2005 at the Midwinter meeting of the American Library Association is an effort to explore the development of a national network of education resources, information and services. The goals of this meeting are to conceptualize the creation of an Education Information Commons (EIC) using technology to bridge the physical distances between collections and services across the United States. The meeting will include discussions of the elements that need to be part of the EIC, which elements are already in place and available for partnerships, what additional elements are needed, and the potential participants in the EIC. The meeting will also focus on common concerns regarding education information, how the proposed EIC might interface with other education information agencies and, if there is interest, take the initial steps to create a national Education Information Commons.

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